



THE GIFT OF SURRENDER

By
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Chapter One

There was once a tapestry that hung in the main hall of Almourol Citadel. No one knew how old it was. It seems it had always been there. The tapestry was a map of all the Hanyanoore, The Known Lands, woven in vibrant colors and rich textures. Some said it was one of several presented to the rulers to herald a time of peace. For Princess Sarianna, the tapestry was her first knowledge of places that existed outside her realm. As a small child, she believed that the ground in kingdoms outside of Arinpera were the same color and texture as that kingdom's part of the map. She would pester her governess with questions concerning how the other peoples kept the bright colors off their feet and clothing.

Later, the tapestry was used to teach the young Princess about the world outside her borders. Her tutors used it to teach geography and history and even economics. She understood words like alliance and commerce connected her land with others, but she never saw directly how it all worked. To her, the different kingdoms in the Hanyanoore were as separate as the colors on the map. The thick black lines between the colors were like walls in her mind. Each place was off having its own history apart from hers.

The only time the other kingdoms were given serious consideration outside of her lessons were in her fanciful musings. She would roll the exotic-sounding names off her tongue and wonder what inspired such words. She wondered if all the rulers were as

wise and kind as her dear father. She wondered if the mythical people of the Forest Realm could really fly. Somehow, all that musing made the other kingdoms less real to the Princess and less relevant to her life.

Sarianna was still a girl when, to the dismay of everyone, the tapestry was found to be rotted through. A single thread pulled, however gently, could unravel an entire region of the map. It became too delicate from the stress of hanging. Thus, it was placed under glass in the library in the hopes of preserving it a while longer.

Sarianna realized that she should have paid more heed to the real meaning behind the fragile tapestry. Once the Princess believed all the kingdoms in the realm were separate places like the colors on the map. These realms were unrelated to one another. How she wished that were true. But as the tapestry unraveled, something she considered a family matter was somehow causing the future of all the Hanyanoore to be in doubt.

The Princess looked at her father with despair. The great King Vaurus had slumped into slumber once again. It was only a little past mid-day, and there was still much left unresolved from the day before. Waking him would be of no use. Once the morning passed, Vaurus grew deeply confused. No more could be done. Sarianna's heart sank every time she saw those sharp gray eyes glaze over and grow distant. He was in so many ways the strong, vibrant father who had raised her. The strong jaw and deep-set eyes still made him as handsome as ever. Even the snowy white of his hair did not diminish the strength of his appearance. But something was robbing him of the essence of his spirit each day. It pained her greatly to see him fade in such a way.

Neuvoja was frowning at her. It was quite a frown with those great dark brows over great dark eyes amidst a long, angular face. Her advisor was growing gray, but he was undiminished from her earliest memories. That was a comfort at least. Sarianna sighed. She did not want to have this conversation again. Neuvoja was very wise, and he was her most trusted friend, but of late his mind had been on but one thought. It was a thought the Princess had no desire to indulge. This time he would not relent. She could evade no more.

"Princess, I must insist," Neuvoja said grimly. "We have succeeded in keeping your father's waning state from public knowledge thus far, but this ruse cannot continue for much longer. The villagers whisper that the King is not seen at celebrations anymore. The farmers notice that it is you that comes to assess their needs. These whispers will carry to other kingdoms if they have not already."

"But how could that be? He has not been fading for very long," Sarianna muttered.

"The Hanyanoore may seem a vast place, Highness," the advisor replied. "But it is not so large that whispers do not carry with the wind."

"But why can I not be named Regent?" Sarianna demanded. "I am neither uneducated nor unfamiliar about affairs of state. I am heir to the throne."

"No one knows that better than I, dear Lady," Neuvoja replied. "You are my finest pupil. It is not a matter of your abilities."

"Is it because I am not a man?" She asked in annoyance.

"Nay, Princess. There are queens ruling in these lands," the advisor said. "It is your experience with matters outside of this kingdom. Your father's age at your birth was

advanced. He did not travel as he once did. The King was very protective of you as well. He sheltered you from much to keep you safe. Thus, you have no direct experience with the other kingdoms."

"Our commanders do. You do," she said.

"Nothing can replace firsthand knowledge, Highness," Neuvoja said simply. "Like our own, each realm has nuances upon nuances with each people and their politics. Any incorrect decision could result in war with an enemy unknown to you until it strikes."

"But must this decision be made so quickly?" Sarianna asked. "I have thought of little else but royal matters for so long. I have given no thought to so personal a decision."

"Forgive me, Princess. This is not a personal matter," the advisor said as gently as he could. "You are heir to a wealthy and strategically important realm. Beyond that, you are the Light of Arinpera. Your marriage is a royal matter."

"Neuvoja, that is a term of endearment from my father."

"Nay, Princess. The title and the mantle it carries are quite real. I feel that it is an arcane tradition, but many rulers still feel the Keeper of the Light is of vital importance to this entire land. Your marriage will be of keen interest to all of the Hanyanoore."

Sarianna rested her head in her hands and sighed. "I do not know how to choose a husband. I do not know how to interest men at all. I barely know how to dance. I cannot flirt nor play games. I cannot hold my tongue to spare feelings. What sort of man would be interested in me?"

Neuvoja stared at her as if startled by the question. Then he chuckled heartily. "Your Highness must include great modesty among your attributes."

She frowned at him. "Whatever do you mean?"

"There are other whispers that have no doubt reached other lands," he said. "Songs about the raven-haired daughter to the elder king whose beauty could best a summer sunset."

"You jest!" Sarianna exclaimed. She was not remotely amused at such a statement.

"I do not, Highness," he smiled. "They sing of wild, black curls and eyes of a midnight sky... an angel's face with..."

Neuvoja stopped speaking and quite uncharacteristically blushed. Sarianna's eyebrows rose with her curiosity.

"Do finish, dear teacher," she said dryly.

"Highness, I do not think..." he stammered.

"But I do. Consider it a royal command."

He grew quite red as he cleared his throat. "An angel's face with a form fashioned for sin."

Sarianna blushed as well. Then she chuckled. "I suppose such tales could help me find a suitor. That and my lands."

"Princess, what I meant by telling you of these songs was that there is very good reason to believe a match could be for much more than strategic advantage," Neuvoja said.

"You may be right," she said thoughtfully. "But we will wait until morning and have father tell the scribe what shall be sent out to the rulers in the known lands. It must be seen as his command."

"Quite right," he said. The advisor smiled at her. "You are a wise ruler, Princess. This decision is a sound one."

Sarianna laughed without humor. "I pray you are right. Now, help me get Father to his bed. One of us should sleep well."

* * *

Evening was nigh before the Princess and her advisor managed to find solutions for most of the petitions presented to the King those past two days. The courtship announcement was to be the only thing Vauraus would address the next morning. Never had they seen to so many entreaties at one time, but taxing the King while having him contend with such a delicate matter was not something either of them wanted.

By the end of her very long day, Sarianna was out of sorts. She felt drawn as taut as a bow. A leisurely meal and bed were far from her mind. The Princess needed to ride lest she would find no rest that night. Sunset was nigh, but she had to risk the danger. It would undoubtedly irritate Neuvoja, but Sarianna thought it a grand idea to keep the sentries sharp by chasing her around the walls. She no longer bothered with the

disguise. A cloak was too hot for the hard ride; and without it, anyone knew she was a female.

“A form fashioned for sin,” Sarianna thought ruefully. She still was not sure if her advisor was not speaking nonsense. Her long straight lines had developed into curves that made climbing trees quite difficult. Riding a horse required learning her balance all over again. The Princess never thought much of her curves. They weren’t as voluptuous as the women who visited court. They were noticeable, but those women felt so good to hug as a child. Her body could never compete with theirs. Her legs were too long and her attributes not as ample.

Still, there was a noticeable increase in attention from men who crossed her path. This was especially true out in the farmlands. The men there were much bolder in their stares than the ones at Almourol Citadel. Sarianna always assumed she was doing something unbecoming to her station. Until that day, she had not considered that the men were actually looking at her. Sarianna rode harder. She took a very sharp turn near a large tree. The sentry following her nearly ran into it.

Perhaps Sarianna never paid heed to the stares because they never caused any sort of reaction in her. The maidservants often whispered about how a man’s stare could make a woman’s heart beat faster or their breath more difficult. These sorts of maladies had yet to occur when her eyes met those of a man. Sarianna assumed the stares meant she had a smudge on her nose. The Princess hugged her mount’s mane closely as they thundered through a canopy of low hanging branches. She lost another sentry there.

Sarianna grunted and spurred her horse a little harder. This was all very frustrating and embarrassing. How could she have so much education and know so little? Somehow learning all the histories and geographies of the known lands did not prepare her enough to be Regent. And knowing all she knew about the sciences of the body and spirit did very little to prepare her to find a husband. The Princess found it particularly embarrassing that her chambermaid likely knew more about men than she did. Usually, Sarianna would not hesitate to inquire directly when she wanted to know something. However, such a course of action with this subject could result in great discomfort for all involved. Sarianna shifted her weight and jumped a broken wall to lose the last sentry before heading into the stables. Perhaps some discreet observation was in order.

* * *

“The captain of the guard will be displeased with you, milady,” Hanna chided crisply as she poured warm, fragrant water over Sarianna’s head.

The Princess sputtered and pushed her heavy, soggy hair off her face. She glared at her maid. It always amazed her how a girl not much older than she could sound like a fussy, old woman. Hanna was too pretty with her long, thick chestnut hair and large, hazel eyes to act like dear, dour Thora. Her head housekeeper had much influence indeed. Sarianna decided that she should encourage her maid to have more adventures.

"I should think Captain Rajotin would be grateful that I put his men through their paces now and then," Sarianna muttered, knowing this would not be the case at all. "There is so little in the way of alarms here, they will forget what they are about."

Hanna was annoyed at being kept late to settle her charge for the evening. As this was not her fault, Sarianna did not feel that she should be blamed. Getting ready for bed was something the Princess had mastered around the time she began writing her own name. But her station demanded that protocols had to be strictly followed. It seemed silly to her that such an intimate service was performed by someone who clearly didn't want to do it. But to end the practice without sound reason would have caused resentment in the staff. So the Princess put up with her body being doused and her hair being brushed by a series of chambermaids who complained of her legs being too long and her hair being too thick and heavy.

Sarianna considered asking her maid about what went on between men and women in courtship, but she felt vulnerable enough with the woman briskly drying her naked body. She did not want to reveal any more. Besides, when her maid talked of relations between men and women, the word rutting was often used. Sarianna dearly hoped there was more information on the subject than that. Instead, the Princess ate her supper of cold meats, cheese, bread and fruit while Hanna combed through her mass of damp hair complaining all the while. That night she may have had reason to fuss. Sarianna had felt some twigs and brambles snag into her tresses during the ride. Her braid had come undone at some point, so her hair had caught on everything she passed. It surprised the Princess that her scalp wasn't torn.

"There," Hanna proclaimed with a final pass of the brush. "You are ready for bed, Princess."

"Thank you, Hanna."

"Do you need anything else this evening?"

"No, thank you. Goodnight," Sarianna replied. She settled under the covers with her book for the evening. This one was a history. Perhaps her answers could be found in books. There were some romances and books of poems in the library. She would try there.

All of Sarianna's plans for research dried up with the dew before the mid-morning sun. King Vauraus was very pleased to have the scribes draw up an edict for his daughter's marriage. She had not seen her father smile in such a fashion for many seasons.

"My child, Light of Arinpera, you have made me very happy in embracing your duty to the Hanyanoore," he rumbled warmly.

It pleased her to please him. "Father, I find joy in your warm regard," she replied. "But how do I choose?"

"Your heart will know."

"Father, my heart is untried."

"Your heart is true, dear Sarianna," he replied with confidence. "You are the Light of Arinpera. You shall know the one who will give himself entirely to serve and protect you as I did for your mother. He seeks not your wealth or power. He seeks your heart."

The scribes finished drafting copies of the edict for the rulers of the Hanyanoore only a few hours later. It was read in the town square as the messengers thundered away from the Almourol Citadel to deliver them. By the time of the mid-day meal, the King was once again a-bed. And Sarianna's life had been turned upside down.

She had barely finished her repast with Neuvoja when the herald came to stand before them.

"Merchants have assembled in the main hall seeking an audience," the herald announced.

Sarianna's eyes widened. She looked at Neuvoja with scarcely contained panic. "But the King only gives audience in the early morn. All know this, herald. Send them away."

"The merchants seek an audience with you, Highness," came the reply.

"Me?"

"Yes, your Highness," the herald said. "As the edict decrees you to wed, they have come to offer their services for food, decorations and clothing."

"Clothing?" Sarianna repeated. She knew she must sound like a dolt, but with dozens of gowns in her closet that had never been worn, it seemed unlikely that more were necessary.

“Princess,” Neuvoja said. “You will need all manner of new gowns for each meal during each visit from a suitor. Each room will have to be re-decorated for each visitor, and there must be many feasts of our best fare. This is all before the wedding celebrations can be planned. Much must be prepared.”

Sarianna wanted to groan. No wonder there were such cheers from the town hall. She had believed everyone happy for her finding a husband to love. They were all thinking of how fat their purses would grow during the search. It would serve them right if she married the first man who crossed her path.

“Very well,” Sarianna sighed. “Send them in as you see fit, herald. Thank you.”

“Your servant, Highness.”

Sarianna narrowed her eyes at her advisor. “You knew about this, didn’t you? You wouldn’t tell me, because you knew that I would never put up with this willingly.”

Neuvoja was nonplussed. “I knew your Highness would live up to all the duties the edict requires.”

Sarianna glared at him, but the doors were opening, and there was no time for all that she wanted to say to him. However, the Princess would not forget.

“Princess Sarianna, Arinpera’s purveyors of food and drink,” the herald called.

About a dozen individuals entered the room with the head cook and his apprentice. Sarianna learned that hunters needed to be dispatched to procure the best game, which then needed to be aged before being dressed and roasted. Intermediaries had to be dispatched to negotiate with a neighboring kingdom for delicacies from the sea and for bushels of extra fruits required for nectars and tarts for general consumption as well as

extra sources of vegetables and herbs. Bakeries needed orders for extra breads and pastries. That meant local farmers must provide more eggs and wheat and milk than their norm. The vintners needed contracts for many more casks of wine than their yearly agreement demanded. Cookware and serving ware and dishes and goblets had to be ordered. The Princess was amazed at just how many purses would be affected providing meals alone. She authorized it all so that they would not run short on anything. Excess would be divided amongst the servants and the poor. Sarianna also gave the head cook leave to hire as much help as he needed.

Next were the merchants charged with furnishing and decorating the Almourol Citadel. They came with the head of housekeeping and protocol. Though short and wraith-thin, she had a huge presence. Thora's sharp features were saved from complete severity by uncommonly curly, dark hair and large, amber eyes. She had to pin the hair to keep it from escaping. Those eyes, though lovely, were often glaring in some sort of disapproval. This day, she had much to put in order. These merchants required imported cloth and dyes and more weavers to fashion blankets and coverlets and pillows and curtains for each change of room. Sarianna never considered that guests would need their own pitcher and basin and tub, but she authorized it. At least she didn't have to replace the furniture with every visitor. As before, the Princess also had to authorize the hiring of much more help. She also required that when the guest chambers are finally restored to their original states, the new dressings were to be cleaned and given to female servants for their dowries.

The royal jewelers were next. Sarianna had no idea why she needed more earrings and rings and hair ornaments, but from her advisor's expression, she knew they were somehow necessary. She authorized them. Next was the head of the musician's guild seeking authorization to hire entertainers. She granted it.

Captain Rajotin, the man in charge of her father's garrisons, was unexpected. The captain was almost as young as Sarianna and had a dislike for dealing with the politics of the court. She wondered briefly if he'd come to scold her about her moonlight rides around the citadel walls. He, too, was too young and attractive to be dour. The captain had dark hair and dark eyes with pleasant open features too often marred by a frown. Hanna often said that it was because he had been promoted so unexpectedly on the death of the former captain. For the life of her, Sarianna couldn't fathom why the promotion was unexpected. The former commander had been old enough to remember when her father last rode into battle. She thought the frown was more of Thora's work.

The reason for the visit was surprising from the very conservative guard. It seemed the men required new dress uniforms and accompanying weaponry. He made a convincing argument that Arinperan forces would be seen by monarchs who might be foes someday. The soldiers needed to make an impression that showed them to be ready and well equipped. The Princess was dubious, but authorized it anyway. This, she felt, gave her leave to torment the sentries without rebuke for quite some time.

The dressmakers and shoemakers were last. They required Sarianna to go to her chamber and strip to her undergarments to be measured. They came with sketches and swatches of fabric to the ready for her choices. Before she knew it, she was standing in

the center of her private receiving room in a shift with her arms raised while people flitted about her.

"The Princess has become quite a woman."

"The Princess has such beautiful skin that any color flatters her."

"The Princess has such beautiful eyes. This should compliment them."

"Your bosom is perfect for the latest décolletage."

"Such a tiny waist and lovely hips. You shall have your choice of suitor."

Sarianna could not have been more embarrassed, despite their sincerity. In the end, dozens of gowns and shoes and under shifts and night shifts were ordered with more to the ready should the search involve many months. There was not room in all of her closets for all the clothes. Her head was swimming when Hanna helped her back into her dress.

"'Tis such a waste to have so much and purchase so much more," Sarianna thought. She looked at her chambermaid. "Hanna, we are the same size, are we not?"

"Think ye?" Hanna asked with a chuckle. "Why does it not look as good on me?"

"Perhaps, it is the clothes," Sarianna said. "Tell the dressmakers that I require all my staff to be fitted for new clothing. If the garrisons need to impress, so does the staff."

"Yes, Highness!" Hanna said brightly. "I can just catch them."

"And before you leave for today, we will empty my closets of those gowns and shifts and shoes and cloaks I accumulate each year as per contract and never wear. You shall have them. Be not embarrassed. No one has ever seen me in them."

"I am not embarrassed, Highness," she said. "I am overjoyed. You are too generous."

“Not by half, dear Hanna,” the Princess smiled. “Go now and catch the merchants.”

The Princess smiled. She would give her loyal chambermaid a portion of her unworn jewelry as well. It would give her a fine dowry with the linens. The head housekeeper must be included in the gift to avoid conflict. Sarianna sighed. Hanna would not be kept late that day. The Princess was exhausted from just those few hours of audiences. It was not that the discussions were taxing. She had never borne the full weight of her people’s expectations alone. The expressions were of great hope and anticipation. The importance of her approval to their livelihood was clear in their expressions and their voices. Sarianna was keenly aware that all she had depended upon the hard work of those good souls. She was also keenly aware of what she had that was being wasted.

By the time Hanna returned, the Princess had cleared the back of her stuffed closets and chests. The items were piled neatly in two piles on her bed. She found two wooden jewel boxes with locks and placed necklaces and rings and hair ornaments that were done by contract in the box. Since the Princess never wore any of the items, they would cause no embarrassment.

“This is no jest, is it?” Hanna asked softly. She picked up the jewel box incredulously.

“Nay, no jest. Go, fetch Thora.”

Once again, Hanna ran from the room. This time, calling loudly for the head housekeeper. Sarianna chuckled. Her spirits were uplifted by the joy the gifts brought.

“What is this child going on about?” Thora muttered as she swept into the room. “As if I don’t have enough to do preparing for the suitors.”

Thora stopped talking and walking when she saw the items on the bed. "Your Highness? This is true?"

"Yes," Sarianna laughed. "Please, make your choice. You have worked hard for me, and the days will be harder still. You have earned some extra consideration."

Thora nearly burst into tears when she opened the jewel box. "Princess, you are a treasure! This has given me security for my old age. And such finery to wear."

"Consider them a gift to celebrate my upcoming betrothal," she smiled.

Thora sniffed, then composed herself. She picked up her bundle. "Well, we can't be forgetting our duties. Hanna, take your lovely things. You may lock them in the fine linen closet until we can get you a proper chest. Then, draw her Highness a bath."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank, you ma'am. Thank you, your Highness!"

Thora gave her most formal curtsy. "The honor of serving your house grows each year, Highness. Thank you."

Bath time was filled with Hanna's happy chatter about where she would wear her new gowns. She wisely chose to keep her jewelry locked away for a dowry. That would keep the other servants from being too envious. Her chatter was soothing to Sarianna after a long day. Even so, the Princess was not ready for rest after her supper. The suitors were coming, and Sarianna had no idea what to do with them.

Once the Almourol Citadel quieted in sleep, the Princess slipped out of her chambers to the library. There were certain books of poetry and prose her tutors had kept away from her curious eyes as a child. One governess called them unseemly. For a long time, Sarianna was obsessed with reading them. She made great, elaborate plans on how to

scale the tall bookcases to get them. But the library was never unattended during the day. And Sarianna was never able to stay awake long enough at night to execute her plan. Over time, Sarianna forgot about the books. During her bath, she remembered just where they were kept.

The books took little time to find. Sarianna remembered the exact place on the bookshelves where they rested. The cases were not so tall for her as a woman that scaling was required. One reach and a volume was in her hands. It was smaller than she recollected. But then her hands had been much smaller when she last sought the secrets between the bindings. The size would make it easier to secrete. She thus chose a larger volume in which to carry the missive about. No one noticed that Sarianna had left her bed.

The book was opened with great anticipation. However, within a few pages, the Princess was more profoundly confused than she had been before beginning to read. There were phrases like “nether lips” and “throbbing shaft” that made no sense at all. She understood well what each word meant, but the string of them together sounded like babble. There was no appendix at the end. Sarianna felt so frustrated that she wanted to throw the book across the room. But a moment’s thought and some sips on her hot cocoa calmed those thoughts. Perhaps the other volumes were annotated in some fashion. And there were large and heavy tomes she often used to learn new words. Explanations might be found in one of them.

Chapter Two

Prince Nikulainen loved the rain, especially when it was warm and driving. It made movement through the trees more challenging, but it was the difficulty he enjoyed. The Prince would train hard even though he did not have a blood lust for battle. The attention to his body's breathing, movement and exertion calmed his mind and settled his spirit. He liked to extend his reach and tax his strength and test his aim a little more each day when he trained. The result left him exhausted at the end, but it gave him a deep and dreamless sleep. And the next day, Nikulainen would wake stronger and faster and surer than the day before.

He moved quickly through the rain-soaked branches, keeping pace with the fast canter of his beloved mount below. Ajaa did not enjoy the rain as much as his master, but he loved the special rubdown and treat given as reward at the end of the ride. As the trees thinned toward the clearing near the fortress walls, Nikulainen swung down to light upon his saddle. The leather saddle was wet, as were his boots. He failed to find purchase and immediately slid off the side. The Prince had anticipated that. He went with the fall, hooking both hands around the horn of the saddle and using the ground to spring back, seating himself without the horse ever breaking stride.

Nikulainen always confounded his brothers with his unusual athleticism and uncanny grace, but his unpredictable fighting style made him an asset in battle. During

their skirmishes with the wild peoples who attacked the borders of the Hanyanoore, the Prince had a penchant for dropping behind enemy lines and subduing opposing leaders. Though his style was unusual, the youngest son of King Magnus was as fierce a hand-to-hand combatant as his older brothers. He was lithe where they were broad, but he had a physical strength that matched Armas and Julin. When the occasion called for it, he was far stronger than they.

What light there was that day was waning, as the storm grew fiercer. By the time Nikulainen reached the stables, the rain was blinding and growing cold. The Prince's valet, Jorgen, was waiting with drying cloths, clothing and boots.

"Your father awaits," Jorgen said.

"He does? I am not overdue for the evening meal," Nikulainen said. He began to strip out of his wet clothing. Naked, he began to take care of his horse.

"I believe there was a messenger from Arinpera," the valet replied. "There has been much talk about it."

"I will hear this talk, Jorgen," the Prince said as he rubbed down the horse. "I will know what awaits my return."

"King Vaurus has decreed that his daughter marry and forge an alliance with one of the kingdoms of the Hanyanoore."

Nikulainen frowned. He gave his horse a treat of sweet carrots, then a lump of sugar for tolerating the rain. Finally, he dried himself. The warm clothes felt good against his chilled flesh.

“Why summon me? My brothers are full born to the royal line,” he wondered aloud.
“They would make much better matches than I.”

“I know not, milord. I just know that he awaits,” the valet said. He was trying valiantly to wring the excess water out of the Prince’s long blond locks while his master pulled on his boots.

The Prince pulled back the damp hair and tied it into a ponytail. Normally, he would have bathed and changed for dinner. But the King would know this. He looked presentable enough. Hopefully, the Arinperan princess would not be in the hall waiting as well.

“Thank you, Jorgen. Make sure my steed is settled. You are then free from duty until the morn,” the Prince said.

“Thank you, Sir.”

Nikulainen really was confused. His mixed bloodline made it unlikely that he would be thought of as a good match for a Princess. Nikulainen always assumed that he would take his place as head of Magnus’ garrisons and marry someone suitable to his station. He also had hopes of having some say in the choosing of a wife.

King Magnus was alone in his receiving hall contemplating the fire in the large fireplace. The large gray-toned room always looked eerie by firelight. Shadows flitted around the corners. And the large mounted heads on the walls seemed to be alive and watching him. When Nikulainen was young, he had first learned that he could climb nearly sheer walls trying to prove to his brothers that there was life in the eyes of those beasts. Magnus looked more imposing before that great fire. His height and his brawn

cast a large shadow. The light made the reddishness tones of his dark hair look fiery. The burning gold glinted off the darkness of his penetrating eyes making it look like the flames came from within. He looked up at Nikulainen as he entered. A small smile tugged at his lips.

"Did you enjoy your ride, my son?" He asked dryly. "Was the torrent to your liking?"

"It was quite enjoyable, Father," he replied brightly. "I pray I have not kept you waiting overlong."

"Nay. Come and sit by the fire," he said. "Dry your hair. I cannot have you fall ill at this time."

"But I never fall ill," Nikulainen laughed. He freed his hair and let it spread over his shoulders to dry more quickly.

"That is true," the King chuckled. "I've hardly seen you bruise, though you've thrown your body in such fashions as to cause my heart to stop."

"'Tis never my intent, Father," the Prince smiled.

"The spark of mischief in your eyes belies that," Magnus said. "You have your dear mother's light inside you. That is why I spoil you."

The King's tone was wistful and caused the Prince to frown. "What troubles you, Great King?"

"The Lady Reija tells me this fortress has too many princes," he replied. "And my dear Lady is never wrong, but I find myself behaving like an old grandmother. I am loathe to let any of you leave Ritvala."

“Leave?”

“An edict has arrived from the Great King of Arinpera declaring that his daughter shall marry,” Magnus explained. “You know how important that kingdom is to the stability of the known lands.”

“Yes, father. It is strategic politically and economically because of its location and wealth,” Nikulainen replied.

“The king is offering the chosen suitor an immediate appointment as Regent,” Magnus said. “That marriage means more than a prized alliance, it means immediate access to incredible power and resources”

“Aye, that is a prize,” the Prince said thoughtfully. “But, Father, my brothers...”

“Your brothers have higher station, true. But this princess is unique in the known lands,” Magnus said. “Her mother was the daughter of the last Prefect of Arinpera and the Keeper of the Light.”

“The Light is a legend, is it not?”

“Some say the Surrimetsa are a legend,” Magnus replied mildly. “There are rulers who remember what the Light can mean. I would not wish for those to have control of Arinpera.”

Nikulainen felt his eyes widen. “But father...Armas... Would King Vaurus not prefer...”

“Princess Sarianna was raised by indulgent governesses and tutors and educated at a level that could challenge most sitting rulers. It is also said that she is as headstrong as

she is beautiful. I am certain that she will be choosing her husband, not her elderly father," he replied.

"She sounds better suited to Armas," Nikulainen murmured. "He enjoys a spirited challenge."

"I agree, and he will have an opportunity to work his charms on the princess," Magnus said. "However, I know that Princess Sarianna has been sheltered all her life from the ways of other courts. It is a certainty that she knows nothing of men other than what she can glean from books. Such a young woman may shrink from a man as bold as Armas or as brooding as Julin. Fine men they are, but they may well be too much for a delicate flower."

Nikulainen frowned. He had never thought of himself as a seducer of any kind. His father noticed the look and smiled. "My son is unaware of his attributes. You have a handsomeness that is a beauty. And my most savage warrior has the heart of a poet. You laugh easily and bring merriment to the dourest of gatherings. You have your dear mother's gift of endearing yourself to almost anyone you meet."

"Father!" the Prince exclaimed. He blushed uncomfortably.

"I do not exaggerate, Son. Many women in this fortress would throw themselves from the highest wall were you to ask them," Magnus chuckled. "Such an untried young woman will be drawn to you, of that I have no doubt."

This was all very strange for Nikulainen. Battle strategy was something he could easily understand. Politics was another thing that came easily for him. Women were a

complete mystery to him. The idea of so much depending on his meager abilities was overwhelming.

“Nikulainen, this is as important as any battle you would fight and risk your life in the King’s name. You will watch everyone as you always do. When your brothers falter, you will win the favor of the fair Sarianna,” Magnus said in a soft, stern voice. “This is a royal command with the full weight and consequences of that order. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father,” the Prince replied. His voice was as quiet and sure, as it always was when he accepted a royal command. He would not let Magnus see how his harsh words affected him.

“That’s my son. Go and prepare for the evening meal,” the King said. His humor had returned as it always did when he got his way. “And show your face to your mother so she knows it is still whole.”

“I will.”

The Prince seemed serene when he found his mother in her chambers. He loved his visits with Lady Reija. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever known. Her face was as young as their youngest chambermaid. Her hair was the same long, heavy veil of pale gold as his. Everyone loved to look upon her. The Prince knew whatever troubled him would be gone with her smile. Nikulainen took care not to trouble her fair countenance. But Lady Reija knew better. Her magical, blue-green eyes fixed warmly upon him as he knelt before her.

She took his face in her hands, looking at him intently. "You smell of rain, dear Niku. And you are very troubled."

Nikulainen closed his eyes tightly, chiding himself for bringing his ills to his mother. "'Tis nothing, Mother. My own failings."

She smoothed a warm hand over his brow. "Now, now. You know you cannot hide from me. Is it about your father's plans in Arinpera?"

The Prince let out an anguished sigh. "Am I not a good son to him, Mother?"

"You are a fine son to the King, Niku. You work very hard to please him, and you succeed very well," she replied.

"Why then does he command me and use our status against me?" the Prince whispered. "He calls me 'son' in one breath, then reminds me that we are hostages in the next."

To his surprise, his mother's smile never wavered. "My son, the Great King can speak most powerfully and persuasively in matters of state. But in matters close to his heart, he has no words that he trusts. So he roars like a great lion when he wants to plead like a lamb. Your father loves you so very much. You must trust that he would never harm you or me."

Nikulainen wasn't sure. She did not see his father's eyes or hear the weight of his tone. "But what he asks, Mother..."

"Magnus asks you to follow your heart to a princess whose beauty has inspired songs. He wants you to court a woman of wit and grace and intelligence," she said.

"Your father knows you very well. Sometimes, you hide yourself from others so they

may not see how keenly you feel everything. He would never ask you to trick anyone into choosing you. What he wants is for you to show her your heart. If she is as is told, she will choose you."

His heart was no longer as heavy, just unsure. Lady Reija chuckled.

"'Tis a wonder that you remain so humble amidst such siblings," she sighed. "If you can do naught else, trust me, dear son, and trust your heart."

After a moment of thought, the Prince nodded. "I will, Mother. I promise."

Nikulainen managed to retrieve some of the good mood he had during his rain-soaked ride by the time he came to the evening meal. Armas was in fine humor. The Prince could hear his brother's boisterous laughter long before he entered the dining hall. It was a certainty that Armas was very interested in a journey away from Ritvala's fortress. It had been a couple of seasons since there was need to visit neighboring lands and even longer since they had to take up arms against anyone. The eldest Prince had been chafing against the inactivity.

Of his older brothers, Armas was most like Magnus. It was as if he had sprung whole from his sire. They had the same imposing height, broad shoulders and physiques that were both muscular and sleek. It seemed Armas grew his father's powerful limbs overnight. He had his father's handsome face, but his hair was a rich dark brown without the reddish undertones. Both of their faces were saved from sternness by large dark eyes that gave easily to mirth.

Armas' smile grew when he spied Nikulainen. "You are clothed, my brother. Praise be! I saw the rain, and my heart sank. Another display of swooning maids I do not think I could stand."

The Prince smiled despite himself. "My mother sent my valet this time."

"The Lady Reija is very wise," Armas chuckled. "Pray remember to make such arrangements at the Almourol Citadel."

"Armas, I would not..."

"Please, Brother," Prince Julin sighed. "Our modest brother would never be so bold as to display his wares to the Princess. Pray you remember that not every woman responds well to a dead stag laid at her feet."

"Perhaps you shall subdue her by rendering her to slumber with epic, maudlin poems," Armas replied.

Prince Julin may have been happy at the prospect of a beautiful bride. But his sardonic demeanor never changed, so it was hard for Nikulainen to tell. He had the same dark, expressive eyes as Magnus and Armas, but his were much more guarded. He had his mother's thick, auburn tresses. His mouth was grim where Armas and Magnus smiled easily. His wit was merry enough, but the barbs were quite sharp. He was still glaring at Armas when the youngest Prince seated himself.

King Magnus laughed. "It is good thing that we are taking this journey. You have all been underfoot for too long."

"When do we depart, father?" Armas asked. "And how long shall we tarry there?"

"We leave five days hence and we depart after the wedding night," Magnus said. His voice was firm and sure. "I have ordered out craftsman to fashion gifts for King Vauraus and Princess Sarianna. The royal tailors arrive in the morn to measure you for new garments."

"Are we to be festooned like peacocks?" Armas demanded. "This woman is to be a king's bride. She should know him to be a man."

"Does that mean you have no plans to bathe?" Julin inquired mildly.

"No woman has ever turned her nose up at the good honest sweat of a man," Armas replied.

It probably wasn't the sweat, Nikulainen mused. It was likely the animal musk and the scent of blood that gave females problems with Armas after a hunt. He caught Magnus watching him while his elder sons argued. The glance was pointed and knowing. Nikulainen met the glance with a small smile.

"My good Lady Reija will help with the choosing of fabrics," Magnus said after the ruckus subsided. "You prepare for battle. This is no different. I intend to win."

Julin's pain at the thought was clear in his voice. "I would rather face the heat of battle than those preening fops crawling all over me while telling me what a golden god Niku is."

The young prince glanced sharply at Julin but said nothing. He had no intention of being drawn into his brothers' bickering. They usually ended up turning on him when he did.

"You sound concerned about competition from our younger brother," Armas taunted.

"Who knows what is in the mind of a young woman?" Julin asked.

"I do not care what is in her mind, so long as she has the sense to choose me," Armas said. His expression was very much like his father's – unyielding and determined.

Nikulainen listened carefully to the tone of his brother's voice. It did not seem that he was planning on giving the Princess a choice. This was troubling. His elder brother was not accustomed to rejection. There had been moments on the battlefield where Nikulainen had been faster and more skilled against an opponent. But at those times only the battle mattered. Armas only noticed the victory. Never had the young Prince set out to take something Armas was determined to have. But the King and Lady Reija were certain that it would come to that. What remained of Nikulainen's good mood fled.

"Drink some wine, Niku," Magnus said quietly. "I'll not have you catch a chill."

The young Prince nodded, accepting the goblet. He welcomed the warm sweetness as he swallowed. The taste reminded him that he was hungry. His trencher had been untouched, and it smelled good. The rest of the room drifted to the background as he addressed his supper. Ritvala had fine food. He would miss it.

"Father, what do you know of court life in Arinpera?" Nikulainen asked.

He spoke so unexpectedly that everyone went silent.

"It is a wealthy land. The King does not waste it with great opulence, but he does feed his guests well. There will be much fine food. And there is comfort in the

chambers," Magnus said. "They keep to formal protocols, dressing for the evening meal and the like."

"Can we train there?" Nikulainen asked.

As always, the young Prince had found a way to please his father. Magnus smiled. "The commander of the garrisons likes his men to learn new methods. And it would do well for our cause to show them the sort of might we offer in alliance."

"And we shall show them," Armas said. "We will take a squadron of our finest men."

"Aye, but we leave the legions deployed under the garrison's commander," Magnus replied. "We shall not tarry longer than necessary, but Ritvala must not be left at risk."

The conversation thus turned from boasting and squabbling to practical planning. Nikulainen enjoyed the planning and his meal. The evening still left him troubled, but he was able to drift into a sound and dreamless sleep.

"Mother," Nikulainen said as calmly as he could. "Have I not tried on every shade of green against my skin?"

Lady Reija laughed. "Not every shade, Niku. I want the darkest one to offset your hair."

"Haven't we offset all that I have?" he asked in exasperation.

The royal tailor even chuckled over that last question. The young Prince fell silent. Lady Reija took pity on her child.

“What gift will you give the Princess?” she asked.

Nikulainen looked up at her. “I thought I would give her a history of Ritvala and the Eastern lands.”

“Really. Why?”

“It is said she is well educated. Thus, she must enjoy reading,” Nikulainen replied.

“It means she must have a curiosity about many things. Much has happened in the years I’ve grown up here that she would not know. I believe she would be interested in reading about it.”

“I don’t know of such a book.”

“I have worked on one for some time,” he replied. “I have given it to the scribes to copy. I’ve been assured it will be ready in time.”

“That is a very thoughtful gift, Niku,” Lady Reija said. “And it is certainly a better choice for such a young woman than a stag.”

The tailor announced that he was finished. Lady Reija had her maid take him to Julin, who had avoided being fitted all morning. That left Nikulainen alone with his mother.

“What troubles you still, my son?”

“Armas,” he replied simply. “He means to wed the Princess. I think her desires may matter not to him.”

“That may be true,” she admitted. “He has your father’s drives and example in many things, but not his understanding of people and their feelings. A serious rejection may be what he needs to build his character.”

Nikulainen laughed out loud. "Teaching Armas lessons can be a painful affair."

"Ah, but there will be a lady's well being at stake," Lady Reija said. "You will know what is best if the time ever comes."

The young Prince sorely wished his mother could accompany them. He was not a man that needed to be near his mother to function, but she had a calm way of seeing that he lacked at times. However, Magnus never let her leave the fortress. Nikulainen had stopped asking why years earlier. She truly had no desire to leave. He had learned to accept that.

"Go and prepare, Niku. Worry no more."

Nikulainen nodded. He pushed all doubt from his mind and focused on the journey ahead.

Chapter Three

Sarianna rode long and hard every day following the departure of her first suitor. She rode until her horse was exhausted. She drove the sentries mad keeping up with her. There was no help for it. Riding was the only way the Princess could blot the previous fortnight out of her memory. The thunder of the hooves and the howl of the wind kept his voice out of her head. The jarring, breathless rides made her forget the feel of his hands on her skin. The problem was that the rides ended throwing Sarianna into a spiral of anger and despair. She was a thundercloud when she was not on her horse. For days on end, the Princess said nothing that wasn't absolutely necessary.

On the fourth day when Sarianna stormed from the stables, she found Neuvoja waiting instead of Hanna. While she didn't want another silent, tense bath with her chambermaid, the Princess really did not want to talk to her advisor.

"I cannot hear any words about my demeanor right now, Neuvoja," she muttered. "Please go. We shall speak in the morning."

"Princess, I come with news," the advisor replied. "A messenger from Ritvala arrived with news that King Magnus is journeying here with his three sons."

Sarianna found her legs had no strength. She sank onto the nearest chair. "Three? When will they arrive?"

"Two days hence at the most," he replied.

The Princess sighed heavily. "Tell me of these sons of Ritvala."

"They are accomplished warriors all and said to have their father's fine looks and bearing," Neuvoja replied. "The youngest one was born of the Suurimetsa."

"The Forest People?" Sarianna asked. "I thought no one from the Hanyanoore ever had contact with them."

"King Magnus did and took one as a hostage bride," the advisor replied.

"I am to meet three warriors whose father has taken a bride and made her bear him a son," Sarianna muttered.

"Ritvala would be a good alliance for Arinpera," Neuvoja said.

"But you still think Rowsdower would have been a better one," the Princess pointed out.

"I am sorry, Princess," he said quietly. "I was thinking that they are close to our borders, and the Queen is an ally of your father's. Perhaps among the three princes there could be a suitable match."

"Please, say no more of it. I must find a way to do what is required," she said quietly.

"All the kind words and advice cannot change the fact that I must face these... suitors... alone."

"Princess..."

"Have their chambers been made ready?"

"Yes, Highness. All is ready for their arrival."

"Thank you, my dear teacher. Please send Hanna to me."

"Princess, it breaks our hearts to see you in such a state."

"It is the way of things. You had your trials to test your knowledge. Warriors must tax their bodies to prepare for battle," she said. "There is little being asked of me by comparison. We can talk further in the morning. I grow weary."

There was much more he wanted to say. Sarianna knew this. But she could not talk about what had happened to anyone. If she talked about it, she would dwell on it. If she dwelled on it, she would never be able to face those brothers.

Neuvoja relented. "Very well. Sleep well, Princess."

"I will try."

Sarianna did not sleep well. Sleep was the one place her barriers were down, and he could get inside her mind again. His name was Prince Rowsdower, proud son of Queen Taraasta from the wealthy and powerful Hakuni Kingdom. This was one of the few lands that dealt with outside Kingdoms. An alliance with the Hakuni would open vast trade beyond their borders. The Princess was very happy to meet him at first. The Queen was a longtime friend of her father's. She was one of the few who still visited on occasion. The Queen was always nice to her during those visits. Having a good relationship with a husband's parent was an advantage.

The Prince had not visited since he was a boy. Sarianna was too young to remember him. Taraasta had him schooled at many of the kingdoms in the Hanyanoore. All who knew of him said he had grown into a fine and intelligent man. Not one ill word was spoken, even amongst the servants. Sarianna listened very carefully for negative words.

To her great relief, all signs were good. Her meeting with the Prince had been filled with expectation.

Rowsdower was not a handsome man, but he had an attractiveness Sarianna found appealing. He was tall and lithe with his mother's hooded gray-green eyes and a full, almost sensual mouth and thick red hair. They got along well during the feasts. Conversation came easily. The Princess forgot about her limited knowledge of men and enjoyed the time they spent together. Everyone in the kingdom was buoyed by how well this first suitor was doing. King Vauraus was especially pleased to see Taraasta's son in the company of his daughter.

Then came that fateful night. Sarianna was in her private courtyard where none would disturb her without an alarm. Rowsdower surprised her there. He said he was troubled and none but she could help him relieve his agony. Of course, the Princess was disturbed by his impassioned words and very much wanted to aid him. She asked how she could help him. She pleaded for a way to aid him. Rowsdower said her beauty haunted him to the point of fever. He could not sleep without her kiss. His words had excited her, and she had been curious about kissing him. Hanna had been pestering her for days about whether she had or not. In that charged atmosphere, she offered him her lips.

What Sarianna had expected, she could not say, save for it had nothing to do with being seized by the shoulders and nearly gagged by an unexpected tongue down her throat. Prince Rowsdower mistook her gasping cries for ardor. The Princess had barely begun to struggle against the kiss when she found his wet mouth trailing moisture

along her neck while one hand was squeezing her breast. There was a hardness pressing between her thighs. An image of the stable's prize stallion before mating flashed into her brain frightening and repulsing her.

In the next instant, Sarianna was angry. If he took her maidenhood, no other suitor would have her. He could force a marriage. Whether that was his intention or whether her beauty had caused a brain fever did not matter. She had to get away from him. Sarianna remembered that aside from hardness, there was vulnerability between a man's legs. The Princess brought her knee up to connect with the area. When Rowsdower released her, Sarianna bid him to leave lest she summon the guards. Sarianna spent a long time in her bath that night. She scrubbed herself until her flesh was pink and sore and the water was cold. A guard stood by her door that night for what little sleep was possible.

Sarianna thought she looked like she always did when she appeared before her father the next morning. But those great gray eyes saw something was deeply troubling her. He terminated the visit at the morning meal. The King was polite for the sake of an old alliance, but he spoke with a firmness not heard in many a season. The suitor and the Queen left by mid-day. Sarianna had to tolerate Rowsdower's presence for only a moment in the main courtyard to say goodbye.

The memory of the Prince would not go away as easily. When not about her father's business, Sarianna was in a bath or riding a horse like a madwoman. Her mood swung wildly from anger at the assumptions and drives of men to despair that she would fail

her father through some shortcoming on her part. After all, a simple peasant girl could control the wiles of men. Why was she so inept?

Her outlook had not elevated with the new day. Three Princes were coming. They were all warriors with a father who had stolen a woman for a wife. Sarianna could not understand why Neuvoja did not see this as something to fear. Vauraus was not afraid. The Great King surprised her by saying that King Magnus always brought laughter to a hall and expected that his sons would as well. Laughter was not something she expected from these men. The King seemed to look forward to the visit. Sarianna did not know what to make of that.

Further confusion came with the King's statements before he retired for the day. He was muttering about King Magnus having a sharp eye but an ambition that could still cost him what he lived for. Those vague statements meant little save that the visiting King and his warrior sons were somehow vulnerable. That made the Princess feel a little hopeful. Very little. She would have to find out what made Magnus vulnerable and how she could use it.

Such qualms and questions had to wait. Sarianna once again sought refuge from her troubles. But there was something amiss when she arrived at the Almourol Citadel's main stables. Her mount had not been saddled as she had ordered before the mid-day meal. Instead, Minos the stable master was pacing and agitated when she arrived.

"What goes on here, Minos?" Sarianna asked. "Why is Kelata not ready?"

Minos lowered his eyes, but she could tell he was angry. His short, narrow body was nearly vibrating in agitation. His white hair nearly stood on end. It was rare to see him in such a state. "I cannot do that, Highness."

"Why ever not?" she demanded. Her patience was thin and she did not want to hear nonsense.

"She will be lame if you ride her today as you have these last," he replied. "Her limbs are strained, and she needs to rest."

Sarianna's anger drained out of her under the stable master's withering gaze. She rushed to her beloved mount's stall. The animal's condition was evident immediately. Her ears perked up when the Princess came near, but she was listless and favoring one leg.

"Oh, Kelata what have I done to you?" Sarianna whispered. "Please forgive me."

The horse nuzzled the hand stroking her nose. Sarianna wanted to cry. How could she have been so inconsiderate to a creature that had shown her naught but affection? She took off her riding coat and reached for a heavy apron on a nearby peg.

"Leave her to me, Minos," Sarianna said quietly. "I will tend to her today."

The old stable master smiled. "That will be good, Highness. She will like that."

"Have someone fetch me a bucket of boiling water," she said.

"Yes, your Highness."

Sarianna walked her horse into the sunlight of the open area in front of the stables while she cleaned out the stall. The pages were appalled at finding her doing such work. Most of them were too young to know she had often worked in the muck as a

girl. It was the fair trade the captain of the guard demanded for her riding lessons. He thought it would make her go back to the more genteel teaching a lady receives from her governess. But the young Princess liked the way the soldiers rode, thus she worked with Minos from then on as time permitted.

Though her activity was not necessarily odd, the impending arrival of the next suitors prompted many to question her timing. First Hanna came by to ask if she might relieve her of the work. Then Thora came by to prod Minos into taking over. The stable master chased both women out with a manure-coated broom. The next was Neuvoja who found her shampooing Kelata.

Sarianna glared at her advisor. "If everyone would leave me be, I could finish all the faster."

"My apologies, your Highness," he said. "But King Magnus' party could arrive at any time."

"Are we not planning use the main hall to receive them?" she asked over the sudsy mane.

"Of course," he replied. The question seemed to startle him.

"Neuvoja, we are far from there right now. Simply have someone summon me when they approach the Citadel's main gate," she said. "Offer them their chambers to change from the journey. By the time they finish, I will be ready to greet them. Now, go and have someone send me more hot water."

He left with something of a smile on his face. Perhaps it was because Sarianna was no longer scowling. Tending to Kelata calmed her like nothing else had. She felt

connected to her beautiful mount, and the horse was enjoying the comforting attention. All her concerns finally slipped away as she shampooed, then dried, then groomed her horse. The Princess wrapped the sore leg in warm cloths and fed her apples. As the afternoon sun began to wane, Kelata seemed more comfortable. Sarianna put her back into her stall and took off the apron. Her limbs felt almost as sore as when she rode, but her mind was much more at ease. Perhaps that night, she would not have those troubling dreams.

And then, the Almourol Citadel alarm sounded. So rarely had it been heard in Arinpera that at first Sarianna didn't know what it was. Minos ended her confusion.

"Highness, help me close the stable! We are under attack!" He shouted.

Sarianna quickly closed the heavy wooden window shutters as Minos closed the great main doors to the stables. Sentries arrived as they finished. The Princess knew they were startled and upset to find her so far from the main building. It could have been far worse. She could have been out riding.

"Do not try to get me back," Sarianna called out to them. "There is too much open area. As far as strangers know, I am a stable girl. Go!"

The men took positions nearby to defend the back entrance and the King's horses. Sarianna didn't expect an attack there. It was nearly inaccessible to those who were not very familiar with the roads. And the terrain was such that no heavy weaponry could get through. Still, Minos picked up a short sword and gave Sarianna a large hunting knife. They anxiously looked through narrow slats in the door toward the main gate straining to hear what was happening.

The noise was not coming from that far gate. The walls near the back entrance were being scaled. Whizzing arrows viciously struck down the sentries on those walls. The battle was engaged before anyone from that gate could sound an alarm.

"This is madness," Sarianna hissed. "Who would attack in such a manner?"

"Assassins," Minos replied with quiet certainty. "I feel it in these old bones. They know you are here or would be nearby."

"What are we to do? No one has sounded the alarm from this gate!"

"This building will hold. If they try to burn it, help will arrive," he said.

The Princess looked at him balefully. "Burn?"

"Worry not, Princess. I do not think it will come to that," he said.

Suddenly, black-clad men with bows and swords dropped down from the wall where the Sentries had fallen. There were ten of them with more on the wall. The guards near the stables were soon overwhelmed with fighting them, leaving the Princess completely vulnerable.

Just as suddenly, the assassins on the wall were falling with arrows in their chests. Sarianna saw a flash of someone running along the wall shooting arrows with incredible speed. Swift footsteps were heard crossing the stable roof. Then the figure was in the middle of the battle in front of them with a sword drawn. He was very tall with long, pale golden hair. That was all she could see, for he moved so quickly dispatching the assassins two at a time. Her own guards had fallen, but were not dead. This stranger kept killing blows from them. He took up the horn of alarm and sounded it when his last combatant had fallen.

"He is here to help!" Sarianna exclaimed, moving to the door.

"Nay, Princess," Minos whispered urgently. "It may be a ruse."

"He has sounded the alarm. I shall meet him before others arrive," she stated. Minos opened the door, but kept his sword and stood close to her.

Sarianna stepped out of the stable as the young man turned toward the movement. In the light of the sunset, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen. He had a tall, lithe body, but he was muscled where Rowsdower had been soft. He had large, expressive dark eyes, fine high cheekbones, a firm jaw and a well-formed mouth. He was masculine indeed, despite the long, thick fall of pale gold hair. Yet he was very beautiful. The man gazed at her for a long moment, and then he sank gracefully onto one knee.

"I am your servant, Princess," he said in a quiet, rich voice.

"She is my stable girl. The Princess is not here!" Minos exclaimed.

"Do not fear me, milady," he said softly.

Sarianna found she did not. "What is your name, sir?"

"I am Nikulainen, son of King Magnus and Lady Reija of Ritvala," he replied.

She found she liked listening to him. She found it would be hard not to look at him. Her breathing became more difficult. Her cheeks colored, but her gaze never wavered.

"I am Princess Sarianna, and I owe you a great debt."

He smiled then, and her breath quietly caught.

"Nay, Princess. 'Tis my honor to serve."

There was a great deal of whinnying at the back gate, which was being scraped urgently. Nikulainen chuckled, making him even more appealing.

"My horse has found me," he said. "I'll check the gate."

Sarianna and Minos watched in amazement as the Prince scaled the gate with no rope to peer over it. He then dropped gracefully to the ground and pulled the large wooden doors open almost as if they were made of paper. A beautiful, black stallion trotted in and nuzzled the Prince. He closed the gate, then headed back to the stable. The horse nuzzled Sarianna, who was enchanted by him as well.

"You smell apples, don't you?" she asked rubbing his nose. "Aren't you a beautiful boy?"

"He is a fine mount," Minos said.

"Ajaa agrees," Nikulainen said. His eyes were full of mirth.

"May I give him an apple?" Sarianna asked.

"Of course," he replied. "Sir, if you would help me with the men. My brothers should be here soon. They took on the battle at the front gate."

Sarianna went red. She'd forgotten her own guards because of this beguiling man.

"Minos, put the Prince's horse next to Kelata. Then bring drinking water. I'll help him with the wounded."

There were clean, dry cloths left over from the grooming. Sarianna knelt beside the Prince and helped him bind the wounds. Those fallen by the black arrows were dead. Those who had been struck by swords needed a healer quickly. Nikulainen was quick

and efficient there as well. They had been fortunate not to be badly injured. The pain was obvious as they came awake with handling. Some protested her tending to them.

“Be still, soldier,” she said firmly. “You risked your life for me.”

By then, Captain Rajotin and his men had arrived. They secured the back gate, then carefully moved the injured to the barracks. He politely but firmly bid her to return to the Citadel. She just as firmly declined. Minos came with water for the men to drink. Sarianna served a dipperful to Nikulainen.

“How did you know I was Sarianna?” she asked quietly as they stepped away from the men and the corpses.

His cheeks colored then. “You looked liked the words in the song.”

Sarianna gaped at him. In a few days time, she had gone from lamenting even having to be involved with a man to wanting to stroke the Prince’s beautiful golden hair. He really was of the Forest Realm. He was magical.

“There he is Father! Playing in the stables again,” a deep booming voice bellowed from a short distance away.

Sarianna looked up to see a tall, broad, dark-haired rider approaching. Neuvoja was with him. Two other large men followed.

“At least he has his clothes on,” another voice said.

“Armas!” a third voice bellowed. “So help me, if you’re like that in front of the Princess...”

They stopped in front of the carnage. Nikulainen looked at the large men ruefully, but there was affection in his expression.

"I'm afraid you're too late," he said mirthfully. "Princess, meet my father, King Magnus, and my brothers, Armas and Julin."

"Praise be that you are safe," the advisor said, rushing to her. "You are well?"

"And whole. The guards need attention immediately," she said. "And send someone to clear away these bodies."

Neuvoja signaled his page to get help.

"Our guests have given us a great service," she said, looking up at Magnus. "If you will allow me, I will see to your mounts while you settle in your chambers. The evening meal will be as soon as possible."

The advisor gaped at her. Magnus smiled.

"You are no little slip of a girl, are you?" he said approvingly. "Vauraus raised you well."

He dismounted, then brought the reins to Sarianna, who curtsied low before him. "Thank you, Sire. My advisor will take you all to your chambers."

"Until later, Princess. Armas and Julin, come with me. I will speak to the captain of the guard about the origins of these assassins before we seek the comfort of our chambers. Nikulainen, help the Princess, then see her safely to the citadel."

Sarianna waited until the men were far enough that they could not hear.

"You do not have to help me, Nikulainen," she said.

"I am Niku," he replied easily. "My brothers think my name too long for one without girth. And my father knows that I enjoy working with horses."

They worked separately and quickly, rubbing down the mounts and feeding them. Kelata liked the Prince, which spoke volumes to Sarianna. The horse nuzzled him each time he passed the stall. By the time they finished, the stable yard had been cleared of all traces of battle. Minos told them the healer was heading for the garrison. Sarianna gave him leave for the night, knowing the old stable master was spent.

"Thank you for your help, Niku," she said as they strolled back to the main buildings.

"I am here to serve," he said. His eyes were warm and sincere. "Ask anything of me."

Sarianna felt devilment grow in her eyes. "You may rue that sentence, Niku."

He smiled at her. "I do not believe so, milady."

A valet waited with Hanna near the main doors. He apparently belonged to Nikulainen.

"My Prince, your chamber awaits," he said.

"Thank you, Jorgen. Until later, Princess," he said with a bow.

Sarianna curtsied, then swept toward her room. Hanna took a moment to catch up. She was, the Princess knew, gaping at Nikulainen.

"I thought the father and brothers were fine figures of men," she breathed as she hurried the Princess through her bath. "I have never seen anything like that last one. And he took on eight men for you."

“It was more than a dozen,” Sarianna said. And Nikulainen had never boasted. He had knelt before her, then helped her in the stables. He did not act like a Prince at all. She remembered her father’s words about service and protection. The Prince moved like the legend said the Forest People moved and had the strength of three his size.

Hanna sighed as she helped the Princess into her dress. “Will you tell me about him after the evening meal?”

Sarianna laughed. “You feign that you would not already know! Hurry with my hair.”

The Princess had been dreading another supper with a suitor and the family. Suddenly, she could not wait. Whether this beguiling man was her choice was too soon to tell, but she was hopeful once again that she could at least try to do what was required of her.

Chapter Four

Prince Nikulainen felt as though he has stepped into a wonderful dream. His heart felt light, and his mind was filled with possibilities. The journey had not begun that way. He had been determined but grim. Even the cadence of the ride and the changing scenery of the journey failed to lull him the way it once would. Nikulainen rode point as always. His sharpness of eye, keenness of ear and sensitivity of flesh made him the perfect scout. The position suited him well on this particular journey. He did not have to listen to the conversations around him. His attention was many furlongs from the other riders.

On the morn of the third day of the ride, Nikulainen felt a freshening in the wind and saw a darkening on the far horizon. A large storm was on the way. That meant no more camping with the night. They would rest the horses twice a day, but the ride would be without stopping to camp. This suited the Prince. He wouldn't have to make conversation at supper, nor would he have to worry about trying to shut off his mind to sleep at night.

It was not that Nikulainen did not know how to talk to women. He talked to them all the time. They sought him often, it seemed, to talk to him endlessly about all manners of matters he did not understand. The Prince did not do well with formal introductions. It always seemed that the person being described was not in any way related to him.

These situations were even more difficult when his brothers were about. Perhaps it was his station amongst them, but Nikulainen was rendered near silent at these times. He couldn't fathom how he could let the Princess get to know him under those circumstances.

And then being presented did not matter. He could hear the thunder of hooves in the distance. Many riders were driving hard towards Almourol Citadel in the distance. Since Magnus and his family were the only ones expected, such haste meant either a grave plea for aide or an attack. Thus, their party drove swiftly onward to assist or defend. Nikulainen saw that the main gate to Almourol Citadel was under attack. He also saw a group of riders splinter off on a road that wound around the walls of the structure. Something urged him to follow. They numbered less than twenty. As it was a number that Magnus knew his gifted son could easily handle, he alone pursued them.

Nikulainen welcomed the battle. He lost himself in the heat of it, first scaling the wall after the black-clad warriors to engage them and then leaping amidst them to fight them sword-to-sword. It was puzzling to him that such a skilled group of attackers would bother with the stables. And then the stable door opened, and he knew why they were there. Nikulainen also knew why he was alive.

The stable master had been foolish to try to conceal her identity. No one else living in the same place could be as beautiful as Princess Sarianna. She was unexpectedly tall with lithesome, but womanly curves. Waves of soft, blue-black hair framed her face and fell to near her waist. And what a lovely face. Her eyes were the darkest blue deeply set above high fine cheekbones. She had a delicate, but well-defined jaw and lush, deep

pink lips. Her beauty sent him to his knee, and when he pledged his service, he meant it for life.

To his amazement and delight, Sarianna was interested in him. That may have been gratitude. It may have been because he was of the Forest Realm. None of the reasons mattered. Sarianna looked at him often and stayed by his side while he worked on the soldiers. Nikulainen's heart sank when he heard his brothers, but nothing changed with the Princess. She impressed his father, which quieted his brothers. And once more they were working together. A highborn princess who loved the stables was much more than he would have ever imagined. He had been reluctant to leave her even to change his clothes.

Sarianna was lovely by firelight as well. She was more of a princess than in a deep blue gown and her hair pinned up with jeweled hair clips. Magnus sat nearest to her, but Nikulainen was near enough to them that they could speak, and he could look at her. The tone of the meal was somber.

"The attack was clearly aimed at you, Princess," Magnus said. "The forces at the main gate were more for noise than conquest. There was no depth to the attack."

"And the arrows from the stable attack were all poisoned," Nikulainen said. "That is an assassin's weapon."

"Oh," the Princess said. She looked at a loss for what to say. It was obvious that she had no idea who would wish her dead.

"Princess, did anyone outside of the citadel know that you would be in the stables?" Magnus asked quietly.

Sarianna thought while chewing her food. The attack had not affected her appetite. For that, Nikulainen was relieved. He was starved and did not want to pick at his food to appear polite.

"My last visitors and any of the messengers from the various rulers who stayed more than a day knew I rode almost every afternoon. I prefer the trails at the east end of the walls," she said. "I would almost always be near the stables near dusk."

"If I may ask, who was the last visitor?" Magnus inquired.

"Queen Taraasta and her son," Sarianna said. Nikulainen noticed a distressed expression cross her face for an instant while mentioning the name.

"Taraasta," Magnus spat.

"That son of hers... Rowsdower," Julin said. "He was always skulking about court. Claimed to be studying our ways."

"He was studying our chambermaids," Armas said. "And I think he was after Niku. He kept talking about his hair."

"Niku did not like him. That was very odd," Magnus said.

He felt Sarianna's eyes upon him. She looked at him expectantly.

"He made me uncomfortable," Nikulainen said. "There was something about him that rang false."

The thought of such a strange and unsettling man near Sarianna bothered the young Prince. He was glad she did not seem to think well of him either.

"They are from a powerful land," Sarianna said. "Why would they want to attack me?"

"Why indeed, Princess?" Magnus asked.

She blushed under his gaze. "Father sent them away two days ago. You must ask him why."

"It can wait until the morn," Magnus said. "Our forces are here to aide yours. I ask that you go nowhere unaccompanied and that you place guards near your chamber."

The Princess seemed reluctant, but she agreed, then smiled ruefully. "I am accustomed to being unfettered. It will please most of the court to know where I am during the day."

Sarianna met Nikulainen's gaze and smiled at him. She seemed to sense they were kindred in that regard. They then ate their fill in easy conversation about the journey after that. Once her plate was empty, Sarianna rose from her place.

"Please, enjoy your meal and have some brandy if you like," Sarianna said. "I am afraid this day has taxed me to my limit."

Magnus bade her goodnight. The Princes did as well. Once she was gone, Magnus drew his sons nearer.

"She must be in the presence of one of you at all times when she is not in her chambers," he said. "Something very troubling is afoot. Armas, work your charms with the maids and find out how that witch Taraasta came to leave. Julin, talk to the captain of the guard about the Queen's men and what they did while they were here."

"And me, Father?" Nikulainen asked.

"Use those sharp eyes on the trails near the east gate as soon as you can," he replied. "Something may have been left behind. Do so before the rains come."

"Yes, father."

"Do not take any risks, Niku," Magnus said. "Vipers may still be in the tall grass."

"Yes, Father."

They retired after that. Nikulainen had no trouble sleeping. He dreamed of Sarianna on her beautiful horse riding with the wind in her hair.

King Vauraus was a fascinating man. He was far more aged than Nikulainen expected, yet there were great wisdom and fire still in his eyes. The young Prince was particularly interested in how well the elder King knew Magnus. This also seemed to surprise Princess Sarianna. They had their audience in the early morn before the first meal. Vauraus embraced Magnus upon entering the room, greatly pleased to see an old friend.

"Magnus, you have not diminished in the least since last these old eyes beheld you," he said. "And your sons have grown into such formidable men."

"Great King, I am pleased to be in your presence once more. It has been far too long," he said. "Sarianna is very fair and does you proud."

The Princess blushed at the compliment, but her attention was on her father as the two men spoke.

"I see these two who are so much like their sire," Vauraus said. "Where is the young one?"

Magnus signaled Nikulainen forward. The Prince came to Vauraus, dropping to one knee before the King. Those great gray eyes took him in for a long moment before he smiled.

Vauraus looked at Magnus with great kindness. "And now I see the reason of it all. Never shall I question you, Magnus. I feel I would have done the same."

Nikulainen was confused, and judging from her expression, so was Sarianna. But Magnus beamed at his old friend. The Great King again looked at the young Prince.

"I owe you a great debt, young man," he said. "You and yours will always find welcome in these lands."

"It is my honor to serve, your Highness," Nikulainen said.

With that, they began their meal. Sarianna sat at her father's right while Magnus sat to his left. Because Nikulainen was nearest the elder King when the meal began, he found himself seated beside Sarianna. While the monarchs caught up with each other, Sarianna turned her attention to the Princes.

"I hope all is satisfactory with your chambers," she said.

"Indeed," Armas said. "Though I fear such softness will make me weak."

"I hope you take advantage of the baths," Julin muttered. He scoffed at Nikulainen's horror-struck expression. "Don't look at me that way, Brother. I know you've had at least three by now. The garden off my chambers is lovely, milady."

Sarianna looked at the men with her fork in mid-air. She didn't know what to make of their conversation. They did not seem to be entirely in jest.

"There are many gardens in the citadel," Sarianna said. "I would be pleased to show them to you."

"Do take in the flowers, Brother. I will be going on a hunt," Armas said. "I shall provide meat for the evening meal."

"That's very kind," the Princess said. She turned her attention to Nikulainen. "You seem to be enjoying the food."

"I am, milady," the Prince smiled. "Everything is well made."

"Niku eats as much as we two," Armas said. "But none knows where the food goes on him."

Magnus chuckled at Sarianna's expression. "Believe me. All you hear is not without affection. And it is best you know them for who they are now."

Vauraus chuckled. "The serene young lady you see here can be more than a handful. She is a match for them to be sure."

"Father!" Sarianna exclaimed blushing deeply.

Both Kings chuckled. The pair thus remained quiet during the remainder of the meal to avoid further teasing. However, they did manage to exchange a number of long glances.

It had been decreed that during the visits by suitors, the royal advisor would hear all village business. This gave the elder King all morning to spend with Magnus and his sons. The gifts were presented once the meal was cleared away. Magnus was generous in gifting the finest goods fashioned in his lands. Julin gave Sarianna a dazzling

necklace of gold and precious gems. Armas pledged the biggest stag the Princess had ever seen. Nikulainen was nervous in presenting the leather and gilt-bound book.

Sarianna accepted the book with great interest. She ran her long, lovely fingers over the binding and looked at the first few pages. Then she smiled at him. Her eyes held more warmth than they did when she received the necklace.

"This is very thoughtful of you, Niku," she said quietly. "I cannot wait to read it. Thank you."

"My pleasure, milady," he said, smiling with relief.

The morning hours passed quickly. Nikulainen noticed that the Elder King's energy was fading. The moment he was not at full force, Sarianna gracefully ended the visit and led her father away. The transition was done so effortlessly that the young Prince would have thought nothing of it. But Magnus watched the exchange so intently that Nikulainen paid closer attention. Vauraus was happily speaking about the visit, but there was sadness about the Princess as she led her father away that did not match the mood. Magnus seemed a little sad as well. Nikulainen wondered what he had witnessed.

"You know what I want you to do, my sons," Magnus said quietly once the elder King was gone. "Go about your King's business."

The stable master Minos was much friendlier when Nikulainen arrived that morning. The Prince bore a bag of fresh apples for all the horses and helped him put out feed for the Ritvala mounts.

"Minos, you take on much work on your own," the young Prince observed. "Why do you not have an apprentice?"

"He thinks none can do the job but him," Sarianna said as she entered the stable. She was carrying apples as well. She looked lovely in riding attire and cloak the color of red wine. The color enhanced her flawless creamy skin. Her hair was tamed in a loose braid that swung along her back. A guard followed her. "It took a royal decree to make him take me as apprentice. Minos, there are many bright pages about the citadel. Why won't you choose an apprentice?"

"These pages all want to be in the grand hall. None want to get their clothes dirty," he scoffed.

Sarianna frowned at that. "I shall have father put out a call for stable apprentices amongst the farmers. Surely there must be one that would be worthy to train."

"It will have to wait," Minos said stubbornly. "I cannot train while we have guests. It would be too disruptive."

"I think you enjoy having royal stable help," Sarianna said ruefully.

"You are both very thorough, and the horses like you," he said shamelessly.

Nikulainen laughed. "I do not mind, milady."

"You only encourage him," she said. "But you are a guest, so that will be the way of it."

Sarianna handed the apples to Minos before really addressing the young Prince. "I visited the wounded in the garrison today. They are all on the mend."

"I am glad," Nikulainen replied.

"Do you ride today?" she asked.

"Yes. Father wants me to scour the area where the attackers rode to see if they left anything behind," he said.

"I will ride with you," she said decisively. "I will go mad if I don't get out for a little while."

"My brothers await your attention," Nikulainen said with a smile.

Sarianna raised a graceful brow at him. "I will ride with you, your Highness."

"I am here to serve, milady," he said. The Prince was quietly elated for the time alone with Sarianna. Conversation with her while his brothers were about was proving to be impossible.

"Minos, if you would saddle Kelata," she said. "I will tell my guard to inform Neuvoja that I am under your protection."

"Have them fortify the patrol at this gate, Princess," Nikulainen said. "I will help ready the horses."

Once they were away from the protection of the walls, the Prince could feel a crisp briskness in the wind. The darkness on the horizon was much closer.

"Stay close to me, milady. We may have to run from the storm," he said.

Nikulainen trotted along the trail, his eyes scanning the ground and the dry shrubs very carefully as he went. Sarianna rode close by but kept silent, somehow sensing he

needed to focus. They rode along the trails where the Prince had chased the riders to the main road and back. He saw nothing.

"They were very clever," the Prince muttered. "They wore nothing that could identify them and left nothing behind."

"The attack was an act of war," Sarianna said. "They would be beset by all in the Hanyanoore for such an act. They had to be most clever."

"What do we do now? My task is complete," he said.

The Princess smiled brightly. "We ride!"

Sarianna turned, then bolted down the trail toward the east gate. The Prince was startled by her sudden speed. His horse sensed a game was afoot and bristled to run. He let the stallion loose and caught up with the Princess moments later. They thundered along the barely visible path over hills and down gullies at a breathtaking speed. She led him quite a chase, but he was determined to catch her. Nikulainen almost managed to cut her off when Sarianna ducked down a gully. By the time he could turn back, the Prince found himself cut off by her.

"It seems I have captured you, fair Prince," she laughed.

"You have indeed," he smiled. "Milady, you are a skilled rider."

"Thank you, Niku."

"But now that you have me, what will you do with me?" he asked, surprised at his own boldness. "Ask anything of me."

Her cheeks colored beautifully, but her gaze never wavered. "I command you to rescue me from your brothers whenever I am in distress."

Nikulainen laughed. "I shall be quite busy."

"You know your brothers better than I," she replied with a wicked smile.

Just then, a cold blast of air hit them. The dark clouds were rolling in with a great clap of thunder. The wind grew so strong that Sarianna was having trouble keeping seated on her horse. Nikulainen knew the small mare would have trouble negotiating that rough trail in the wind with a rider.

"The storm will overtake us," he shouted over the wind. "Ride with me, milady. Your horse won't make it with a rider."

Kelata started badly with the next thunderclap. The Princess nodded, taking the arm offered, allowing the Prince to pull her into his embrace in front of him. He pulled her hood up, then wrapped his cloak around them both.

"Hold tight to me, milady," he said.

Sarianna held close, pressing her face against his neck. Nikulainen hunched low toward his horse's mane and spurred into a swift gallop. Kelata followed a short distance away. He had only to run a trail once to know it, so he did not decrease speed even when the rains opened upon them and the sky went nearly black. It took mere moments to get to the citadel walls, but they were soaked through and already feeling chilled. Sarianna still held him, but he could tell she was weakening, undoubtedly from the cold and the strain. Once inside the east gate, Sarianna tried to pull away.

"Nay, Princess. I will take you to the main building. You must get warm and dry," he said.

"What about you?" she replied. Her voice was shaking.

"I will be fine for a bit longer. I have to see to the horses," he said. "Besides, I never fall ill."

"I will send your valet to you," she said as they reached the front doors. Her guards were waiting to help her from the horse. She glanced up at him before heading inside. "You had better not fall ill, Niku. Remember your pledge."

"Always, milady," he smiled before trotting back to the stables. The warmth from her body sustained him. Her sweet, delicate scent clung to his cloak and mingled with the rain. He could still feel her arms about his body. They were slender, graceful limbs, but they were also quite strong.

Nikulainen was buoyed by Sarianna's touch. His skin flushed all over warming him against the chill of the clothes clinging to him. Settling the horses was enjoyable in that happy mood. He hummed while brushing and drying them and soothing them against the storm. It was tempting to rush through the process, but the animals needed to be slowly calmed and assured of their safety. This duty could not be taken lightly. That would be like slighting dear friends.

Jorgen appeared as he finished with the animals. The man seemed startled upon finding him. The Prince chuckled at the man's expression. "Yes, I am clothed. And I will stay that way until we reach my chambers. I would like a hot bath before dressing."

"Yes, your Highness," the valet replied. "At least put on this dry cloak. The Princess made me promise I would take no chances with your health."

"Did she?"

“Yes, your Highness,” Jorgen said with a smile. “Prince Julin said you often did not know when to come out of the rain, but she refused to get warm herself until your bath was ordered and I was sent to you.”

Julin would not be happy about that. And Armas would likely have a lot to say.

“If I may say so, the servants think the Princess is taken with you,” Jorgen continued.

“Do they?” The Prince asked as they crossed the main courtyard. That was a good sign, for they would know.

“I hope so, Highness. She would make you a lovely match,” the valet said.

“Thank you, Jorgen. May it be so.”

Chapter Five

"Horses! I hope you did not spend all that time alone talking about horses," Hanna muttered. "Not with one who looks like him."

"Hanna, I told you we were on an errand for King Magnus," Sarianna said patiently.

"Even so, there is time enough to steal a kiss," Hanna said. "You do not know what you are about if you don't want to kiss him."

"Hanna! Don't you worry what I am about," the Princess said in exasperation. "Just bring me Prince Julin's necklace."

Sarianna was drawn to Nikulainen. She could not deny that. Being close to him warmed her and thrilled her. It was not merely the feel of his body as it moved beneath her hands. It was the way his amazing strength radiated from him. Even while flying on that horse in a howling storm, she had felt safe. There were other things Nikulainen made her feel. The softness of his skin along the column of his throat; the thick silk of his hair and the scent of his skin made her want to touch him. She wanted to kiss him, but that was the very least of it. She sensed that the Prince would not object to anything she wanted.

But nothing was as simple as doing what she wanted to do. There was the matter of the older brothers and the Prince's standing among them. It was not clear that he was available as one of her choices. Asking would be very awkward if King Magnus

planned for Armas or Julin for her suitor. And even if Nikulainen were a choice, would he really be any different than Rowsdower if his passions were inflamed? How to determine if there was a difference between the two men in that way was something of a quandary. The Princess surmised that men might not be truthful about such matters if the truth did not result in following where their passions drove them. Once again, Sarianna felt nearly paralyzed by her doubts and indecision.

Sarianna may have had doubts about many things, but that night she knew she looked beautiful. The ivory-colored ensemble made her skin look even creamier and was a perfect contrast to the brilliant ruby necklace. Her hair was done in ringlets held in place by red stones.

"Oh, your Highness," Hanna breathed. "You are lovely."

"Thank you, Hanna," the Princess replied. It was said that beauty was power. She hoped that she could feel it and use it in the presence of those powerful men.

Sarianna was early for evening meal to check on the staff. They were holding up well despite early arrivals and the unexpected attack. Spirits were apparently quite high. Magnus and his sons seemed to tax them far less than Queen Taraasta and Rowsdower. The staff enjoyed the way the men enjoyed the food and the easy laughter they shared. The cook was a little daunted dressing and roasting an enormous stag Prince Armas presented that afternoon, but that tempest passed quickly. Even her trusted advisor was in good spirits. The citizens of Arinpera were making fewer petitions during the visit, thus his day passed more pleasantly than it was wont to do. The Princess let him enjoy

his day. King Magnus had not confirmed his theory about the attack, so there was no reason to alarm him.

Her various musings were interrupted by King Magnus stepping out of one of the gardens into the dining hall. He looked at her intently as if trying to determine what he should say.

"Princess, will you join me for a moment in the garden?" he asked quietly.

"Of course, Sire," she replied following him to a pair of benches under a small tree.

Magus towered over her even seated, but he did not seem very fearsome in the moonlight with his kind expression.

"It was good to see my old friend Vauraus today," he said. "I saw that his wisdom is still there as is his wit and his warmth, but I have known the man for many, many seasons. I can see, child, that his light is diminishing."

"Sire..."

He quieted her with a raise of his hand. "You and your advisor have done a fine job of not taxing him so that he rules still. He will have many years of fine life if he continues to rest thus. But your kingdom is in grave danger with my dear friend in this state."

Magnus had eyes that were too sharp for her to play him false. She did not try. "That is why I agreed to marry, Great King."

"The opportunity for your own choice is nearly gone," Magnus said solemnly. "Even if Taraasta is not responsible for the attack, she will take advantage of what she saw here to take or see destroyed what she could not gain by marriage."

"Father told you why she was sent away?"

"He did," Magnus replied grimly. "I did not like that whelp when he was a youth. I cannot imagine what sort of man he has become raised with that viper. You are best rid of him."

"But I must choose one of your sons," she said.

Magnus smiled. "I like the fire in you, lass. You would be good for any one of my sons. Vauraus wants you to choose. As we both chose for love, I cannot ask you to do less. A true alliance should be built on happiness."

Sarianna thought Magnus meant the mother of Armas and Julin, but dared not ask. But she would ask another question while her nerve was strong. "My choice may be of any of your three sons, true?"

"That is my wish."

"And the sons I do not choose shall accept that decision?"

"They are men," he said confidently. "They will wish their brother well."

Sarianna thought for a moment. A small smile graced her lips.

"What think you, lass?" Magnus asked. "Such a look is a dangerous thing."

Sarianna looked at Magnus greatly pleased that she could unnerve him. "I was pleased to see how much my father enjoyed your visit. He thinks this will be an advantageous alliance. I like the laughter your house brought here. I know my duty, Great King. I will not fail my people."

Magnus was wise enough to see that there was an answer in her reply that would make him happy. He smiled, then offered her his arm to escort her to the table.

Nikulainen awaited, standing serenely by the table in forest green finery. His hair was dry and shiny in the firelight. His eyes were warm and happy.

"I am here to fulfill my oath, milady," the Prince said. "I think it best you sit at the end of the table. I will take up my station alongside you."

"That seems to be a sound plan," Sarianna replied.

Magnus laughed. "If you are trying to best your brothers that way, pray they don't tear apart the table."

At that moment, Armas strutted in with the head cook and two assistants, who were carrying platters full of meat. Much of it was set in front of the Princess, who stared at it wide-eyed.

"This is... quite a gift. But I have not the appetite to do this justice," she began. "It is my custom to share fine gifts with my people."

The head cook thankfully spoke up without prompting. "The Princess is most generous with all of us."

Armas nodded. "Then your people shall know my generosity and my skill."

He signaled the cook and his staff to take two of the three heavy trays. That left a manageable amount of meat to eat with all the other foods on the table. Armas settled himself across the table from Nikulainen as Julin entered the hall.

"Princess, you look lovely," Julin said as he bowed before her. "I knew that your skin could stand up to the fire of those jewels."

"My thanks again, Prince Julin," Sarianna said.

The meal passed amicably enough. Sarianna would have preferred the Princes found some proof that Queen Taraasta was behind the attack. At least she would then know who her enemy was. It was distressing to think any shadow could be an assassin. Thankfully, the lively conversation kept the Princess from truly dark thoughts.

All the Princes had a gift for weaving images with their words. Armas told such an elaborate tale of his stag hunt that Sarianna thought she was there. The eldest Prince thought well of his prowess in the hunt and told of it with the same elaborate detail and vivid words. While his tale was fascinating on its own, Sarianna was amazed at how anyone could spend so much time and so many words on themselves. The Princess was surprised that he knew anything at all about his brothers. Armas had an agile mind and great skill as a warrior, but his assumption that his looks and his prowess were enough for her to choose him was bothersome. Even if he succeeded in getting to know her, would the Princess ever feel any real affection and caring from him? This was very doubtful.

Prince Julin seemed pre-occupied with himself as well, but this was more difficult for the Princess to know for certain. When he wasn't artfully making dark jests at his brothers' expense, Julin was silent and brooding. His gift had been as extravagant as his brother's had been. However, it spoke more about his own wealth and standing than it did to Sarianna's tastes. The necklace could have been for any woman. Sarianna was certain Julin knew no more about her than Armas did. She was also sure she would not feel love or warmth from this brother either.

Nikulainen was quiet as always. He listened to his brother's epic tale with interest. The Prince asked many questions and enjoyed the answers. But Sarianna felt that the young Prince's focus never left her. Nikulainen saw that neither her plate nor her goblet went empty. Whenever her gaze wandered his way, the Prince's eyes met hers. After a while, just looking at the young Prince was not enough. She wanted to hear him speak. The next time Armas paused to take a breath, Sarianna spoke up.

"Niku, can you tell how long the storm will last?" she asked.

"There was some clearing in the darkness of the sky at the furthest point on the horizon," he replied. "It may pass by dawn, milady."

"I suppose I should not ride until it clears," she said wistfully.

"Even I would not ride in that storm, milady," the young Prince smiled.

Those comments inspired Armas to talk about the great battles he had waged during rainstorms. Julin was not going to remain quiet any longer. The storm inspired his thoughts of a doomed world to run wild. Sarianna had a full tummy by then. And the warmth of the room along with the droning voices was making her sleepy. She caught Nikulainen's eyes, pleading with him to rescue her from showing her boredom.

The young Prince barely reacted to her gaze. But he did look toward his father. "Father, the Princess is fatigued from the ride. I would escort her to her chambers."

"Princess?" Magnus asked.

"I feel a bit flushed. Perhaps I should not have pestered the Prince to take me with him," she said.

"Niku should have said no," Magnus rumbled. "Thus, he shall leave this good company and see you to your chambers."

"Yes, Father."

Sarianna caught the gleam in the King's eye as they rose. She turned to Armas and Julin with a curtsy. "Thank you for your wonderful tales. Good night."

There was a chorus of good evenings as Sarianna was led toward her chambers. Since she was with an armed Prince, the guard did not follow. They walked down the main corridor, but instead of heading toward the royal quarters, she tugged Nikulainen with her into the library and shut the great door. A small fire was still burning, so the room was warm.

"Do you think ill of me for my ruse?" Sarianna asked softly as she lit fat candles about the room.

"Nay, Princess. I have sometimes prayed for release from my brothers' tales," he sighed with a smile. "Some nights if Magnus spoke, they could go on for many hours. And tonight they had inspiration."

"I thank you doubly then," she said.

"But why are we here in your beautiful library?"

"I did not wish to be put to bed like a small child," she replied. "You do not have to remain."

"I wish to, milady," he replied softly. "I promised you an escort to your chambers. Besides, I like libraries."

Nikulainen looked about the shelves. Perhaps it was that the book was set forward to the rest on that shelf. Or perhaps the Forest People really could read minds. For whatever reason, the young Prince reached up and plucked the history that hid Sarianna's romance poetry from prying eyes. The Princess was beside herself, but could say nothing that wouldn't give her away. She feigned interest in an old map while Nikulainen settled in a high-backed chair where her tutors would sit.

"This is interesting," he murmured. "Either my memory is faulty, or someone has re-written this text to be far more... lively than it once was."

"Really?" Sarianna asked as if only mildly interested. "Do you find the text to be stimulating?"

"It reminds me of some of Julin's verses," he replied. "He often writes in terms of passions and fevers. Much of his verse is concerned with being torrid."

"Does he enjoy being in such a state?" Sarianna asked.

"I do not think so," Nikulainen replied. "It is often hard to tell with Julin, but I think he fears great passion. He may be forced to be happy."

"Do you read such texts often?"

"At one time I did," he admitted with a small smile. "As part of my studies... of... people. Sometimes, information was hard to come by. I long suspected whatever I learned from my brothers was a lie."

Sarianna smiled at that. It was easy to imagine them trying to lead astray a brother so comely. "Are you so experienced that you no longer need studies?"

Nikulainen met her gaze with eyes tinged with mischief. "I am not so experienced, Princess."

"But you do know what you are about in such matters?" she asked before she could stop herself. It would never do if both of them were fumbling about. That was if she even chose him.

"I believe I know what I am about," he said quietly.

"How did you learn? How does anyone learn?" she asked. Her cheeks were flaming hot from embarrassment. "Oh, forgive me, Niku. I do not mean to embarrass you."

"I said you could ask anything of me. I spoke truly," he said. His cheeks colored as well, but he did not look uncomfortable. "When I was a certain age, my father brought me to a courtesan who... guided my... studies..."

"This is not fair. Such methods are not available to someone like me," she murmured. "I must remain innocent and ignorant."

"You can be innocent of the act of joining, Princess, and not be ignorant of men," Nikulainen replied softly. "I will tell you what you want to know. I will do anything you ask of me."

"Until you become fevered by your passions," she countered. "I cannot fight one as strong as you. I cannot begin to fend off an impassioned Armas or Julin. It is as though I have no real choice. How am I supposed to do this?"

Sarianna had turned her back on the young Prince. She hoped he would leave her to fall apart in solitude.

"Sarianna," Nikulainen said gently.

When she turned, Nikulainen still sat in the high-backed chair but he held thin-corded rope in his hands that was usually looped on his belt. "Secure my arms to this chair. Then you may learn me as you will."

Sarianna moved to stand in front of him. "What would I do?"

"What do you want to do, milady?"

The Princess looked at his pale gold hair in the firelight. She had longed to touch it. She looked at his lips. Kissing was something she never thought she would never want to try again. But being near Nikulainen changed her mind.

"I will not harm your wrists," she said decisively. In only a moment, Sarianna deftly secured the young Prince's arms to those of the chair. She kept the rope whole by running it along the back of the chair after securing the first wrist then, tying the other.

Sarianna put that accursed book away carefully before turning back to Nikulainen. The Prince was looking at her intently through his long, dark lashes. His breathing was a little faster than before. This pleased the Princess, for hers was also.

"Your hair is longer than any man I have known. It is longer than your brothers'," she said. "Why do you wear it thus?"

"It is the way of my mother's people," he replied softly. "Do you not like it this way?"

"I do. Very much," Sarianna whispered. She reached out to run her fingers through his hair, enjoying the smooth softness. The Prince sighed then leaned into her touch, tilting his head back.

"You bare your throat to me, Prince Niku?" she demanded softly.

“Are you my enemy, milady?”

Sarianna traced along his jaw line with one slender finger. Her other hand still firmly held his hair. She gently traced the fine cheekbones, then his brow. All the while the Prince watched her with fascination.

“Nay, not an enemy,” Sarianna whispered. She then set her lips against his in a gentle and chaste kiss.

This kiss was different, and it was not because the young Prince could not move. The touch of his warm, firm lips sent a jolt of pleasure deep within Sarianna. She pulled back to look into Nikulainen’s eyes. They seemed even darker, and his cheeks were flushed. Sarianna kissed him again, this time gently pushing her tongue against his lips. Nikulainen opened his mouth for her, moving his tongue against hers but not taking over the kiss. The kiss tasted of heat and the sweet wine from the feast. The Prince moaned into her mouth, jolting her more intensely. When Sarianna moaned, she pulled back startled.

“Niku, it did not feel this way before,” she murmured stroking his face.

“It has never felt this way before,” he replied breathlessly. Those large dark eyes were full of wonder and amazement.

A strong surge of want coursed through Sarianna. It was frightening because it was such a new, intense feeling. The Princess wanted to touch more and to taste more of Nikulainen, but the chair made that impractical. Then she realized Hanna or Jorgen or even worse, the older Princes could interrupt her at any moment. There would be time later. She needed to step back to determine what she wanted to do.

"I will free you, but you will not force yourself on me," Sarianna said.

"You have my word," he replied earnestly.

With one tug, the rope came free. Sarianna unwound it, freeing him from the chair. She moved away to a side table where she poured them each a goblet of wine.

"You will not let anyone else touch you thus," she said handing him the wine. The possessiveness she felt was almost as strong as her need for him.

"I promise no one shall," he said softly. In his eyes was a commitment that shook her.

Sarianna realized she did not want anyone even looking at him the way every woman in the Citadel had been. She said nothing of those feelings. They were strange and unnerving to her. She did not want to frighten the young Prince.

The Princess sipped her wine for a moment while gazing at Nikulainen. "I shall not kiss anyone else."

Those dark eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled behind the rim of the goblet. "I am glad of that, I must admit."

Nikulainen moved to the large window where Sarianna was standing clutching her goblet. He stood very near, but did not quite touch her. She could inhale his gentle, clean scent and feel the warmth radiating from him. They sipped their wine while gazing at each other.

"What goes on, milady?"

"I...I..." Sarianna stammered, then sipped her wine again. "Niku, I do not want you to leave here."

He smiled at her, causing her breath to catch. "I know I want to stay. Do you tell them?"

"I want to, but once I do we will not be alone again for many days," she replied. "I barely know...anything..."

"You wish to know me better," he said. The beautiful smile grew more so.

"Yes, and I wish to know how we are together," the Princess said.

"Then tell them when you will, Sarianna. When matters not so long as we are together," he murmured. "I do ask one thing."

Sarianna looked up at the young Prince, mesmerized by his nearness. "Ask me."

"Do not fear me, milady," Nikulainen said softly. He pressed a gentle kiss at her temple.

"I would never take what is best given." His head dropped to press another kiss at the curve of her shoulder. "I understand those poems now. Passion is best unleashed."

The Princess gasped when her earlobe was gently sucked for the briefest instant.

"Pleasure is best when shared." Nikulainen lowered his head to kiss Sarianna's upturned lips. Sarianna was hungry for that kiss, moaning as their tongues played together. Yet for all the passion in that kiss, they did not embrace. Each still held a goblet. The Princess felt how much Nikulainen wanted to crush her against him. That kiss spoke of blazing fire and savage want, but he held still. When she pulled away, he let her step back. His eyes made her gasp they were so intense upon her.

"Do not think I easily allow you to step back, Sarianna," Nikulainen rasped. "But I will never see doubt or distrust in your eyes. I can await your pleasure. My desire will remain unchanged."

"And mine is growing beyond my ability to control," she replied breathlessly. "It would be best that you escort me to my chambers."

Nikulainen nodded, setting the goblet on the side table and offering his arm. Somehow, Sarianna was able to set hers down with trembling hands. She found she needed to lean on the young Prince to keep upright. Fortunately, the corridor was deserted save for the guard at her door. He released her arm with a bow.

"Good night, Princess."

"Goodnight, Prince Niku," she said with a curtsy. "Until tomorrow."

"Until tomorrow."

Hanna took one look at her Lady and let out a squeal. "Her Highness has found out what she is about!"

"Hanna, I swear..." Sarianna exclaimed as she took out her jeweled hairpins.

"How does he kiss?" Hanna demanded playfully as she unlaced the Princess out of her clothes.

"I cannot say..." She wanted to say. She wanted to shout from the tallest citadel spire.

"He made your heart race and your face flush and your knees want to buckle," Hanna gushed.

Sarianna blinked at her chambermaid. "How did you know?"

"Look at him. He would be no other way," Hanna replied.

"But he was sweet and kind, too," the Princess said wistfully. "I always feel safe with him. And he makes me laugh."

"And you hate the night for keeping you from him," Hanna sighed.

"Yes," Sarianna sighed.

"You were born under a lucky star to have found such a man," she said.

The Princess turned on her servant, catching both of her busy hands in hers. "Hanna, breathe not a word of my choice yet. We want a little time before the wedding takes over everything. Please..."

"On my honor, Highness, I shall hold my tongue," she said. "But all will know by looking at you together. Most already knew your choice that first night. The Great King prefers him."

"He does, 'tis true."

"And those brothers are grumbling about Prince Nikulainen," she continued. "They have demanded of King Magnus that they be given time with you."

"Magnus knows my choice," the Princess said. "But that will not keep them from trying until Father announces my betrothal. Oh, why did he have to have brothers?"

Hanna laughed at her Lady's consternation. Sarianna glared at her.

"Worry not, dear Princess," she said. "There are maids that would very much like to distract the bold Princes. I think I can get them to make good on their wishes. I could tell them they are helping you test how true these suitors would be as husbands."

Sarianna stared incredulously at the woman brushing her hair. “Hanna, you astonish me with your cleverness. I am not saying to do such a thing, but what I do not know...”

“Yes, your Highness,” Hanna chuckled.

Sarianna settled into bed without further fuss. She was very tired from the day’s events, and it was true that she could not wait until morning. The sooner she slept, the sooner she would see the beautiful, enigmatic Prince Nikulainen. Sarianna soon drifted into sound slumber with the sound of the rain to lull her.

Chapter Six

The morning brought more surprises for Prince Nikulainen than the night before. Jorgen woke him long before dawn with a summons to his father's receiving room. This was not unusual in Ritvala as there were often patrols or skirmishes he had been sent out on a moment's notice. The Prince thought that unlikely or hoped it was. Leaving Sarianna for any reason was not something he wanted to do. With Jorgen's help, Nikulainen managed to dress quickly and maintain the royal formality of the last few days.

Armas was already seated before Magnus when Nikulainen arrived. Julin was steps behind him. Magnus was not alone. Captain Rajotin of the citadel guard was present.

"My sons, the captain has informed King Vauraus and myself that riders are moving on the eastern border," Magnus said. "Their numbers are not great, but they may be as skilled as the assassins."

"What does our King wish of us?" Armas asked.

"We have been asked by King Vauraus to take our soldiers and meet the insurgents before they get far into the territory," he replied. "You and Julin will ride with them. I want the invaders' commander alive to question."

"And what of Niku?" Armas demanded.

Magnus nodded at the Arinperan captain. He nodded and left the room.

"King Vauraus himself has requested that Niku remain here to protect Princess Sarianna," Magnus said. "This attack may be a diversion to leave her vulnerable."

"Father, this protection is giving unfair advantage," Armas retorted.

"They have spent many hours alone together," Julin observed.

"You play your brother false, my sons."

"No, I think he plays us all false," Armas rumbled. "Regent of Arinpera and command of this citadel bests his status at Ritvala."

"Armas!" Nikulainen snapped. "I have never done any more than my King's bidding. Nor would I ever set out to hurt either of you."

"Niku speaks the truth. His time with the Princess has been spent cleaning stables and grooming horses. They searched the perimeter walls on my behalf, then went on a reckless ride near the eastern gate. Once the rain began, Niku brought her directly to the main entrance and handed her to her guards. Last night, he spent some time in the library at her behest. She was in her chambers long before her usual hour," Magnus said.

Nikulainen looked at his father incredulously. Magnus chuckled. "We are in a strange place where lives are in danger. You two were never alone. And Niku has never acted improperly."

"Father..." Armas said.

"My sons, you all have greatness in your futures," Magnus said. "But not if you fight what the fates have in mind for you. Now, go and do as I have commanded."

Armas and Julin left with perfunctory farewells. Nikulainen remained before his father with his head bowed.

"Do not be angry with your brothers, Niku. Such beauty often makes men rash," he said. "You have your duty. Remain armed and do not leave her."

"Yes Father," he replied. "It is no hardship to stay near her."

Magnus chuckled. "I would imagine that it is not. Go now and fetch the Princess. Vauraus awaits you both."

"What goes on, Niku? Why could I not leave even with my guards?" Sarianna asked as soon as they were in the hall. "Has something happened to my father?"

"Nay. Arinpera is facing attack. Armas and Julin have left with Captain Rajotin," he replied quietly. "You are not to be without me. King Vauraus awaits us."

"Something else troubles you, Niku," she said. "I will know what that is."

"Nay, Princess. It will keep," he replied. "We must see your father."

"I will not forget, Niku," she said quietly. "I do not like the distress on your fair face."

"I will tell you. I promise," he replied.

"Have you had a change of heart?" Sarianna whispered anxiously.

"Never! My heart belongs to you," Nikulainen replied with quiet intensity. "My life belongs to you."

King Vauraus watched carefully as the couple entered the main hall. Magnus stood at his side. The advisor Neuvoja was present as well. Nikulainen knelt on one knee next to the high-backed chair where the Princess was seated.

"My child. Light of my life, Light of the land," Vauraus said with profound emotion. "My frailty has endangered not just our kingdom but perhaps the stability of all the Hanyanoore. Were there time, I would allow you the pleasures of slowly building a lasting union. But there is not the luxury of time."

He paused and looked at his daughter, then at Nikulainen. The next words were said with a tone backed by fine steel, startling them both. "I would know what is in your mind and in your heart. Sarianna, have you chosen your intended?"

"Yes, Father. I have chosen," Sarianna said softly.

"And is your choice this young Prince of Ritvala?"

"Yes, Father. He is my choice." Her voice was strong and clear.

"And tell your King why this man is your choice for your husband and Regent of Arinpera?" Vauraus demanded.

"Nikulainen is a fierce warrior who prefers peace. He is a born leader who willingly serves. He would rather listen than speak," she said rising to her feet. "I did not choose him merely because he is beautiful. I know that Nikulainen would learn and respect our customs. He would rule with great strength and wisdom."

The Prince rose to his feet. His heart soared. That Sarianna wanted him was without question. At that moment, he knew how deeply she cared for him. Vauraus smiled a great and happy smile. Magnus was beaming at them both.

"My young Prince of Ritvala, tell me why you would accept my daughter and this responsibility," Vauraus said.

"I pledged my life in service to Princess Sarianna the moment we met. I would be honored to serve her even if I was not her choice. She is strong and kind and beautiful and intelligent," Nikulainen replied. "My home is with her. My duty is to her people. There is nowhere else I can be."

The two kings were pleased. Sarianna's eyes were large and misted over with emotion.

"An announcement of your betrothal shall be made this day. The wedding will be in a fortnight hence. On this day, Prince Nikulainen shall be named Regent to Arinpera, and the kingdom of Ritvala shall be aligned with ours," Vauraus said.

"And Ritvala pledges from this day hence that the enemies of Arinpera will be theirs. And they shall have the might of our sword for protection," Magnus boomed.

The Princess seemed shaken from the suddenness of the announcement. Nikulainen reached for her hand and clasped it in his. She looked at him. There were many emotions playing across her lovely face. Nikulainen leaned in close.

"Do not fear, Princess. I am nervous as well," he murmured with a smile.

She smiled bravely, then nodded.

"Neuvoja, as soon as the scribes have completed the proclamation, send forth the messengers to the rulers," Vauraus said. "Our enemy will know that their treachery has failed."

"You think there is a spy in the citadel?" Nikulainen asked once the advisor departed.

"We do," Magnus replied. "It may be someone who believes that they are saving the kingdom by providing it with leadership."

"It is my hope that the intent was benevolent," Vauraus said. "Still I wish for the spy to be found."

"We will find him, Father," Sarianna said.

"You have much to do today, children," Vauraus said. "After the proclamation, you and the Regent have to prepare for audiences and the celebrations."

"Yes, Father," Sarianna said.

"Jorgen is moving your belongings to the chambers next to the Princess," Magnus said. "Do not leave her."

Nikulainen blinked at his father. Sarianna blushed to her hairline.

"Don't be shy, children," Magnus laughed. "You are to be wed."

"Sarianna, you do... want the Prince," Vauraus asked gently.

"Father!"

"Ease my mind that I am not forcing you into a loveless union," the Elder King said. "Kiss your Prince."

Sarianna gaped at the two kings, but Nikulainen was not going to forgo such a pleasant request. He gently pulled the Princess into his arms. Holding her was a grand indulgence he had not had enough of as yet. It thrilled him that her hands moved up his

shoulders into his hair and that her lips parted for his tongue. It was a gentle kiss, but it jolted them nonetheless. They parted breathlessly and lost in each other's eyes.

Magnus began to chuckle. "Me thinks we shall see grandchildren before another year passes."

"Father!" Nikulainen exclaimed. He was mortified at such a public declaration yet reluctant to completely release the Princess from his embrace.

Sadly, Nikulainen had to let her go. The villagers and the citadel staff had gathered in the main courtyard. The rain had cleansed the air, making the sky seem more clear. It was a very beautiful morn. Sarianna sought his hand again as they faced the boisterous throng. The proclamation took very little time, but those few moments would forever alter their lives. As King Vauraus finished speaking, the young Prince was betrothed to an incredible woman, and he was Regent of a powerful and wealthy kingdom.

The reception from the people surprised him. Perhaps his rescue of the Princess had traveled far and wide. Whatever the reason, it was good to have their approval and well wishes. Still, he was in a daunting position. Vauraus decreed that he would begin meeting with the people on the next morn. And they would have to attend various celebrations during the fortnight before the wedding. It was exciting and festive but nearly overwhelming for a Prince who spoke little in public.

"Do not fear, my Prince," Sarianna said in his ear as they stood on the balcony. Her soft voice was strong against the din. "For I shall be with you, always."

"You protect what is yours," he whispered with a smile.

"Of course."

Nikulainen impulsively kissed the Princess on the forehead, causing the crowd to cheer. Still, he was quite nervous. Fortunately, there was little time to dwell on how he felt. Once the proclamation was made and the messengers were sent, the day passed very quickly. Sarianna asked him to help her settle her father for the day. She did not like for anyone else to do it, and he was not to leave her. The Elder King was sweet in his vagueness. It was easy to feel protective of him.

His admiration for Sarianna grew deeper that day as he learned just how much responsibility had come to rest on her slender shoulders. After the very detailed explanation of how Vauraus went about his duties, it was apparent that the Princess had been all but ruling in his stead. This also meant something disturbing. The spy was someone very close to the Princess. This was someone who knew that by killing her, not only would Vauraus' extreme frailty be revealed, the entire government would collapse. Every one of the most trusted household staff had to be watched closely. And Sarianna could not part from him even in sleep.

"Regent, we should stop now," Neuvoja said. "There is enough time before the wedding to go over everything."

"And I have the Princess to aide me," Nikulainen said.

"Yes, you do," she said. "Come, you look fatigued."

The Prince did not protest. His head was nearly swimming with details. "It has been many seasons since I have studied this much."

"You are an excellent pupil, Regent," the advisor smiled. "Until tomorrow."

Nikulainen was quiet as he walked with Sarianna to her wing of the citadel. This time, he was aware of his father's men nearby. There was no doubt the interior walls were well guarded. He found the corridors to the chambers were as well. This pleased the Prince, for he found he needed to relax his guard a little or he would exhaust himself.

"What troubles you so, Niku?" Sarianna asked. "The shadow in your eyes has faded with the glad tidings, but it has not fully diminished."

"It has been quite a day, milady."

"And that does not answer the question, Regent," she replied.

"Nay, Sarianna. I am not Regent when we are alone. I like the way you say my name," Nikulainen said softly.

"Niku, tell me what troubles you."

The Prince sighed. "My brothers left with angry words toward me. They felt I have played them false in keeping you to myself."

Sarianna stopped and stared at Nikulainen. "They act as though I do not have mind enough of my own to choose where I want to be."

"Father tried to set them right," he said. "But the events of this day will harden them against me. As joyous as I am that you chose me, my heart remains heavy."

"Another reason I know I chose well," Sarianna said. "You feel matters too keenly to ever try to hurt anyone. They will have to get past their notions or feel my ire."

The Princess spoke with such vehemence Nikulainen could naught but believe her. He decided he would really enjoy seeing that. It was moving to feel like someone was protecting him.

Once they reached the wing, Nikulainen instructed the guards stationed at intervals in the corridor to immediately sound an alarm if attacked. Above all else, he needed time to react to any insurgent.

When they reached Sarianna's chambers, the Prince thought he could relax. But a sudden movement in the room brought his sword to his hand and almost ended a chambermaid's life.

"Niku!" Sarianna shouted sharply. "It's only Hanna!"

Nikulainen froze a fraction from piercing the maid's throat. He felt Sarianna's hand grasp his wrist and bring his arm down, then turned him toward her. The Prince pulled her into his embrace and held her close, breathing in the scent of her hair.

"I didn't mean to startle," Hanna said in a tremulous voice.

"Perhaps you should announce yourself before entering," Sarianna said mirthfully.

Nikulainen pulled away from the Princess, smiling sheepishly at Hanna. "My apologies. I am drawn tight today."

"There is little wonder, Regent," she said, recovering herself. "Jorgen has your chambers ready should you want to rest."

The chambermaid turned to a wall with a large looking glass on it. She pressed the glass, causing the wall to open like a door. A short corridor was revealed. Nikulainen and Sarianna followed Hanna through it to an adjoining suite of rooms. The rooms once

had belonged to her father's first advisor. They were as large as hers with a sitting room and sleeping chamber; each had a large fireplace and built in bookshelves. A handsome desk looked out upon the small garden off the sitting room. Sarianna had the curtains and bedding made in deep muted greens. Jorgen was there putting away the last of his things.

"Take off your sword and armor, my Prince," Sarianna said. "We are safe here."

"Indeed, Regent," Jorgen said. "No visitors save for your father and brothers and King Vaurus himself are allowed in this wing. We are the only servants allowed. Any heavy lifting will be done by the guards."

"Then let us take refuge in this safe haven for the night," the Princess said. "Write a note to Magnus and tell him we will dine in our chambers and take early rest for tomorrow."

Nikulainen was relieved. He was fatigued, and they had not really spent any time alone for all of that day. He felt deprived as well; his plans for the Princess were vastly different from what occurred. The Prince very much wanted the time alone.

"As you wish, milady," he murmured.

Jorgen was instantly there with paper, pen and ink. This made him suspect there were romantic plots afoot amongst these servants. He found he didn't mind. The note was written quickly. Magnus wouldn't mind. In fact, he would be quite pleased.

"Hanna, I wish you and Jorgen to see to our meals personally," Sarianna said. "Bring wine and water for the evening. But wait until dusk. We need to rest..."

"Yes, Milady."

"Do you need help undressing, Regent?" Jorgen asked.

"No, thank you, Jorgen. I will manage."

Nikulainen smiled at the Princess after the servants left him. "Thank you, Sarianna. I find that I am not up to another busy supper. I find I am fatigued."

"Father always says the labors of the mind are more difficult than those of the body. You have been given much to contemplate. Now, give me your arms."

The Prince raised a brow but obeyed. Sarianna deftly removed his bracers. She fingered each one as if enjoying their suppleness before setting them aside. Next, she unfastened the straps that held his sword belt and removed it. Each item was carefully placed on the very table he preferred.

"We should get a little rest," Sarianna said. "I should be safe enough with the connecting doors open."

"Nay," Nikulainen whispered. "Stay with me. I am not to leave you. We can remain clothed, so you will feel safe."

"I... I feel safe with you, Niku," she said softly. Her eyes roamed over his face longingly. "I want to stay, but when we touch..."

"I know Sarianna," he said. His voice was soft as well. "But there are other feelings between men and women that are as powerful. There is comfort and strength and healing."

"You make me feel safe," she murmured. Her cheeks flamed, but her gaze did not drift from his. "We should get comfortable. Remove your boots and your jerkin."

Nikulainen's eyes widened a fraction, but he quickly complied while the Princess removed her outer shift. The room was quite warm from the fire, so they needed no blanket.

"Unbind your hair, Niku. You will be more comfortable."

"Free yours as well," he replied.

Sarianna did as he bid her. She then climbed onto the bed where he waited on his back.

"Make yourself comfortable, milady, but I would hold you."

Without hesitation, she settled herself along his left side with her head on his shoulder and an arm across his waist. Nikulainen wrapped his arms around her, then sighed. It was in his head to allow her to sleep while he watched over them both. But once her warm body was pressed close and holding him, he gave into the fatigue and gave into the feeling of love and protection, drifting easily into sleep.

Chapter Seven

Sarianna awoke feeling warm and content. Strong arms held her against a strong body. Somehow, she had ended up half on top of Nikulainen. And the Prince was awake. She could tell by his breathing and his heartbeat.

"I have not known such a feeling since I was a young child," he murmured.

"What feeling?" She asked in a whisper.

"Protected," he sighed. "Magnus wanted his sons to be strong and self-sufficient even as children. My mother did not hold me after I began to walk."

"Niku..."

"I did not even know I wanted to be held thus," he said. "My intent was to protect you while you slept. But as soon as your arms were about me, it felt right to rest myself."

Sarianna lifted herself to look down on Nikulainen. He looked like a golden angel with his hair spread over the pillow.

"Are we not to share burdens and protect each other?" she asked.

"This was not what Magnus presented."

"He may not want you to know how vulnerable he is," Sarianna replied. "There is a reason your mother loves him. I can see him in you."

"Most only see the Forest People."

“To own you, I must know you,” she smiled.

“How will you claim ownership? Will you use my strong right arm for defense? Will you use my mind for your kingdom?” he asked.

“In those ways, of course. You have great skills that I require,” Sarianna replied reasonably. Her hands skimmed over his warm skin appreciatively. “But I will own your body as a man owns a woman’s. And before we wed, I will know your body as well as my own.”

Nikulainen’s eyes darkened. “We had better leave this bed, or you will learn a great deal immediately.”

“You will obey me, Niku,” she murmured. “I want one kiss while we are like this.”

“Anything, milady.”

“Do not move.”

Sarianna had to have the taste of his kiss. The short kiss in front of their fathers was not enough. His lips were warm and inviting, opening for her tongue. The heat and sweetness of his mouth made her want more with each kiss. Again, they parted breathlessly.

“Sarianna... Blast. I hear them coming. The servants are at the entrance to the wing,” he murmured pressing his face against her throat.

“Shhh... we have time, Niku,” she replied, gently calming him. “And I know you well enough to know that you are hungry for more than my lips. I will meet them in my chambers.”

“Very well. Leave the linking door open,” he said. “If you hear anything odd, come to me. If you cannot get to me, call out.”

“I shall,” she said, kissing him quickly.

Sarianna was in her chambers before she heard Hanna at the sitting room door. She had thrown on her outer shift and even thought to throw a blanket on the bed. It was not so much for modesty that she staged the ruse. The great concern for her well being had seeped into her actions. She did not want anyone to know in which room she was actually spending her time. Hanna could not even know. The girl was not good at lying, so she couldn’t be told.

A guard assisted in carrying a large tray of roasted meats and baked goods. Hanna carried the breads and cheese and fruit. Jorgen carried the wine and water.

“You look rested, milady,” Hanna smiled. “Let me put up you hair.”

“Nay, Hanna. The Regent likes it thus when we are alone,” Sarianna replied.

“Very well, milady,” Hanna said. She was grinning broadly.

“I will fetch the Regent,” Jorgen said.

“Hanna, mind your tongue,” Sarianna said, reading the curiosity in her maid’s expression.

“I was only going to say that King Magnus was pleased at the Regent’s choice for supper,” she said still grinning.

“Of course,” the Princess said dryly.

“Princess, I hope I have not kept you waiting,” Nikulainen said warmly.

“Nay, Regent,” she replied. “The food has only just arrived.”

"Jorgen, please draw my bath once we start dining," Nikulainen said. "I will be retiring early."

"Yes, Regent."

"Would you like yours as well, milady?" Hanna asked.

"Please."

The meal began over talk about the morning audiences. Nikulainen had questions about what would be expected of him. He was much less tense than before their rest, and he was very hungry judging from the way the food was disappearing from the trays. Sarianna was very interested in seeing him during the audiences. He had a way of listening with great intensity, but he was not intimidating like his father. Those large, dark eyes missed very little. As they finished the meal, those eyes were very thoughtful as he grew quiet. The Prince was not saddened as he had been that morning. His lips turned upward into a smile that was both wistful and mirthful.

"Why do you smile, Niku?"

"My plans for this day were vastly different from what happened," he replied.

"How so?"

The smile grew wicked. "I was going to lure you out for a wild ride to a glade of shady trees."

That plan did not seem to warrant such a smile. "To what end?"

"Solitude for your pleasure from me," Nikulainen murmured. Those large dark eyes were warm and provocative. "Trees are useful for restraining a man."

"I see," Sarianna replied softly. "What of the danger of being alone and away from aide?"

"I can hear for miles in the open," he said. "I feel less safe where these walls mask the sounds of an enemy."

"You would let me bind you?"

"Yes."

"And bare your skin?"

"Yes."

"And learn you?"

"I would. I will."

Sarianna thought as she sipped at her wine. She looked at him intently. "You want me in your bed from now hence."

"Want. Need. My own desires overwhelm me," he said. "But my reasons extend beyond them. I must protect you."

"If I lie with you, new from my bath with my scented hair and skin..." Sarianna began.

"It will be torture, milady."

"Does it have to be? Is there a way to slake your desires without losing my maidenhead?" she asked.

Nikulainen's eyes darkened. "There are ways."

"Will I then know your body?"

"Yes, you would know my body well."

"And what of my desire? When I touch your hair or taste your kiss, I want... I need..."

"I can give you what you need without joining," he whispered. It seemed to be a great effort for him to remain seated. "I will know your body as well as you will know mine."

Sarianna wanted a lot right then. It was all she could do to keep in her chair and refrain from giving herself to him that instant. "Niku, this seems like torture, does it not?"

The Prince closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them once more. "The wait for you is maddening. It is nearly painful, the want I feel."

"I cause you pain?"

"Nay, Sarianna. The wait taxes me, but it also exhilarates me. And you are worth any amount of time."

"I feel the same."

Hanna knocked then and announced herself. She entered followed by two guards bearing hot water. The tub was filled efficiently while Sarianna and Nikulainen stared at each other.

"Your bath is ready, Highness."

"Thank you, Hanna," Sarianna replied. "Could you have all the trays removed save for the bread and cheese?"

"I will take my leave, Princess," Nikulainen said. "Would you act upon the matter discussed?"

"How can I not?"

He left with a smile at Hanna.

"I see that you fancy his hair unbound as well," Hanna quipped.

"Mind your tongue," Sarianna replied. There was not heat to her words. "I will have my bath now."

"Asking for one and at a reasonable hour," the chambermaid observed playfully.

The Princess ignored that remark as she removed her clothing, then slipped into the hot fragrant water.

"Are you excited about the wedding?" Hanna asked. "The whole staff is giddy with the news. They all like the Regent. He is so quiet and kind. He does not act like he is stronger than everyone, but someone everyone knows he is quite strong. He is like the Great King in that way."

"He is, is he not?" Sarianna replied. "I have never met a man with such strength. Yet, he is also the gentlest man I have ever known."

"But her Highness is a little scared," Hanna said. She was so certain that the Princess was startled.

"Everything is so important, Hanna," Sarianna replied. "We already have so many responsibilities to fulfill. And somehow we have to make a union for life."

"But you are bound to a man who wants to make you happy, Highness," she said. "Worry not about the Regent. Let him be your strength and you will be his. You were born and raised for this, as was he."

Hanna was very wise. Sarianna thought about her advice while she bathed. The talk was about her wedding attire. Her thoughts were on the man waiting in the next room. It was time that she acted like a Princess. She had to trust him and begin their union in truth.

"Hanna, I must have your promise this night," Sarianna said. "And you must be true."

"Yes, milady?"

"Amidst the joy of the wedding, there is much danger. I know you know this, but you must be extremely careful. If you see or hear anything even a little strange, you must alert only the captain of the guard or King Magnus. Do not intervene," she replied. "And tell no one of what occurs in this wing. If anyone seems unduly curious, you must let me know."

Hanna eyes grew big with alarm.

"Do not be unduly afraid. The Regent wants me to be very careful. These precautions may be unnecessary, but they ease his mind," the Princess explained.

"I see he is protective of you," Hanna said. "And you are of him. The Regent is not known for taking naps."

The chambermaid's mirth returned. Sarianna glared at her as she dressed.

"The Regent has to be alert enough to protect me," the Princess quipped. "He was overtaxed."

Hanna muttered something in reply as she started brushing Sarianna's hair, but the Princess didn't really hear it. She was chafing for the chambermaid to leave, but nearly

terrified of what was to come after she did. Eventually, her hair was dry and every thing had been taken away.

“Will you be needing anything else, Princess?”

“No, Hanna. Thank you,” Sarianna replied. “I will rise earlier than my norm to prepare for the audiences.”

“Yes, your Highness. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. And thank you.”

Sarianna gazed at the fire for a moment after Hanna left. The chambermaid sometimes returned for a forgotten item. But when she did not return, Sarianna looked toward the connecting door. All was quiet in the rooms beyond. The light had been dimmed to one or two candles and the fireplace. Despite the stillness, she knew the Prince was awake and waiting. He would not have to wait any longer.

Sarianna moved silently through the passage to Nikulainen’s room. He was not in his sitting room. There was movement in the sleeping chamber that drew her there. What she found there, took her breath away. He was on the bed lying on the sheet with his golden hair spread all over the pillow. The covers were turned down. Another sheet covered him at his middle. The rest of his skin was bare. It was golden in the gentle firelight. Most intriguing was the lengths of rope on each corner of the mattress. Upon her entrance, Nikulainen raised his arms and spread his legs so that his wrists and ankles were near a length of rope.

No words were spoken as the Princess crossed the room. She came to stand at the head of the bed on his left side. Gently the left wrist was grasped. A kiss was pressed

into that open palm before that wrist was tied to the bedpost. His skin was warm and smooth under her hands as she caressed the length of his arm. The feel was like the whole of him — softness over steel muscles.

Nikulainen's feet were beautiful. She kissed each arch before tying his ankles. She caressed each long, well-formed leg, marveling at the suppleness that belied how strong the limb was. Finally, the other wrist was tied. Sarianna looked into her Prince's dark eyes before lowering her head to kiss him. The kiss was slow, almost languid. They had time, and she wanted to set a slow pace. He complied, surrendering control of the kiss to her.

They parted with a gasp. Sarianna turned Nikulainen's head to one side. She tugged on his earlobe with her lips just as he had hers in the library. He inhaled sharply. He moaned when she gently bit, then sucked the curve of his shoulder at his neck.

"You would taste my skin thus?" she asked.

"Yes..."

"Where else would you taste me?"

"Ah... your collar bones... your breasts... your navel..."

"Would you use your tongue and your teeth?"

"Yes... gently tug with my teeth... hold the skin with my lips and suck," he said with a moan.

Sarianna liked the sound of that. And judging from the heaving chest and the straining against the ropes, Nikulainen did as well. He did not have breasts like hers, but the smooth firm planes of his chest felt good under her hand. And the Prince

reacted strongly when his nipple was grazed by her fingers. She licked one nipple, then she tugged it gently with her teeth. Nikulainen arched up as Sarianna sucked the nub into a hard peak.

“Did I hurt you?” she asked softly.

“Nay... please, do not stop...” His soft voice was raw with need.

The Princess moved to the other nipple. She could feel his heart thudding in his rib cage as she suckled him.

“You taste sweet, Niku,” Sarianna murmured. “Your skin is sweet. Your kiss is sweet. How can this be from a warrior?”

His answer was lost in another deep kiss. This one had more heat and urgency. The Prince was hungry for her. And her hunger was growing.

When she pulled away again, Sarianna took hold of the sheet covering his middle. One tug revealed him completely. Nikulainen went still as she looked at him. He inhaled sharply as she touched him.

“You are beautiful even here,” she murmured petting him. The hair was a little coarser than that on his head, but it was soft nonetheless. The shaft was very stiff, but the skin was like hot velvet. The sack beneath the shaft seemed fragile, it was so soft.

Nikulainen held his breath as she explored him with the gentlest of touches. His eyes were black when she met his gaze. It seemed his control was hanging by a slender thread.

“Tell me, Niku,” she whispered. “Tell me how to bring you release.”

“Ah... wrap your fingers around the shaft... and stroke up and down,” he rasped.
“Grasp me firmly.”

Sarianna did as he told her to. The heat of his skin amazed her. It was little wonder men spoke so often of fevers with their passion. The shaft grew hotter and harder as she stroked him.

“Hold me tighter,” he ground out. “Please... stroke harder...”

She complied, watching him in rapt fascination. His expression was so much like pain, but his moans and gasps were drenched in pleasure. He was making her want for... for something from him.

“Kiss me, Sarianna,” he pleaded softly.

Sarianna sealed her lips over his, kissing him heatedly. She firmly grasped his hair to keep him from thrashing. This kiss was undoing her. His mouth was so hot, and the sounds that she was muffling from him reverberated across her nerves, setting her desire aflame. She was stroking him for some moments when she felt a surge along his shaft. The Princess knew he was near release. She wanted to see his face when that happened. She tore her mouth from his to watch.

Nikulainen never closed his eyes. He locked them on hers as the surge ripped through him. His face looked pained for an instant. Then he gasped loudly, and a hot, thick liquid spurted over her hand and onto his stomach. His expression was blissful in the aftermath. His skin almost glowed from the sheen of perspiration and the firelight.

Where he was blissful, Sarianna was restless and unsure of what to do. She retrieved a wet cloth from the table where the washbasin was kept and cleaned off the seed cooling on their skin.

"The water is cool, but it will dry quickly," she murmured.

"Thank you," he said languidly. "Sarianna..."

She looked into his hooded, drowsy eyes. He was even more compelling in this lazy, sated state. At that moment, she decided that no one other than her would ever see the Prince like that.

"Do you see the power you wield over my body with just your hand and your kiss?" he said huskily. "Imagine how well you will own me once we are joined."

The power of his response to her was heady, but she wanted more from him. Nikulainen sensed that as he was watching her closely.

"Let me give you the same kind of pleasure, Sarianna," he said huskily. "Trust me..."

The Princess moaned softly at the sensuality of his words. She reached up with a shaky hand and pulled at one of the ropes at his wrist to free him. He only needed one hand free to loose himself completely.

Once free, Nikulainen sat up close to Sarianna. He gathered her in his arms to kiss her deeply while he gently laid her back onto the bed. She expected him to strip her bare, but he did not. Instead, he held her in his arms and kissed her. When her arms went around his neck, he rolled her beneath his body. The weight of him felt wonderful.

She could feel the warmth of his skin through the thin night shift. Somehow he knew she wasn't ready to have all of the protection of her clothes removed.

But her shift did not keep Nikulainen from setting her skin aflame. He moved to partially cover her body. His nimble fingers kneaded her breasts, then tugged at her nipples until they were hard, throbbing pulses of pleasure through her. The Princess writhed against him during those long kisses unsure of what her body was demanding. Nikulainen knew. One strong hand moved down her right side, then up her inner thigh under her shift. Before she could panic about where that hand was going and what would follow those questing fingers, he brushed a spot just shy of entering her that made her cry out into his kiss.

Nikulainen turned slightly, firmly pinning her alongside his body. His kiss grew more demanding while that hand stroked over that heretofore-unknown spot sending waves of intense pleasure throughout her tingling body. Within moments, Sarianna no longer cared what the Prince might do. She was caught in an upward spiral of pleasure that culminated in a burst of heat and light that took her breath away.

The kiss was gentled in the aftermath. Sarianna still throbbed pleurably between her legs, but it was less intense. The Prince's hold on her was less demanding and more comforting and protective. When he ended the kiss, he gazed at her through hooded eyes. His expression had a hint of concern on it. Sarianna reached up to smooth his hair. She smiled at him.

"Is joining as pleasing as this?" she asked breathlessly.

"More so," he replied with a smile.

"How could I bear it?" She sighed.

"You are strong," he replied mirthfully. "I believe you will endure. I thank you for your trust."

"I thank you for your care and patience," she said. "You are an extraordinary man."

"I am a man in love with an extraordinary woman," he murmured.

"Niku... I love you, too," she said in wonder. "I had despaired so easily, and you were just beyond the horizon."

"I am here now. And we have found each other," he said. He pulled the blankets up over them and settled alongside her, entwining his limbs with hers.

"How will we get through a fortnight?" Sarianna wondered quietly. "I know I cannot be without you thus. But we cannot marry any sooner."

"The threat to you will not pass until we are wed. My Regency can be challenged if the attackers succeed. It is a somber reality, but it will keep us close together," he said.

"I do not like the circumstances that threw us so closely together, but I cannot regret them," she said squeezing him.

"Nor could I," came the sleepy reply.

They drifted to sleep then. Neither was troubled by the shadow that hung over them.

Chapter Eight

Regent Nikulainen found he enjoyed the audiences. Magnus had made sure he and his brothers sat in on them often in Ritvala and learned how to adjudicate conflicts, thus he was familiar with such proceedings. The problems were not simple. In the majority of the petitions, further study would be required before he could rule. The issues presented before him were fascinating and told him a great deal about the intricacies of life in Arinpera. Above all, the audience was a chance for the Regent to meet his subjects. And that seemed to be what was on their minds as much as their own problems.

There were well wishes for the upcoming wedding directed at him and at Sarianna, who sat beside him. The petitioners watched his interaction with the Princess with keen interest. Since neither of them could hide the warm looks and smiles that passed between them, the curious managed to witness a great deal. The children who attended the audience gave him the most insight to what the adults were wondering. The little boys asked him about his skill with a bow and if he could fly. The little girls wanted to know about his hair. The littlest ones who could walk were very bold. If they got away from their parents, they were climbing on him. Sarianna was very amused by this and seemed to enjoy rescuing him from the wiggling children. Nikulainen answered the

children's questions with the same thoughtfulness given to the adults, and they left contented.

The Princess was less amused at the young women who were barely acquainted with adulthood. They were bold in their appreciative stares, and their questions just skirted propriety despite the presence of their parents. Nikulainen was accustomed to such attention from young maids. He thus knew how to reply diplomatically without hurting anyone's feelings.

The morning had passed quickly on its own because the work was so interesting. But his spirits had been buoyed so much, the audience could have been more tedious by scores and Nikulainen would not have noticed. Waking with Sarianna in his arms was an incredible experience. He felt loved and supported and possessed and even protected by her. He could face anything with ease after a morning like that.

Sarianna was smiling before she woke. She rubbed her cheek against his before opening her eyes. "Have you watched me sleep all night?"

Nikulainen smoothed her hair back, then gently kiss her parted lips. He was pleased when she returned his kiss with a moan.

"I awoke only moments ago," he murmured. "The servants will be here soon."

"Hmmm. I wish it were not so," she sighed, reaching up to caress his jaw. "I can feel your flesh has once again... grown... impassioned."

Nikulainen felt a blush spread across his cheeks. "All places on a man's body wake up with the morn. 'Tis naught that will not keep."

"It feels most urgent." She smiled.

“’Tis almost always urgent.” He smiled. “It will keep. We must rise.”

The Prince was very pleased at how reluctant Sarianna was about leaving his bed. She left his sleeping chamber with a wistful look at his naked body. Before reaching the door, she turned back to kiss him quickly but deeply. Then, she was gone.

Their separation was not for long. Even while apart, the Prince could hear Sarianna talking to the very mirthful and vocal Hanna. The chambermaid was teasing her lady about how rested and peaceful she was that morning. Though Jorgen could not hear what the ladies were saying, he nonetheless commented on Nikulainen’s serenity. His blush gave away more than he would have liked, but his loyal servant mercifully refrained from commenting.

The Prince and Princess had fared better under the watchful gazes of their fathers during the morning meal. There was no doubt in Nikulainen’s mind that their sires had not missed any of the crackling heat that passed between him and his betrothed. News from Armas and Julin preoccupied the Kings’ attention.

“The insurgents fled without engaging our forces,” Magnus said. “Your brothers return by nightfall.”

“It does sound like the attack was a diversion,” Nikulainen observed. “Yet there was no hint of trouble here.”

“Perhaps it became known that you remained here,” Sarianna suggested. “It must be clear to those at the citadel that you will allow no one near me.”

“I do believe there is a loose tongue close to this court,” Vauraus said solemnly.

“Nothing can be done now that Niku is Regent and they are to be wed,” Magnus said. “To proceed would risk war with Ritvala.”

“There is still a risk. A challenge could be made to the legitimacy of the Regency should my daughter die,” Vauraus said dourly. “Or there might be a challenge to the marriage itself.”

“None may challenge the Regency. Niku is my son and an heir to Ritvala,” Magnus said. “A challenge to my name is an act of war!”

Nikulainen sat stunned at the vehemence of the King’s words. So often he had thought himself as less than his brothers in the eyes of Magnus. So often had he been reminded that his mother was a hostage and not a wife. It was never as clear as it was at that moment that Magnus looked upon him as a son in truth. He wished his mother had been present to hear.

“There will be no challenge to the marriage, Father,” Sarianna declared. Her tone was emphatic. Her expression was fierce. “The Regent and I will meet the protocols if it is demanded.”

More became clear in the Princess’ statement. She resisted joining not merely out of fear of men. His lady wanted to prove she had been intact on her wedding night, so none could challenge the marriage. When she glanced at him, he could see something else in her eyes. She would not lose him for any reason. He felt doubly delighted that morning.

King Vauraus laughed with a deep rumble in his chest. “Our children are surprising.”

“And they have a great deal of self-restraint,” Magnus chuckled.

Nikulainen felt his face flush, and Sarianna went scarlet. Thankfully, the conversation turned to the audience of that morning. And there the subject stayed until Neuvoja came to escort them to the main receiving hall. King Vauraus retired to his chambers with a guard and his valet. Magnus set off to meet his sons. Nikulainen surmised his father wanted to tell them of his betrothal and Regency in private. He wondered how his brothers would receive the news. Their last words still stung him deeply. He worried most about Armas and his temper. His thoughts must have played across his features. Sarianna stopped him just before they entered the hall.

“Niku, do not be troubled by our fathers this morn,” she whispered in his ear. “I mean us not to join until the wedding night. I have not changed my mind about being with you and learning you well.”

The Prince forgot about his brothers. He nearly forgot about the audience waiting. “Milady has a way of making my troubles fall from thought along with almost everything else in my mind. I thank you.”

Her smile further buoyed him throughout the morning.

Neuvoja deemed the first audience a success. He left the royal couple to their mid-day meal in order to consider recommendations for the petitions. That left them alone save for the servers and the guard.

“You were very impressive, Regent,” Sarianna said quietly.

“Impressive?”

"In your royal finery and leather bracers," she said. "You are a fierce warrior, Regent."

Sarianna's words were mirthful, but her gaze was warm enough to singe him.

"My attire was the only thing that impressed them?" he asked mildly.

"Only a small part. The Regent is also very insightful and wise," she replied softly.

"You inspired confidence and trust. Then, you charmed everyone."

"Not everyone," he smiled. "Some of the gentlemen farmers feel I am too young for the position."

"They can be very harsh, our farmers," she admitted.

"That comes from being at the mercy of the land and the elements," Nikulainen said.

"I understand."

"Be fair with them. They will come around," she said. "Their daughters certainly have."

The Prince rolled his eyes, and his demeanor became rueful. "Yes. That is not about me so much as it is the my new station."

"Nonsense. You are beautiful."

"They probably view that as an extra bit of luck," he sighed. "In Ritvala, I was the most available prince because of my mother's status."

"They hoped to marry you because of your status?" Sarianna scowled.

"No... they wished for me to bed them... one of them," he replied quietly. "They sought status as my consort to make their lives more comfortable."

"It wouldn't matter if you were married?"

"Nay. Many royal men take consorts in addition to brides," the Prince replied. "It is understandable for the maids, I suppose."

"How?"

"They wish to escape a very hard life," he said. "Still it is uncomfortable to be considered for such an arrangement. I had hoped it not to be the case here."

"So, there are those in Ritvala who would be disappointed about your betrothal?" Sarianna asked with interest.

"And surprised," he admitted. "Most of the court staff thought Armas would marry first."

"You'll have to introduce me to these surprised young women," she said with a smile.

Nikulainen paused with a fork in the air. "I do not believe that a prudent idea. Their invitations never interested me before. They certainly do not now. No one has charm enough to distract me from the Princess who owns me. I shall spend a lifetime learning you."

There was a flash in Sarianna's eyes before she looked at her food that made Nikulainen wonder if there would be a chance to be alone with her that afternoon. He dearly wanted time to hold her before his brothers returned. But that was not to be. Their plates were barely cleared from sight when Thora, the head of household and protocol, was standing before them.

"The tailors and jewelers are here, Highness," she said. "They are to help you select your wedding attire."

"But, Thora, I've just been fitted for dozens of gowns," Sarianna said. "Some I have not even seen. Would not one of them suffice?"

"And I have a trunk full of new garments," Nikulainen said.

The woman looked at them like they were very willful children. "It is a tradition that the Arinperan craftsman clothe for royal ceremonies. It is expected."

Nikulainen knew what those words meant. They weren't required to accept the garments or the jewels, but it would be a grave insult and cast a pall over the entire celebration. Sarianna's face was resigned. He sighed.

"Where do you require us to be?" the Princess asked.

"Regent?" Thora inquired.

While the thought of being separated didn't appeal to him, all the talk of protocol and challenges caused the Prince to be concerned about the craftsmen knowing of the adjoining rooms.

"Our chambers," he said. "There will be guards outside each door. Everyone will be searched before entering."

"Regent, is this necessary?" Thora asked. "These craftsmen have been in service for generations."

"The Princess is in grave danger. If I am not in the room with her, I must be assured of her safety," he said.

"I do not wish to be away from the Regent," Sarianna said softly. It seemed she sensed his unease and shared it. "We will be fitted in my receiving room. I can stay behind my bathing screens."

Everyone looked at the Regent. "It shall be as my lady wishes."

Thora seemed scandalized, but faced with Sarianna's formidable will, she had to agree.

Thus, Nikulainen found himself standing on a wooden stool draped in fabrics. He did not know if he was heartened by the fact that the Princess was not pleased either.

"Honestly, do you have to measure me each and every time? I have not grown in several days time."

"We must be precise, milady. This gown is the most important one you will ever wear," came the patient reply.

Nikulainen was about to chuckle, but noticed one set of nimble fingers fluttering over his body were unfastening his bracers.

"Why do you do that?" he asked. "I always wear my bracers."

"To correctly measure your wrists, Regent," was the reply. "Besides, you would not be wearing them for the wedding."

He was about to protest, but a voice floated over the screen. "I wish him to wear his bracers."

"Would you, Milady?" the Prince asked. "Why?"

"You were wearing them when I first saw you," she replied simply.

"What of my shoulder armor?"

"I would prefer it, but the court may have an apoplexy," Sarianna replied dryly.

"You may be correct," he chuckled, looking at Thora.

"May we discuss fabrics?" Thora asked crisply.

“Certainly,” Sarianna said. Her voice was nearly contrite.

“We have a very soft, supple fabric in white with various undertones that are barely visible but give the white a character,” the tailor said.

“What sort of undertones?” the Princess asked.

“We have a pale gold, pale blue and pale green,” the tailor said.

“I wish to see the pale blue,” the Prince said surprising everyone.

They draped it across his bare arm to feel the texture. It was soft and silken. The color was a creamy white but with the palest tinge of blue.

“Princess, I wish you to wear this one,” he said softly. “It will enhance the blue fire in your eyes.”

“As you wish, Regent,” she replied. “I wish to see the gold undertone.”

The tailor hurried the bolt behind the screen. Nikulainen wondered on what part of her body they would drape it so she could test the feel.

“Regent, I wish this one for you. It accents your hair, and it has almost the same undertone of your skin,” she said.

“As milady wishes,” he replied with a smile.

Those present smiled much after that. All of Arinpera would know before nightfall that the royal couple was besotted with each other, but he didn’t mind. It pleased him to make such choices with her.

They dressed and sat together with the jewelers. Neither wanted new crowns made. Each had a sentimental attachment to them. They instead decided to have a strand of gold woven into an Arinperan design added to their crowns for the occasion. Sarianna

surprised him and everyone else by undoing his hair then placing his crown on his head.

"The crown holds it in place," she observed. "Would you wear it thus for the wedding?"

"If I get fair return," he replied.

"Thora, please assist me," she said quickly removing the pins from her hair.

Once her hair was free, Nikulainen placed the crown on her head. Thora helped him place pins to hold the errant curls, but her hair was mostly free. He stepped back and smiled at her.

"Does this suffice?" she asked with an arch of her brow.

"Very nicely," he replied.

Concentrating on the rings was difficult after that. The details surrounding the combining the crests of their two realms was not as compelling as Sarianna's hair. The problem with her flowing hair was that the dark, silken tresses begged to be touched. It was all he could do to focus on the selections. When they were through, Sarianna pulled the jeweler to one side to give him a design she did not want him to see. Nikulainen surmised it was his wedding gift. That reminded him to have Jorgen do his bidding on that matter.

As the craftsmen left, one of Magnus' messengers arrived with word that the King and his brothers would camp for the night just outside the village for the night. The note confused and concerned Nikulainen.

"Ill news from King Magnus?"

"No, I think not. Father and my brothers will be delayed until morning," he replied.

"What troubles you then?"

Nikulainen knew he could not hide from her vivid blue eyes. "I believe Armas may have difficulty with my new station. Father is likely attempting to assuage that," he said. "I let these matters worry me of late. Perhaps it is because I have not had as much exertion as at home to distract an overly nimble mind."

"I know we cannot ride, but you must do other things to keep your body ready for battle," she said.

The Prince was thoughtful. "I enjoy sparing with my men. It taxes my muscles yet calms my mind."

"Then do so," Sarianna said. "I will enjoy watching you."

The suggestion lightened his sagging spirits. His muscles needed to work after days of being relatively inactive. Moments later, he and three of his guards were in the main courtyard. Sarianna was seated in the main entryway. She could see and was easily protected, but remained well out of the way of flying limbs. The Princess looked curious when Nikulainen removed his quiver and bow, his sword and his leather jerkin. He merely smiled, then took up a quarterstaff.

"Now, my Prince. You have been getting soft, haven't you?" Nikerym, the archer said playfully.

Nikulainen knew the tone. It was not entirely without danger. Sparing was the one activity where he and the other guards could best the Prince. They took great pleasure in doing that when they could.

“Not soft enough to save you,” the Prince replied with a smile of his own.

They began their dangerous dance about the courtyard with Meikka and Peitsi, the other archers. The first moments were to get the lay of the land about them. Each archer knew the Prince would use every tree, cart rail and wall to elude him. Anything loose was a weapon for him. His men had learned over the years and through many bruises to make sure he didn't completely surprise them.

As always, Nikulainen never struck first. Part of his strategy was to draw out the wait. Nikerym struck first. The others joined in quickly. The Prince was soon lost in the heat of the fight. He let go of his mind and let his instincts take over. His body dodged the arcing staffs taking him up walls around trees, under carts with speed that was leaving him nearly breathless. His skin warmed as he fought. The tunic was removed and used to blind Meikka, who then took a staff to his gut. The cool air was bracing but barely cooled his heat. He was not unscathed. The blows were bruising, but not punishing. They kept him from getting sloppy and taking his opponent for granted. Each one that was landed caused Sarianna to gasp softly. The Prince could hear her fretting about their bruising his skin. The archers landed one blow for every ten attempts. The fight would intensify, then slow in turn to draw out the activity. The sun was low in the sky when they began. Dusk was falling when Peitsi conceded for the archers, throwing down his staff to halt the fight.

“Well played,” Nikulainen gasped, bowing to his men. “And much needed.”

The Prince drank deeply from a water skin, then handed it to his men.

“Aye, Regent,” Nikerym smiled. “Perhaps we can use swords on the morrow.”

It was then the men noticed the audience that had gathered in the entryway with the Princess. The small group of servants applauded as they drew near. Sarianna applauded as well. Appreciation and heat sparked in her eyes as they roamed over his bare chest and shoulders. He was flushed and sheened with sweat. Even his hair was damp. Yet she looked at him like he was a very tasty item to be devoured. He blushed under her gaze, but it pleased him nonetheless.

"That was most amazing, Regent," Sarianna murmured when he was by her side. "Captain Rajotin should see this."

"It would be a pleasure to demonstrate. And I am always looking to spar with someone new," Nikulainen said. "He is welcome to join me. As are you."

"I?"

"Yes. The quarterstaff is an excellent weapon for a woman to use," he replied. "It is light and it keeps adversaries at a distance."

"You would show me?"

"Yes. I will teach you to use a sword as well," he smiled. "All should learn self-defense. It could be needed at any time. My mother is skilled with the staff and the sword."

"I would like that very much."

The Princess had been right about him. He felt much better. His head was clearer. A hot bath awaited him if he knew Jorgen. He would enjoy that, then his evening with his Sarianna. Armas and his temper were long forgotten.

Chapter Nine

Night had just fallen by the time Sarianna returned to her chambers. Nikulainen left her to bathe and change. The connecting door was closed, thus the Prince had stationed his guards outside her door. It was maddening for her to stay in the chamber when he was bathing. A sudden urge to see him with his wet hair glistening in the firelight nearly overwhelmed her. Hanna's fluttering in the bedchamber was grating on her nerves. Thus, she went into her garden. It was safe from outside walls because it was on the interior of citadel structures. Sarianna sat on a little bench under a small tree and gazed at the darkening sky. The air was still and sweetly scented. The cool breeze lulled her senses, calming her.

"And Julin still waits for a tour of your gardens," a voice said. "Now that will never be."

Sarianna turned, badly startled. She found Armas at the entry to her receiving room. The questions that sprang to her mind were dismissed before they found voice. Of course, the guards allowed him in. His name was among those granted access to the wing. The guards wouldn't necessarily know he wasn't due back. Even if they knew, they would not question the Prince. What Sarianna did wonder was where Nikulainen was and why he had not come to her. Then she recalled that the connecting door was closed.

"You and I have much to discuss."

Hanna appeared at the entry to her bedchamber. Concern was evident on her face.

"Do you need something, milady?"

"Do you recall that odd matter we discussed?"

"I do indeed," she said. Her eyes were as big as saucers.

"You may tend to that now whilst I speak with Prince Armas."

It was clear that she did not want to leave. Her reply was reluctant. "Very well."

"Thank you, Hanna," she said. Once her chambermaid left, she squared her shoulders at Armas. "It is unfortunate I was unable to show him my gardens. Perhaps Niku and I can when he returns."

"Oh, yes. My golden brother," Armas muttered. "They already sing songs about the warrior Regent. We go to battle, and he wins hearts with but one brief audience."

"Perhaps the score of assassins with poison arrows he bested to save my life may have aided in his popularity," Sarianna commented dryly. "And did not Magnus order you to battle?"

"Aye, but there is much wrong in all of this," he said bitterly. "Father knows the order of things. It was he who imposed it. Niku should not have even been in consideration for your hand."

"He was from the start. King Magnus told me so," she replied. "My father gave me the right to choose. My father requested Niku's personal protection. Why do you feel wronged?"

"I am first born of a woman made wife. Any choice given the King's progeny should go to the first born," he declared angrily.

"And I am first born of a Royal line independent of your family," Sarianna declared angrily. "My choice matters as much as yours. My choice matters even more so in this instance, because I am heir to the throne. Were it not Niku, no son of Ritvala would have been chosen."

That angered Armas, who seemed to think he was an easy choice to make. "But you are a woman. Your choice is irrelevant."

"By whose authority? Armas of Ritvala? Would he next challenge the sovereign rule of the three Queens who rule in the Hanyanoore?" she snapped. "Would he end the diplomatic ties his father forged with these irrelevant women? What a fine King you would be."

Armas looked confused and then angry. "You twist my words, wench. You cover your own manipulations. You want Niku because you can control him."

Sarianna laughed. "I suppose the deaths of those assassins at his hand was an indication that an unarmed woman could control him. When, pray, did I bewitch your father?"

"You are a devil woman! I have never met one with such a tongue," he seethed.

"Then why trouble yourself with my choice? I am a woman with the same education and training for rule as you and your brothers. The weight of my throne will be on my shoulders no matter who is Regent. By law and by custom, I cannot and will not be a

silent wife," she retorted. "Be happy to be free of me. You have your choice of Princesses who have not another thought than how to be pleasing to a husband."

"Your words do not matter in this. There is an order of things, and I am first born!"

"So you would rather be with a woman who would make you very, very unhappy just to keep your youngest brother from being first to wed?" she exclaimed. "You behave like a spoiled child."

"Enough! I will hear no more!"

"There is no more to hear. Nikulainen is Regent. The betrothal has been announced to all the Hanyanoore with both of our fathers' blessing," she said evenly. "There is nothing to be done."

"That is where you are wrong, wench," Armas grumbled. "The Regency and the Bride go to he who has claimed both. I will challenge Niku's claim to the Regency on the morn. Right now, I will claim the Bride."

"You wouldn't dare force yourself on a sovereign person!"

Armas smiled. It may have been an attractive smile, but Sarianna could only see the grave threat in it. "'Tis never forced for very long."

Armas lunged at her suddenly, grabbing her around the waist. She considered kicking him between the legs, but he was in battle armor. Instead, she clawed him at his throat drawing blood. He dropped her.

"Niku! Help me!" she shouted, putting the small tree between her and Armas. She heard him not a moment later banging on the connecting door that had been locked. Though a risk, the Princess made a desperate dash to open that door or get to the

guards outside. Arms caught her about the waist again, then picked her up and headed for her bedchamber. The chuckle coming from him was ended when Sarianna hit him on the head with a water jug she had grabbed from a ledge.

It was not a killing blow, but it caused the elder Prince to drop her once more to grab his head. Sarianna scrambled away just as Nikulainen leapt from the wall adjoining his courtyard with her garden. He was between Armas and the Princess by the time the elder brother recovered.

"No more, Brother! Do no more damage than you have!" Nikulainen demanded.

"You cannot interfere, half-caste," Armas rumbled dangerously. "Lay a hand on me in conflict, and your life is forfeit."

"No longer, Armas," the Prince said quietly. He kept Sarianna behind him. "I gave my life to the Princess on the day we met. It is hers to keep or destroy. I will fight you, Brother."

It was a dangerous and painful moment that next passed. Sarianna could hear the deep pain in Nikulainen's voice along with the anger. She despaired there would be no way to avoid violence between the men. Armas was not going to back down.

And then Hanna had returned with the captain of the guard and a phalanx of men.

"Seize Prince Armas and keep him in his chambers!" Sarianna exclaimed. Her fear had been suddenly replaced by fury.

"Princess?" Nikulainen asked.

"Your brother has assaulted a royal person and threatened the appointed Regent," she replied hotly. "I could throw him in the dungeon."

"Where is my son? Where is Armas?" The booming voice of King Magnus came from beyond the chamber doors. Then he was in the small garden. Sarianna had never known it to hold so many, and she was intent on making everyone leave.

"What goes on here?" he demanded. "Clear this garden. No guards are needed here."

Nikulainen turned to her; anguish was clear on his face. He leaned in close to whisper in her ear.

"Sarianna, please. For my sake, leave Armas to my father."

Magnus looked furious and overtaxed by what was undoubtedly a hard ride to catch his errant son. Perhaps a harsher fate awaited him with the sire.

"You may go, Captain Rajotin," Sarianna said. "My thanks."

"My men will remain at their stations. Now, none shall enter this wing save for the Kings, Jorgen and Hanna," Nikulainen growled.

Sarianna felt the Prince wrap an arm around her and pull her close. His body still protected her from his own kin.

"What goes on here?" Magnus repeated.

"Prince Armas decided to make his own challenge to the Regency by making me unsuitable for marriage to anyone save him. My choice and the blessings of two Kings were not relevant," Sarianna said. She was surprised at how calm her voice was.

Incredulity crept across the King's face as he gazed at Armas. "You have heard nothing I said this day? Are your interests more important than those of two kingdoms?"

"Arinpera should be mine," Armas insisted.

"You have witnessed so much of my rule, but have learned nothing," Magnus muttered angrily. "You are entitled to naught but what your King demands. If you fell in battle this day, that would be the way of things because it was my will."

Armas was going to speak, but the King's glare managed to silence him.

"King Vauraus is a wise man and an old friend. He placed this decision in his daughter's hands. She is the Light of this Land," Magnus continued. "A good ruler respects his fellows. He respects his father."

The fight seemed to go out of Armas. Sarianna was not so certain. His posture remained rigid. His visage remained defiant.

"Do you end this now, or do you face the consequences of defying your King?" Magnus demanded.

There was a long silence as Armas composed himself. "My allegiance is with my King."

Magnus shifted his gaze to Sarianna. "And do you allow this to end?"

The Princess felt Nikulainen tighten his hold on her. She could feel the tension pouring off his body. This was causing him great pain, and she could not bear being a part of it.

"I shall let this end, Great King," Sarianna replied. "But I cannot speak for my Father. The insult was as much to him as to me. I have never been able to hide my distress from his eyes."

"I will speak to Vauraus before the morning meal," Magnus said. "And now we will take our leave of you. Goodnight, Niku."

"Goodnight, Father," the Prince said quietly.

Armas said nothing before preceding the King out of the garden and out of the chambers. The Arinperan guards could be heard retreating from the wing. Sarianna began to tremble then. All that had fettered her feelings was gone. She had been so angry and frightened in turn, it was hard to know what to feel. She felt lost. Nikulainen embraced her, pressing her close to his body.

"I failed you, Sarianna," Nikulainen said with great anguish. "I heard his voice from my chambers but did not ever think he would dare..."

"Do not blame yourself. He is your brother," she murmured holding him close. "Why would you think he would betray you? I knew you would come."

"Milady?" Hanna said from the doorway. "You must have some food."

"Oh, Hanna, I cannot face an evening meal in the hall," she groaned.

"Bring our meal here, Hanna," Nikulainen said. "We have retired for the night."

"Jorgen and I will arrange everything, Regent," she said. "Milady's bath will be brought after the food is served."

When the door closed in her chamber, Nikulainen tilted her head back. His eyes were luminous in the moonlight. His skin was golden even in the silver light. He was so beautiful. His eyes were so full of love. Sarianna stopped trembling and pulled his head down to hers. When he kissed her, it was with a possessiveness heretofore unknown to her. It was not an unwelcome feeling.

"Seven days ago my life was so different from now," Nikulainen murmured.

They were seated in Sarianna's receiving room in front of the hearth in comfortable high-backed chairs. The remnants of a very tasty supper rested in trays on their laps. The Princess did not believe she would have an appetite, so shaken were her insides. But the scent was enough to change her mind. Nikulainen had been very hungry. He was on a third helping before speaking.

"Seven days ago I believed Armas had the right to take my life if I transgressed against my kin," he continued quietly.

"I simply cannot understand how that can be," Sarianna said.

Nikulainen shrugged. "I never questioned what always was. All I knew was our status had to do with the truce after the Suurimetsa War."

Sarianna surmised that any peace for her betrothed with his family was to get to the heart of the matter surrounding Magnus and Lady Reija. Though that was important, nothing could be done at the moment. Thus it had to wait. A great strain had been placed upon their fragile union. Strengthening their bond was more important right then.

But Hanna and Jorgen were suddenly under foot. Hanna was with guards carrying in hot water for the bath. Jorgen was clearing away the food. The work had to be done, but the Princess lamented the break in the mood. The intimacy dwindled.

"The water is very hot, milady," Hanna was saying. "It was allowed to come to a boil. I can come back once it's cooled a little."

"No... Hanna. I can get the bath myself," Sarianna replied. "I will see you in the morning."

Hanna seemed reluctant to leave. The Princess assumed their anxiety was still close to the surface. Jorgen stood awkwardly beside his master unsure of what to do either.

"Get some rest, Jorgen. We have a long day tomorrow," the Prince said.

"Very well, Regent."

For a while after everyone had gone, Nikulainen gazed into the fire. His face was calm, but Sarianna felt the turmoil swirling within him.

"Do not worry, Sarianna," he said softly. His eyes remained on the brilliant blaze. "My heart would have been sorely troubled a mere seven days ago. This night I realize much of what Armas said was really for Magnus."

"You were hurt nonetheless," she replied.

"I was wounded for you," he said looking over at her. "I could not bear to hear you that way."

"Still," Sarianna said kneeling on the floor between his thighs. "I would provide you comfort."

"I look at you, and the last thing on my mind is comfort," he murmured. His eyes were like the fire he had been looking at.

"Take what you will, Niku," she whispered, mesmerized by his gaze.

Sarianna could not bear it if he did not kiss her. Then he was kissing her deeply and passionately. The possessive quality of earlier had not abated. It was stronger than before. It was barely contained. She didn't mind. Some of the same feelings had taken hold of her as well. Unbidden, Sarianna's hands slid up into his hair, freeing it from its tie. She clutched at the silken strands, deepening the kiss while the Prince's fingers were busily unlacing her dress.

The Princess was lost in Nikulainen's kiss. She felt her bare skin on the thick, warm fur as she was lowered onto her back, but had no idea how her clothes were removed. To her dismay, his clothes were still in place.

"I would see your skin in the firelight and feel it against me," she whispered. "Please, Niku..."

The Prince was more than a little wild-eyed. At first, it didn't seem like he had heard her at all. Then his hands were fluttering everywhere over his body, and his warmth was covering her while he kissed her into oblivion. His kiss undid her. Sarianna would have done anything for him. But he had only begun using his mouth to torment her. Or was it torment? It seemed he was worshipping her with that talented mouth. Her nipples were alternately suckled, then gently nipped until she was writhing against him. He pinned her against the fur with one arm as he traveled lower still. She felt his tongue in her navel and then still lower. Sarianna's eyes flew open. The question on her lips died as that tongue found the same hidden place between her legs where his fingers had so cleverly played her the night before. This time it was different. There was wet

heat and that probing, relentless tongue. Her body was already singing with pleasure. This soon put her over the edge.

“Niku...” she whispered desperately. Then she moaned out loud as wave upon wave of intense pleasure rippled from that place along every one of her nerves, stealing her breath and her will, leaving her blissfully spent.

When next she opened her eyes, Nikulainen was hovering over her. His eyes were nearly black with passion. Sarianna reached up to gently stroke his hair.

“How do I give you release?” she asked softly. “How do I please you?”

“I am nearly undone by the sweetness of your taste and the way you sound and move from my touch,” he replied with a husky voice. “It will not take very much.”

“Take your pleasure then,” she replied.

Nikulainen hitched himself up a little to align himself along the sensitive nub in the soft hair between her legs.

“Wrap your legs around me, Sarianna...”

She moaned at the urgency in that whispered plea and could not but comply. It was difficult, as her limbs seemed made of very heavy wet dough. Somehow she managed to hold his slim hips against her. Her eyes never left his flushed face as he began to rhythmically thrust against her. His hardness again sent pleasurable jolts inside her, building that delicious tension once more. The Prince was true about his state. After several deep undulations, Sarianna could see that combination of pleasure and pain cross his features and feel the powerful pulse along his shaft before he gasped her name

and the thick wetness spread between their bodies. Nikulainen trembling arms gave way. He collapsed into the Princess' embrace.

"You trusted me," Nikulainen said in wonder. His arms tightened around her briefly before returning to stroking her hair. "You let me have you without restraints."

They were in his bed somehow. Sarianna's memory was not very clear. She remembered him using the warm bath water to clean them both as they lay in front of the fire. Then he left her for a long moment. She thought she heard him say something about taking his clothing back to his chambers. When he returned, he put her in her night shift. She wasn't sure why. Maybe he could tell she was chilled despite the heat from the hearth. Then she was floating in his arms. Finally, she was half on top of the still naked Prince under warm blankets with her head on his chest.

"You are not like other men," she murmured in reply. "I realized that tonight. You would never take your pleasure over my feelings or our duty. And I felt your need to really claim me this night. I found that I needed you to do so."

"Will you still restrain me?" he asked softly. Worry tinged his voice.

Sarianna smiled against his skin. She lifted her head to gaze at him. "There is still much that I have to explore with you. And I promised you fair return, did I not?"

"Yes, but I don't understand..."

"I would have you with my lips and tongue as you had me," she said with a wicked smile.

His breath caught, and his eyes widened.

"Sarianna... you will drive me mad."

"I will give you the same pleasure you give me in all things," she smiled.

Nikulainen took a deep breath to calm himself. "It would please me that we rest now. Tomorrow we face both of my brothers and begin receiving guests."

"Aye, love."

Sarianna shared the vague dread for the upcoming days, but she felt stronger for being with him. Perhaps they could cope with anything so long as they were together.

Chapter Ten

The day began as Nikulainen expected. He and Sarianna were summoned before King Vauraus before they were even dressed. The Princess was barely in her chambers when Jorgen arrived with the summons. The couple had not planned to cut the time that close. Holding Sarianna lulled his senses, making him sleep much more deeply than he planned, and the night slipped away before he knew it. The Princess was so deeply asleep, she was difficult to wake. Then she was so sweetly befuddled, it took some moments for her to understand that she had to leave his bed. The Prince was less than helpful because his own reluctance to let her go may have made him unclear about leaving.

But leave she did with what seemed to be more difficulty than the morning before. Moments later, the servants arrived clucking that the monarchs were already awaiting them. The slow start did not set the pace for the day. Sarianna was dressed and well composed when the Prince came to her door only a short while after rising. They said little on the walk to the receiving hall, but the warm feelings from the night before kept them close in spirit. Eventually, Nikulainen noticed his betrothed was quite mirthful.

“What amuses the Princess this morn?”

Sarianna chanced a smile at the Prince. “A solemn and important audience with our fathers awaits, does it not?”

“Aye, Princess. It is very important to the alliance between our lands.”

She smiled again, then laughed at the confusion on Nikulainen’s face. “’Tis my own folly. All I can think about is how hungry I am.”

A small smile crept over his face. “We were quite active after our meal. Thus, it did not stay with us. I am quite hungry as well.”

The smiles still ghosted over their faces even under the solemn visages of the monarchs who awaited them. Magnus was particularly somber as he gazed at his son. Vauraus was harder to read though the Prince noticed him watching Sarianna intently for a long moment before speaking.

“Good morning, Daughter,” Vauraus rumbled.

“Good morning, Father,” Sarianna said brightly. She went to the Elder King to embrace him, gifting him with an impetuous kiss on the cheek. “Have you slept well?”

“I have. You look well rested,” he observed with a brightening countenance.

“I am, Father,” the Princess replied with a slight blush.

“This pleases me greatly, child. Your sleep was undisturbed. You are happy,” he said. “My heart is thus unburdened, and I can grant an old friend’s request.”

“Thank you, Vauraus,” Magnus said, visibly relaxing.

“This is a time of unity and celebration,” Vauraus said. “I would speak to my new son who has captured the affection of my people and the discerning heart of my daughter.”

“Yes, Sire,” Nikulainen said drawing near.

“Neuvoja tells me you fared very well with your first audience,” The Elder King said. “Have you any questions or concerns I might address?”

“I do need some information about your treaties with the north and how it would affect new roads,” Nikulainen replied.

The elder King nodded. “I thought as much. I have given an opinion on those petitions to the advisor.”

“Thank you, Sire.”

Sarianna chuckled. “He has other concerns, Father. Our Regent worries that the farmers think him too young for his position.”

Vaurus chuckled. “Worry not. They have only deemed me seasoned enough in recent days. There will be little you can do to please them completely. Just do what is best for the region and be willing to listen fully to complaints – which will be numerous.”

“Yes, Sire. My thanks,” Nikulainen said with some mischief. “And now if I may point out a concern of my betrothed?”

“Pray tell,” Vaurus asked. Sarianna looked at the Prince curiously.

“She is very hungry,” he said.

“Niku!” she exclaimed.

“Then let us eat,” Vaurus chuckled. “Please, go ahead. I would confer with Neuvoja before joining you.”

Nikulainen swept into step with his father. Sarianna quickly kissed her father then, hurried to join them. The Prince was confused at the monarchs' reaction to his jest at Sarianna's expense.

"Father, why is milady's voracious hunger a cause for celebration?"

"Niku! You make it sound as though I would eat a whole stag," Sarianna retorted. Her smile belied any sort of annoyance.

"I would imagine the Princess does not so hunger if she is unhappy," Magnus said.

"No, I do not," she replied. "And I am quite happy."

Magnus paused. He gazed at Sarianna with a broad smile. "Niku has always been a good son, who is always willing to please his father. His bride is a fine daughter. I am pleased to welcome you into my family."

The Princess curtsied. "Thank you, Sire. And to ease everyone's minds, I will make welcome my new brothers."

The reminder almost cast a pall on the morning's fine beginning. Nikulainen had been basking in the approval of both Kings as a Regent or a husband. But there was still the matter of his brothers. Magnus realized this as well. It was not an accident that the Great King entered the dining hall with them. The message of royal support could not have been clearer. The Prince only hoped his brothers would recognize the message.

It was Julin they saw first as he entered the hall from the guest wing. To Nikulainen's infinite relief, his brother was smiling as they approached.

"Regent Niku!"

Nikulainen raised an inquisitive brow at Julin. Sarianna looked very confused. The Prince could understand that. It was often hard to understand when Julin was jesting. In this case, it was still not clear.

"You have my sword, Brother," Julin said in a serious tone. He then dropped to one knee. "I shall defend your throne as I would my father's."

The Prince walked over to his brother, then placed a hand on his broad shoulder. "Thank you, Julin. You honor us."

"My thanks as well, Julin," Sarianna said softly. "Welcome to my family."

"And I welcome you, Sister!" Julin exclaimed. In the next instant, he was on his feet and lifted her in the air spinning her about. Sarianna was stunned at first. Then she started laughing before he set her down.

"Where is Armas?" Magnus inquired as they settled down at the table.

Julin grew more serious. "He has gone on a hunt. He told me he will be back before the evening meal."

Sarianna gently grasped Nikulainen's arm. "That may be for the best. He may need the time."

"He is likely hunting a gift of atonement," Magnus said.

"Yes, a large gift of meat," the Princess commented. "We are having guests from now hence. That would be a great service."

Once Vaurus joined them, they began to eat their meal. Sarianna was discreet, but she managed two full helpings by replacing individual items as they diminished. It did not seem that she ate much at all to most at the table. The Prince noticed her happiness

with the tasty morsels. She almost hummed in enjoyment. The Elder King noticed as well. His great gray eyes missed little. He seemed satisfied with the good fellowship at the table.

"Julin, court business arrives by dispatch," Magnus said. "I think my son should sit in council with me this day."

"Yes, Father."

"And later, Brother, come spar with me," Nikulainen said.

"I will spar with the men. You're leaping and spinning make my head swim," Julin laughed.

"As you wish," the Prince smiled. "Come, Princess. The farmers await."

Nikulainen found the conference with Neuvoja curious. The advisor's council on many of the petitions was almost completely contrary to his thoughts. Sarianna did not agree and thought him overly cautious to the point of harsh. He even conceded that King Vauraus did not hold his view.

"There are great costs to providing these roadways," Neuvoja said.

"Dear teacher," Sarianna said. "Even with the wedding costs, the treasury is bursting."

"For the moment," Neuvoja replied. "But what if after such a great commitment, there is drought or flood?"

"Cataclysm can happen at any time," the Princess said. "Our people have never lived in fear."

"The investment is worth it for the region. The farmers will find more markets. We increase trade with our neighbors," Nikulainen said. "The poor would be put to work."

"But what of our neighbors? Roads could bring weapons and soldiers to our gates with more ease. Or it could bring fears of our weapons coming to other gates," the advisor said.

"That is why we will negotiate with our neighbors and give them right of way," Sarianna said. "The wedding is the perfect time to do so."

The advisor still resisted despite the well-reasoned arguments. Nikulainen could sense Sarianna's growing unease with the whole encounter. The Prince decided to offer a compromise and further explore the reasons for this learned man's objections.

"Neuvoja, we will not rush into this decision. Much has to be explored," Nikulainen said quietly. "But the farmers present a petition well worth considering. The Princess and I will speak with our neighbors while they visit. We will then confer with you, King Vauraus and the treasurers."

The advisor nodded satisfied with the response. He bowed before them. "I will instruct the herald to summon the petitioners."

He left them then. Nikulainen let out a sigh, glad to be free of the strange tension he felt from the man. Sarianna squeezed his upper arm gently, then smiled at him. As always, she eased his mind as she stirred him.

"Is your appetite still satisfied, milady?" he asked mildly.

“For the moment, Regent,” she replied. Her voice was like silken tendrils playing gently along his nerves. His own appetite began to stir. “I will let you know if they come to life once more.”

The Princess smiled at him. Her expression was somehow both innocent and sultry. It was a look that made him want her kiss. Sarianna must have known what he was thinking for her eyes grew darker, and a blush spread across her cheeks.

“Will it always be thus?” she asked him quietly. “That I look at you and become wanton?”

“I hope so,” he breathed.

Sarianna swallowed hard. She swayed toward him, but instead of a kiss, she caressed his hair gently grasping the locks to pull him toward her. Their foreheads touched and he breathed her in. Then Neuvoja and the herald had returned and it was time to get to work.

Nothing pleased the Regent more than the news delivered at the end of the audience. No guests would be arriving until the day before the wedding. The suddenness of the betrothal caught most of the monarchs unaware. It was widely believed the choice would take a lot longer. There were affairs to be put in order before a ruler could travel. This gave the couple a reprieve after a long morning. As it was, they could not attend the mid-day meal with the family. Nikulainen had much he wanted to write down for

King Vauraus. He also needed to confer with Sarianna about the unease he felt as the villagers left.

The audience had gone well. More subjects attended than the day before. Far more appeared than were listed to be heard. Curiosity about the Regent had grown from the day before. Nikulainen wondered what they saw as they watched him with such rapt attention. The focus should have been on Sarianna's radiance in the morning light. Then again, perhaps it was best that it wasn't. The thought of others regarding her in the same way as the Prince made his blood rise. Fortunately, he wasn't given very much time to ponder such possessive thoughts. Much had to be addressed, and many were waiting.

The decisions on the petitions had been well received. Disputes were settled with general satisfaction and most requests were granted. Even the farmers had reacted well to the news that the King would pursue negotiations for new roads to the north. Nikulainen could not say the dour bunch was happy, but they were less hostile than the day before. On the surface, it appeared the audience was even more successful than the one before. The only really visible difference and his one regret was that the mothers managed to hold onto their young children. Thus, none climbed upon him. He and the Princess were greeted often with big smiles and loud salutations, but he did miss wrangling them.

All in all, the morning's events would be well heralded, but Nikulainen felt uneasy. He asked Neuvoja leave to him and the Princess alone and instructed a page to have

Jorgen bring them their meal there. Sarianna was very curious, but waited, expecting nothing until they were completely alone.

“Neuvoja resists the new roads petition mightily,” Nikulainen said quietly.

“I know. It colors his every word to you this day,” Sarianna agreed. Her brow knitted with confusion. “And I see no soundness to his reasoning nor his strong allegiance to it. Above all things he taught me is no land can survive without growth.”

“And Vauraus has not considered this without prudent thought to the changes this growth would bring,” the Regent said. “Has the advisor disagreed with the King before?”

“Of course,” Sarianna replied thoughtfully. “But the occasions were rare. And the disagreements were slight in the philosophies to solve a problem. I sense Neuvoja is set completely against this petition.”

Nikulainen considered this as Jorgen and a page entered with their trays. Once alone, he leaned in close to Sarianna. “Did your advisor have a preference for your betrothed?”

“Nay,” Sarianna replied.

They ate in silence for a time. The Princess seemed lost in thought. She seemed to be going over some events in her mind. .

“He did not have a preference for my suitor, but he did find Queen Taraasta to be great company,” she said after a time. “He spoke often of her sophistication and what she brought to this court.”

“Does he think Arinpera unsophisticated?”

"I suppose he does," she replied quietly. "Our wealth is built on farming not trade. And we are land bound. Seldom are we exposed to outsiders. I could be considered quaint. I have not traveled, so I cannot say. Neuvoja never seemed unhappy."

"Is he well traveled?"

"He used to be," Sarianna recalled. "He would go forth on my father's behalf to all manner of places. I recall that he would be gone for long periods of time. And when he returned, he would have gifts and books from all sorts of places I could only imagine. But those days ended before I became of age."

"He stopped traveling when your father's condition worsened?"

The Princess nodded. "I was afraid to let him leave lest I forget something and the King's ailment would be revealed. I needed him to help me."

"Would he tarry in one land for very long?"

"In some cases, he would. His stays were lengthy in lands where my father had long friendships," Sarianna replied. "How is it that he never visited Ritvala?"

"Magnus ceased having visitors around the time of my birth," Nikulainen said. "I never knew the reason for it. If a matter needed discussion, Magnus would go."

"I confess my confusion grows," Sarianna said. "New roads would bring more contact to Arinpera."

Nikulainen nodded absently, returning to his meal. After a time, he looked up at the Princess, who looked even more troubled.

"Sarianna, what would happen if the petition is denied?"

"There may be some unrest if the farmers were affronted by an unsound rejection," she replied. "Before you became Regent, it may have called into question the King's ability to rule."

That sparked a thought in Nikulainen's head. "Do we know when the petition was to be heard?"

"The farmers sought an audience about it in the weeks before the announcement I would wed. Neuvoja wanted it heard, but I was delaying it," Sarianna replied. "I thought the issue too complex for the King alone, and I was uncertain of how to approach the northern rulers without him."

Nikulainen grew quiet again. His thoughts were taking him to a sad and disturbing place. Sarianna sensed this. She rose from her place leaving most of the meal behind. It pained the Prince to be part of the cause for her distress, but there was no help for it.

"He would never want me harmed," she said simply. Her voice was soft but certain. "He could not have known this would happen."

"I know," he replied. "His regard for you is genuine. I saw how concerned he was for your safety the night of the attack. If any of this is true, it is certain he believes he is acting in the interest of Arinpera."

"We do not know that this is true, do we?"

"No. Care must be taken before an accusation is made," Nikulainen said. "I would loathe to besmirch a man's valuable reputation in your eyes or your father's and be wrong," the Regent said. His tone had the same somber weight as the burden of this knowledge.

Sarianna looked at the Regent solemnly. "You also want to find out who may be in league with him."

"Sarianna..." He longed to hold her and try to soothe some of that anxiety.

"I do not blame you for this pain I feel, Love," she murmured. "You only desire to protect me. "

"Yet, I hurt you just the same."

"Nay, never you," Sarianna replied. She was behind him then, stroking his hair. "What do we do?"

"Let us write down our thoughts on this whole matter for your father," Nikulainen said. "Is there a place for his documents where none but he will see?"

"Yes, there is a little chest on his desk for papers from me. Only he and I have keys."

"That is the way then."

Sarianna penned their theories while the Regent wrote his opinions on that day's petitions for Neuvoja. All had to continue to appear normal. Though he had not said that it might be true that Neuvoja had compatriots, it concerned the Regent. He gave letters of safe passage to messengers and had leave to allow visitors inside the citadel. The advisor had a great deal of power within those walls. A talk with Thora and Captain Rajotin about visitors and their movements from that day hence was in order. It would be easy for strangers to slip into forbidden areas with all the visitors who would be at the citadel for the wedding. Keeping Sarianna safe would be more and more of a daunting challenge as the nuptials drew near. Keeping his bride happy was even more

of a challenge. Their situation was perilous, but he did not want a time of celebration to be shadowed by fear.

An opportunity presented itself when they ran into Captain Rajotin shortly after placing the vellum in the chest for the King.

"Captain, a word," Nikulainen said with a smile.

"Yes, Regent?"

"I would have you spar with me and my men," he said.

The man smiled wryly. "It will be an honor to have a thrashing at the hands of the Regent."

"It need not be a thrashing. It all hinges on your own skill," Sarianna said.

"Against a man who can fly? The Princess has a sharp sense of humor," Rajotin said.

"I am at your disposal. I will bring two of my men. There must be two in need of sound discipline."

Nikulainen chuckled. "Meet us at the stables after you change."

The Princess eyed him curiously as they walked back to their chambers to change.

"Why the stables?"

"I have not visited my horse in days. I know he'll feel ill-used despite the pleasant surroundings," he replied. "I know you miss your fine mount."

She smiled brightly at him. "Yes, I do. I miss her a lot. I can exercise her while you thrash the guards."

Minos was very glad to see the Princess despite the grumbling about her absence. After feeding their horses apples and making sure their noses were properly nuzzled, Sarianna led both mounts to the exercise ring where the Prince awaited his men. Ajaa nearly knocked Nikulainen down in greeting him.

"You've been well fed and have a beautiful companion," he muttered, stroking the horse's mane. "You have no reason to be off put."

Ajaa snorted in response, then trotted after Kelata. Sarianna was laughing at his consternation.

"You are having trouble with one of your subjects, Regent," she smiled. Devilment had returned to those deep blue eyes.

"He has no respect for my new station," Nikulainen agreed ruefully. "But he will come around as soon as the brush comes out. Are you not going to ride?"

"Yes, but I want to help Minos for a while. He feels off put as well," she replied with a shrug. "Your playmates have arrived. Have fun."

Sarianna disappeared inside the stable. Nikulainen smiled. This worked out better than he had planned. The sturdy building had no doors or windows that he could not see, yet the Princess was out of earshot just as Rajotin and the others approached.

"Before we begin, I must speak to you about the guests attending the wedding," Nikulainen began, drawing Rajotin, Meikka and Nikerym from the others. He kept a peripheral eye on the stable to make sure the Princess did not hear.

"Yes, Regent?" Rajotin asked.

"There will be a viper among the visitors," Nikulainen said darkly. "As yet, we do not know who it is or with whom he is in league. We cannot risk an insult to another sovereignty, but the Princess must be protected."

"What would you have my men do?" Rajotin asked.

"I know that there are customs and protocols dictating where guests may stay and where they may roam, but we cannot allow any movement toward the royal wing to go unchallenged. Even if the guest is accompanied by a high-ranking member of the citadel staff, they may not pass," he replied. His tone remained quiet, but the message was emphatic.

"But Neuvoja..."

"Will be told of this order. If he forgets, you and your men will gently, but firmly remind him," the Regent said. "You may shoulder the blame on my possessiveness of my new bride. It is the truth, after all. And I shall say again that not even my brothers may pass."

"Only King Magnus," Rajotin said.

"That is correct. I also want an additional guard on King Vauraus. Place someone in his antechamber as soon as he retires each day, with relief for each watch. They may sleep, but the doors must be bolted," he continued. "The guard outside the doors in that wing must stand awake. Relieve them on half watches if necessary."

"Yes, your Highness," Nikerym said. "None shall harm you or your bride while we still stand."

The men gathered around him looked back with eyes that were earnest and true. There was naught else to be done short of wrapping his lady in chain mail.

“Very well then,” Nikulainen said with a small devilish smile. “As my lady instructed, let us find some merriment.”

Chapter Eleven

Minos was surprised when Sarianna swept back inside the stables tying on an apron. His broom was hanging in the air, and he gazed upon the Princess as if he did not recognize her.

"Is something wrong, Minos?" Sarianna asked. "You look so strange."

"I thought you were going to ride, Princess," he explained. But that was not the whole of it. He appeared far too uncomfortable for it to have been a simple misunderstanding.

"Something troubles you, old friend. I would know it," Sarianna said quietly.

"It was an old man's foolishness," he admitted in a tremulous voice. "I thought that since you were betrothed, there would be no more work in the stables. Your work would be far too important."

"Why would you think that? I have had court duties for some time."

"You have not come for days even to bring apples to Kelata," he replied. The stable master was reluctant to tell the Princess this. His words were hesitant. "I've been told of how well you and the Regent are doing in the King's stead. I supposed this would be the way of things."

Sarianna smiled at him placing a comforting hand on his corded shoulder. "Yes, that is foolishness. I will never be too busy to find time for my work here. The Kings have

been concerned for my safety since the assassins attacked. I am not to leave the Regent's side. He has been tied to court for audiences. This is the first day we have been free."

"Princess, forgive me..."

"There is nothing to apologize for. I will always have time for one of my favorite teachers," she smiled. "Though I still plan for you to take on an apprentice – maybe two."

"Two? Why would I be needing two neophytes underfoot?" Minos sputtered. "You think I've slowed down that much in my work?"

"No, dear friend. You are as strong and sure as you ever were, but I am selfish," she replied. "I want you to be the same when I bring my children to train with you."

The stern, leathered face faltered for a moment before returning to normal. He nodded briefly. "There is the broom."

Sarianna smirked at him, then grabbed the handle. The job wasn't as daunting as it could have been. Minos had mucked the stalls earlier in the day, as was his habit. There were straw and spilled feed that needed to be cleaned away. Then there were tools to be cleaned and put away. Even taking great care, that much work would be done long before Nikulainen finished sparring.

As was her habit, Sarianna took great care with each of her tasks. Not one piece of hay or speck of feed escaped her broom. Each piece of used equipment was carefully cleaned, then put in its designated space. By the time Armas and his hunting party returned, the stable would be spotless, leaving Minos only those horses to feed and settle for the night. Unlike the petitions before the throne, which were complex and

largely unsettled, Sarianna's work in the stables was very satisfying because she could see it was well finished. Minos, however, had to make his inspection before it could be considered complete.

The stable master looked about the room with arms akimbo. He spied in each corner of each stall and fingered each stowed piece of equipment. All of this was done with his usual stern and vaguely disapproving expression.

"Not bad for someone so out of practice," he said. "I hope those unused muscles are not too sore to exercise your horse."

Sarianna chuckled as she shook her head ruefully. "I do not know why, but I will make sure you get a good helping of the game caught when the garrison gets theirs."

"Do not forget the sweetmeats and dessert," he quipped.

Sarianna took off her apron, then headed outside. What she saw outside took her breath away.

Nikulainen was not sparring with the men. He was stripped down to his under tunic and leggings, riding bareback on Ajaa while shooting arrows at targets set up at different points around the exercise ring. His hair had come undone. It flew behind him in the afternoon sunshine as he whipped around that ring hitting every target with amazing ease. His face was impassive save for the slight frown of concentration. But his eyes blazed with the passion of the hunt. Sarianna could only shudder at how fearsome he would look in the heat of battle. He was like a terrible angel.

Nikerym noticed her approach and bowed.

"I thought you were to spar," she said. Her eyes never left Nikulainen.

"We are, but you were not here to distract him from really fighting us," he explained. There was laughter in his voice. "So we thought we'd distract him until he tired a little or you returned."

"Do you think he has tired?"

Nikulainen then struck one target with two arrows in such close order it seemed they were shot simultaneously.

"No, Princess. I do not."

Sarianna laughed. "Alas, your reprieve is over."

With that, the Princess retrieved her horse from the tether outside the ring. Nikulainen had saddled her, so she simply had to swing up onto Kelata's back. He noticed her as she approached the entrance to the ring. The bow was lowered as he rode toward her. His hair tumbled to frame his flushed face as he stopped.

"You have defended this patch of land with honor, but you must now yield," she smiled.

Nikulainen tilted his head to one side. Those dark eyes were all but glittering with devilment. "This was a hard won patch of land. I could not yield without some consideration."

Sarianna looked at him warily. "What sort of consideration?"

"The precious gift of your kiss," he said softly.

"You are a very bold warrior," she replied. Her face heated, but she did not shrink from his entreaty. "What would this company think?"

"These good men would not mind such a display," he countered, moving his mount close to hers.

"These good men hope for your thorough distraction," she quipped but stood her ground.

"Fair enough," he conceded with a small smile. "But they will be discreet."

"If that will spare our hides," Nikerym said. Captain Rajotin agreed.

Nikulainen then caught her about the waist with one arm then, easily moving the horses close. He leaned into her and her to him. Sarianna could not continue sparring when she very much wanted his kiss as well. One hand was in his wild hair before his lips covered hers. The kiss was short and free of scandal, but it scorched them both nonetheless. Nikulainen managed to explore her mouth and steal her breath. He ended the kiss with obvious reluctance. She released his silken hair with equal hesitation.

"Now you have made my blood rise," he murmured for her ears only.

"You had best let me end your misery," Julin said from behind the men. He approached them with two of his guard, wearing a broad smile and carrying a drawn sword. "I have never seen Niku in such a... heightened state."

Julin engaged Captain Rajotin as his men took on some of the citadel guard. Nikulainen smiled a wicked smile at Sarianna before trotting off. He gracefully discarded his bow and quiver before swinging off his mount while it was in mid-stride, then flipping over the fence into the midst of the men. The Princess rolled her eyes, then urged her horse into a canter as the swords started clashing. Ajaa followed.

Sarianna began to ride the course at a brisk rate. She could do the course with ease while still watching the battle raging just beyond the fence. The pace and the brisk afternoon breeze hid the reason for her flushed face and heated skin while Nikulainen continued to inflame her. Even while barking out refinements to his opponents, the Regent was fighting with an intensity that was almost savage. Her mind wandered despite herself to thoughts of seeing such intensity unleashed under her hands or against her body. Sarianna realized with a strong and pleasurable jolt that she had not seen Nikulainen truly unleashed with her.

Such thoughts thrilled and frightened her. And he could see what she was thinking when they chanced to meet. The first time, Nikulainen was surprised to see the want in her eyes. Then he looked to meet her gaze and matched her want with his. All the while his battle strength and strategy never faltered. A man who could be so strongly of two minds was truly a wonder. Her kingdom would thrive under him. She wondered if she could survive such focused attention. She couldn't wait to find out.

Dusk was nigh when her horse began to tire. As soon as she headed for the training ring's gate, Nikulainen exploded into action forcing a quick surrender from the men. Before she could clear the fence, the Prince had leapt from the fray and onto his horse.

"You fought well, friends. A fine meal awaits!" He laughed.

"What shall we do tomorrow to top it? A legion of ogres?" Julin asked dryly.

"Perhaps a legion of ogres with flaming swords could slow the Regent down," Nikerym muttered. "Princess, we beseech you."

"I?" Sarianna exclaimed. "What do I have to do with your games of battle?"

“What these very tired men are saying is you have all the weapons you need to keep our energetic Regent happily pre-occupied until his wedding,” Julin said dryly. “From the looks of it, a week or so without training will not slow him in the least.”

“So you would leave me to do battle with him?” Sarianna demanded.

“Dear lady, you are the only one who can defeat him,” the older Prince replied. “Come, men, let us have some wine to soothe our abused limbs.”

The Princess watched them leave incredulously. “I do not think they wish to play with you anymore.”

“Perhaps,” Nikulainen replied. He did not seem to mind. “Let us settle in our horses.”

Sarianna rubbed down a very contented Kelata while pondering the confusing afternoon. Nikulainen worked in silence a short distance away. His body was relaxed with his task, but she knew that he was very much aware of her.

“Is it true? Can I defeat you?” she asked softly.

“Absolutely,” he murmured without looking up. “You can slay me with a word.”

The statement was made in wonder but without fear. How did she have this power over a man with all that strength and intensity? There was still so much she did not understand about the potent connection between them. Events of the last few days had kept them from exploring. Perhaps Nikulainen needed to spend time with her more than he needed to tax his muscles. Maybe he could tax his muscles with her. When they finished a short while later, she decided to test the notion.

"I have decided not to share you with the men for now. If you need to be taxed or find release from your troubles, you will do so with me," she said once they were away from the stables.

"Yes, Princess," he replied. His voice was quiet, but his eyes held the fire they had during the battle. "I am yours to command."

Sarianna smiled at him, resisting the incredibly strong urge to kiss Nikulainen soundly, then pull him back to their chambers. Instead, she indulged in the luxury of braiding his unruly hair before heading inside. And it turned out to be wise she had resisted. Just as they reached the entrance to the citadel, riders were entering the courtyard. Before they were inside, Nikulainen knew who they were.

"Armas has returned," he said quietly, then stepped in front of Sarianna. The Princess, though, would not hide. She stayed behind Nikulainen but to one side so that she was clearly visible.

"Greetings, Brother and Sister," Armas said ruefully. "As there is no guard awaiting, I assume all is forgiven."

"Aye, King Vauraus deems the matter forgotten," Nikulainen replied quietly.

"As do I but for one matter," Armas said. He signaled to the riders behind him. They came forth with cleaned and dressed game of many types. "For your kitchen, Princess."

Sarianna stepped forward, then curtsied. "Thank you for such an extravagant gift. I appreciate it and the sentiment in which it was given."

"My pleasure," he replied. Then returning his gaze to Nikulainen. "Does Father await me?"

"Nay, he is writing edicts for the messengers to take home," the Regent replied. "He will be at the evening meal."

"And what of Julin?"

"He is drinking in the garrison with the men. We were sparring today."

"With such inspiration, I have no doubt that they have well abused themselves," Armas replied with a wry smile. "I shall add to his discomfort. Until later."

He rode off then. The couple looked at each other. Sarianna was looking for some sort of assurance that all was well.

"I know he is my brother, but I know no more than you," he sighed. "Let us ready for evening meal."

Mercifully, the older brothers were distracted from the awkwardness the betrothal caused. King Magnus was vexed at the number of frivolous requests he received via messenger. He was convinced it was only because the petitioner did not have to face him that such requests were made. Sarianna only half listened as the King discussed the day's edicts with his sons. She let her mind wander to the encounter with Neuvoja earlier. It would be a major blow to the throne and to her personally to lose him. His counsel was almost invaluable. She fervently prayed their deductions were incorrect.

Dark thoughts almost consumed her. It was Nikulainen's voice that pulled her back to the matters at hand.

Armas and Julin were engrossed in the details of the hunt. Nikulainen was quietly speaking to Magnus.

"What news do you have of Lady Reija?" he was asking. His already quiet voice grew reverent speaking her name.

The King's eyes sparkled warmly. "She is well and misses you."

"I miss her, too," the Prince said wistfully. "I wonder if she has received my letter."

"The Lady had not received our missives about the wedding yet. Her reply should be with the next messenger in a few days," Magnus said. "I am certain she will be very happy and proud."

Nikulainen gazed at Sarianna. "She knew I would wed."

"Did she? How extraordinary," Sarianna said quietly.

"It is thought that her people have second sight," Nikulainen said. "I have not such a gift."

Sarianna was not so sure. He had an uncanny insight into people. She wondered what Lady Reija would see in her when they met.

"I cannot wait to meet her, and yet the thought intimidates me," Sarianna said. "It is difficult enough meeting the mother of the groom. Harder still with no where to hide from her."

"You should have no fear of that, Princess," Magnus said.

"No, Sarianna. You have nothing to worry about," Nikulainen smiled. "She will adore you. A visit will be arranged as soon as possible."

The Princess was watching both men very carefully. Never had she seen Magnus look so tenderly about anyone as when he thought about his Lady. Once again, she was puzzled as to why such a revered Lady was not to be present at such an important event. But no one talked about it, and she did not want to make anyone feel awkward.

There was more conversation between the men, but the food and the lateness of the hour began to take its toll on all gathered. As soon as the conversation lulled, she bid everyone goodnight. Nikulainen took her arm and led her away.

"Your gait is slower tonight, Regent," she observed quietly. "And Julin can barely lift his arm. Have you injuries I cannot see?"

"Nay, but I have really tired my muscles. The heat of the bath makes them feel very heavy," he replied.

"You will be very stiff without aide," she said softly.

"I have been thus before. Truly, there is no aide for this."

"But there is, and it would be good for you to know it," she said. "Leave everything to me."

"How do I prepare?" He asked. His voice slipped into a sensual tone.

"Wait for me naked in your bed. Make sure the room is warm," she whispered in his ear.

The couple was just inside the royal wing, and the guards were alert at each door. The couple fell silent as they drew near her chamber. Nikulainen opened the door, then ushered Sarianna inside with a warm smile.

Hanna was waiting inside even though the Princess had had her bath earlier. She was laying out the morning's clothing.

"Thank goodness you are here. I need some herbal oils."

"Are you unwell, Princess?"

"Nay, Nikulainen has overtired his limbs."

"He will be stiff in the morning," Hanna clucked. "I'll fetch some and give them to Jorgen."

"Bring them to me and say nothing, Hanna. Please."

Hanna smiled wickedly. "Yes, Princess."

"Oh, Hanna."

The maid left with a laugh that almost sounded like a cackle. Sarianna made herself busy by taking down her hair and brushing it out. She did not put on her nightclothes because she didn't want to spark any more commentary. Hanna was swift of foot, returning not long after she finished with her hair.

"I have arnica oil in the blue bottle and calendula oil in the green bottle," she said. "Each will soothe soreness. He can choose the scent he prefers."

"Thank you, Hanna."

"Is all well with you, Princess?" she asked with some worry. "I heard that Prince Armas has returned."

"All is well. Thank you," Sarianna said. "I think we should dwell on joyful matters and prepare for the wedding."

"I am ready for that, milady. Goodnight."

As soon as her door was closed and locked, Sarianna quickly removed her gown then put on her night shift and robe. The tray was not heavy, but she found it trembled slightly because of her nerves.

Nikulainen's room was quiet, lit by candles and the fire in the hearth. The Prince was propped up on the headboard with a sheet covering his middle. His hair was wild again, flowing softly around his face and over his shoulders.

Sarianna walked around the bed and placed the tray on a small table there. She sat on the bed close to his side. It was her intention to speak to him about the oils, but she found herself gazing at his strong yet delicate features. He reached out to smooth a curl away from her face.

"I have never seen a fairer face," he murmured. "And each time I see your face, it becomes fairer still. Right now, you take my breath away."

Sarianna pushed his hair off a smooth, warm shoulder, caressing it. "You distract me from my purpose." Her voice was more provocative than she intended.

A smile tugged at his sensual lips. "Forgive me. Carry on."

The blue bottle was presented first. The Princess pulled the cork, then passed it under Nikulainen's nose. "This is arnica oil. And this one in the green bottle is calendula oil. Each is soothing of aches and healing of injury. Which scent is more pleasing to you?"

Nikulainen's dark eyes held hers. "You choose which is more pleasing to scent on my skin."

He held out both wrists. Sarianna placed a drop from each bottle on the inside of each one. Then she took each wrist in turn and scented it deeply. Nikulainen inhaled sharply each time she inhaled him. Both oils were lightly floral, but the arnica oil had a faint spicy undertone that mixed well with the Prince's natural scent.

"I shall use the arnica oil," she whispered.

"And what do I do now?"

"Turn on your belly with your arms out to your sides," she replied with a little stronger voice. "Try to relax."

"Oh, Sarianna. The things you ask of me," he muttered softly while doing what he had been told.

The Princess removed her robe and slippers, then straddled Nikulainen at the hips. She kept the folds of her shift from the thin sheet barely covering his buttocks. Sarianna poured the oil in her hands, then rubbed them together.

"Tell me if I cause you discomfort," she murmured.

"I shall," he murmured.

Calling upon all that was taught to her by Minos about manipulating muscle to ease pain and prevent injury, Sarianna moved the heavy fall of hair aside, then began with Nikulainen's broad shoulders searching for tautness then working the muscle until it yielded. The Prince sighed when she found the first ones then groaned when she found a very tight group.

"Does it hurt?" Sarianna asked.

"No... so... good..." he moaned.

Sarianna felt the sound though his body and up her thighs. That was unexpected and very pleasurable. The sensation almost caused her hands to falter, but there was great tension in his muscles. He needed her aide. Her hands moved slowly and carefully along his upper back and then down each arm. The oil was light and rubbed easily into his skin. His groans continued, but there were gasps as well. Sarianna recognized that he was falling into the throes of pleasure. Indeed, this was another way of learning this remarkable man's body. It was another way of owning him.

Her hands fell into a rhythm that carried her along his long form with no further hesitation. She shifted her body to one side of his and removed the sheet to work his lower back. There was much tension there, and his moans were very near pain at her touch. But the sight when she finished was even more sweet. While the muscles in his buttocks were not very tense, manipulating them brought forth all sorts of sounds that were very pleasant to her ears.

The thighs and calves were well corded and barely moved under the hardest push of her hands. Perhaps she was growing tired. Still Sarianna could not leave a thing undone. Nikulainen's graceful feet were worked until he all but purred.

"You are growing tired," he whispered breathlessly. "I feel much better and will sleep like a stone."

"You speak a half truth, Niku," she murmured looking at his body, sheened from the oil glistening in the firelight. "You still have one very stiff muscle that needs tending before you will sleep. Turn over."

"Sarianna I will be fine..."

"Turn over, Niku."

Nikulainen did as he was told, and Sarianna gasped at how his flesh strained with need. His eyes were nearly black with want. She smiled at him with a shake of her head.

"I could not sleep with you in such a state," she murmured oiling her hands once more. "Let me help you."

Whatever answer he had for her was lost in her kiss. She grasped the straining member and stroked it in the way she had before. This night, he was closer to release than before. The massage had worked him into quite a state. It took naught but several slow strokes before she felt him seize. Then it took only a few fast strokes before he cried out into the kiss, and she felt his hot, thick essence cover her hand and his belly. The Prince could not really move afterward. He lay trying to catch his breath while Sarianna put away the oil, then wiped him down with a damp cloth. He groaned when she climbed into bed.

"What is wrong, Niku? Have I hurt you?"

"Nay, but I can offer you no... comfort this night. I cannot keep sleep at bay," he murmured. His eyes were heavy lidded as though he could barely keep them open.

"I want your comfort to be sure, but I am spent from the day and the massage," she said. "I only require your embrace this night."

He smiled with drooping eyelids. "That I can give."

Sarianna pulled the covers over them both, then settled into Nikulainen's arms. He slipped into slumber immediately. She inhaled the sweet scent of him and the oil and fell asleep shortly afterward.

Chapter Twelve

Days fell into routine for Nikulainen after that. Magnus kept Armas and Julin occupied with the messages from court and patrols with Captain Rajotin. In the days before the guests began arriving, he hardly saw his brothers. When they were present, their company was boisterous and teasing as it always had been. It seemed that the storm with Armas had passed. Sarianna watched his brothers carefully during those times and seemed satisfied that they wished no ill toward the union. Her ease with them grew. She actually began to form a friendship with Julin. This eased his mind and allowed him to fully focus on matters of duty and heart.

King Vauraus reacted to the suspicions surrounding Neuvoja with caution. He agreed the situation did not look good for the advisor, and there were good reasons to question his loyalty. But all agreed the matter was delicate and complex. There was time to negotiate with the northern rulers about the roads. A final decision on the petition was weeks away. Meanwhile, Neuvoja would not be impeded from his work. He would be carefully but subtly monitored during the wedding celebrations for collaboration with foreign rulers. This decision eased Sarianna's heart. She truly cared for her teacher and loathed to think of him in any treachery against the court.

After Nikulainen and Sarianna rendered decisions on the last petitions, audiences were put on hold until after the wedding. Guests would be arriving within days. He

and Sarianna had to be available since Vauraus would not be. Though not having audiences did not mean any more freedom. It seemed having a royal wedding was much like planning an invasion. The difference was an invasion was coming to them. All that was done had to be inspected. It was not usual for a Prince to concern himself with the food and drink, but Nikulainen went where Sarianna went. Thus, he learned a great deal about the work such celebrations demanded and about the inner workings of Almourol Citadel. His captains could learn much from Thora about organization.

Nikulainen did not mind the inspections. He was encouraged to taste the foods for the celebration without getting his hands smacked. Not only was he encouraged to taste, but he also noticed Sarianna enjoyed watching him savor the treats. She watched his mouth and his eyes so intently his leggings would grow quite tight. He was very grateful for his long tunic and jerkin.

The Regent was also useful with advice in assigning the living arrangement. In his travels for his father, Nikulainen had learned much about what rulers got along well with each other and which ones were better given some distance. Thora found that very helpful in assigning chambers and seating for meals and the wedding banquet itself. Nikulainen could not tell from the sternness of the head housekeeper's visage, but Sarianna insisted the woman was very pleased with him.

When they were not inspecting, they were being fitted for various garments. It puzzled Nikulainen how leggings that seemed to fit him with nearly embarrassing accuracy needed any more adjustments. Yet there were tailors on three occasions with their pins and their orders to be as still as a statue. The Regent made sure the tunic was

long enough as to not reveal everything to the assembled. It heartened him that Sarianna was even less pleased about the fittings. He could not blame her. It seemed there had been many fittings over the past weeks. This particular fitting was intriguing to the Prince. It seems her gown was to be as formfitting as his leggings were to be. This would have been pleasing for his eye, but he was not happy about all of the known lands seeing the beauty of his bride. The tailors assured them there would be no shame on the wedding day. The couple was compelled to take them at their word. And if this were not the case, he would dress Sarianna in body armor to say her vows.

When the couple was not with their fathers in conference or inspecting something, they found time for other pursuits both practical and pleasurable. Sarianna was true to her word about the royal stables. She and Nikulainen found time for a couple of hours work and to exercise their horses each day. Only the mounts of King Magnus and his men were stabled at the east gate. The remaining guests would be using the main stables in town. This kept the area secure and lessened the load for Minos.

The Prince greatly enjoyed working with the horses, but he was finding a new joy in sharing his knowledge about fighting with Sarianna. Once he convinced her of his earnest desire to teach her to fight, she was eager to learn. But she did not want to learn in any of the public areas around the citadel. She favored being schooled in her courtyard.

"I had a quarterstaff made that suits your height," he said that first day of their lessons. "But I want you to think of any sort of pole as a weapon. A broom or mop stick would do as well."

Sarianna nodded, accepting the staff, then placing her hands the way she was instructed.

“Stand with your legs shoulder-width apart and bend your knees slightly. You want to keep your weight balanced,” he said. “Now, do what I do.”

The Princess mirrored the Prince’s movements. Her movements were smooth and her blocks were strong. This did not surprise Nikulainen. This was no soft and pampered Princess. She liked to work, and she liked to ride. This made her strong and graceful. With very little instruction, her form with the quarterstaff was impressive.

“The best thing about using a staff is you can keep an opponent at bay until help arrives,” Nikulainen said. “Thus, you should try to sweep the legs out from under your foe or jab in a weakened area to slow the advance. Be creative.”

“Not yet. I will get familiar with the movements,” she replied, tapping his quarterstaff to begin.

Nikulainen took her through the basic exercises over and over again. Each time they went through the routine, the Prince went a little quicker. Each time, Sarianna kept pace with him. The pace was taxing even to the Prince. He had to exercise more control over his form than was his want. Somehow that made him more tired than the free form he used with his men. On the fifth cycle, they were moving very quickly and with a fair degree of force between them. When they finally stopped, each was breathless. Sarianna smiled at him tiredly.

“I believe I will need the calendula oil this night,” she said ruefully.

"That would be wise, milady," he said with a smile. "You have used new muscles today. They will be stronger tomorrow with proper care."

"And you will care for my muscles?" she asked. Her voice was soft and sultry. The tone sent fire along his nerves.

"It would be my pleasure."

Thus, that evening after a leisurely and social meal with Magnus, Nikulainen and his brothers, then a hot bath, Sarianna came to him for aide. She stripped bare then, lay on her belly with a sheet over her lovely, rounded bottom. Nikulainen remained dressed in loose fitting leggings and a large shapeless tunic. They were not sleeping clothes. He would wear them if he were doing work close to his chambers.

"Take them off," Sarianna said softly when she came into the room. "I always want to see your skin. This is the only place I am allowed."

"Sarianna, I will not be able to hide my... response to your nearness."

She smiled back at him. "I want to feel you. And this is the only place I am allowed."

Nikulainen shed his garments. Just before he climbed onto the bed, Sarianna pulled the sheet away leaving her body completely bare. With a slow, deep breath the Prince straddled her.

Sarianna's skin with the oil was warm and satiny under his hands. There were firm muscles under that softness, and they were drawn tight. This made Nikulainen move very carefully to find the knots and places of extreme stress. His fingers were firm but gentle in easing the strain. Once the muscle loosened, he increased the pressure, drawing moans and sighs out of the Princess. The sounds she was making caused him

to lengthen and harden against her. And if feeling her warm, smooth skin responding under his hands wasn't enough of a challenge to his concentration, Sarianna moved that tempting bottom against his hardness.

"Sarianna..." Nikulainen moaned.

"Hmmm?" She murmured.

"You are... distracting me greatly..."

"Really?" she whispered. "I do not mean to. You just feel... so wonderful."

He moaned again, realizing he was to be tormented throughout his tending to her. But such distractions could not make him falter in his task. He had to slow his trembling hands and feel the knots as they occurred and not injure the delicate tissue surrounding them. Nikulainen's young body could not help that his blood ran hot while touching that silken flesh so intimately. His body would respond, but his hands and his mind remained focused on easing her soreness and preventing injury. His hands traveled the same path as hers had: neck to back to arms to legs. All the while, Sarianna sighed and moaned and wiggled beneath him.

When Nikulainen was finally finished with Sarianna's backside, he tried to turn her over. He was hard and dripping but determined to give her fair return of what she had given him. The Princess, however, refused to move.

"Back to where you were, Niku," she sighed. "You have not finished yet."

This puzzled the Prince. If her muscles were any looser, they would be liquid. But he was there to obey, so he straddled her once more. His shaft settled in the warm cleft of her round firm cheeks giving him a feel for heaven and hell in the same instant. And

then she pushed back against him tempting his straining member with delicious friction.

“Sarianna...” he gasped.

“Please, Niku,” she moaned undulating against him once more. “You must know what to do...”

“Oh, I do, Sarianna...” He ground out, snaking one hand under her hips to press her against him. His fingers unerringly found that spot that made her cry out as he started to thrust along that wondrous cleft. Sarianna canted her hips, moving counter to his thrusts. Her movement nearly undid him, for they were both perfect and unexpected. He found the rhythm again, reveling in the sensation building between them. The sounds she made drove him to thrust faster and harder against her. They trembled with the effort. Heat built between their supple bodies. Suddenly, Sarianna went still throwing her head back onto Nikulainen’s shoulder, letting out a gasping cry. That was enough for the Prince. He pinned her close, thrusting in a quick burst that brought him to climax. They collapsed on their sides with Nikulainen holding her close.

Sarianna was asleep when Nikulainen rose to clean them both and retrieve the blankets. Still, as soon as he settled beside her, she turned toward him and settled in his arms. The Prince sighed in contentment looking at her. It almost frightened him to love and want someone as much as he did Sarianna. Almost. Somehow she brought him as much strength as she did passion. He could not wait for his mother to meet her. It was with that pleasant thought he fell deeply asleep.

Whether anyone noticed Nikulainen and his betrothed often carried the same scent of herbal oil, he did not know. There was never even a whisper about it. The scents were very subtle. One would have to be quite close to notice, and Nikulainen was not one to let anyone that close to his bride unless it was Hanna or they had a tailor's pin in hand. Besides, none had as sensitive a sense of smell as Nikulainen possessed. He knew Julin was smoking Arinperan pipe leaf of late, and his brother had been lingering in the citadel's more fragrant gardens. These observations indicated to the Regent his brother was writing another epic poem. This verse would probably be among his wedding gifts to them.

Nikulainen also knew Armas had been bedding a number of maidservants. It was quite a number of them from the various scents he carried each day. The only maidservants he didn't notice on him were Hanna and Thora. Nikulainen wondered about the sageness of such activity. There was bound to be squabbling amongst the women over him before the visit was over. However, since Nikulainen had managed to find some harmony with his brother and Sarianna did not seem to notice, he was not inclined to say anything.

King Magnus carried Lady Reija's distinctive scent. It was faint and elusive but very definitely present. Nikulainen surmised his father was carrying some scented item from his mother. The item had to be close to his body for it was not discernable from casual observation of his person. This observation told him much about Magnus he had not known for certain before. Whatever was said about his mother's status at Lanakae

Keep, there was now no doubt in Nikulainen's mind that Magnus was deeply in love with her. The Prince needed Sarianna near at all times. He could barely stand the moments without her while they dressed. When their lives found their routine and duty called him from her side, her scent would be all that would keep him sane. Nikulainen appreciated his father's strength more than ever. He couldn't fathom how he could be away from the Lady Reija for that long and still lead so well. The Regent hoped he could be as strong.

For the time being, Nikulainen cherished his time with Sarianna close to him. They spent a great deal of time training together in all manner of things and learning a great deal about each other. Sarianna was a natural with the quarterstaff and learned very quickly. She was also very good with a short sword. The Prince found that he enjoyed sparring with her. He had to use classic form for each weapon, and that kept his skills very sharp even if the encounters were not as strenuous as the free-form fights with his men.

The Princess had other ways of exhausting him. Sarianna had been true to her word about her intent towards him. She had not forgotten about her ownership of his body and his pleasure. The night after her first quarterstaff lesson, Sarianna came fresh from her bath with lengths of thick, silken ropes and a soft smile. Nikulainen nearly moaned out loud at that sight. He truly enjoyed the helplessness the restraints caused, and he reveled in the intense attention from Sarianna to his every breath and every reaction.

She pulled the sheet away from his middle once close to the bed. "You cover yourself to vex me. Do you court punishment, Niku?"

"Never Sarianna," Niku replied. His voice had gone soft and husky. "I enjoy your eyes upon me above all others."

"All others? How many others have seen you thus?" She demanded.

"Not so many as my brothers would have you believe," he smiled.

"I would know the number," she persisted with an elegantly raised brow.

"No females other than my mother and the courtesan," he replied.

"And the maids who have cornered you," she quipped.

He chuckled at her cross expression. "I do not think they saw me really. They just had me."

"I am certain they found a way to see you. Women are very treacherous," she said ruefully.

"Hanna is not thus."

Sarianna chuckled then. "You have a tender heart where women are concerned. And a tender head as well. That she has not seen anything is not for lack of trying."

That surprised him. "Jorgen does not try to see you," Nikulainen observed.

"Because he knows you would kill him," she replied. "Hanna foolishly thinks that she is safe from my wrath."

"Hanna knows her mistress well. You would never harm her," he said with a warm smile. "You have a tender heart for your people."

"And you try to change the subject. How many others have seen you thus?"

"In this constant state of exquisite torment and arousal, none. Those who have seen my naked flesh, my brothers and my men," he said. "My virtue is certainly safe from my men."

"I would be certain of nothing in the face of such beauty," she retorted.

"Who desires me other than my beloved Sarianna matters not at all," he whispered. "I belong only to you."

She took his wrist then, kissing his palm before tying the limb to the headboard. "I had these fashioned for you. They will not damage your flesh even if you struggle against them."

"You have given this some thought then," he gasped as the other wrist was tied.

"Yes," she admitted. "I often think of you lying helpless, bathed in moonlight awaiting my touch or my kiss."

"I often think of you in the moonlight, Sarianna," Nikulainen said. "It's a wonder I can get anything done during the day."

Sarianna laughed softly at that as she fastened his ankles to the footboard. But she grew quiet looking at him. Her expression was tender and predatory at the same time. Without another word, she removed her night shift, then straddled him. It seemed Nikulainen stopped breathing he was so taken with her loveliness in the flickering firelight.

"This night, I mean to taste your skin and give you fair return with my mouth," she murmured over his lips.

Nikulainen sighed into the kiss. Her lips were gentle and sweet and spoke of her innocence, but there was a heat and hunger growing in her kiss with each passing day. Sarianna's tongue grew bolder and more confident with each gasp and moan she drew out of him. The day would come when she could bring him to completion with merely her kiss. Mere moments under her sweetly questing tongue brought him to full hardness and undeniable need. He struggled against the ropes to let her know he needed her touch.

She lifted her head to look into his eyes. He could barely see any blue in them. "I feel the need in you, Niku. I will taste you first. There are many times during the day when I wished I could taste your skin."

His reply was a gasp as she nibbled, then sucked at his earlobe.

"Hmmm, when do you have these thoughts?" he managed to ask as her lovely tongue moved along his throat.

"When you sweat, your skin looks sweet," she murmured against his skin. "But then, I think it may be salty."

Nikulainen gasped louder as she sucked at a nipple. His struggles renewed. Sarianna stilled him with a hand on his abdomen.

"Sometimes when your head is bowed over petitions, I long to lick your ear or lick your neck above the collar," she continued between long swipes of the tongue down his chest.

"You want to claim my skin publicly," he groaned.

"Hmmm," she sighed appreciatively. "The maid servants stare at you like you were a piece of sweetmeat. They watch you even after having Armas."

The shock of her statement was outpaced by the jolt Sarianna's tongue in his navel caused to his nether regions.

"I would have them know that you are bound to me by more than oath and duty," Sarianna whispered against his skin as she moved lower.

"They know," he rasped. "They know that I can see no one else."

And then her tongue was on his shaft slowly moving along its stiff length from tip to base. He felt her inhale his hair there. She enjoyed the moan wrung from him.

"How can you be so hard and so soft at the same time?" she said softly as she laved him up and down. "Tell me what to do, Niku."

"Sarianna... take... take as much of me as you can in your mouth," he murmured. "Move up and down as you suck me in the same way you used your hand. You do not have to..."

She looked up at him with fire in those deep blue eyes. "I want to, Niku. I need to have you."

Words escaped him. Thought escaped him as she took him in her mouth. She took him more than halfway inside that wet, hot mouth. It took all of his control not to buck up into her. Instead, Nikulainen clutched at the ropes until his knuckles were white. Sarianna moved slowly at first. He could tell that she was getting a feel for him in her mouth. She did not have to do much. He was already in heaven from the heat and tightness of her mouth and the silken coolness of her hair. Somehow she seemed to

know he would want to see her face as she had him that way. The gaze that kept returning to his was watchful and expectant. He murmured his approval, spurring her to go deeper. The position was awkward and new for Sarianna. She tired after several moments.

“’Tis more difficult than the quarterstaff,” she murmured breathlessly. “You must know the way of this.”

Nikulainen swallowed hard. Sarianna’s determination robbed him of speech for a long moment. He was having trouble finding the right words for such tender and untried ears.

“Brace yourself so that you can take me as you were without moving,” he said with a deep blush. “I will move my hips. Suck when I thrust.”

Sarianna did not seem to notice his consternation. She immediately did as he suggested, gazing at him expectantly.

The image was too much for Nikulainen to resist. He moved his hips thrusting into her mouth so that she was taking half his length. And while this was beyond pleasurable for him especially while watching her, his release seemed a long way off. But his wise and perceptive Princess knew what to do. Sarianna shifted again so she could grasp the remaining length of him enveloping him completely. That was enough for Nikulainen. That she was so intent on his pleasure undid him. He tried to pull out before he released his seed, but she would not be moved.

Nikulainen gasped her name as he spent his seed. Sarianna looked startled by the sudden spurt, but she didn't pull away until he softened. She collapsed on wobbly arms onto his thighs where she stayed panting softly and trying to regain her composure.

"Sarianna... free me... I need to hold you," Nikulainen whispered.

"Hmmm..." she murmured. It took another few moments, but she managed to crawl back up his body to untie one arm. He somehow found the strength to free his remaining limbs, then gathered her against him.

"Are you well?" he asked, kissing her hair.

"Aye. My jaw is a bit sore," she laughed softly. "You taste salty... maybe a little bitter, but not unpleasantly so. Much like a fine herb."

"An herb you might like to taste again?" he asked. It was not out of boldness on his part. Even in his blissful state, he worried that she may not want to go further. He feared that he pushed her too far.

"I want to savor it as often as I can," she breathed, kissing him briefly. "You are as delicious as a fine wine, Niku. And your body responds to touch like a fine instrument."

Nikulainen sighed, hugging her close. "You are a marvel, Sarianna. Now I will give you pleasure in kind with my mouth. I too crave your taste during most of my waking moments. You drive me nearly to madness."

Thus, he turned her onto her back and settled between her thighs to once again lap at the nectar there while his tongue played with that special spot that made her thrash against the bed and cry out his name in a hoarse whisper.

The long, languid kisses shared afterward beneath the blankets tasted of each other. Nothing had ever been more savory to him. Once again, they fell into deep sleep filled with sweet dreams.

Chapter Thirteen

Sarianna had tasted power in every interpretation of the phrase. She had learned the flavor of Nikulainen's essence while indulging in the most intimate of kisses. She had reveled in the feel of him filling her mouth with his heat and his hardness. The Prince was a powerfully built man in a lithe, graceful form. Sarianna could feel how much he was restraining that power as she had him. If he were of a mind to, Nikulainen could have ripped free of his bonds and overwhelmed her, but he did not. He made himself vulnerable and enjoyed it as much as she did. His surrender was all the more moving because of his power.

Nikulainen was a rare man in his willingness to surrender control to a woman. But Sarianna now had no doubt that all men felt the power in a woman's touch. She could only imagine what sort of affect their joining would have on the Regent. Perhaps that was why men could be so rash around women they desired that they sought to control them. They feared losing control to that power. They feared losing themselves to it. Her Prince did not fear such things. Somehow what they shared bound them closer. And she was bound to him. With each time she wound rope around his limbs, he did as much to her heart.

Thus, Sarianna did not mind having a very sore and tender jaw the next morning. However, she did glare at Nikulainen's open amusement over her troubles chewing her

food during the morning meal. Fortunately, he refrained from comment on her condition at the dining table. She would have had to find a way to flay the skin from his body. The glare must have conveyed the sentiment, because the Prince managed to look somewhat contrite despite the twinkle still dancing in his dark eyes.

The Kings were perplexed by the playful war between them but asked no questions. Julin was preoccupied with finding rhyming words or answering phrases. Sarianna was not of much help. She was never very good at such things, and rhyming her name or Nikulainen's seemed impossible. The Prince begged off immediately, pleading an inability to write verse. Armas ignored the whole discussion in favor of eyeing another maidservant. New girls were working in anticipation of the guests arriving. That situation vexed Sarianna, but she could make no comment so long as the girls did not complain.

And while Armas was staring at the maidservant, he was not staring at her. The Princess knew his eyes were upon her though she did not catch him at it. His eyes had always shifted before she could glance his way. That morning she could feel him watching her struggling to chew. She wondered if Nikulainen noticed those wandering eyes lighting upon her. It was doubtful. There was no tension from him toward Armas. The matter was best forgotten since he made no further trespass.

Besides, Sarianna had more weighty matters demanding her attention. The guests were arriving. Before the mid-day meal, representatives from Siljanen, their neighbor to the north, and Valtameri, the land by the sea, arrived. They numbered eight guests in all and a dozen guards and servants. After very brief greetings, Sarianna had them

shown to their chambers for food and rest. It was very good that King Magnus was considered a part of the Arinperan court. He offered to take time with the guests should the royal couple be otherwise occupied. He had not been among many of them since Nikulainen was a child. Thus he had business and social reasons to take on this responsibility. However, the Princess suspected there were other motives.

With the coming guests, it was impossible for Sarianna to hide the King's condition. This made her very nervous about the security of their realm even with the marriage. The morning before the first arrival, she was trying to determine how Vauraus could spend time with the guests in the mornings when Magnus spoke up.

"Princess, I think it will be easiest if the guests were made aware of his being indisposed after mid-day. Trying to maneuver around it will only cause you and the staff grief," Magnus said gently. "You both should be focusing on the wedding."

"But, Sire, I have been made painfully aware of how ill prepared I am to have an audience with these rulers alone," Sarianna said. "And I cannot have them insulted for the slight of not having time with the King."

"There would be no slight, for there would be an audience with a King," Magnus said. "With Vauraus' and your leave, I would be glad to receive the guests. I am known to them all. They would have attention from one considered a peer, and we can show that our houses are united."

"Sire..."

"You are my family now, Sarianna," he said quietly. "Vaurus is now my brother. I do not seek to be ruler. The throne is yours and Niku's. I only wish to ease the transition."

Sarianna looked to Nikulainen, who had been considering his father. The Prince nodded solemnly. His eyes once again implored her trust. "We would do well to accept the offer. We should also attend some of these meetings so the King can introduce us."

"I will speak to my father in the morning and urge him to agree," Sarianna said. "I thank you for such a considerate offer."

"I do as well, Father," Nikulainen said.

"You are most welcome, children," Magnus smiled.

Sarianna was confident the decision was sound. King Vaurus agreed and was very pleased at her trust in Magnus. He explained those who held power in the Hanyanoore were slow to embrace great change. Having the two sitting Kings ease the way to the change in rule would do much to quell fears of instability. For herself, Sarianna felt a tender regard from Magnus toward her. She felt he cared deeply for her because Nikulainen did. That touched her.

All through this Sarianna noticed the older Princes ever watching everything that transpired. Julin took everything in while not taking an obvious stand. He seemed intrigued, judging from his expression. Sarianna wondered if Magnus had ever behaved in such a fashion around the Princes. From Armas' sour look, she doubted it. He was no doubt convinced anew she had somehow bewitched his kin. Julin noticed

Sarianna's appraisal of his older brother and acknowledged it. She wondered what he thought of the exchange.

Her pondering had to wait. There was a final fitting to endure. While behind the screen that day, Sarianna inspected the gifts she was going to give her husband. Hanna had done very well relaying her instructions to the craftsmen. She was very pleased and certain Nikulainen would be as well. The bracers were the palest fawn colored soft deerskin. But even in their softness, they were strong. Inlaid on the leather was an intricate etching of the symbol of Arinpera. The boots matched perfectly as they were from the same flawless skin. They were fine enough to wear for the wedding but strong enough for every day use. The gifts also were of the same forest colors that Nikulainen favored wearing.

The other gifts were just as fine. The brush and comb were fashioned from the rarest wood with a dark patina and molded to fit his hands. The bristles were stiff, but not so much that they would damage his scalp or his hair. Sarianna couldn't wait to see him use them. She wanted to use them on that silken hair herself.

The final gifts were very private. One gift was made in pieces so none would know what the gift actually was. The other raised eyebrows from Hanna and the artisan, but no questions were ever asked. These private gifts were beyond her expectations. Sarianna was very nervous about presenting them and yet she could not wait. Thoughts about his passionate response to her explorations gave her reason to be excited about his reaction.

Thus, Sarianna was in a splendid mood when she and her Prince escaped to the stables. Nikulainen was curious about her secretive smile, but did not press for an explanation. They set to work in amicable silence while Minos fussed about the incoming guests trying to get stalls in his stable. They took their time enjoying the simplicity of even the problems there. Sarianna was very glad not have to worry about the meaning behind every tone and glance.

At the end of their chores, the Princess found herself facing Nikulainen in front of the stables with a broom in her hands. He grasped a rake in his. The Regent gave her a sly smile and a little bow indicating combat was about to begin. Sarianna went into her stance as he started toward her. The broom was lighter than the quarterstaff, so it moved faster. This fight had a much quicker pace than their first ones. The Princess was more aggressive and creative. Nikulainen was almost tagged on a couple of her more unexpected maneuvers.

“What, am I catching a fearsome Suurimetsa off his guard?” she quipped.

“Nay, Princess. You do not fight like a warrior,” he replied. “I have to think of another way.”

Nikulainen began to counter her moves, trying to put her off her guard. But Sarianna’s choices were not governed by a warrior’s logic, thus she kept from getting pinned or backed in a corner. He would have to try to really hit her to break her perimeter, and that pleased him. And then he looked alarmed.

“I yield, Sarianna! Get in the stable!” Nikulainen exclaimed. His voice was firm, and it held no room for argument.

Before she could lower her broom and turn around, Nikulainen had his bow and quiver and was vaulting over the exercise pen fence and onto Ajaa. In the next instant his bow was drawn on the riders approaching from the main courtyard. Minos pulled her into the stable, but she quickly moved to watch from the window.

“Halt!” A guard was shouting behind the rider. The alarm on the east gate was sounded, bringing the arrows of the guards on the wall toward the rider as well.

The man was tall and dressed in a fine traveling cloak and hat that spoke of royalty. Strangely, he did not wear the colors of a particular kingdom. That was unusual for an official visit. He had a haughty demeanor yet did not show his face. The dolt only slowed his mount when he could see that Nikulainen was about to let his arrow fly.

“Halt! Hold your ground!” The Regent shouted. It was nearly a snarl.

The rider stopped and removed his ornate hat. “Is this how you treat guests here at Almourol Citadel under the new Regent.”

“It is when a guest breaches clearly placed security,” Nikulainen replied. “What business do you have here?”

“I wish my horse housed in the royal stable. The common one will not do,” he replied.

Sarianna recognized the voice with a gasp. It was Prince Rowsdower.

“Master Minos is a fine stableman, but his services are not worth your life,” Nikulainen said in a low, cold voice.

“Who are you to challenge a Crown Prince,” Rowsdower sputtered in fury.

"He is the Regent, your Highness," Sarianna said icily as she moved toward them. "And his rule here is law by decree of my father."

"Princess..." Rowsdower said. His tone caused Nikulainen to pull his bow tauter. The man finally realized that he was still in mortal danger and addressed the source. "Regent, why would you bar royal guests from parts of the citadel normally at their disposal?"

"Someone tried to put a poison arrow into the Princess. None will be allowed where she is vulnerable," Nikulainen replied. "Go back to the main courtyard, your Highness. A page will tend to your mount."

It was clear the threat would not ease until he did as he was advised. Neuvoja appeared then. He was horror struck by the scene before him.

"Regent, surely Prince Rowsdower means no harm," he began.

"Do not interfere, Neuvoja," Nikulainen stated. "I am sure Captain Rajotin informed his highness about the stables."

"Well, yes, Regent," the advisor replied.

"And now you have the reason for it, your Highness," the Regent said.

Rowsdower turned with a glare at Sarianna and trotted off. Neuvoja followed trying to make amends. Nikulainen signaled for two of his men to follow. Sarianna started breathing when her Prince dismounted. She soon found herself in his arms pressed against his body.

"He will try to make trouble over this," she murmured against his neck. "His mother is overbearing in the advocacy of her son."

"He should thank his fortunes that I did not shoot his eyes out," Nikulainen muttered, squeezing her tighter. "I do not like the way he looks at you."

Sarianna was startled by the vehemence in Nikulainen's words. She pulled back a little to look at his beautiful face, then kissed his brow.

"Do not worry, my Love," he said with a quiet fervor. "You will not be troubled by them. Nor will they detract from the happiness of our union."

She believed him. His strength radiated through her body giving her peace. They shared a brief kiss before returning their mounts to the stable. Returning to the Citadel was the last thing that either wanted to do. But it was time to face the guests.

Since there were royal guests in the dining hall, Sarianna dressed with more formality than she had since the betrothal was announced. The formality was her armor. While dressed in an opulent gown and elegantly jeweled including her crown, she could be distant and unapproachable. Or so she thought until Nikulainen walked into her chambers. He took one look at her, and his eyes turned into pure heat.

"Sarianna," he sighed. "Our wedding cannot arrive quickly enough."

She felt the same. Nikulainen looked like the ruler he was to be in the deep green silk tunic and leggings. He wore his beloved bracers and boots, but they somehow worked with his simple crown. Hanna just about fell over upon seeing him.

"My warrior Prince," the Princess breathed as he pulled her gently into his arms for a brief kiss.

Hanna slid out of the room discreetly as he held her. He cupped her chin to look into her eyes. "Sarianna, I ask you to stay close to me."

"That is no hardship."

He smiled at that. "I also ask that you walk a half step behind me holding my arm. I do not think of your station as below mine. You own me utterly and completely, and I consider you as important to me as my right arm, but I need to protect you. Prince Rowsdower is very clever. He has ways of insinuating between people and drawing them away before anyone notices..."

"Niku..." Sarianna whispered, looking at him with concern.

"I was nearly cornered by him," he admitted. "It was some years ago. I do not know why he feigned not knowing me today. I did not know what his purpose was in seeking to get me alone at that time, but I was not going to find out."

Sarianna's cheeks burned. "I have been alone with him. Whatever he had in mind for you was likely to include ugliness and violence."

"Aye," he agreed, kissing her brow. "Thus, I ask you to do as I bid."

"I will. I have no wish to see him die," she replied. There was no doubt in her mind that Nikulainen would have killed Rowsdower that afternoon. "Perhaps he too can find other diversions in the citadel, though I cannot imagine anyone being willing."

"Fortunately, that will not be our concern," he replied. "Let Magnus take on Queen Taraasta."

Sarianna smiled ruefully. "I doubt we could stop him. And we can learn much from their encounter."

"My brothers will prove useful with Prince Rowsdower," Nikulainen said. "They can barely tolerate his presence."

"This should be a fine evening for our digestion," she said dryly.

Queen Taraasta was among many other things, a very fine strategist. She was very warm and smiling when Sarianna and Nikulainen arrived in the dining hall. Magnus was smiling as well, but the mirth did not reach his eyes. Rowsdower was seated uncomfortably between Armas and Julin. The Princess would have smiled at that, but their arrival put everyone's attention on them. After acknowledging the company with a bow from Nikulainen and a curtsy from Sarianna, the couple took their seats across from Magnus and Queen Taraasta.

"Greetings, your Highness," Sarianna said. "I hope you and your party are well settled."

"We are," she said with a regal nod. "Thank you."

"May I present my youngest son, Nikulainen, betrothed to Sarianna and Regent of Arinpera," Magnus said proudly.

"The formidable young Prince is already well known. We heard songs about his fierce beauty almost all the way home," she said. "And I thought them exaggerated."

"You are very kind," the Regent said coolly.

"Not at all," she smiled. Sarianna thought it a predatory smile. "So tell us what has transpired to spawn such incredible security for the lovely Sarianna."

"We arrived at the citadel to find it under attack," Magnus said. "A group of assassins split from the main fighters to try to attack Sarianna at the stables. Nikulainen stopped them."

"Alone?" Rowsdower asked incredulously.

"More than a dozen of them by himself," Sarianna said.

"And he was weary from the journey," Julin chuckled. "You are fortunate to be breathing, friend."

"An unfortunate misunderstanding," the Queen said with a smile. "Of course, we shall certainly respect the boundaries around the Princess. Everyone wants to see her safely wed."

"Of course," Magnus agreed amicably. "We thought that was the case."

The Queen turned those hooded gray eyes back to Nikulainen. "Your days must be most daunting as both protector and Regent. You can barely breathe without being in Sarianna's presence."

"That is a singular joy, your Highness," Nikulainen replied smiling at Sarianna. "And there is much I have to learn from the Princess about my duties."

"Still, all that time spent alone must be an incredible challenge for a pair of such beautiful and... vital young people who are said to be besotted with one another," Taraasta insisted.

That was clearly a challenge to Sarianna's continuing virtue. Though neither she nor Nikulainen reacted, Magnus stilled for a moment. His eyes frosted. The older Princess

actually slowed down their ravenous attack on their dinner. Even Rowsdower looked smug. That Sarianna could not bear.

Neither could Julin. "Our brother finds unusual interests in situations that would challenge ordinary men. Like gorging himself on meat pies."

Nikulainen looked indignant. "I was asked to inspect the food for the feast."

"And he has found a bride with even more interest in the stables than his," Magnus remarked.

"You really do love that place," Rowsdower said in amazement.

Sarianna found herself mildly annoyed. "I have said as much."

"I meant no offense in my incredulity, Princess," Rowsdower replied smoothly. "It was merely that I couldn't imagine someone as lovely and delicate as you pushing that heavy broom."

"Push it? You should see her wield it," Julin laughed. "It seems my brother has been teaching our delicate Princess the finer points of quarterstaff combat."

"How do you know this?" Nikulainen asked quietly.

"The wounded in the garrison appreciate a little wine each day. They are fit company," he replied. "And there is still concern about the east gate while you and your bride are there."

The Regent glanced at his Father who shrugged. "I have said you two are never alone."

"Dear Sister," Julin said. "I had no idea you would take my suggestion so literally as to spar with him."

"The men will not," Sarianna replied as if that were answer enough. "Though I am not much of a challenge compared to a warrior."

"I would not be so sure about that. You came closest to bringing him down that I have seen in a while," Julin retorted.

"He is hardly trying. His feet never leave the ground," Sarianna said.

"If you wish, Princess..." Nikulainen said mirthfully.

"No," she said quickly. "I will be whole and healthy for my wedding day."

Magnus chuckled at the Queen's confusion. "As you see, they are well suited to each other's interest. And those interests can bear close scrutiny."

Taraasta eyed Sarianna with a look that neared disdain. "What an extraordinary pair you are."

"I certainly would not have considered combat as a possibility with the Princess," Rowsdower quipped.

"Really?" Armas rumbled. "It is what I first think of when your name is mentioned."

To everyone's surprise, Queen Taraasta laughed. "Magnus, your sons are all delightful. I had no idea warriors could possess such wit and humor. They have been well raised for the throne."

Magnus nodded. "Your Highness is very kind."

"And you are being a fine brother to Vaurus," she continued. "Will he be hosting many of the celebrations?"

“No,” Sarianna replied. “My father is infirmed. He will be at morning functions like the wedding ceremony itself. Otherwise, King Magnus will preside in his stead. The Regent and I will act as representatives of the throne.”

Queen Taraasta was taken aback by that statement, though she did a fine job of concealing it. Sarianna saw the flash of surprise in her eyes, and her lips were set in a fine line for an instant before the warm and smiling face returned. The Princess felt Nikulainen react, but his face remained impassive.

“My congratulations, Princess. You have strengthened your house into a formidable power,” she said. There was admiration in her voice but it spoke of some grand manipulation to Sarianna’s ears. “And, Great King, your power has been solidified for ages to come. Should those on your borders have concern?”

“Arinpera has not sought to extend its reach since before the great tapestry was woven,” Nikulainen said with deceptive mildness. “It is a contented and prosperous land. Further gain is not reason enough for it to sacrifice its sons.”

Sarianna smiled at her Prince deeply moved and pleased at how well he had come to understand her people. She would have to write a note for her father with that sentiment. It would please him as well.

“And I have learned from my youthful folly that there is more gain from reaching out a hand to new peoples than in swinging a sword at them,” Magnus said. “This alliance will strengthen the known lands and perhaps allow for alliances beyond our borders.”

“You have become quite an optimist,” Taraasta said. Her eyes fell upon Nikulainen. “What manner of magic has had you enthralled these years?”

“It is the wisdom of years and realizing what one has to lose can vastly outpace gain,” he replied. She was unable to ruffle his feathers.

Sarianna knew King Magnus was saying a great deal more than it seemed. So did Nikulainen and Julin. It was as if they were seeing something about their father they had never known. Taraasta saw something as well, but the Princess did not know what that might be. She felt the whole conversation was as complex and as dangerous as a battlefield.

Still the Queen smiled. Then she raised a goblet. “Let us drink then to this new and powerful, united and happy family.”

It appeared that everyone drank, but Armas did not. Sarianna noticed but was not sure anyone else did. The toast ended the meal. For her part, Sarianna was very glad it was over.

“Queen Taraasta is the source of the treachery,” Nikulainen murmured later that night.

He was holding Sarianna in bed after a long round of oral explorations. The Princess had tied him down and practiced her newly acquired skill of pleasuring with her mouth. En route to driving the helpless Prince to wrenching completion, Sarianna also learned how sensitive his collarbones and his inner thighs were to licking and sucking.

When she finally look him into her mouth – after teasing him until he was sheened with sweat and pleading with her – she almost had the whole shaft inside. That was enough to make Nikulainen nearly bite through his lip to keep from wailing loudly as he reached release. The Prince more than returned the favor. He suckled her nipples until she was wild with need. Then he spread her trembling thighs and tongued and suckled at that spot he loved to torment until she nearly ate a pillow to keep from screaming.

Afterward, they lay trying to catch their breath and calm enough to sleep. It was after many long moments thus that Nikulainen spoke.

“Nothing that transpired this day was an accident,” he continued. “There were no idle questions or comments.”

“What do you think she has learned?” Sarianna asked, cuddling close to him.

“The Queen knows that you are too well protected to harm before the wedding,” he murmured. “And that there are eyes and swords in places she cannot see. She has learned Magnus will stand by our house even to the point of battle. But there is discord in our family.”

So he had seen. Sarianna squeezed him briefly, then kissed the warm skin where she rested her cheek

“What do you believe she will do now?” She murmured.

“I am certain she will have our union challenged. Probably Rowsdower or perhaps someone closer to us,” he replied. His voice was a little sad. “I expect her to stir discord over the new roads. I cannot allow my father to make any comment on the petition.”

“Why?”

"Ritvala would not be directly affected by the new roads, so his counsel would not be necessary, and he may make our neighbor wary," Nikulainen replied. "Magnus was the last king in the known lands to engage in an action of aggression toward another kingdom. No one has forgotten that."

"Least of all Taraasta," Sarianna commented with a sigh. "How will you approach your father?"

"Carefully?" Nikulainen chuckled. "I believe if we talk to him with King Vauraus, he will not be offended. I believe he will agree."

"And what about Neuvoja?"

The Prince sighed. He kissed the top of her head. "We will watch and have him watched. If he is involved, it will become clear soon."

"And what of the family discord?" she asked quietly.

Nikulainen went still for a moment. Then his arms wrapped around her a little more tightly. "I do not know, Sarianna. I am lost and bereft in the face of his behavior. I pray he will not actively participate in anything that would harm us. I pray that more than you and Julin have seen."

Even if Magnus could see where Armas was heading, would he believe, Sarianna wondered.

"How are we supposed to enjoy this wedding?" Sarianna mused with a sigh.

"By remembering that we end up here free to do whatever we want," Nikulainen replied. "And that you have not begun to feel the pleasure we can share."

"Oh," the Princess replied. "But there is one problem still."

"Tell me, Sarianna. I will not have you troubled," he said softly.

"I am ashamed to admit it, but I cannot dance," Sarianna said quietly.

Nikulainen laughed softly. "Do not fret, my Love. If you can use a quarterstaff, you can learn courtly dance. I know enough not to hurt anyone, so there will not be a lot to surpass. I'm sure Hanna and Jorgen can help."

"We will practice in my courtyard, and none shall know," she said, looking up at him.

"On my honor," he smiled. His expression was happy in the moonlight. She settled back on his chest finally tired. She fell asleep just as his breathing changed to that of slumber.

Chapter Fourteen

The guests began arriving in earnest in the following days. Neither Sarianna nor Nikulainen was accustomed to having so many people amongst them. It was daunting to have to cope with always minding their tongues with all the ears about. The dining hall seemed to be teeming with people all the time. There was no corridor, no courtyard and no garden that did not contain someone or some group. Attempts at a few solitary moments often resulted in unexpected communication beyond meals. Those already dangerous meal conversations became more treacherous with each new ruler who sat at the growing table. There were few moments during the day when the couple was not under intense scrutiny. With every encounter they had to carefully measure their words.

This grew wearing as even brief moments with their fathers were carefully watched. The Prince and Princess marveled at their sires' ease in the public eye. Their demeanor was regal yet relaxed. Even the most strident personality did not affect the cordial discourse with the Kings. Magnus showed a charm that was beyond anything his sons had ever seen. He was even charming to Nikulainen when asked to stay clear of the Regent's affairs though he suspected his sire made the conversation more difficult than it had to be purely to test his mettle.

The Prince still shuddered at the way Magnus looked at him as he explained the precarious situation over the roads petition. King Vauraus had listened to the royal couple's concerns earlier that day. The Great King understood their position and supported it, but thought it best they deal with Magnus on their own.

"You will inherit the throne of Arinpera," he rumbled. "You must fight your own battles to earn the respect of other rulers. If you cannot convince Magnus of your position, what hope have you with strangers?"

Thus Nikulainen and Sarianna found themselves under the glare of intense dark eyes beneath a great scowl. The Prince had to quell the feeling he was still a youth subject to a parent's discipline and meet that glare like the Regent he was.

"My son, are you saying you cannot trust your father to speak to his fellows about matters that affect the known lands?" he demanded.

"Of course not, Father," Nikulainen said with a hard swallow.

"Do you fear I will take over your throne and use the kingdom to further my ambitions?" he countered. "Do you think I have so little regard for your integrity? Do you believe I could rear a spineless sycophant?"

"Nay, Father! That is pure folly." Nikulainen snapped. His tone surprised him, Sarianna and especially Magnus.

"Speak clear then, Regent," Magnus rumbled. "What are you saying to your father?"

"I am not speaking to my father," Nikulainen said, regaining his composure. "I am speaking to the King of Ritvala. You are the most well versed about the politics between

the kingdoms. We welcome your counsel on this and any other matter. However, we do not believe that some of your fellows will be so open."

"Really?" Magnus replied. "And why would this be?"

It took all Nikulainen had not to wither under that wrathful gaze. "You mention the reason yourself. Though it has been decades since you looked to other regions to expand, there are those who fear you still. They believe they know you. They do not know me at all. It would not be unreasonable for them to believe my interests in this kingdom would be yours."

"I see," he said. "Continue."

"I only ask that you not discuss the petition with them," the Regent said with growing confidence. "There is much you must discuss with them as it has been so long since you have laid eyes on one another."

"This is true," Magnus replied. His glare was softening in small increments.

"Let them know you as the just ruler you are," Nikulainen said. "Let them see that you will be a close friend and ally to Arinpera, and my rule with the Princess is an independent one. That will ensure the stability and peace we all seek."

Magnus considered that thoughtfully. But before Nikulainen could breathe a sigh of relief, the Great King's attention turned to Sarianna.

"And what about you, wise Princess?" he suddenly demanded. "Have you no opinion in this?"

"Of course I do, Sire," she replied.

"Why do you not speak it then?"

"I have spoken it to Niku," she replied. Her voice was calm and steady. "How he handled this matter is between you."

Magnus chuckled at that. "Why did you remain silent?"

"The throne must have one voice. Vauraus named Nikulainen to be that voice," she replied.

"And you are content with that?"

"He has my father's confidence, and he has mine," Sarianna replied. "And he is wise enough to seek my counsel."

Magnus finally smiled. "You are both very wise and very strong. I will do as you ask."

At that moment, Nikulainen realized his resolve was being tested. He glared at his father for putting him through such an ordeal, but the King was unrepentant. However, he was true to his word. The petition never came up even in the most dangerous of those politically charged meals. Nikulainen was exceedingly grateful for his father's offer to host some of those occasions. The time he and Sarianna spent in the stables and having meals in their chambers was the only thing keeping a civil tongue in his head. He thought he schooled his expressions well enough to get by, but his Princess noticed how much he was holding within. And now this façade was causing turmoil within him.

"I believe that poor broom has been punished enough," Sarianna said merrily as she peered over Kelata's stall.

Nikulainen noticed he was throttling the handle and thus very little was being cleaned in Ajaa's stall.

"Whose throat are you imagining in that elegant grip?" she inquired mildly.

The Regent smiled ruefully. "Any one of a number of Kings, Princes and Consorts who do not seem to understand you are bound to me."

"No one has dared approach me," Sarianna replied puzzled.

"They look at you in a manner that is very close to insulting," he muttered, beginning to sweep with great concentration.

"And what of the Queens, Princesses, Consorts and handmaidens who watch your every breath or nearly swoon when you lick your lips?" she asked. There was some annoyance in her tone, but there was also mirth.

"I do not notice any woman but you, milady," he said softly. "I must speak to queens but I do not notice their charms."

"They have noticed that as well," Sarianna said in wonder. "I've never received such venomous glares in my life. And they are all our allies."

"So our fathers keep saying," Nikulainen said with a sigh. "Though the sires have a way with them."

"We are untried," Sarianna said.

"And you are very beautiful."

"As are you, fair Prince," she countered with a warm smile. "We must be patient and earn their trust."

“Fortunately King Tuomas and Queen Hannele act more like grandparents,” the Regent observed. “It is a little galling being treated like precocious children, but at least they listened.”

“They undoubtedly dote on their grandchildren, for they are fair and full of laughter,” Sarianna said. “And they listened to us about the petition.”

Nikulainen laughed at the memory of that conversation in the King’s audience room. He felt like he was a small boy explaining with great care some vivid story he had conjured for their amusement. When he finished, they smiled at each other and then at him like he was their very favorite child. They agreed the proposed road was a sound plan and that he was an adorable Regent. The Queen even patted him on his head.

“You are an adorable Regent,” Sarianna laughed.

“Please, my Love, if Julin hears of that, my title that will be until I die,” Nikulainen muttered.

“Very well. I will call you that only in our chambers,” she said resolutely. “That is if you can resist the charms of the fair Laurila.”

“She is a child, Sarianna, with elbows sharper than my arrows,” he replied ruefully. “Have I your word?”

“Of course. I am only teasing.”

The twinkle in Sarianna’s eyes made him wonder, but he decided to trust her. They finished cleaning the stalls in amiable silence. He found he missed the quiet within the citadel walls. With all the voices echoing off stone walls, the halls and courtyards were anything but quiet. However, there was peace in the stables and peace in their

chambers. Sarianna was comfortable with Nikulainen in silence. She did not feel the need to fill the air with endless chatter. Her stillness calmed and soothed him, giving him the will to cope with the guests.

Eventually, the Prince found himself resisting the presence of the company. Whenever possible, he and Sarianna were in the stables or in their chambers. And when in their chambers, the focus was on teaching the Princess how to dance. It had seemed a simple matter. Sarianna was graceful and athletic with a sharp memory. Teaching her the steps would not be difficult. Having suitable music to use in time with the steps was the problem. The Princess simply refused to practice in the hall with the musicians. She did not wish for anyone to know of this deficiency. Hanna and Jorgen tried valiantly to serve, but they were not very musical. Sarianna spent most of her time laughing, and very little was learned.

It seemed hopeless for a little while. Sarianna was trying to find a way to feign a leg injury in time for the reception. Then Hanna and Jorgen found some way to convince the musicians to practice in the courtyard near the royal wing.

"I told them the truth," Hanna said as the melodious sounds drifted over the walls to the garden. "I told them you needed to hear what they would play at the reception."

Sarianna laughed at that. "I shall have to look more closely when you tell me the truth."

For the next few hours while the lilting music filled the courtyard, Nikulainen and the servants guided Sarianna through the finer points of courtly dance. Just like with the quarterstaff, the Princess walked slowly through the steps and the basic patterns to

the dance. Then, each time she repeated the whole routine faster and with more confidence. Soon, Sarianna was dancing, and Nikulainen took delight in her enthusiasm and joy at succeeding. Hanna and Jorgen were having a good time as well. They went from gently encouraging the Princess through the learning of the dance to kicking their heels up when the movements grew faster.

The Prince was at first resistant at the thought of Jorgen dancing with his bride. But the loyal valet was so thrilled and honored to dance with the couple and his hands on Sarianna so tentative and reverent, he could not object. Hanna was not as tentative though she was as thrilled. The maid was not shy about hooking Nikulainen about the waist and gazing up at him with mock adoration while playfully teasing the Princess. For her part, Sarianna was sweet to Jorgen and only occasionally yanked Hanna away from the Prince when she lingered too long and threw off everyone's time. The yank was playful but firm. The maid merely laughed and danced on.

When the music stopped, everyone bowed and curtsied to their partners. Sarianna and Nikulainen acknowledged their servants with a bow and a curtsy.

"We want to thank you both for your loyalty and service," Nikulainen said.

"It is my honor and pleasure, your Highness," Jorgen said.

"Mine as well. We have the best station in the Hanyanoore," Hanna said.

"We have to ask another important task that will soon be upon you," Nikulainen said quietly.

The pair looked at him curiously.

"We expect there will be a challenge to our union," Sarianna explained while blushing deeply. "There will be a search of our chambers after we've dressed for the ceremony."

Hanna blushed as well. "What would you have us do?"

"Be helpful with the search," Nikulainen said. "But do not allow anything to be left in the room, and do not allow anyone to touch our things. I shall have two of my trusted guard to help enforce these edicts."

"You fear poison," Jorgen breathed.

"I fear everything where the safety of the Princess is concerned," Nikulainen said. "Perhaps I am over cautious."

"Nay, Nikulainen," Sarianna said quietly. "We must be. There is too much at risk."

"We will not allow them to touch anything. They need not touch to look," Hanna muttered. "'Tis already a disgrace to put you through this on your wedding day."

Jorgen nodded, his face pinched in disapproval. "None shall violate the safety you feel within these walls."

Nikulainen felt the truth in those words. They were welcome to his ears. He needed a place where he could lower his weapons and his guard and truly rest at ease.

"My thanks," the Regent said. "I suppose we must prepare for one last evening meal."

Nikulainen had been most reluctant to attend this meal after such a pleasant day, but the insights gathered were valuable. Queen Taraasta was in a very festive mood that evening while Neuvoja was pensive. He watched the Queen and Prince Rowsdower warily. The Regent wondered what could be the cause as they had been visiting happily with each other during previous meals. The Queen stayed away from Magnus. She was engrossed in conversation with Armas. His older brother was not scowling for the first time in days. In fact, he seemed to be enjoying the conversation.

Something about the tableau tugged at the corners of Nikulainen's mind. Armas was riveted by the Queen, who though much older than he, was still quite beautiful. She was not in any way like the very young and untried maids that tended to catch his eye. Rowsdower viewed the scene with a jaundiced eye. The Regent wondered if his older brother was openly entertaining the elder queen purely to annoy her son. That thought soothed Nikulainen though something dark still tugged at him.

"Are you tired, my lord?" Sarianna asked very quietly. "You look a little distressed."

"Do I? Forgive me," he murmured with a sigh. "I am seeing intrigues everywhere. Perhaps I am better off staring into your eyes."

"That would be most pleasant, but that will send more venom my way," she replied dryly.

"They will have to get past any fanciful notions where I am concerned. Better still, I shall make an announcement," he declared.

Nikulainen started to rise, but the Princess grasped him by the back of the tunic and pulled him back to his seat. It was so swift only Magnus and Julin noticed. They raised their goblets and laughed.

"Have you had too much wine, milord?" Sarianna whispered.

"Nay. Likely not enough," he murmured. "Or perhaps I am in need of more potent diversion to keep me in control."

Nikulainen glanced at Sarianna with a gaze of pure heat. The Princess met that stare with fire of her own.

"You do not frighten me with that fire, dear Niku," she said softly for his ears only. "For in the end you will be naked and helpless to my desire."

Before he could reply, there was someone standing before them. Neither of the pair noticed until they were being spoken to.

"I had not believed it until now, but there is no denying all that passion," Queen Taraasta was saying. "You are quite a match."

"The fates were kind to us," Nikulainen said. His eyes reluctantly left Sarianna's. "Are you enjoying your stay?"

"Yes. Princess, I thank you for your hospitality. I am enjoying your surrogate hosts very much," she said with a smile at Armas. The elder Prince was engrossed in what seemed to be a tense conversation with Julin. Nikulainen wondered about that, but the Queen was still talking.

"I would like to offer my aide to you on your wedding day, Princess," she said with a sugary smile.

Sarianna looked up puzzled. "You have already given us extremely generous gifts, your majesty."

"And you are more than welcome," she replied. "But there are special services a young lady needs from an older woman on that special day. And since you are without a mother, I thought you might like some help preparing."

Sarianna nodded appreciatively. "That is most thoughtful, your Highness. And I deeply appreciate the thought. But I have dear Hanna and Thora who have been caring for me for a very long time. They would be most hurt if I denied them."

"You have a very kind heart, Princess," she said. Her tone sounded pleasant enough, but there was a hint of ice within. "It is good you have someone to protect it."

"With my life," Nikulainen said. "Now, if you will excuse us, we have a long day tomorrow."

The Regent helped Sarianna to her feet, then the pair bid their guests good night. Nikulainen had tired of all the verbal fencing and the wondering. Their day tomorrow was to be quite leisurely, but he no longer wanted to share his bride with anyone. Sarianna seemed to share the sentiment. Most paid no heed of their departure. There was still food on the table, and the wine and ale still flowed.

The couple breathed the cooler air in the corridor outside the dining hall. The relative quiet made their breathing sound loud to his ears. Sarianna sighed in pleasure, leaning heavily on the Prince's arm.

"I thank you for your uncanny timing," she murmured. "I was growing very weary of the heat and the noise."

"It was somewhat selfish on my part. After such a long evening, I was not up to sparring with Queen Taraasta," Nikulainen admitted. "My head swims with the effort of trying to find the real meanings of her words. My tongue is not that clever."

"I find you have a most clever tongue," Sarianna said quietly. Her smile was innocent, but her eyes were full of mischief.

"I beg mercy, milady," Nikulainen replied with a sigh. "I cannot bear to be tortured after such a night."

Whatever reply the Princess had on her exquisite lips was silenced when they spied Neuvoja slipping into the deserted library. The pair looked at each other and then at the door.

"He seemed distressed this night," Sarianna said.

"We should talk to him. Perhaps he will be willing to unburden himself."

They entered the library without care for the noise they might make. Thus, it was strange the advisor never looked up from the window where he seemed to be keeping a vigil. Sarianna moved to Neuvoja side placing a hand on his shoulder.

"What troubles you, dear teacher?" she asked quietly.

Neuvoja sighed heavily. "I am childless. Perhaps that is where my error lay."

"I do not understand," Sarianna replied.

He turned to look at them. To Nikulainen, the advisor had aged greatly in a very short span of time. The Prince looped an arm around Sarianna sensing she might need some of his strength through this.

"You are such an innocent to the ways of the world and the ways of men," he said quietly. "I did know those who would seek your hand. And if not the young men themselves, I knew their sires."

He looked pointedly at Nikulainen. "Each ruler is powerful with a great deal of influence on their sons. Princess, please forgive my lack of vision and my presumptuousness."

"Tell me what burdens you," Sarianna said insistently. Nikulainen could feel her shiver slightly with fear.

"I do not know precisely why the King made Queen Taraasta and Prince Rowsdower leave, but whatever the reason, I believed it ill-advised for you and for this kingdom," he said. At least he had the presence of mind to show that his own words shamed him.

"But it was not my decision. Did you not trust the King?"

"Where you are concerned, I did not," he replied. "You are so sheltered I believed any sort of advance by a healthy man would be viewed as unseemly or disgusting. I thought your father overindulgent and reckless in his old age. The Queen and her son were the most sophisticated and learned rulers I had ever known. I felt Rowsdower would be an unparalleled match for you and that Taraasta would be like a mother you have not had."

Sarianna sagged against Nikulainen. "Please go on."

"I found out Magnus was coming the day before Vauraus expelled the Queen and her son," he admitted. "I told them there would soon be competition for your hand. They told me a great deal about the King's aggression against the Suurimetsa and his

kidnapping of that Lord's daughter for his bride. I was terrified your choice would be taken away and Magnus would never allow an independent Arinpera. I encouraged Rowsdower to move matters along."

"Tell me about the roads petition," she said. Her voice was neutral. Nikulainen could tell she was numb.

"I had not expected you to agree to wed. Initially, I thought if you and Vauraus rejected it, the unrest would force you to take a husband for Regent. But after you were bound to Nikulainen, I used it in hopes to cause unrest and a challenge to his rule," the advisor explained miserably.

"What had Nikulainen done to make you distrust his motives so?" Sarianna asked incredulously.

"He is King Magnus' son!" Neuvoja exclaimed. "You do not know what his sire's rashness nearly caused to the Hanyanoore decades ago. Without thought to those bound to him in alliances, he waged a war of aggression against a fearsome people. Every kingdom including this one could have been plunged into it. There are many rulers here who were convinced this wedding was about getting into Arinpera's coffers for more aggression toward Ritvala's neighbors."

Nikulainen had heard these whispers when the guests arrived, but they were growing quiet as the wedding approached.

"Obviously these views were deeply held for you to doubt me," the Princess said sadly. "It seems something has changed your mind."

"There has been much that cured my blindness," Neuvoja spat. He sighed then. "I was near when the Regent spoke with his father about the roads petition and when you both spoke to the Northern rulers. It was clear even to me the King had changed and his son is strong enough to truly rule on his own. But there is more that makes me deeply ashamed."

"Go on," Sarianna said.

"I stopped Prince Rowsdower from abusing one of the new servants," he said quietly. "He was very cruel and abusive toward her. And defiant when he was caught. I did not know until that moment what he had to have tried with you. I am so sorry, Princess. You have no idea how this sickens me."

"Do you believe they are behind the attack on the Princess?" Nikulainen asked. It seemed he startled the advisor by speaking.

"I still do not know. It is such an incredible risk for a ruler to take," he replied. "However, the Queen and her son knew Sarianna's habits very well. They frequently complained about her riding and her time at the stables. Their party was only two days gone when the attack occurred. I do not know."

"Something else troubles you," the Prince said with certainty.

"Aye, your highness," Neuvoja replied. "There will be a challenge to the union. It will be Armas and Rosdower but it is at the...urging of Queen Taraasta."

"We know that," Sarianna said. "I was certain he would challenge the moment he was rejected as a suitor. We will pass the challenge."

That seemed to surprise the advisor. "I truly do not know my prized student."

"Is there anything else we should know, Neuvoja?" Nikulainen said. He was not willing to even consider forgiveness of the man until everything had been drawn out of the shadows. "Anything you might consider merely odd?"

"Taraasta sent a messenger off today. That struck me as strange," he replied.

"Why?" Sarianna asked. "The rulers have been sending messengers every day."

"I heard him say he was traveling west for ten days. He needed enough food for that and the return trip," Neuvoja said. "Ten days to the west..."

"Is the grand forest of the Suurimetsa," Nikulainen said quietly. "Why would she send someone there?"

"I do not know." Neuvoja said. He sighed, seemingly relieved but very tired. "I shall resign my position after the wedding and leave after the guests have gone."

"It is not that simple, old friend," Sarianna said. Though there was a tremble in her voice, both men knew she was firm in her view. "I cannot speak for my father, but I cannot allow you to leave."

"I do not understand," he replied.

"If you have spoken true this night, your actions were chosen to save my kingdom, not to harm me," Sarianna said.

"This is true, I swear on my life," he said.

"I am deeply hurt you did not know me enough to trust my judgment," she continued. "But your departure would leave a void in our government that may be irreparable."

"I agree," Nikulainen said. "Even with my education and travel, there is much we do not know, and we can only tax the Great King so much."

"You wish me to remain in service to your Regency?" he asked incredulously.

"I cannot say I will not question your counsel more keenly," Nikulainen said. "But yes, that is what I wish."

"As do I," Sarianna said. "Though it may take me some time to find the trust I once had in you."

"I understand, Princess," he said sadly. "I am grateful for what you are willing to give. I will speak to King Vauraus in the morning and tell him all. Goodnight."

Once they were alone, Nikulainen turned Sarianna in his arms and held her trembling body close to him. "Let us have an end to this day. Nothing else can be done until Vauraus is consulted. We should rest."

She nodded, allowing him to guide her to their chambers. En route, Nikulainen instructed one of his guards to have Neuvoja protected from that point hence. Hanna and Jorgen awaited, but since the baths happened before the evening meal, they were only present to undress the couple. Nikulainen gently dismissed them. Sarianna's composure hung by a thread. He helped her into her night shift, then carried her to his bed. There she huddled under the covers while staring at the fire as the Prince hurriedly undressed. He thought of putting on some sort of sleeping attire.

"Do not cover yourself, Niku," she said softly. "Come to bed."

"As you wish," he murmured.

Sarianna turned to him as soon as he was settled under the covers. Then the tears started to flow. Her slender body was wracked with sobs. There was nothing that he could say to ease her pain. Nikulainen had no doubt that his bride had been holding a lot back since first agreeing to marry. Though the Prince hated hearing her in such pain, he also knew that it needed release. She cried until there were no more tears to flow, then she fell deeply asleep. So deep was her slumber, she did not stir when he rose to get a wet cloth to clean her face.

“I swear by all I hold dear that no one will hurt you like that again,” Nikulainen whispered over her sleeping form.

Chapter Fifteen

There were few times in Sarianna's young life when she was truly sad. Rarely had she cried for reasons other than an injury. She had been far too young to remember her mother, so her death did not have an impact. Occasionally, she realized she was lacking something important without one. But there was a lot of love and benevolent indulgence that made her a happy child. She cried when her last governess married and moved away. The last time she shed tears of sadness was when she realized that someday her father would not know her. But after a day of wallowing in sorrow, Sarianna decided she would treasure all the time she had with him and try her hardest to make it last.

All of those moments of sadness could not compare to the sadness she felt at the betrayal by her beloved advisor. That the betrayal was born of mistrust troubled her more than reasons of greed or anger. She had never been a frivolous child. Her studies and her duties were always taken seriously. Never had she given anyone reason to believe she was not willing and able to assume her assigned role upon the King's death. Even her heart would not allow her to go against the duty she was born to follow. It would have killed her soul, but had Nikulainen been wrong for the throne, she would have spurned him. It hurt her deeply that a man who should have known her had misjudged her so badly. And still her duty bound her to keep him in her court.

It was crushing in its irony that the only person in the kingdom that knew Sarianna besides the Great King was a man who fell in love with her within moments of their first meeting. The man holding her close to his strong, warm body was the only reality that kept her from falling into despair. His warmth and his strength lulled her to sleep, then eased her into waking.

"Have you slept?" she murmured against his skin.

"Yes," he replied softly. "I succumbed after you and awoke when you stirred."

"Good. I cannot have you out of sorts as well."

Nikulainen responded by rolling her onto her back to look at her. His hair fell about them in a veil of pale gold shining softly in the morning light. He was breathtaking, as he looked her over intently. There was nothing she could hide from him. Those large dark eyes missed nothing.

"I am well, Niku," she said sincerely.

"I know, but you are still sad," he replied. "I wish I could fix that."

"You have, my love," she smiled. "You give me your respect. You trust me enough to make yourself vulnerable to my whims. You bring me joy."

Nikulainen's eyes seemed to light from the inside. He lowered his head to kiss her gently. His touch spoke of love and reverence. Sarianna was nearly brought to tears once again by his tenderness.

"We must see our fathers this morn. Then the day shall be our own," the Prince promised. "What would you have us do?"

Sarianna thought while stroking his hair. "I would like to be very quiet. After our work in the stables, let us spend the hours in the library. I would like to read your book."

"That suits me well. There are some volumes I would like to read over," he said.

"I have hidden those," Sarianna quipped.

The Prince smiled wickedly. "I do not think I need such instruction. I am prepared to reveal my skills on our wedding night."

"I must wait so long even for a brief taste?"

"I would give you one, milady. One you would not forget, but the servants are coming soon," he replied in a languid, husky voice.

"One kiss for strength."

"You do not need my strength. But I will give you a kiss for love," he said as he lowered his head. This kiss had more hunger and heat. Nikulainen made her moan, but he had enough control to pull away.

"Only once more shall I leave you in the morning," she whispered after a swift kiss on his forehead.

"I am living for that truth, milady," he murmured.

Just as there were few times that Sarianna was very sad, there were very few times she saw her father greatly concerned. When they arrived, Neuvoja was nowhere to be seen. Magnus was present and very solemn faced.

"My children, this is a most dreadful state of affairs," Vauraus said.

"Has he told you everything?" Sarianna said.

"Yes," Magnus said. "I know of the messenger."

"What will you do?" Nikulainen asked. "He has a two day start."

"I leave for Ritvala the day after the ceremony," the King replied. "We can reach the fortress before the message is delivered. I regret not remaining longer."

"I understand, Father," Nikulainen replied. "Do you believe the message will be heard?"

"Aye, son," the King sighed. "There have been ears waiting years for the right message."

Sarianna watched King Magnus in the early morning light as if she was seeing him for the very first time. He was not nearly as formidable as she had thought. And while the Princess would never call him frightened, a lot of the King's certainty was gone. Her father's words upon seeing Nikulainen the first time came back to her.

"And now I see the reason for it all," Sarianna murmured as she moved to stand before Magnus. "None of this was about aggression. This was about love. You seek a powerful alliance to avert war with the Forest People."

Magnus looked surprised at first. Then he smiled wanly at King Vauraus. "You have raised a brilliant and insightful child, old friend. She truly has the Light."

"Sire?" Nikulainen asked.

"Your bride speaks the truth, my son. I have feared the day they would come since I first took Lady Reija home," Magnus said.

“Why would you think they would come even after all these years?” Nikulainen asked.

“Because Lady Reija’s father swore he would come for her,” Magnus said. “And I know his word is true for I would do the same to get my child back. Lord Valtias has waited for scores of years for a weakness. He has ears even within the Hanyanoore.”

“Does my mother want to return to her people?” The Prince asked in dismay. “Is she unhappy at Ritvala?”

“Nay, Son. Your mother loves me. We were hit by something that felt like a lightning bolt upon our first meeting. We met on the field of battle. She nearly struck me down with her sword. She succeeded with one gaze. During the truce talks, I demanded her as part of my price to stop fighting,” he replied with a smile. “I was near driven mad with the need to have her. But the more I fell in love, the more her happiness concerned me. Before you were born, I even tried to get her to return. I was so ashamed at how I took her from all she knew and did not know how to make it right. She would not leave me.”

“That is why she will not leave the fortress,” Nikulainen said.

“She fears being taken,” Magnus said. “That is why I called you both hostage for all these years. If you were lost to me somehow, the people of Ritvala would not call for war.”

“You could not fight her father,” Sarianna said.

“I could not harm her people. I’ve done enough to them,” Magnus said.

"What will you do if Lord Valtias comes?" Nikulainen asked. "Will you fight now? Do you wish Arinpera to fight?"

"I will not allow her to be taken. I curse my own weakness, but I cannot be without her," the King replied bitterly. "I hope all my sons will stand with me."

"Is there no other way?" Sarianna asked. "Fathers want their children to be happy. When Lord Valtias last saw his daughter, she was being torn from him. His last image was of her in misery, was it not?"

"Yes."

"Show him she is happy, and he will relent," Sarianna said.

"My daughter is right," Vauraus said. "Her years of happiness and a fine grandson will quell his ire no matter how great."

"He will never believe she could be happy," Magnus said with less certainty.

"If he knows his child, he will see the happiness shine in her eyes every time she looks upon her beloved," Vauraus said. "Just as I see my child's joy right now. Arinpera will stand with Ritvala to prevent war while you attend to this family matter."

"Thank you, Sire," Magnus said. "I am grateful for your belief in me. But the other rulers..."

"Tell them, Father," Nikulainen said. "Most know some parts of the story. Reveal the whole truth and tell them you seek peace. Many were allied with you before that conflict. They have a right to know."

"They do, old friend," Vauraus said. "I will stand with you. Make the announcement at the morning meal after the wedding night before the departures commence. Take away all of Taraasta's fire."

"I would like that," Magnus said. "I would like an end to all these secrets and shadow. Very well then."

"I will follow with the armies within a day of your departure," the Prince said resolutely. "I will amass them between the fortress and the western woods."

"It is decided then," Vauraus said. "Now, what of Neuvoja?"

Sarianna had almost forgotten about him. She squared her shoulders and faced her father. "He has told you of our decision."

"Yes," Vauraus said.

"You do not agree?" she asked.

"I agree his counsel is valuable," the Elder King said. "However, we have to know he can be trusted."

"What would you have us do?" Nikulainen asked.

"Have him continue his relationship with Queen Taraasta," Vauraus said. "I feel we have not seen the end of her treachery."

"Our standing against the Suurimetsa will test his faith in us anew," Sarianna quipped. "The Queen will be easy."

"Do not fear. We are on the right path," the Prince said.

There was serenity in those dark eyes she could believe. She nodded. "When do we tell him of our plans?"

"I think I trust your instincts above all others, dear Daughter," Magnus said with an ironic chuckle.

"I agree," Vauraus said. "Go, children, and enjoy your day of quiet. Already you have spent too long on troublesome matters when your minds and hearts should be on the joys ahead."

"Aye, leave the guests to us this day." Magnus said.

There was no more to be said. As much as she enjoyed and savored her father's company, she wished to be away from all her burdens with Nikulainen. They bid their fathers good day and sought the solace of quiet and one another's company.

"How did you know about my father and mother?" Nikulainen asked softly.

They were in the library then; the remains of their morning meal cooled on a table nearby. Minos had turned them away from the stables, ordering them to avoid possible strain before the wedding. He also reminded them of the platter from the nuptial feast he wanted. Nikulainen settled them into the library with orders for meals and otherwise not to be disturbed. After the meal, they settled onto the large cushioned window seat facing each other with their legs intertwined.

"Magnus had the same expression as my father when he thinks of my mother," she replied thoughtfully. "That he had such a mournful expression at the thought of losing the Lady Reija told me his love for her eclipses almost all else."

"Almost? Who does he love as much?"

"You and Armas and Julin," she replied. "All he has done was to protect his family. He is a romantic and intensely passionate man beneath the blustering. Your mother glimpsed such a powerful masculine beauty with all that stirring within him, and she fell immediately."

"And he was slain by her incredible beauty," he mused.

"It is more than beauty with your people," Sarianna said quietly as she gazed at him. "Something of your essence shines through your eyes. Somehow, I knew you the first time I looked upon you. I am certain your father saw the same in your mother."

"Not everyone sees, Sarianna. The fates blessed me that I fell for a woman who could really see me," he said softly.

"And I fell as quickly as your father did. If I had to, I would have left all I knew to be with you," she said. "I understand them."

"And now, so do I," Nikulainen sighed. "This explains so much I didn't understand."

"Like why she is not here for the wedding."

"Yes, I would have liked that."

"I will meet her soon," Sarianna said. "I'm going back with you."

"No, Sarianna! I go to stand in battle."

"I do not mean to wade through arrows should they fall," the Princess replied. "I go to the fortress to wait with your mother. We will have just been wed. I do not mean to wait for many days without you. I do not mean for you to face your people without knowing I am near for support."

The Prince stared at his bride with eyes full of conflicting emotions.

"You want me with you," she said. "Do not fight me about this."

"The fates save me, I do," he murmured. "I do not understand how Magnus can be without his lady this long. But I fear for your safety."

"I will be well with you and your men until we reach Ritvala. You know I can keep up with a hard ride," she said. "I will be within reach of the fortress before you face down the Suurimetsa. I will not have your worry for me cause you injury."

"But Vauraus..."

"Will not be pleased. This is very true," she conceded. "But he is wise enough not to stop me. You make sure to bring me back."

He smiled at that. "I shall, milady. You have my word."

For a time, they enjoyed the quiet and their closeness. Sarianna read the history she had been gifted while Nikulainen studied lore written by local writers. The Princess realized during those long and serene moments their reign would likely not include much in the way of entertaining. Each enjoyed solitude too much. Both found all those guests a strain.

Their peace was interrupted that day. With the mid-day meal came Thora and Neuvoja. Hanna and Jorgen were most indignant and apologetic, but their seniors were insistent. The couple did not move from the window seat, gazing at them expectantly but with clearly tested patience.

"Forgive us, your Highnesses," Neuvoja said. "We will keep this interruption to a minimum. But this is very important."

"Yes?" Sarianna asked.

"There are some protocol problems with the current security," Thora said. "Custom demands the Prince not see his bride in her attire until they step before the Prefect Amandil. But the Great King has ordered you shall not be apart when in public."

Sarianna sighed. "'Tis simple enough. I have a great formal cloak with a hood. I shall wear it until we reach the balcony."

The pair did not leave. The couple stared at them once more.

"There is the matter of the Prince's bracers," the advisor said. "Many of the guests wondered if he will wear the colors of Ritvala or Arinpera. Thora tells me her Highness wishes the Prince to wear his boots and bracers."

"Yes, I do," Sarianna said. "Hanna, if you would."

"Yes, your Highness," she replied, quickly leaving the room.

Sarianna swung her legs around to stand. Nikulainen rose to assist her. The pair sat at the table where Jorgen began to serve their meal. Before it was set in front of them, Hanna had returned with two bundles wrapped in rich cloth.

"These are for you, Niku," she smiled. "I was going to wait until this evening."

The Prince opened the bundles while all eyes watched. Inside he found the boots, sword belt and bracers with the symbol of Arinpera clearly etched upon them.

"These are beautiful, Sarianna," he smiled. "They suit me even as they make me a part of your people. I will wear them with pride."

"Does this settle the question?" Sarianna asked.

"Yes, your Highness," Neuvoja said with surprise. "We will leave you in peace."

"Jorgen, will you place these in my chambers?" Nikulainen asked.

"Certainly."

"I'm sorry the surprise was spoiled," Hanna said.

"It is not a concern, dear Hanna," the Prince smiled. "I was surprised just the same."

The maidservant blushed, laughing as she poured the wine. "You will be wanting to retire early, I suppose."

"Yes," Sarianna said. "We must be dressed and ready by first light."

"A light supper then. The bath to be when you wake," Hanna said. "All your clothing is laid out and ready."

"Thank you, Hanna."

"Where will you take your rooms after the ceremony?" She asked.

Sarianna shrugged. "There is no provision for two rulers in the citadel. We like our chambers."

"The Princess can keep her receiving room. Her bedchamber can someday be a nursery," he said.

Hanna blushed deeply. "I think that will be wonderful! I have to make the arrangements for this evening."

Nikulainen looked dismayed as the maidservant scurried from the room. He looked at Sarianna in confusion. "Why do I feel that I have done something unexpected?"

"Most monarchs do not share a bedchamber," Sarianna said merrily.

The Prince frowned. "Did you want separate chambers?"

"Of course not, and I do not care who knows," she replied. "I just thought I would be the one to scandalize the court."

"I suppose I am making myself at home," he chuckled.

The day had not been a very busy one compared to some others, but Sarianna found she was tired by the time the sun set nonetheless. The matters that were not foremost in her mind while lazing in the library taxed her all the same. Nikulainen said little about all that had transpired, but she could see him trying to grapple with the burden. There was a shadow cast in his eyes that did not leave all that day. It was unfair that even once wed, they would not be free to learn each other as they pleased. More peril than ever lay ahead.

By the end of their meal, Sarianna's limbs were as heavy as her heart. She was bone tired. Hanna seemed concerned as she left her Mistress for the day.

"Are you ill, milady?" she asked quietly. "You seem so unhappy."

"Nay. I have had a tiring day, 'tis all," the Princess replied. "I need the long rest of this night."

"But you are happy about the wedding?"

"Oh, yes. Never doubt that," she managed to smile. "Off with you now. Your day begins sooner than mine. Goodnight."

Hanna bid her a reluctant goodnight, leaving Sarianna free to go to her Prince. Nikulainen waited with the blankets drawn back for her. He smiled somewhat sheepishly.

"I thought you might be too tired for naught but sleep," he said. "It would not trouble me if that is true."

"It is, my love," she said. "Though I do need your arms about me and your body close to mine."

"As do I," he whispered.

With that, Sarianna climbed into bed and snuggled close to Nikulainen as he pulled the covers over them. Surprisingly, it did not take very long to fall fast asleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Sarianna awoke before Nikulainen that morn. His breath was deep and even and his face angelic and untroubled in the fading hearth light. She stroked some stray hair from his forehead, then kissed the smooth skin there. The Prince smiled though his eyes were still closed.

"You wake early," he murmured, pulling her down for a quick kiss. "You were not awake long?"

"Nay, but I was glad for the moment I had to see you sleep," she murmured.

He smiled at that. "The citadel is stirring."

"I know," Sarianna replied, throwing back the blankets. "Hanna will be here earlier than asked."

She rose and wrapped herself in her robe. But the Prince looked too good with his hair flowing wildly to leave without a final kiss. They broke apart with a moan.

"Soon," he whispered.

The Princess was rebuilding the fire when Hanna knocked on the door. She entered, followed by guards with buckets of steaming water. The maidservant looked fetching in the staff's wedding attire. Her hair was attractively arranged, and she wore the gifted jewelry.

"Princess, you should not be doing anything," Hanna exclaimed.

"I woke early. I thought I would help by getting the room warmer," she said. "It only took a moment. Don't you look lovely?"

Hanna frowned. "Thank you, milady. Let me see your hands."

Sarianna sighed, holding her hands out. The maidservant examined her fingers, then checked her hands for softness. "It's a wonder they are so soft between the stables and everything else."

Once the water was in the tub, the guards were back in place. Hanna started brushing her hair. There was a tremble in her hand.

"Are you nervous, Hannah?"

"Why would I be? I dress you every day," she said.

"Yes, you should remember that," Sarianna said mildly. "I have received nothing but compliments on my appearance all week."

"Truly?" She asked wide-eyed.

"Yes," Sarianna laughed. "Now, help me!"

Hanna put on her apron, then helped the Princess out of her sleeping attire. "If you would stand on the cloth near the tub, there is a special cleansing ritual."

"Really?"

"That is why I am a bit nervous," she admitted. "I am to scrub to your skin with this warm oil mixed with fine sand. Then, you are to soak in the hot water while I wash your hair."

"That sounds simple enough. Proceed."

The mixture felt good on her skin as Hanna gently scrubbed in circles across her body. It smelled faintly of spices and somehow relaxed her as it cleansed. Hanna was thorough but efficient, making sure no part of her skin was neglected while not allowing her to grow chilled. Once she slid into the hot water, Sarianna almost fell asleep.

"Nay, milady, you must eat something," Hanna said as she cleaned her hair with a different oil-laden soap that smelled of exotic flowers. "Just a moment while I rinse it out."

Once the mixture was thoroughly rinsed from her hair and it was drying in a cloth, Hanna set a small table next to the tub. On it she placed a tray of cut fruit and cheeses and some pieces of fresh bread.

"You are not to pick at it, milady," Hanna clucked. "Neuvoja says it will be some time before you will eat at the feast."

"Yes, Hanna," Sarianna sighed. But the food was especially tasty, and she was especially hungry. She finished all that was on the platter before her hair was brushed dry.

"Was the soap for my hair part of the ritual?" the Princess asked.

"Nay, but as your hair will be free, this will make it look its best," she replied. "Is the water too hot?"

"Nay, 'tis wonderful," she sighed. "May I have some cool water to drink?"

"Of course."

The water eased the temperature within and allowed Sarianna to sit still while Hanna brushed her hair dry.

"You spend a lot of time with Jorgen, do you not?"

"Yes," Hanna answered with a note of caution. "He and I have the same routine, and he knows no one here. Why?"

"No reason. He is a fine man," the Princess commented. "I was just wondering."

"Oh... nay... we have not had the occasion... and he has never looked on me that way," Hanna said quietly.

"I am not sure about that, dear Hanna," Sarianna smiled. "I saw how happy he was to dance with you."

"You jest with me."

"Has he seen you today?"

"Nay... I was anxious to get started," the maid replied. "I had my hot water before he came to the kitchen."

"We will see how he looks on you today."

Hanna let out an exasperated sigh, then announced that Sarianna's hair was dry. The Princess was helped out of the water, then patted dry. Lotions were quickly rubbed into her skin leaving softness and a faint fragrance. Only then were the garments presented for her to dress.

Sarianna was frankly amazed. She had had fine items of clothing all of her life, but there was nothing to compare with the delicate softness of the undergarments Hanna helped her into that morning. The Princess feared the nearly sheer garments could be

ripped asunder by the slightest pull, yet they fit over her hips and covered her breasts in softness that somehow supported her curves. She felt utterly feminine and completely at ease. The silken gown slid over the undergarments to mold exactly along Sarianna's body. At that moment she understood the painstaking measurements and fittings; there was no room for error with that dress.

Sarianna turned from her reflection in the mirror to where Hanna stood transfixed.

"How do I look?" the Princess asked.

Hanna sank to her knees with tears in her eyes. "I've never seen anyone look as lovely."

"Do not cry, Hanna!" Sarianna exclaimed. "I will cry as well, then Thora will frown at us both."

The maid nodded. "Let me help you with the shoes."

Strangely enough, save for the longer bath, getting dressed for the wedding was less complicated than her practice of that week. Having her hair held in place by a few pins and the crown took far less time than pinning it up in jewels had each morning. It seemed mere moments before she was completely dressed and staring at the serene stranger in the mirror. And then she heard a gasp from the door.

"Fates save me if you are not the image of your mother," Vaurus whispered, looking at Sarianna with such reverence that it shook her. The King was most regal in the muted gold silk robes with dark green trim. Below the crown perched on his snow white hair were clear eyes that were full of joy. "You are beauty itself, child."

"Do not make me cry, Father. Thora will frown," Sarianna said softly.

"We cannot have that, can we?" He chuckled, accepting her embrace warmly. "My heart is gladdened the fates decided you would remain here with me. I do not know if I could bear to see you leave. Instead, I am gifted with a son."

"We have been doubly blessed," Sarianna agreed. "I could not be happier."

"Come then, put on your cloak," he said. "If I know young men, the one in the next room is about to come out of his skin with waiting."

Nikulainen's resolve had been sorely tested that morn. Never had he been so thoroughly scrubbed and in such areas as he had that day. Were it not for Jorgen's unquestionable loyalty and discretion, he might have felt compelled to execute the man for such liberties. He understood custom and ritual as well as the rest, but that was bordering on an assault on the royal person. The fine breakfast calmed him as he soaked in the tub. It did not come close to slaking his ravenous hunger, but it would do until the feast.

Jorgen calmed down once the Prince was soaking. He had a right to be nervous with that duty on his mind. The whole ordeal set him to thinking about how his Sarianna was being handled that day. Even with Hanna being a woman, the thought of anyone touching her skin so intimately bothered him. After that morn, new arrangements for bathing were in order. That would surely be a scandal the imperious Thora would not like in the least, but Nikulainen did not care.

He looked over his trusted valet for the first time while he finished the cheese. Jorgen looked good in his formal uniform. He was dressed in the same pale brown as his new bracers and boots. The symbol for Arinpera was embroidered on the tunic. He had new boots as well. The colors were a wise choice. He no doubt knew about Sarianna's gift and that influenced his choice.

"You look very handsome today, Jorgen," Nikulainen commented. "You should make sure to have a dance with Hanna at the feast."

"Really, sir? She has not looked on me thus," he said sheepishly.

"Has she seen you today?"

"Nay," he replied. "She was already in her lady's chamber when I reached the kitchen."

"Trust me, Jorgen. Ask her to dance."

They fell into an amiable silence then. Nikulainen finished his bath without further bristling. He was amazed at how fine his wedding attire was. It was soft and close fitting without making him feel less of a man. The fabric was strong enough that he could go hunting in it without fear of it tearing.

"You look very fine, sir. The color really suits you," Jorgen said as he helped him with the bracers. "The Princess chose well."

"She did indeed," a voice said from his door.

Magnus stood there looking regal and formidable. The King wore silken robes in the royal colors of blue and gold that were subtle and muted in tone. He was also smiling broadly.

"I wish the Lady Reija were here," he said quietly. "She would be so proud. I certainly am. You have become a very fine man."

"Thank you Father," Nikulainen said with a voice that broke slightly. "I could not ask for higher praise."

"Let us go and collect your bride."

Nikulainen did not have a long wait in the corridor. The door opened with the first knock from the guard. Vauraus stepped out with a bow to Magnus and Nikulainen. Then the elder King held out his arm. A figure covered from head to toe in a cloak of deep red emerged. Her face was hidden. Only the slender hand on Vauraus arm was visible. For a moment, the Prince was seized with panic thinking there may have been some mischief and his beloved was left behind.

"Forgive me, noble Sires, but I would know for sure that milady is within this great cloak," Nikulainen said quietly.

Everyone in the corridor was taken aback, but there was a soft chuckle from within the lush folds of fabric.

"I know what literature the Prince likes to study when he is unsure of what he is about," a melodious and merry voice said.

The Prince smirked, narrowing his eyes. "It is reading material you would like to discuss with our fathers then?"

"Nay!" the voice exclaimed indignantly. "We can discuss what you know and do not later, Niku."

The Kings laughed. Magnus was quite amused. "Is she yours, my Son?"

"She could be no other," Nikulainen said with a shake of his head.

With that, the party made its way to the great hall. The decorations had transformed the room overnight into a fantastic realm of flowers and candlelight. The staff must have worked all night to achieve such lush detail. The staff was assembled at the back of the hall, but they had a clear view of the balcony. Like Hanna and Jorgen, who could not seem to take their eyes off each other, the rest of the staff looked proud in their formal attire. The royal guests and prominent citizens were seated just below the balcony. Neuvoja looked dignified waiting by the Prefect Amandil. Armas and Julin stood next to Neuvoja. For some reason they seemed startled by Nikulainen. Julin gave him a small bow. Armas' expression returned to impassive.

"Are the parties ready?" The Prefect Amandil asked.

"We are," Nikulainen said solemnly.

"Come forward then so that you may be joined before this company," the Prefect Amandil intoned.

Magnus took his place next to his older sons as Nikulainen stepped onto the balcony in front of the Prefect Amandil. Sarianna paused to have her cloak removed, then she stepped out as well to a gasp from the assembled. The Prince looked at his bride in awe. She was so lovely that it took all the control he had to keep from falling to his knees weeping. He prayed she would forgive his possessiveness that day, because he could trust no man to be near her alone. Sarianna's blue-black hair softly framed her face, then fell in gentle waves to nearly her waist. The dress did not cling, but it was so well fitted her sleek curves were apparent for all to see. That lovely face all but glowed in the

morning light. The Prince could not believe his great fortune that this incredible woman was gazing at him with such warmth and love and that she was holding out her hand for him. The Prince managed to come out of his reverie and take that hand.

Though Nikulainen could hear the Prefect Amandil ask the ritual questions, his focus was on the lovely face and the deep blue eyes before him. Were they joining of their own free will? Were they prepared to live in accordance to the laws of the kingdom? Was the Prince willing to become a true son of Arinpera? Nikulainen answered clearly and without the tremble he was certain would be in his voice. Then he pledged his heart and his sword to Sarianna for as long as he drew breath. Those dark blue eyes sparkled with joy at him. The Prefect Amandil had to get Sarianna's attention to answer her questions for she was looking at him so intently. The audience found that endearing. Her blush moved Nikulainen. The Princess then answered the ritual questions in a soft but clear voice. She then pledged her heart and body to nurture and support him for as long as she drew breath.

They were smiling brightly at each other as the Prefect Amandil said his final phrases.

"Barring failure to pass a challenge to the honor of this union, what has formed here this morn is a life bond of love and honor. The fates shall curse any who seek to break it. And now Nikulainen, Regent of Arinpera, seal this bond with Her Serene Highness, Princess Sarianna, with a kiss before the fates and this company."

A single step brought Sarianna flush against him. She spared him from getting lost in her eyes by fluttering them shut as he lowered his lips to hers. It was a sweet, gentle

kiss that spoke of a shared passion. They parted before succumbing to its powerful temptation. The people cheered. The couple then turned to King Vauraus. Nikulainen dropped to one knee.

"Welcome, my Son. You are now part of Arinpera," he boomed.

The Regent rose, and the couple turned and waved at the crowd whose cheers grew into a roar.

"And now let the celebrations begin!" Vauraus exclaimed.

Nikulainen turned to find his father before them. His eyes were brimming as he looked upon them.

"I cannot ask you to risk all you have here to right my mistake," he said hoarsely.

"Father, I cannot keep from doing this," Nikulainen replied. "For Mother, as much as for you."

"I agree," Sarianna said.

The Princess then embraced the Great King as she would her father. Nikulainen thought the man would weep then. He almost did. Armas chose that moment to sweep from the room. Magnus did not notice as he was captivated by Sarianna, but Julin and Vauraus did. Nikulainen put it from his mind and accepted his brother's rumbling, crushing embrace.

"May I kiss your bride's hand?" Julin asked.

"I do not mind if my bride does not," he smiled.

"I do not mind," she laughed, holding out her slender right hand.

Julin placed a dainty kiss upon her hand with a great flourish, then accompanied them to the dining hall, where the music was already playing.

Sarianna felt as though she was walking in a glorious dream. She could not be so fortunate. Yet there she was standing with Nikulainen while he pledged his heart to her. He was a golden beauty with his hair framing his face beneath the simple braided metal crown. His attire not only perfectly offset his skin, it showed that slender muscular form to its best advantage. Sarianna couldn't call the attire revealing or inappropriate, but it certainly allowed all who saw him to know just how finely he was built. Though she enjoyed looking upon him thus, it was vaguely disconcerting to know everyone else could as well.

Other women would not have much of a chance to distract Nikulainen. All he seemed to see was Sarianna. As it was their special day, she supposed he was indulging himself by not even pretending to notice anyone else unless they addressed him. He was not allowing any men save for their fathers near her. He was not very subtle about his possessiveness either. Sarianna did not mind.

"Are you hungry, my Love?" Nikulainen murmured.

"Desperately," she breathed in his ear. "But we cannot go until Father leaves."

He drew back then to look at her. Sarianna blushed under his blazing gaze. He smiled sensually, then accepted a tray from a servant and placed it in front of her.

"It will be my pleasure to satisfy all milady's hungers completely," he said softly.

Sarianna took a deep, shuddering breath, then began to eat. The food was exquisite, so she savored each bite as Nikulainen did. Fortunately, they were allowed to eat their fill before the toasts began. She was very hungry. Nikulainen was as well. They were on a second platter when Hanna hurried over to their table.

"Highnesses, the Prefect Amandil has been asked to inspect your chambers," she whispered.

"Who is with him?" Nikulainen asked.

"Prince Rowsdower," she replied with a wrinkle of her nose.

He nodded. "Take Jorgen and make sure to do as we planned."

"You will be fine, Hanna," Sarianna said. "Inform us of how the search went. I am certain you will be back in time to really enjoy the celebration."

"Yes, Princess."

The party left on their dubious mission without anyone save Magnus and Vauraus taking notice. The couple returned their attention to the meal.

"I do not understand why he persists," Sarianna muttered between bites. "If I could not pass the challenge, then I am an unfit bride."

Nikulainen flashed a brilliant smile. "Your beauty today is reason enough, milady. He is not a stupid man."

"You are an extraordinary man to find a way to compliment him," she replied.

"It is the joy of the day to be sure," he murmured, smiling once more.

The music stopped then. The couple looked up to find King Vauraus standing with a goblet in his hand.

“My day is ending soon, but I did not want to take my leave without saying a few words to my children,” he said. The words were solemn but there was a smile on his face and a light in his eyes. “When my dear Queen died, I thought I had lost all joy and light. I was wrong. In Sarianna, I found the light again. Joy and laughter returned to my heart. My wonderful child has grown into an extraordinary woman who is as wise and as kind as she is beautiful. My child is worthy of her mother’s legacy. And in that wisdom she has found an extraordinary young man I am proud to call son. May you have a long and joyous life together. And may you have many children so that you may know the singular pleasure I have had in rearing you.”

Before the single tear sliding down Sarianna’s cheek could be wiped away by Nikulainen, Magnus was on his feet also with a goblet.

“Friends, allies and family, I too want to say something about this day and these young people,” he began. “In my youth and arrogance, I made some impetuous and dangerous decisions that endangered the peace of the Hanyanoore. The fates must have had a plan for me. That is the only way I can explain how such a rash and aggressive act could result in the creation of such a son like Nikulainen. He is wise beyond his years. He is often wiser than I. His bravery and kindness will make him a fine ruler. Sarianna is the best daughter I could have hoped to have. That is my solace in losing him. Long life and much joy to you both. I too hope your children bring your union as much happiness as I have known.”

The company was stunned for a moment. Then the Northern rulers began to applaud. The reaction spread across the room until there was cheering. King Vauraus

left with a smile and a wave at Sarianna, who was shedding tears. Nikulainen kissed her gently, then wiped the tears away. The music began again, as did the merriment.

“Have some wine, Sarianna,” Nikulainen said. “And some sweets.”

“You seek to stuff me,” she laughed.

“I seek to satisfy your needs,” he smiled.

Her retort was thwarted by well-wishers who began to appear in front of their places at the main table. The Princess schooled her expression to the business at hand. Once the well-wishers began their greetings, the pair would have to sit for all of them. This included the servants of the citadel and the citizens. Sarianna understood why her father chose his departure. With age, there was great wisdom, indeed.

Neuvoja was first. The advisor’s visage was full of barely hidden emotion. The couple tried to ease his turmoil, but that seemed to agitate him more. Sarianna told him to have some food and wine and to rest his weary mind that day. She dearly hoped he would try.

Captain Rajotin and Nikulainen’s men, Meikka and Nikerym, were next. The Regent promised they would to stay in the dining hall under the eyes of the guards. Only then did the men promise to partake of the feast in some fashion. They promised to stay away from wine until the couple was safely in their quarters. It was implied that they might not come out for days, so drink was not a problem.

Hanna and Jorgen were next. Sarianna had them draw near.

“How went the inspection?” She asked.

"It went well, Princess," Hanna said. "The Prefect Amandil brought Thora, who would allow no one save he and us inside. She did not permit him to touch anything. Your chambers are safe and locked with a guard at each door. We will take them food."

"Thank you, dear Hanna," Nikulainen smiled. "Make sure you and Jorgen dance."

They scurried off with Hanna giggling. Sarianna looked at Nikulainen in relief.

"Fates bless dear, unbendable Thora," Sarianna sighed.

On and on the greetings went. Sarianna realized that she would be hungry again before long. The dancing had yet to begin. She could not complain though. The outpouring of love from her people could help her bear anything. That affection was not for the Princess alone. They were all genuinely fond of her husband. The Regent greeted each of them warmly. Princess Laurila nearly burst into flames at Nikulainen's warm smile. The girl looked lovely with her red-gold hair pinned in attractive ringlets. The muted gold of her gown suited her amber eyes. She was still an awkward child, but Sarianna could see the woman she would become. She would make an interesting neighbor once she succeeded her grandparents. Hopefully, her crush would end by then.

Thora was near the end of the procession. She was with the head cook. Sarianna and Nikulainen stood for them and gave a little bow.

"Our deepest thanks for all your tireless work," Sarianna said. "This would not be the wondrous celebration it is without you both. Thora, we thank you for your care and patience with us. Know that we are deeply grateful for all of your efforts."

The head housekeeper was nearly in tears when she curtsied and turned away.

Minos was the last. The music for dancing began as he strolled up.

"Did you not get your platter?" Sarianna asked merrily.

"Aye," he replied with a sheepish smile. "But I had to come to see... lass, you are so lovely. You are a woman grown..."

"Now, do not go soft," the Princess said. "And do not make me weep. How is Kelata?"

"Missing you as Ajaa misses the lad," Minos said. "You look lovely as well."

Nikulainen snorted. "Thank you."

"I will get some apples for them and some sweets for me," he said.

"Thank you for coming," Sarianna said softly. "It means a lot to me."

With that, he was gone. The long parade of well-wishers ended. Still Sarianna sighed. The celebration was far from over.

Chapter Seventeen

The day was a long one, full of conversation and food and dancing. Nikulainen knew that much had occurred that would someday make for fond memories. Julin had recited his poem in verses throughout the feast. He and Sarianna had many conversations with the Monarchs who were more interested in Magnus' toast than they were in wishing the couple well. He knew they found many ways to evade Queen Taraasta's insistent questions. There was so much going on, Nikulainen could not grasp the entirety of it. Thus, he focused on his bride. And she was growing more tempting by the moment. By the sixth hour of the celebration, he was certain he would cause a scandal. The problem was that Sarianna was doing very little to discourage him.

"Children, I will give you one last gift this day," Magnus said as he came to stand before them.

"What more could you give us, Great King?" Sarianna asked merrily. "You have been more than generous in heart and goods."

"I grant you your leave," he said quietly. "Go now, before my son does something terribly rash. I will entertain your guests in your stead."

Nikulainen felt the blush spread across his cheeks. "Thank you, Father. The fates will bless you."

"I bless you," Sarianna said with fervor. "Niku, let us leave while we can. Julin may have more verses."

For a moment, Nikulainen wanted to see if his bride would drag him from his seat. Then he saw the flash in Sarianna's eyes and decided it would be lunacy to tarry. Instead, he rose from his seat with surprising grace then held a hand out to the Princess.

"Try not to run the whole way there, children," Magnus rumbled.

Nikulainen thought to glare at his father, but Sarianna was gently tugging at him. They managed to sweep regally from the room and head toward the royal wing at what appeared to be a leisurely pace. Hanna and Jorgen managed to catch them as they reached the corridor to their chambers.

They bowed before the pair. "There is food and drink in the Regent's chamber. We can have your baths drawn," Jorgen said.

"That will keep until the morn," the Regent replied. "We are both still very clean from that scrubbing."

"But what about your clothing?" Hanna whispered. "You will need help getting out of those things."

"Not necessary," Nikulainen said in a quiet voice. "I've been savoring the thought of that chore all day."

"As have I," Sarianna blurted.

Jorgen was about to say something else. Nikulainen held up a hand, silencing him. "Nothing more, friends. We will see you in the morn. Bring the baths and more food then."

“Go and enjoy yourselves,” Sarianna said with a smile. “We will manage for the night.”

They started to say more, but Sarianna fixed them with a cautioning gaze. Then she did tug her groom away. The servants could be heard laughing as they headed back to the feast.

The pair continued to their chambers at a brisk clip. Nikulainen paused one more time to speak to the guards.

“When the Prefect Amandil and the others come for the challenge, do not bar their way,” he said. “Otherwise, no one is to come into these rooms.”

The guards acknowledged the order then gave their congratulations.

Once inside the door, Nikulainen turned on his Princess. She was leaning against the door with a wry smile on her face.

“I hope they did not think us rude,” she said.

“They will have to get past it,” he replied pulling her against him. “We have shown as much restraint as humanly possible.”

That dress was as maddening as the woman wearing it. The fabric was a soft sheath over her firm curves. It felt so good beneath his hands; he was reluctant to remove it. Nikulainen held Sarianna close, breathing in her wonderfully scented hair and just enjoying her nearness.

“Tell me, beautiful Sarianna,” he sighed. “How do I begin? What to I do first to satisfy your hungers?”

Her hands were roaming his back slowly. She too was enjoying scent and nearness. Her voice was soft and almost muffled as she spoke against his chest. "I have felt you restrain your ardor with me out of fear you would lose control and take what I was forbidden to give. Take it now, Niku. End my innocence and unleash your passion fully."

Nikulainen sunk one hand into the soft, thick waves of her hair, then gently pulled her head back so he could look into her eyes.

"Taking a gift that can only be given once requires time and great care," he said softly. "Be patient, for I will go slowly."

"What if I wish to be ravished? I feel the strength of your want, Niku. I will know it," she replied. Her voice was low and drenched in need.

"You will know ravishment this night, my love. But not this first time," he murmured. "Trust me, Sarianna."

"Always," she breathed as he covered her lips in a gentle kiss.

Nikulainen sighed against her soft, warm lips. He wrapped his arms about her body completely, fitting that wondrous form against him. This was an indulgence that had been all too rare since they were betrothed. How he had longed to simply learn her kiss, slowly and leisurely and thoroughly. Sarianna relaxed into his embrace. One of her arms wrapped around his neck. That hand sank into his hair. The other was gently rubbing circles along his back. He had wanted this for so long. Had they not been confined to the citadel walls, he would have sought time to gently pin his beloved

against a secluded tree and learn her kisses while basking in the sunshine or in the moonlight.

The kiss naturally deepened, and Nikulainen was thrilled at the way his beloved's knees weakened and her lovely body leaned heavily against him. She moaned under the heat of the kiss, and her hand clutched his hair more firmly to hold him where he was. That was his Sarianna – yielding and demanding in the same instant. Her growing passion ignited his. Nikulainen growled, kissing her hotly. When his beloved's knees buckled, he swept her in his arms, then carried her to the neatly turned down bed and sat her on the edge of it. When he moved to untie his bracers, her hand stilled his.

“Allow me,” she said. “Though I am loathe to have them removed. I so enjoy how you look in them.”

“Mayhap I can wear naught but them for your pleasure,” he smiled. “And the boots.”

Sarianna gasped, then pulled him urgently to her for another kiss. He groaned at the sudden, sensual attack. The intensity of his beloved's desire nearly broke his control. The fire in her eyes when he gently broke free all but did him in. The Princess smiled at him while drawing a shaky breath.

“I make a poor valet,” she said breathlessly. “I distract too easily. How does Jorgen manage?”

“I do not hold the same appeal for Jorgen,” Nikulainen chuckled. “At least I pray that is the case. It pleases me to know I distract you as you distract me.”

The bracers came free. Nikulainen bowed his head to put the crown in reach. Sarianna deftly found the pins and removed it. She indulged in scenting his free-flowing hair before the Regent straightened and put the crown aside with the bracers. He carefully felt about the thick waves of her hair for the pins that held her crown. He was longer at the task, but eventually it came free. Somehow he managed to keep from pulling out her hair.

Nikulainen gazed at her, grateful that their time began when the sun's waning rays still filled the room. Sarianna looked glorious in that light.

"I love you in this dress, Sarianna," he breathed. "I would have you in it, but I need your limbs more free."

"I can save the dress for when we celebrate our union next twelvemonth," she smiled saucily.

"Fair enough," he murmured. "Now, how do I remove this lovely garment?"

Sarianna slid off the bed, which once again brought her flush against him. "It pulls over my head."

"Hmmm," Nikulainen murmured, sinking to his knees. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed his face to her middle for a moment. She gently stroked his hair.

"Oh, Niku," she sighed. "Your tenderness moves me to weep."

He gazed up at her with a brilliant smile. "I shall not tarry then, for I do not want you to weep."

He grasped the dress at the hem then gently pulled it up as he rose to his feet. Sarianna bent her legs slightly so he could pull the garment completely away from her outstretched arms. Sarianna was still clothed in a gossamer-thin sheath that was magical in its clingy translucence. She was naked, but somehow not. He stroked her shoulder in fascination.

“What manner of magic is this?” he murmured reaching for her.

She laughed while batting away his nimble fingers. “Nay! I will see you less clothed, Niku.”

“I do not hide anything nearly as delightful as this before me,” he whispered.

Her eyes flashed. “But you do, milord. You hide flawless skin that could be bathed in the light of a golden sunset from these eyes. I have longed for such a sight.”

“I am here to serve,” he replied softly, taking a step back.

Nikulainen unlaced the tunic then pulled it over his head. There was a similar gossamer undershirt. Sarianna petted it briefly before he removed it. Her eyes danced with warm light as she looked upon him. She ran a gentle hand along his collarbone. Then she took him by his arms, steering him toward the bed.

“I will remove your boots,” she said simply as she gently pushed him onto the bed. The Princess ran her hands along his thighs as she knelt before him. “Your leggings feel so soft. How do they feel to you?”

“Soft... but the heat of the fabric under your hand singes my flesh,” he said softly.

“I will not have you in flames before you have had me,” she replied. “I shall not tarry.”

She sank on her heels, then took off the boots one at a time. Then she rose up onto her knee once again. "Stand so I may remove your leggings."

"Sarianna..." he moaned. "You test me sorely."

"I will see your beauty and savor it," she replied huskily. "This is my wish."

Nikulainen rose slowly, taking a deep breath to calm himself. Sarianna quickly untied the laces, then slid the garment over his hips. She was careful in pulling the clingy fabric over his hardness. Nikulainen sighed in relief as his constrained erection was released into the cool air of the room. Sarianna gracefully eased back onto her heels and helped him pull each foot out of the leggings. Then she looked at him for a long moment. The warmth and desire shimmering in the deep blue eyes nearly undid him.

"Sarianna, have mercy on me," he implored her. "Let me do as I will."

The Princess sighed, then held up her hand for him to help her up. Sarianna did not resist as he lifted her onto the center of the bed. The light loved her skin and her hair making her even more beautiful than her incredible norm. He loved the light in her eyes.

"You are golden and brilliantly beautiful like a myth or a legend," she whispered.

"I am flesh and blood," he said lowly. "Flesh that hungers and blood that burns."

Nikulainen took her lips roughly this time as he pressed his body against hers. Her gasp melted into a moan as her body arched into his. This time, he was intent on indulging his senses. One hand sank into Sarianna's soft, thick hair to imprison her head. The other hand was splayed along her side. The Princess had courted his passion, so he unleashed it through that long, deep kiss.

She was breathless when he tore his lips away to map her sweet flesh with his tongue. He wrung more moans from her as his mouth and tongue traveled over her gossamer-covered skin. The sweetness of her skin was even more delightful for having to chase it beneath the sheer undergarment.

“Niku... please,” Sarianna gasped, trying to move against him.

“Patience, Love,” Nikulainen purred, laving at the hollow of her throat. “I have waited too long to have you thus.”

There were more sweet sounds as he toyed with her ears, then deeply scented her hair. She gasped at being gently bitten at the curve of her shoulder. Nikulainen held her still, for he would not be distracted from having his fill of her. This grew more challenging as he worked his way down the luscious length of her body. As he suckled at each nipple in turn, Sarianna arched toward him. Those delicate peaks were very sensitive. One night he had vowed to bring her to the point of climax toying only with them. That night, he had another goal. With a final suck, he released her breasts, moving lower.

Nikulainen was reluctant to remove the tantalizing undergarment, but it kept him from his goal. He took it by the hem, and with Sarianna’s aid, moving her body as he needed her to, it was pulled over her head and tossed to the floor with the rest of their clothing. He gazed at her in the last of the sunlight. She was breathing heavily and staring at him with more hunger than he had ever seen in her eyes. There was the same need in his eyes, Nikulainen was certain, as he gently nudged her thighs apart.

Those long, shapely legs did not escape his attention. Delightful discoveries awaited him along those limbs. Sarianna was a little ticklish behind her knees. A tongue along her inner thighs made her gasp. Nikulainen gently bit her there as well, causing her to gasp. How he loved the sounds she made under his attentions. He wanted to hear her become undone before taking her. It was time to surrender to the lure of his bride's sweetness. Nikulainen settled between her thighs to nuzzle the downy hair. Then he started tonguing her there.

Music could not have sounded sweeter to his ears. Sarianna's gasps and sighs and moans were delicious. They struck a cord in him that stoked his own hunger to the very edge of control. The Princess would not have believed, but he did not linger over that delightful task. He used all of his skill and knowledge to push her over the brink. When he felt the shuddering deep within her and heard his name gasped from her lips, Nikulainen knew it was time.

Nikulainen moved to hover over Sarianna's trembling body. She was beautiful in the throes of passion. It was no longer possible for him to resist her. His own hands trembled as he spread her thighs further apart, then positioned the tip of his shaft at her warm and throbbing opening. Sarianna stilled then. She watched him with wide eyes, panting from the waves of pleasure still apparent in their affect on her. At her slight nod, he pushed his length in her in one smooth movement. The force breached her barrier easily, but still caused a gasp in pain.

"Forgive me," Nikulainen gasped. "That is why I had to take care..."

How he could speak, the Regent was not sure. Never in his life had he felt such exquisite, tight heat hold him. It was all he could do to keep from thrusting within her.

“Tell me when to move,” he ground out.

Sarianna’s gaze was no longer pained. Her eyes were filled with wonder and returning passion.

“Kiss me, please,” she moaned.

Nikulainen eased his body onto Sarianna’s, fully aware that her warm skin and taut nipples would cause him further torment. But that hungry kiss was worth anything he had to endure. She devoured his mouth while those silken limbs wound around him. One hand anchored in his hair while the other stroked his back languidly. The Princess held him captive with that kiss, even as her body held him deep inside. Then she moved against him. Her hips shifted against his. The hand on his back pressed him down. Nikulainen groaned loudly, then started to move.

Thrusting into Sarianna was paradise. They fell into a lazy rhythm while endlessly kissing. The Princess continuously caressed him, moving her hands along his back and through his hair. He would not have known there had been pain by the way she moved and the sounds she made. Every thrust was rewarded with a gasp or a moan. Soon she was clutching at him, urging him to go faster and deeper. Nikulainen growled as his control finally lapsed. His thrusts grew more forceful. His kiss grew more demanding. And his Princess met his every demand until he felt her release coming in powerful waves, wringing his own release from him. The last thing Nikulainen remembered was trying not to collapse onto Sarianna, but her arms remained wrapped around him.

Trembling limbs could no longer hold him, thus he came to rest his head against her shoulder.

"I believe I was supposed to be the one to be doing the claiming this night," Nikulainen sighed.

Sarianna laughed softly. She gently stroked the damp hair from the side of his face. "You have taken and taken well, Beloved. Am I correct in the belief our future couplings will grow even more pleasing?"

"Aye," he murmured into her sweet, damp skin. "Your body will grow accustomed to me. There will be no more pain."

"'T'was not so much pain," she murmured. "What there was causes no complaint. It was well worth any discomfort."

"When my bones take form, I will clean us a little, then light the fire," he said.

"Hmmm... there will be no end of clucking from Hanna and Jorgen about the room and lighting our own fires," Sarianna said. There was mirth in her voice.

Nikulainen somehow found a way to ease himself up and away from the warm haven of his lady. He even managed to sit up without trembling. "I have found that if there is not something for Jorgen to complain about, he is not truly happy."

"'Tis the same for Hanna," Sarianna laughed. "She will be very happy tomorrow."

The Regent was very surprised that his legs were steady. "Should I light candles as well?"

"Nay. Sleep is not far from claiming me," she said. "Unless you want them."

"I am not far from slumber," he replied.

Nikulainen completed his tasks without covering himself. He could feel her eyes upon him. Amazingly, his body began to stir.

"How quickly does a man recover?" Came a merry question from the bed.

"That matters not, Beloved," he replied, returning to the bed with a basin of water and some cloths. "My member may be always willing, but you have drained me."

Before setting about his last and most pleasurable task, Nikulainen took a moment to gaze upon his Princess. She was propped up on her elbows. Her hair was tumbling past her shoulders in attractive disarray. Those sweet, hungry lips were rosy from kisses, and her eyes were still dark and dazed. His fatigue was slipping away.

"Even sated, you manage to drive me mad," he murmured.

With the gentlest hands, he cleansed away the traces of their passion as his bride settled. Her eyes grew heavy-lidded. She was nearly asleep by the time he cleaned himself, then pulled her into his arms beneath the blankets.

"I love you," she murmured.

Nikulainen sighed, holding her closer. "I love you."

Sarianna woke to a room that was dark save for the fire in the hearth. She could tell by the position of the moon that it was not yet midnight. Nikulainen still held her alongside his body. Her head rested on his shoulder with one leg thrown over his. His arms were wrapped snugly around her. Though they had been together in bed for

days learning one another, Sarianna discovered she felt very different in his arms upon waking.

"I understand what those poems and stories mean," she said quietly, knowing Nikulainen had awakened. "You have been inside me. I am yours."

"You are mine," he murmured. "And I am yours. You have given me a singular and precious gift. You have bound me to you forever with that act, though I would have remained by your side without it."

Sarianna shuddered at the thought of what Prince Armas and Prince Rowsdower were planning to do against her will. Either one was willing to rip her asunder and invade her body and sentences her to a lifetime of such intrusion.

"Do not think of what might have been," Nikulainen whispered. "No one can touch you now lest they want to feel my arrow or my sword."

"Do you now know what I think?" she asked in wonder.

"Nay, but I do feel your fear," he replied. He seemed surprised by that. "And somehow I knew the matter of it. I have never known such a thing with another."

Sarianna gently broke free of his embrace to hover over him. He looked so beautiful in the moonlight. Though she had seen his sated face before, but this was different. There was a serenity within him. It was as though the restlessness of youth had been stilled. She still saw the vibrancy and humor that was his spirit, but all doubt and uncertainty was gone.

"More magic from the Forest People?" she wondered.

"I do not know," he replied. "There is much I will learn from my grandfather."

Nikulainen reached up to gently caress Sarianna's cheek. "There is something different about you as well."

"I do not know if I like that you can know what I am feeling," Sarianna said ruefully.

"You seem to know me well enough," he smiled. "I would wager you know what I'm about this very moment."

"Food, milord?"

Nikulainen smiled. "There is certainly hunger. We can satisfy that one first. Shall we eat by the fire?"

"Yes," she replied.

"I will light the candles," he said.

It was in her mind to ask her Prince to fetch her robe, then she noticed as golden light filled the room that Hanna had been very busy. Her robe was draped on a chair near the fire. The other gifts for Nikulainen were piled next to the chair. There were more gifts piled next to the opposite chair.

"Put on your robe, Niku," she said pulling on her own.

"Have you tired of seeing my nakedness?" he smiled.

"Nay. The room is chilled," she replied. "I want you healthy, even if you never fall ill."

"Very well. So long as I am naked for you later."

"Have no fear about that, fair Prince."

She settled on the thick fur leaning on the chair where her gifts were piled. Nikulainen pulled on his robe, then placed the tray of food between them while she

took the pitcher of wine off the table along with a pair of goblets. At first she thought there was too much food left for them. But it took only a bite or two to remind Sarianna she was hungry. Nikulainen was famished.

“Are you very tender, Love?” he asked after a while.

Sarianna tilted her head at him. So he could not see everything in her mind. “I am a little tender, but not unduly.”

She found herself falling into Nikulainen’s gaze. Her cheeks flamed, making him focus on her intently before he smiled.

“You want me still. How will you have me?” he asked quietly.

“Eat,” she replied with a smile of her own. “You will have to show some patience now.”

They ate in comfortable silence for a while. Nikulainen watched the fire, but Sarianna knew his mind was far from that room. His face was serene, but his eyes were vivid. A lot was going on in his mind.

“How long is the ride to Ritvala?” she asked quietly.

Nikulainen was surprised by the question. “And you think you do not know my mind. It is a five-day ride without rest. The roads are well traveled, though I cannot speak of their safety now.”

“I am going with you, my Love,” Sarianna stated firmly. Her voice remained soft, but her intent was clear. “Do not make me follow you, for then I will not be safe.”

"Sarianna, do not say such things," he said solemnly. "I will not leave you. I promised. Though I do wish you did not have to face this. I do not know what we will find."

"That is all the more reason for me to be with you. I am to share your burdens as you share mine," she said.

"Our bond is so new," he sighed. "I lament the brief time we have to strengthen it. We may have no time tomorrow."

"I know. None of this was as we would have liked," she agreed. "Thus we should savor this time."

Nikulainen managed a smile. "You are right, of course. We have satisfied our hunger for food. What else shall we savor?"

His expression was innocent. Sarianna, however, saw the glint in his eyes. "I now wish my curiosity sated. What are those parcels by the chair?"

"Again, Milady surprises me," he smiled. "These are my gifts to you on our wedding day."

Nikulainen took the tray away, then placed the parcels between them. The sizes intrigued the Princess. He gave her the smallest one first. It was a velvet sack with a silken cord holding it closed.

"It is my talisman. It is called the tuilemiire or morning jewel," he said as she gently pulled out the gem. It was a brilliant, amber-colored stone nestled in an intricate knot of golden threads on a fine gold chain. She held it up in awe of the jewel's beauty and of the fine chain that held it.

"It is lovely, Niku," she breathed. "But why have I not seen it before now?"

"I had it sent to the royal jewelers the morning after you told me of your choice," he said. "I wanted it to have a chain fashioned for you with great care."

"Put it on me, please," she murmured, holding up her heavy hair.

Nikulainen complied, deftly fastening the delicate clasp at the back of her neck, then moving around to see how the talisman looked on her. It settled just above the swell of her breasts. If his smile was any indication, he liked the way it looked. The Princess smiled almost shyly at him. Her reward was a sweet, tender kiss.

"Time for another gift," he said softly.

The next parcel was larger. Sarianna was quite surprised to find it contained her own bracers and boots. They were a deep brown, soft leather with the symbol of her realm etched into the bracers. The boots were flat and much like the ones the Regent favored. Instead of responding to her bemused gaze, he handed her another package. This contained a soft leather jerkin and matching brown leggings all fashioned for her size.

"I know you were not bred to be a warrior," he said. "But I also know you will often want to ride with me when I go about my duties. You should be prepared. The females in my mother's kingdom wear garments like these. My mother still does."

Sarianna fingered the beautifully fashioned pieces in wonder. "I think these are by far the most thoughtful gifts I have ever received. And they are beautiful. All that is missing is the sword."

Another parcel was pressed into her hands. Inside was a beautiful sword and sheath made for a woman her size. A matching knife and hilt came with it, along with a belt to hold them.

“Thora will have to send for her healer,” Sarianna said dryly. “Neuvoja may never survive the scandal.”

Nikulainen looked concerned. “You are learning how to use them well.”

The Princess laughed merrily. “That will not make them feel any better. Though why they would worry, I don’t know. I have my husband after all.”

“And he wants you to know how to defend yourself. A heavy jug may not always be at hand,” he replied. “Do you really like them?”

Sarianna kissed him soundly on his parted lips. “I adore them. And now, I have more gifts for you.”

“You have given me so much this day, beloved,” he breathed.

“It is my pleasure and for yours as well.”

She handed him a velvet sack with a drawstring cord. Inside he found the comb and brush set. That brought a smile to his lips. He tried them in turn before returning them to the sack.

“They are very fine, Sarianna,” he said. “I will keep them with me.”

The second parcel was smaller. Inside the silk pouch was a short necklace made of thick, smooth gold links. At its center was a golden rectangle with a symbol engraved in it.

"The symbol is my name in the ancient tongue," Sarianna said. "When I fasten the clasp, it will form a link that cannot be opened without destroying the necklace."

"Thus, I wear your mark forever," he said quietly.

"Unless it is torn from you," she said.

"Only if I breathe no more," he whispered, moving his hair to one side. "I will wear it now."

Sarianna moved behind her Prince. She kissed the back of his neck before smoothing the necklace into position. "Does it chafe in any way?"

Nikulainen turned his head from side to side as she held the necklace in place. "Nay, it is very smooth on my skin."

Very carefully, Sarianna fastened the clasp, then pushed the lever until it snapped off. Then she wrapped her arms around him and kissed the side of his neck above the chain. The Prince leaned back against her.

"I sorely wish we had more time to be alone like this," Nikulainen murmured wistfully. "I feel our whole relationship has been forged in the heat of battle."

"Aye, but we will be stronger for it," she said. "Open this last gift."

Her Prince was surprised at the weight of the last parcel. He opened it with great curiosity. Inside the cloth wrapping were four soft leather manacles. They fastened with a buckle and each had a fine silver chain attached to it. The chains were strong but not unbreakable.

"You would bind me, but only so long as I agree," he said.

"You must always submit of your own will," she said against his hair. "And if we were in danger ever, you must be able to get free."

"Ah, even when your mind is on pleasure, you are logical and wise," he chuckled. "Shall we use them now? You have yet to claim me."

"Hmmm, that is true. Take off the robe, Niku. Then get on the bed."

Sarianna marveled at how such an innocent face could affect such a naughty expression. Those legions who thought him some pure and untouchable being would be appalled at the shameless way he dropped the robe, then spread himself sensually over the bed.

Sarianna chuckled softly as she approached him. "You do not put up much of a fight."

He offered her an arm with a smile. "I do not wish to fight you, my Love."

"Have you had many occasions to fight?" she asked as she buckled him into the first manacle.

Nikulainen watched the Princess fasten the chain to the bed frame. "Some women suppose that if a man can be sufficiently aroused, she can get even a reluctant man to couple with her. There is also a belief that I would rather be ravished than harm a woman who is making advances."

"Really? Are you sure you want me armed in Lanakae Fortress?" she demanded. "How many have had you?"

He gasped as she jerked a leg manacle to the frame. "No one takes me against my will."

"You fought these women?"

"For the most part, they could not catch me," he replied. "Seldom can such women conceal their intent. For those who laid hands on me, I removed them as gently as I could. If they were harmed, it is because they would not let go."

There was a shadow in Nikulainen's eyes from some remembered unpleasantness. Sarianna could not have that on their wedding night. She finished chaining him to the bed, then allowed her robe to drop to the floor. The worry in his eyes diminished, then turned to fire.

"No one will dare touch what is mine," she whispered fiercely. Then she was kissing him deeply and urgently, drawing a loud moan from him at her intensity. He struggled against the manacles, wanting to put his hands on her. "Patience, Beloved."

Sarianna indulged in long, languid kisses. There were too many times in the last several days that Nikulainen had looked like a man who wanted a kiss. Often, she desperately needed his kiss. Thus she kissed him. Then, she caressed his beautiful skin from head to toe, first with slowly moving hands, then with her hair and then with her hardened nipples. When she returned to his lips, her Prince was panting for breath and pleading for release. She kissed him into silence.

"Tell me how to have you in me thus," she demanded softly.

Nikulainen struggled to think. He looked confused by her demand. "With one hand, find the opening between your legs. The outside will be tender and there will be some wetness..."

Sarianna leaned back, widening her thighs. Under his fevered and unblinking gaze, she did as he bid her. The lips surrounding the opening were tender, but there was pleasure in touching them. The hesitant caress sent a jolt deep within her. Eagerly, she pushed a finger inside. It was very warm and wet there. Her shy intrusion made her hunger for the fullness of her Prince's rigid shaft.

"Are you very wet, Sarianna?" he whispered hoarsely. "It must be so to ease passage."

"I am very wet, Niku. I grow wetter as we speak," she said haltingly.

Nikulainen had to take many long deep breaths before he could speak. "Move your opening over... the tip... then lower yourself onto me."

They both gasped as her body slowly engulfed his hardness. It seemed that she did not breathe until the downy hair at the root of his shaft reached her skin. They panted in unison for long moments before Nikulainen arched against her.

"Sarianna... please... move..." he pleaded.

She moaned loudly, loving the feel of his vital life force deep within her body. Somehow she heard his cries through the pulse pounding in her ears. It took a moment to recall the motion of his strong thrusts earlier, but she did. Then Sarianna moved. Her undulations were slow at first, moving her sheath over his shaft. When he caught his breath, Nikulainen started matching her moves with ever quickening thrusts upward.

Again, the hunger built. Faster and sharper movements both sated and heightened the need. And all the while as they moved, he watched her. His eyes burned her face and her breasts as she moved sensually before him. The heat of his gaze stoked her

higher. And then she felt the waves of intense pleasure ripple from deep within her outward. Sarianna felt herself close tightly around the man within her. Nikulainen cried out her name. The tone was moving in its desperation and deep feeling. Then she felt him spend his seed. The burst was hotter than her own fevered flesh. And then the pleasure hit a zenith of blinding heat, robbing her of breath and strength.

It was long moments lying against his damp chest trying to breathe before Sarianna could muster the will to unbuckle one of the wrist manacles. Her awareness waned then. The fatigue of the day and the intensity of their coupling took all she had. Only dimly was she aware of Nikulainen freeing himself. He cleaned her again before removing the manacles from the bed and putting them away. Then he had her drink cool water before the candles were extinguished. At last, Nikulainen was holding her beneath the blankets under the moonlight. She fell deeply asleep.

Chapter Eighteen

Something was very wrong. A loud howling voice in Nikulainen's mind shook him into sudden wakefulness. A muffled commotion was growing outside his chambers. In the next instant, he had pushed Sarianna off the far side of the bed, and urged her to pick up her robe. Fortunately, his sudden movement woke her and she knew how to quickly respond to his wordless commands. The bow was in his hand in the next second. Before the door could open, three arrows had pierced it. Sarianna was huddling behind Nikulainen, though she has managed to wrap his robe around his hips.

"Regent! Regent! It is I, Prefect Amandil!" Came a cry just before the fourth arrow hit the door.

The Regent stilled but did not put down his bow. "Nikerym! Answer me true!"

"Yes, Regent. It is he. All is well," came the guard's reply from beyond the door.

"Enter then," Nikulainen barked. He pulled on the robe and tied it, but kept Sarianna behind him.

The Prefect entered hesitantly. Behind him was Prince Rowsdower. The Princess stilled his arm before the bow could be raised again. In the hallway, he could hear Julin's laughter.

“Did I not tell you to announce yourselves?” his brother chuckled. “He is off his game this morn. I was certain he would hit one of you. My brother does not like to be startled from sleep.”

The Prefect was beside himself. Nikulainen could tell the man wanted to shout at him for the severe fright, but was in no position to do so. Rowsdower was not so silent.

“The law is the law when a challenge is made,” he said while still cowering behind the elderly cleric. “No warning is to be given.”

“So it was your plan to see my bride naked on her wedding bed?” Nikulainen asked in a low, dangerous voice.

The idiot Prince had enough sense to blanch at the Regent’s tone. Thora had made her way into the room by then. She fixed the intruding royal with a stare that may have made him wish for the arrow.

“There will be no shaming of milady while I draw breath!” she snapped. “You had no right barging in here like that after the room had been searched and sealed. The King shall hear of this, mark my words. Now, do your business and be gone with you both. Highness, if you would come and sit by the fire. I have your servants bringing some food and tea.”

Sarianna was gently urging Nikulainen away from the bed. They backed away from the others in the room to the chairs by the fire. The Princess sat, but the Regent stood close by watching everyone warily. He knew how beautiful his bride looked in the morning light still affected by their shared passion and hated anyone else seeing her

that way. He could feel her sudden fear and turmoil, and it angered him. Still, she held his hand as if to keep him from some violent action.

Matters were not helped when Armas entered the room. Sarianna refused to shrink from view, but Nikulainen could feel how uncomfortable this made her. Julin's presence helped.

He looked at the four arrows and laughed heartily. "Your speed has not diminished, brother."

"If you knew, why did you not say he might strike out?" Rowsdower asked in irritation.

"You court your own end, dear Prince. You should have marked that neither of Niku's brothers approached the door," Julin said. "I'm surprised your new-found friend failed to mention it."

Julin was staring at Armas when he made that remark. Nikulainen frowned at them.

"Mind your tongue, Brother," Armas snapped. "I am here to see to Father's interests. Why are you here?"

"I was hoping for an execution or two," he replied tersely.

"Enough!" Rowsdower snapped. "Prefect, what say you?"

All eyes turned to the bed where the sheets showed the evidence of the bride's gift to her Prince. The Prefect was even examining the cloths Nikulainen used to clean them after their coupling.

"All is as it should be. The Princess was a virgin. The union is true," he said with pleasure.

"There still could have been some treachery," Rowsdower insisted.

"The room was sealed," the Prefect said icily. "I saw it done with my own eyes as did you. No one save this couple entered, and they entered with only their wedding attire. I followed them here. They did not even allow their servants to cross the threshold."

"That is very plain to see," Thora quipped taking in the mess about the room.

"And finally, those who would put evidence on the bed never think about the cleansing cloths. They are always pristine in fraudulent circumstances. These were not," the Prefect said. It was clear that was all he would say. "Thus, I repeat. The union is true. Be warned. Henceforth, any who interfere with this bond will be in violation of the laws of the Hanyanoore and subject to severe penalty. Good day."

"That is it, then," Thora said. "Everyone out this minute. And do not think this will be the last word said. Forgive us, Highnesses."

"Thank you, Thora," Sarianna said in a small voice. "Thank you, Julin."

Julin bowed. "My sister. Niku."

"Thank you, Brother," Niku said with a bow.

Then they were gone. And suddenly Nikulainen realized that Sarianna was crying. He was on his knees in an instant brushing the tears from her cheeks.

"They took our morning from us," she whispered. "I have wanted to have you in the morning for the longest time. And they examined... and discussed things you used for such intimate care of me."

She shuddered violently. Nikulainen pulled her from the chair, then seated himself with her in his lap. The Princess pressed her damp face against his neck and clutched him tightly.

"I know, Beloved," he murmured. "'Tis not fair to wield great power and still not be free in our bedroom, but our duty in this is done. Never again shall I allow our sanctuary to be breached. I promise."

Sarianna stopped trembling, but her hold on him did not lessen. They were still in that chair when Jorgen and Hanna entered. Whatever they were planning on saying about the room withered when they found the couple huddled in the chair by the fire.

"Jorgen, please feed the fire," Nikulainen said quietly.

The valet put the tray of food on the table, then tended to the fire. Hanna entered the room then. She paused a moment to look at her Lady before setting the pitcher of warmed juice on the table.

"Begging your pardon, Regent," Hanna asked timidly. "Is the Princess well?"

"I am, Hanna" Sarianna replied looking up. "There was some unpleasantness with the challenge."

"I could tell that by the arrows in the door," she replied dryly.

That coaxed a small smile from the Princess. Nikulainen gave the maidservant a small nod. At that, she turned and really looked at the room.

"Thora's gone on a tear, and who knows where it will end," she continued in dismay. "I thought it was about the challenge, but it could be about this room. Highnesses, do you even know what became of your crowns?"

Nikulainen looked up at Sarianna, who mirrored his own puzzlement. They both looked back at Hanna.

"We had them when we came in the room," Sarianna said with a frown. "They must be here somewhere."

"Honestly," Hanna muttered. "Jorgen, help me put these things on the bed. You two should eat something. There is talk of audiences this morn."

Sarianna relaxed as Hanna prattled on in search of the elusive crowns. She tilted her Prince's face up to kiss him gently. Then she left his lap to sit across from him. Nikulainen missed holding her, but she was smiling and pouring the juice. They broke their fast amicably amidst the cleanup and fussing.

Sarianna slid into the bath with a groan. Her limbs felt taxed and the tenderness in her nether region was amplified with the heat of the water. Hanna eased her back to rest completely submerged in the tub. The maidservant insisted that she have the bath alone despite Nikulainen's persuasive entreaties to join him in his. She had called the waters healing and necessary after their night together. It was only when she promised that the bath would make her all the more ready to receive him later that the Princess and the Regent agreed.

"Did you enjoy the feast, Hanna?" Sarianna asked after long moments of soaking.

"I did indeed," she replied with a smile. "We danced until very late. My legs may never be the same."

"I am glad. And what of Jorgen?"

"He is very sweet, milady," she replied. "But so very shy. I do not know when he may say anything about me personally. He was fun to dance with though. How was your night?"

"Hanna! You know I cannot say," Sarianna replied. "I will never forget it though. I am very happy."

"I am so relieved, Highness. When I saw you this morn, I thought you were ill-used."

"I was," Sarianna replied angrily. "Though not by the Regent. Never by him."

Hanna let out an impatient sigh. "I do not understand what madness is in their minds. Excuse me if I speak out of turn. How could they witness such a beautiful wedding and not see that you were meant only for the Regent? Everyone was moved by your love for each other."

"They care not about love. All they crave is power," she muttered. "Let us give them no more of our thoughts. I need you to prepare my journey to Ritvala."

"You go to Ritvala? When? Why?"

Sarianna sighed. "I am sorry to turn everything on end, dear Hanna. You have been through so much this week. But I must go with the Regent to avert a conflict between Ritvala and the Suurimetsa."

"You go to face the Forest People?"

"Do not fear so, Hanna. Niku goes to face his grandfather and fix a terrible mistake," Sarianna said in a calm voice. "I do not wish to be parted from him."

Hanna nodded at that. She seemed to be thinking of what to say next. "Highness, I will go with you."

"That is not necessary, Hanna. We will ride hard to Lanakae Fortress," the Princess said. "There will be maidservants to tend me there."

"Indeed, and all of them after your husband," Hanna practically spat. "Jorgen has told me about those bold articles. I will not have them near you or him."

Sarianna paused in thought. She did not look forward to coping with those women, especially when the journey was already steeped in peril.

"Are you sure this does not have anything to do with Jorgen?"

"Milady, you are a Princess of a powerful kingdom and the heir to the throne. You should not visit the halls of your in-laws unattended," Hanna countered sternly.

The Princess looked at her maid sideways. She was manipulating to get her way for sure, but she was also correct. Thora would be beside herself at the thought of her Princess riding to another kingdom without at least one maidservant. Neuvoja would likely agree.

"Very well, Hanna," she sighed. "But do not complain to me about your backside after all that riding."

Her maidservant agreed happily. Sarianna was glad she consented. Though she knew a warm welcome awaited her in Ritvala, it was still a comfort to have someone familiar serving her.

The bath was soothing and healing. Much of the soreness in her body had abated when she finished. By the time Sarianna was dressed, she had almost forgotten the

embarrassment of that morning. Then the guard knocked on the door to inform her King Vauraus awaited the royal couple.

Nikulainen received the same message as he finished dressing. A moment later, there was another knock on the door. He was surprised when Magnus entered the room as Jorgen discreetly departed. The King took in his son quietly. His expression was muted. It seemed to the Prince that he was both happy and sad. Before he could ask what brought his father there, Sarianna was in the room. She was surprised, but pleased to see the King.

"Good morning, Great King," she said warmly. Then she was embracing Magnus and gracing him with a kiss on the cheek.

Nikulainen was graced with a sweet, but brief kiss on the lips and a serene smile, which he returned before again addressing his father.

"I see between you two what came to be between me and my Lady Reija," he said reverently. "Can you hear one another when you do not speak?"

Nikulainen started, and Sarianna gaped at Magnus. "Yes, Father. I do hear her when the feelings are strong."

"That voice will grow stronger over time," Magnus said. "That bond is how I can bear to be away from your mother, Niku. She is always with me."

"There is much you have not told me regarding the Forest People," Nikulainen said quietly. "Why?"

Magnus sighed. He seemed very tired. "Lady Reija and I were unsure of how much of your blood would be Suurimetsa. Why tell you of traits that you might not possess? Later, when it was clear you had more of your mother's blood than mine, I worried about your acceptance among the people. Sometimes magical beings can be frightening to the ignorant. I was reluctant to allow you to learn the language, but I could not refuse your mother."

Nikulainen was troubled at his father's behavior and somewhat resentful of what it probably had cost him of himself, but the Great King had paid for his misdeeds. The Prince knew his father was suffering much guilt and sorrow.

"Something else brings you to our chambers," Nikulainen said. "You would not have us keep King Vauraus waiting."

"You read me well, my son. And I have sent word to the King that I am speaking to you both," he said. "I come about Armas and his presence at the challenge this morn. I must apologize for his behavior."

"Nay, father! He made his own choice in this."

"He made a choice based on my own folly," Magnus said. "He took my words to heart as I trained him to do in all things and thought of you and your mother as hostage, not kin. I am stricken that he could not open his proud heart and embrace you as a brother the way Julin did."

"For Armas, placing Niku in contention for marriage on equal terms with him was a grave insult," Sarianna murmured. "To him, it would be like making Jorgen a Prince. He will never accept being given this chance. Thus, he will never accept the marriage."

"I cannot fathom how he could grow up with Niku and see my union with Lady Reija and not know the place they have in my heart," Magnus sighed. "I was foolish not to have married the Lady. This is more than apparent. But what sort of man can rule by the word of law and know nothing of peoples' hearts?"

"This is not your failing, Father," Nikulainen said gently. "I believe Armas' rigid ways would not allow him to accept even Julin advancing before him."

"I agree," Sarianna said. "He has chosen to see the world the way he does. There is naught that could have prevented his actions save himself."

"I have come to advise you to not have him in this citadel again unless it is as a visiting ruler and you have no choice," Magnus said sadly. "He seeks to break your union. It is best to cut him off, brother or not."

"I will miss him," the Prince said. "But I must agree. I shall take leave of him when we depart from Ritvala."

"He will not be at Lanakae Fortress when you arrive," Magnus said. "He has refused to return with us. He refuses to face the Suurimetsa to keep Lady Reija. He sees our union as the source of his strife."

"Father..." Nikulainen said. His heart was in turmoil.

Magnus smiled a bit sadly. "It was his choice. He believes because he is to rule, the world must bend to him. He will learn that to rule, he must often be the one to bend. And he will learn what life is like without support he can trust completely."

"Do you banish him?" Nikulainen asked in trepidation.

"Nay. But he will have to earn a place at my side once more," Magnus said. "I strongly advise you set the same standard."

It was difficult, but the Prince agreed. "I will, Sire."

"How is your alliance with King Vaurus?" Sarianna asked.

"Your father is one of the wisest men I know," Magnus replied. "He understands the follies of over-indulged children as well as he does the treachery of rival monarchs. Our alliance and our friendship remain strong. You should go to him now. I am off to speak to the rulers about the Suurimetsa and what will happen next with them."

"Good fortune, Father."

Nikulainen embraced his sire with heartfelt warmth, and it was returned in kind. Then he was gone. It was time to face Taraasta and her son.

Sarianna was shaken by the encounter between Magnus and Nikulainen. It filled her with sorrow that the family had been broken in her hall. She walked silently beside her husband just ahead of their guard, to the King's receiving room, feeling grief overcoming her.

"Sarianna, do not blame yourself in any fashion," Nikulainen whispered close to her ear. "This would have come whether or not you came into my life. It is the way Armas chose to look at our lives. Please, do not regret meeting me."

"Never, beloved," she replied, chancing a glance at him. "That is why I feel badly. I cannot regret finding you no matter the cost."

Nikulainen stopped her to pull her against him and kiss her thoroughly. The shadow crossing her heart lifted and was replaced by the intense closeness she had felt when he was inside her. Only then did he let her go. His gaze was very warm and beguiling.

"That is better," he smiled. "Come."

King Vauraus was seated on his throne with Neuvoja standing beside him. The couple came before him. Sarianna curtsied before moving to embrace her father, then kiss him on his cheek. The King held her at arms length to look at her. He smiled in satisfaction.

"My daughter is well and happy," he said.

"Yes, Sire. I am very well and very happy," she said with a smile.

"Greetings, my Son," the King said. "I hope all is well with you and your sire."

"It is, Great King," Nikulainen replied.

"Seat yourselves at my right, and we shall be about the matter at hand," Vauraus said, nodding at Neuvoja.

By the time they were settled in the chairs designated for their official rank, the doors to the hall were opening. Queen Taraasta swept into the room with Prince Rowsdower. Captain Rajotin and two of his men were behind them. As they greeted the King, Sarianna could not help her reaction. She felt angry all over again. It was as though the challenge had just occurred. She also felt the King's eyes upon her once again before he turned to the guests before him.

"Forgive me, Great King, but Magnus is making an announcement of great import," Taraasta said.

"I shall reveal his announcement myself. I have a matter of grave import to discuss," Vauraus replied in great rumble. "My daughter has been caused great distress on a day that should have been filled only with joy."

"It was a duly sanctioned challenge, Great King," the Queen countered. "And not without foundation. They had spent a great deal of time alone in the days before the wedding, and they are both young and very comely."

"I do not take issue with the challenge, Highness. I take grave issue with Prince Rowsdower's insistence on entering the couple's chambers before dawn and without the Prefect," the King rumbled angrily. "He nearly came to blows with the Regent's guards. Then, he questioned the Prefect's judgment even after the evidence was clear. In this matter, I have several witnesses. Neither my daughter nor the Regent have lodged complaint."

"You questioned the Prefect?" Taraasta demanded.

"He may have been in league with them," Rowsdower said irritably. "It is just not possible that a man could spend all that time with Sarianna and allow her to remain a virgin."

"Fool! The Prefect was from Valtimeri. He has no cause to lie for them!" the Queen snapped. "You must forgive my son's fevered brain. The Princess' beauty has even come between brothers."

"That matter is not of your concern," Vauraus said solemnly. "This is the second time that this young man has insulted my daughter's honor. There will not be opportunity for another."

"What are you saying?" The Queen snapped.

"All treaties and accords between our kingdoms will be honored, but this court will not see Prince Rowsdower in its halls until such time that he can respect Princess Sarianna as the monarch she shall be."

"Great King!" Taraasta exclaimed.

"The court concedes that may mean that we shall not see the face of Taraasta again," Vauraus continued. "Mark now, Magnus is telling the rulers of the known lands of his grave folly in seeking gain through conquest of the Suurimetsa over two scores of years ago. Though the resulting union produced my daughter's beloved husband, there remains a pall between the two lands. Magnus means to face that mistake and the fates willing, correct it without war. The Regent will take a legion from Arinpera to stand in support. Our Kingdoms are united in the interest of peace and an end to treachery."

Taraasta was stunned. Rowsdower's gaze slipped to Neuvoja before he could school his features. The advisor stood tall.

"That is quite an announcement," the Queen said quietly. "For such a docile land, Arinpera is full of surprises. So is Magnus for that matter."

"A new generation will soon be in power. They should not have to cope with the mistakes of their fathers," Vauraus said.

"Is there nothing that Rowsdower can do to make amends to the Princess and the Regent?" Taraasta asked.

"That you are asking and not your son is answer enough," the Elder King replied. "I expect him to be gone before I retire at mid-day."

“Then I will take my leave as well. You do have my apologies, Princess,” Taraasta said rising. “I had hoped that we would be close, especially since you shall be a Queen as well.”

“I had hoped so as well,” Sarianna said quietly. “Farewell.”

The Princess fixed a cold stare at Rowsdower as he rose and left with his mother. It gave her considerable satisfaction that the Queen was very displeased with him. Twice his unchecked wants had thwarted her plans. Though she should have been patient herself. Even if Rowsdower had not been the choice for Regent, Sarianna would have sought her counsel because her father valued it and because she would someday be Queen. Only a Queen would understand that position. Both suffered from their baser instincts. Sarianna wondered what danger they could reap with a more focused will on their side.

Nikulainen looked at her sharply. She knew he heard her and knew what she meant. Both prayed that they were wrong.

Chapter Nineteen

As Nikulainen predicted, there would be no returning to their chambers after meeting with Queen Taraasta and Rowsdower. Vauraus was not ready to release them after the monarchs. Captain Rajotin remained after the guards left with the Queen and her son.

"I will hear your plans for this march to Ritvala," Vauraus said.

"Yes, Sire," Nikulainen replied rising. "Captain Rajotin shall remain with all but the one legion. I will have the farmers from the borders come into the walls of the city for their protection. I will have you and Neuvoja on a continuous guard with no audiences until we return. I will announce that the roads shall be built. That will placate the citizens until then."

After a long moment, the King nodded. "A sound plan. And how will you protect my daughter, whom I know shall accompany you?"

"I will not leave her until she is in reach of Lanakae Fortress' gates," he said. "Then Julin will remain with her until I return. She will be well protected always."

"This I know, but it will still be difficult," the Elder King sighed. "We have not been parted since she was a very young child."

"Oh, Father," Sarianna exclaimed. "Forgive me, but I must..."

"You must be with your heart," he smiled. "There is no need for regret, child. I have known great love. You must be near it always. Just come home to me as soon as you can."

"I promise," she said.

Nikulainen vowed to make sure that promise was kept.

The King left them then. He and Neuvoja went to join Magnus and the other rulers in the dining hall. Sarianna looked at Nikulainen and the captain expectantly.

"We shall see that the horses are readied for the long ride," the Regent said. "We will need to find a suitable mount for Hanna."

"How did you know that?" Sarianna asked.

"You have been worrying over her since we left our chambers," he replied. "Jorgen can look after her. He knows how to pack, and he knows how to keep up in a hard ride."

"Do you think me foolish in bringing her?"

"Nay," he smiled. "I think it will be good for you and Jorgen to have her with us."

"Niku, the Kings shall be engaged until after the mid-day meal. Magnus will not depart until after then," Sarianna said.

"That is true."

"Could we go riding until the time your father departs? We were to be abed until well past now," she continued. "We cannot return to our chambers because Jorgen and Hanna are packing."

Nikulainen gave the matter some thought. "The source of your peril is on the road to the north. Our guards roam the countryside. It would be a most foolhardy plan to attack us now."

"And we could be alone."

He smiled at her. "And we could be alone. Though I would not risk us being as vulnerable as we would like until we were certain the danger passed."

"We could spar," Sarianna suggested. "Or eat or just gaze at the sky."

"All of that sounds appealing. That is what we will do."

They paused in the mayhem that was their chambers to get their weapons. Sarianna hurriedly braided her hair, but didn't bother to change. Hanna looked distressed enough without presenting her with the challenge of putting her Lady in leggings for the first time. Besides, the Prince found he liked the way the sword and knife belt looked on the dress. With the quarterstaff slung across her back, she looked every bit like a woman of the Forest Realm.

Minos was amused. "It was said that it would come to this someday. Everyone thought it would be a lot sooner."

"Pardon me?" Sarianna asked.

"One of the many reasons Thora has given against you spending time with me. Somehow horses lead to sword play," he said drolly. "Apparently, it's husbands that do and in very short order."

Sarianna muttered about everyone having opinions on everything she had ever done while saddling her horse, but she was not upset. He could tell she was very glad to have

some freedom. Kelata and Ajaa were pleased as well when they realized they were headed for the big gates and not the pen. Their canter became more lively, and it was clear they wanted to run.

Nikulainen found he felt very much the same as his mount. As soon as they reached open ground, he glanced at Sarianna with a bright smile, then took off. He did not surprise his lady, as she was right on his heels. They chased each other around the trails near the citadel walls, then slowed to a canter.

"There is a glade nearby I like to visit," Sarianna said. "We are still in view of the guards, but it feels like being alone."

It was a lovely place with a small stream running alongside the clearing. The horses ambled over to it as soon as they dismounted. They were indeed in the line of sight of the guards on the wall, but not so near that they lacked some privacy. Sarianna was spreading their cloaks on the soft grass as he approached with the water skins and the meat, cheese, fruit and bread they had pilfered from the kitchens before leaving.

"This was a fine plan, Beloved," he said softly as they lazily consumed their meal.

She smiled in return. How the sun made her eyes bluer and brought a sheen to her black tresses. He felt like he too should compose a song or a poem in celebration of her loveliness in the beautiful morning sunshine.

"What mischief brings such a smile to your face?" Sarianna asked with a tilt of her head.

"I find myself wishing for my brother's talents with verse," he chuckled. "For I find you incredibly beautiful here."

"You do not find me beautiful elsewhere?" she demanded playfully.

He rolled his eyes. "I find you beautiful everywhere, witch-woman."

Sarianna laughed again, and Nikulainen found he loved the sound. He must make sure there was much mirth in their halls. So lost in thought was the Regent about the future, he had not noticed his bride had closed the distance between them and was gently caressing his face.

"You seem so far away, my Love," she murmured.

"Nay. I am here," he replied, pulling her against him as he rose to his knees. His hands were in that glorious hair, ruining her braid as he devoured her mouth in a deep kiss.

Nikulainen pulled back before their passion overcame them. He smiled at Sarianna and was about to suggest some sparring when pain exploded brilliantly in stars and color in his head. He could hear the Princess gasp, then there was the sound of a ringing slap.

Through the thick, sickening haze in his head, Nikulainen heard a voice. "I have wanted to slap you almost since the moment we met."

Prince Rowsdower! Nikulainen fought to regain his senses, but his head continued to swim in colors. "Pity I cannot do the other things I very much desired, but you are to be a gift to my new-found brother."

He could hear struggles, then another gasp and some fussing from Kelata. She must have been thrown over the horse. That was a relief, but still Nikulainen fought to clear his head and make his body move.

Then someone was moving him. His hands were bound above his head and the rope tied to a nearby tree. Rowsdower was hovering over him sneering.

“As for you, Regent, a thatch of hair will have to do,” he said running his fingers through the Regent’s hair roughly. “But since I cannot have the bride, I will have the groom. You’ve grown even more beautiful than you were as a child. No doubt you are still untouched where it matters most to me.”

Even in his haze, Nikulainen recoiled violently at the words. He was not afraid for himself. What was unbearable was the thought of Sarianna seeing him used, then killed. With all his will, the warrior within was brought to the fore. As the vile Prince set about cutting off his clothes, Nikulainen was coming back to himself. He tried to twist from Rowsdower’s grasp. For that, he was struck soundly.

“Do not fight me, fair Niku. Let your last moments have some pleasure. I see she has collared you,” he said with an oily voice. “You should enjoy this. When I am through, I shall end your life painlessly.”

Rowsdower grabbed his face by the chin and held him still. And then to his horror, that hard mouth was covering his and a slithery tongue was pushing inside his mouth. Nikulainen tried to struggle, but his head was held as if in a vice, and the Prince was using his body weight to hold him still.

“You have a very sweet mouth,” he whispered. “If you please me, I may just keep you for myself. Mayhap your bride will behave if she thinks there is a chance for you to live.”

"No!" Nikulainen snarled, wrenching his head free and nearly unseating Rowsdower.

For that, he was struck once again this time with bruising force. As the wretched Prince continued to slice the clothes from his body, Nikulainen became enraged just thinking about how he must have made Sarianna feel. He too felt desperate and helpless. It was far different for him to have his power taken from him rather than to give it freely. He never felt this way when Sarianna bound him. He had to fight. He could not allow this to happen while his beloved watched. In the next instant something swung in an arc connecting with Rowsdower's head.

"You insult me at every turn!" She exclaimed with pure fury in her voice. "Prince of idiots! You know that one rider would not alarm the guards on the wall, yet you think so little of me that you barely tie me up, then leave me alongside my knife and sword!"

Sarianna gave Rowsdower another whack on the head, causing him to roll from Nikulainen. The Regent was still confused. It sounded as if his love was annoyed at being able to easily escape. She freed him from the rope, then continued to advance on Rowsdower, who was running for his horse.

"Sarianna, halt!" Nikulainen called. He grabbed the horn from his saddle, then sounded the alarm before mounting Ajaa to pursue the Prince. "Go back to the stables. Please, my Love."

His Princess was not pleased, but she picked up their cloaks, then mounted her horse. She was riding hard toward the citadel as Nikulainen went in pursuit of Rowsdower. He knew the guard was coming, but this matter had to be settled by him

that day. The Prince rode well over the rugged terrain, but the warrior was faster. Ajaa lived for this sort of hunt at breakneck speed. The stallion was almost playful when he caught his prey. Nikulainen was not. He leapt from Ajaa's back and took Rowsdower off his mount.

"Get your sword and die with honor," Nikulainen snarled. "For you will die today."

Rowsdower looked like he might resist his generous offer, but when the Regent unsheathed his sword, he thought better of it.

"This does not have to end in bloodshed. I am certain the citadel has a dungeon that will satisfy your sensibilities," he said. "I could be a valuable hostage against some dangerous intrigues."

"You are a poison to my halls! Fight!"

Nikulainen rejoiced that the Prince knew his way with a blade. It was a real fight that boiled his blood and would mean that the kill would not be a cold thing. The struggle lasted long enough for Nikulainen to hear the citadel guards thundering towards them. It was time to stop toying with Rowsdower. The warrior unleashed moves of lightning speed disarming the Prince while delivering the killing blow.

"My Liege! Are you injured?" Captain Rajotin demanded.

"Nay. 'Tis not my blood," Nikulainen muttered while cleaning his blade on Rowsdower's cloak. "Search his packs, then secure the body on his horse. He must be prepared to be sent home."

"Yes, Regent," Rajotin replied, signaling his men to action.

Nikulainen took a moment away from the carnage to calm himself and to clean away the blood. He had to return to Sarianna immediately. The fever in his blood had to pass. He had some minutes before he had to take the ride back. By the time the captain called to him, he was serene once more.

"What have you found?" Nikulainen asked as he returned to the men.

"Black arrows, Regent," Rajotin replied. "The same as the assassins used."

The Regent nodded. "We have some proof at last. Let us return to the citadel. Where was Milady when you left?"

"She was within the walls, Regent."

"Good."

They rode with speed back to Almourol Citadel. Nikulainen had calmed considerably, but he could tell the men viewed him differently than before. The warrior was different from the Prince or the Regent. He was a trained and ruthless killer. That was a side of himself he had hoped to spare Sarianna for a long time. He prayed she could accept that part of him as well.

Sarianna was beside herself. She had brushed down Kelata and selected a horse for Hanna that the Regent had to approve. There was nothing else for her trembling hands to do. So she paced in front of the stables wringing her hands. Even jests from Minos could not ease her mind.

"He will come back to you whole and well, Sister," Julin said quietly as he came toward her. "One attacker is no match for him."

"I know, Julin," she replied. "I fear he may kill a man who cannot put up a fight in his anger."

"He will kill only if he needs to," Julin replied confidently. "He is young, but he is cool-headed."

Sarianna grew thoughtful. "Never fear me."

"Pardon me, Princess?"

"When I first met him, Niku told me not to fear him," she said.

"He was right. Niku has the gentlest soul I have ever found in a man despite his fierceness in battle," Julin said.

Sarianna considered Julin. He was a very fine man, probably overlooked by most between Armas' bluster and Nikulainen's dazzling beauty. She knew with sudden certainty that he would rule Ritvala someday.

"I am sorry your brother is lost to you, Julin," she said placing a hand on his arm. "I pray I hold no blame for that in your thoughts."

"Nay, Sister. His path fell into shadow long ago," Julin replied. "He does not understand the duty that comes with power and that a strong will must be matched with compassion. I have often seen his thoughtlessness and unintended cruelty. Father never could."

"He never liked Niku?"

Julin shook his head. "It was more complicated than that. It is hard for anyone who knows Niku to dislike him. But it was also plain to see the favor he held in Father's eyes. Armas feared that and resented it. There were times when Niku bore the brunt of his feelings. I protected him while he was very young, but as soon as Niku could hold any weapon, he could fend for himself. There was harmony because Niku was a hostage, but Armas could not acknowledge the love between them."

"I am glad he had your love," she smiled.

"And my sword for as long as he requires it," Julin said. "Ah, he returns. And half naked. Well, he's improving..."

Sarianna spared but an instant to frown at her brother-in-law before returning her gaze to Nikulainen. The Regent was naked to the waist with his hair flying in the breeze and his eyes burning intensely. He was fierce and looked dangerous even though he undoubtedly had had time to let his anger cool. He rode to Sarianna and his brother and dismounted.

"Rowsdower is dead," he said flatly. "This attack on us was his idea alone, apparently to put him in better favor with his mother and her new conquest."

"Armas?" Sarianna asked.

"I believe so," Nikulainen replied. "In this, Rowsdower was alone. However, Captain Rajotin found black arrows like the ones the assassins used in his packs."

"The captain and I will tell Magnus what has occurred," Julin said. He looked over his brother ruefully. "Perhaps you should change and join us before we depart."

The Regent managed a smile at his brother before seizing Sarianna to crush her against him. She welcomed the embrace, for until that moment, she had been uncertain that her husband was truly uninjured. He felt good against her despite the scent of blood that still clung to him. She could feel the repressed turmoil within him. There was much they needed to say to one another, but it could not be there.

Sarianna pulled the cloak about him, then pulled him away. "Minos, old friend, tend to Ajaa please."

"Yes, Princess."

"Come, Niku," she said quietly.

Jorgen sighed when he saw his charge. Nikulainen chuckled. "This was not my fault, Jorgen. And it was only my tunic this time. "

Sarianna looked at them with consternation. "Just how often are you without your clothing, Niku?"

"I suppose if I am compared to other Princes, then it is often," Nikulainen admitted with a rueful smile. "But it is usually because of some incident in battle or training that makes it prudent to remove clothing that gets in my way. I never lose them when I wear battle armor."

"I am pleased to hear it," Sarianna muttered.

Jorgen gave the Regent a new tunic, then took out his brush and comb before leaving discreetly. The door had hardly closed when Sarianna was again crushed in her husband's embrace.

"You did not fail me in any way," Sarianna whispered against the sweat-dampened skin along his neck. "Rowsdower was desperate. His plan was insane with patrols everywhere and Magnus' party about to leave the walls. No one can plan on insanity."

Nikulainen had his face buried in her hair, inhaling her scent contentedly. He was settling into his normal self with each breath. When he finally raised his head, it was to kiss Sarianna possessively. The Princess moaned into his demanding mouth, feeling her knees weaken. It felt like he was going to take her, but she knew there was no time. He released her with great reluctance.

"We must say farewell to Father," Nikulainen said softly. "But after we fulfill our duties, we return here."

"Yes, Niku," she sighed. "Anything you desire."

Nikulainen found his father at the front gates. Julin was taking the rest of the Ritvala forces save for Nikerym and Meikka. They were to ride in the morning with the Regent's company. Magnus appeared tired to Nikulainen's eyes. His confession and apology to the monarchs went well without Taraasta to harden their hearts. Thus it was Armas that troubled the Great King. There was sadness in his usually sharp eyes as he embraced his youngest son.

"I am well, Father," Nikulainen murmured. "How do you fare?"

"I will endure, Niku. Though I do feel the need for your mother's sweet voice," he said wistfully. "She has felt my distress and calls me home most urgently."

"Then tarry here no more. We will follow with first light," Nikulainen said. "A company of citadel guards will see you safely to the border."

The King nodded. "What will you do about Taraasta?"

"I have send soldiers to catch her party and see her to the border. They bring Rowsdower with them," he replied.

"You do not fear her response?"

"Nay. I have sent a letter that tells of Rowsdower's plan and enclosed one of the black arrows," Nikulainen said. "We have no proof she was directly involved, but those arrows will keep her from declaring war."

"Fine work," Magnus said. "Then I say my farewells."

Sarianna embraced Magnus sweetly. "I miss you already, Great King."

"Thank you, dear Daughter," he said. "We will see you soon. In the meantime, take what time you may to strengthen your bond with Niku. Do not fill all the time you may have alone with your duties. The bond is still fragile."

"I shall, Sire," she promised with a smile. "Good journey to you and Julin."

"Farewell, Brother," Julin said.

"Good journey, Julin," Nikulainen replied. "When we ride to the fortress, I wish that you watch over Sarianna until I return."

"Where will you go?" Julin frowned.

"I shall speak to my grandfather before any blood is shed," the Prince replied solemnly. "I will end this family turmoil before anyone else is lost to us."

Julin nodded. "I will protect Sarianna. Good fortune, Brother."

With that, the party thundered off down the road that would carry them west. Nikulainen watched their progress until he could see them no more. Sarianna stayed at his side holding onto his arm, but somehow supporting him.

"We shall see them in just a few days," Sarianna said, apparently sensing his sorrow.

"Ah, but I will not be going home. I will be a visitor," he said quietly. "I never thought I would leave Ritvala."

The Princess was silent for a time in response. Nikulainen realized his sentiment was being misinterpreted. He turned and gently pulled Sarianna into his arms.

"I have no regrets, Beloved, that my heart was found far from my father's halls," he said softly as he nuzzled her hair. "You are now and forever my home."

She squeezed him tightly for a brief moment. "I shall heed your father's advice and take you back to our chambers."

"I always obey my dear father," he smiled.

Captain Rajotin appeared before they reached their destination to tell them King Vauraus had issued the edict calling the citizens within the city walls.

"The royal guests will begin departing after the morning meal with Vauraus. The city shall be secured with soldiers in place by mid-day. He has declared 30 days of celebration within the citadel's limits. The people will be fed and entertained. There will be no court business," he said. "Nikerym has taken command of the Arinperan complement that travels with you in the morn. All is ready."

"Protect the King with all vigilance," Nikulainen said. "And the advisor Neuvoja as well. Take no chances with either of them, even if they protest."

"Yes, Regent."

"Order the men to speak not of what goes on in the citadel, no matter how innocent the inquiry," Sarianna advised.

"Yes, your Highness."

"Thank you, captain. I rest easier knowing that matters shall be in your hands," Nikulainen said sincerely.

"It's is my pleasure, Regent."

With that he was gone, leaving them alone.

"Come, my love," the Regent said. "I am both weary and needy. I need you."

"Then, you shall have me."

Chapter Twenty

Hannah did indeed complain, though it took her the better part of the first days ride. She never complained to Sarianna. It was Nikulainen with those highly attuned ears who heard the mumblings aimed at Jorgen. The maidservant had been given the option to ride in a wagon that followed a few hours behind the main party, but she insisted on staying with her Lady. Sarianna admired her determination. The Regent thought the horse was the better option, as the wagon was quite jarring on those roads. He also assured the Princess that despite the pace they kept, there would be chances to rest.

Sarianna was thrilled to be on the road. The day was glorious in its beauty, and within just a few hours on the journey, she had passed beyond anything familiar. She was enjoying the simple beauty of the farmlands and the flowering trees along the lane. Arinpera was truly lovely. Everything was fragrant, and the colors were bright and pleasing. When they returned, she would make sure seeing more of it and her people would become a habit.

That was a day of firsts for the Princess. It was her first time parting from her father for more than a day's rest. The Elder King helped her by not being sad. He had looked on her with pride as she stood before him with Nikulainen. He charged them both to represent Arinpera with honor and find a way to maintain peace in the Hanyanoore. Then he embraced them both warmly and bid them to return home safely and swiftly.

She shed a single tear upon leaving him, but her heart was not heavy. Sarianna had her duty to both her husband and her King. It excited her to be thought of as a diplomat. It was the first time she was officially acting under her title.

It was also the first time she wore Nikulainen's presents. As expected, it caused quite a stir amongst the staff, though Vauraus merely raised a brow. Thora was beside herself in displeasure. Sarianna had to sternly remind her it was she who was the monarch of the two. In her mind, her wedding attire was far more provocative. Between the tunic, the jerkin and the leggings, she barely had a waist to be seen. She was also covered to her collar. And what her riding attire didn't disguise, her long traveling cloak did. She could hardly be called a strumpet. Still Thora persisted strongly that it was an unseemly way to meet the mother of the groom. It was not until Nikulainen informed the woman that wearing such garments honored his mother and her people that her objections eased.

The fine travel garments and weapons did not make Sarianna a warrior. Nikulainen made it very clear that at the first sign of any attack, she was to obey the soldier nearest her in finding cover and remaining hidden. While on the road, the Princess rode in the middle of company. Thus, she was not lacking for either company or security. She understood the reason for the security easily enough. Nikulainen was still stung by Rowsdower's attack despite repeated assurances that he was not at fault.

There was another reason for the company surrounding her. Nikulainen often rode to the head of the column and further. Nikerym came to ride with her the first time he left her.

"The Regent has to be away from all the noise of the company to hear what is ahead," he explained.

"How far can he see and hear?"

"Many leagues, Princess," he replied. "We saw nothing but a little dust stirring on the horizon when he noticed the assassins attacking the citadel. And I'm sure he can hear you now."

Sarianna blushed. "He would not allow himself to be distracted."

"The Regent will not falter in his tasks, but he is always aware of you," the captain smiled.

"Ah, then you will be unwilling to tell me tales of your commander in Ritvala?" Sarianna smiled.

"You are correct in that, Princess," the captain laughed. "I value my hide too well."

"Very well. Preserve your hide," she replied.

"I thank you. I promised my own Lady that I would return intact," he said.

"You have a wife, captain?"

"For only a few mere months," he replied with a smile. "I miss her dearly. And there are weighty matters we must discuss. You may be of help with them."

"I? How can I help with a matter that concerns your good wife, sir?"

The captain was solemn. "Though I serve in the garrisons of Ritvala, it has been my honor to serve under the Regent when he was a captain. I have been trained by him for his elite guard."

"You wish to return with us to Arinpera," Sarianna said.

"Yes, Princess. Meikka wants to as well," he said. "We are happy at Lanakae Fortress, but we have served the Regent for years and desire to remain with him."

"That will please Niku greatly," she said. "But how may I be of help?"

"If there is time, I would ask you to speak to my dear lady about how fair a land your Arinpera is and how fine a life would be at Armorial Citadel," he said. "I am asking her to leave all she knows."

"My own union is only a few days old, but already I know she will want to be wherever you are," Sarianna replied. "But I will be happy to talk to her."

"Thank you, Princess."

"Does Meikka have a lady that would need persuasion?"

"Nay," he smiled. "Not here. A comely village lass in Arinpera has caught his eye."

"That is happy news."

At that moment, the company passed by the position Nikulainen had been holding while keeping watch. Sarianna liked seeing him like that, astride that fine mount with his hair gently rustling in the breeze. His posture was straight, but not rigid. He held himself with absolute poise and grace. And he rode his horse like he had been born on one. Nikerym nodded, then rode to the head of the group once again. The Regent fell in alongside Sarianna.

"Have you found out any secrets, milady?" Nikulainen asked with a wry smile.

"You already know I have not," she replied. "I do wonder how I ever surprised you with your gifts."

"I have learned not to listen to conversations when not on patrol," he said blanching at a memory. "It caused me many awkward moments as a child."

"I would imagine so," Sarianna said. "But you are listening out here."

Nikulainen nodded in mock seriousness. "How would I know what Hanna is feeling?"

"What is Hanna feeling?" Sarianna asked dryly.

"I admire her determination," he said. "But she is tiring."

"Will we be able to rest?"

"Yes. We can take at least six hours when we get near the border. Then another six hours when we've crossed Enewald," Nikulainen said. "As I do not plan to join my father's forces, we can arrive a little later than expected. I do not want my company to arrive exhausted. Not my men and not my wife or dear Hanna."

"Because your wife and dear Hanna have a battle of their own to wage?"

"Perhaps. And perhaps I just want you well rested," he said with a sly smile.

That smile sparked a sudden longing in Sarianna that must have reached her eyes for it caused a flash of fire in Nikulainen's eyes. His smile changed to something hotter.

"I shall have tents erected for privacy," he said for her ears only. "Alas, there will be no tub."

She gasped, then blushed deeply. Nikulainen inhaled sharply, looking at her.

"Milady, I must ride forward again before I forget the purpose of this journey," he growled

As he thundered off, Sarianna pulled up the hood of her cloak from curious eyes. Nikulainen triggered strong memories of the previous night. There had been scandal when the Regent ordered Sarianna's tub brought into his sleeping chamber, then dismissed Jorgen and Hanna. He told them both they needed rest for the journey, but the way he nearly ran them out the room belied that. Sarianna did not mind. She wanted to personally cleanse him of Rowsdower's touch and his blood. Before he could kiss her into mindlessness, she took over.

"Remove your clothing," she demanded softly. "I will remove every trace of him from you."

He smiled at her even as he complied with her wishes. "I might suggest that you remove your garments as well. I have been known to be a messy bather."

Sarianna raised a brow at him. "You would have me believe that Jorgen bathes you while he is naked?"

Nikulainen chuckled. "'Tis a recent failing. I would hate to see your gown ruined, beloved."

Sarianna looked into those mirthful dark eyes and realized what an incorrigible child her husband must have been. He was nonetheless irresistible. She removed her clothing under his blazing stare from the bathtub. It was almost unnecessary to have the heat from the fireplace.

"You will obey me, Niku," she whispered. He looked so tempting she feared being overwhelmed and pulled into the tub with him.

"Yes," he replied softly.

Sarianna indulged in a brief kiss because she simply had to. The heat and sweetness of his mouth almost made her forget her purpose. But then she caught the scent of blood still clinging to his skin. That jolted the Princess into acting. With great care Sarianna supported Nikulainen's head, then guided him back and down into the water to soak his hair. Once he was seated upright, she soaped his hair thoroughly from the scalp to the ends. She needed two dips to rinse the heavy, silken mass. Finally, the Princess had her Prince lean completely on the back of the tub with his wet hair hanging over the edge.

"There," she sighed after squeezing the excess water from his hair with a drying cloth. "Now, for that lovely skin."

Nikulainen was still and mostly silent as she worked. Occasionally he would sigh or gasp, though he would deny she was hurting him. His eyes were nearly black as he watched her. They were glittering in the fire's light. Sarianna had gently scrubbed her way over most of his upper body when Nikulainen spoke in an amused and exasperated tone. "Do you allow Hanna to touch you thus?"

"Nay," she laughed. "I clean myself, then she rinses me. I only need her help to rinse my hair. Does Jorgen..."

"Nay!" He exclaimed. "He rinses me as well. Save for that wedding... cleansing."

"Aye, that was different," she admitted. "I would not like that cleansing again."

"Indeed," he sighed as she leaned in to clean his lower body. "And that brings me to another matter. I would like to tend to your bath from now hence. Would you mind?"

"I would not. I have to see how you work," she said. "You will have to explain it to Hanna. Stand, please."

Sarianna's breath caught as Nikulainen rose gracefully from the water. The firelight caused the moisture on his body to glisten, making him even more golden. She swallowed hard then turned from him to get the pitchers of clean water warming by the hearth and compose herself.

"Hold your hair to one side," she said huskily. She poured the water over him, chasing all the suds away. "I could not bear to see him touch you. I cannot bear the thought of anyone touching you."

He stilled her hands as she began to dry him. "Nor can I. The thought of even Hanna touching your body distresses me beyond measure."

Sarianna continued drying that long, lithe body, smiling at the gasps she was drawing out of him. She carefully dried him everywhere, even between his legs while she felt him tremble with the need to act upon his growing desire.

"You have behaved so well, Beloved," she smiled, sitting back on her haunches to look at him. "And you have been sorely tested. How shall I reward you?"

"If I might make a suggestion, Milady," he replied in a soft, tremulous voice. "It seems a poor use of the water to bathe you then spoil the results."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "That seems reasonable, but will the water not cool?"

"Nay," he replied. In just a moment, he had moved the unused tub nearer to the fire. "Will that suffice?"

“Aye,” Sarianna replied huskily. She nearly moaned out loud in anticipation.

That had been the last intelligible word she uttered for some time. The next thing she knew, Nikulainen had pressed her onto the soft furs near the fire, covering her body with his heated flesh. She should have been frightened. Her Prince had endured her subtle teasing obediently, but his body was not unaffected. He seared her with a kiss of breathtaking heat. Indeed, Sarianna should have been very frightened. The ravishment she had been long courting was upon her. But instead of shrinking from his heat, she moaned under his kiss and surrendered herself to him.

One hand sank into Sarianna’s hair to grasp the mass and hold her head still while the other hand smoothly traveled up her thighs. She cried out in pleasure as she felt two of Nikulainen’s fingers press into her. The Prince groaned at the feel of her.

“It is good to know that you were not unaffected by my bath, Princess,” he growled before taking her lips once more.

Sarianna mumbled some response against his lips, but the words and thoughts were lost as Nikulainen played with her, using long fingers to stroke within her wet heat and his thumb to torment that secret spot that sent jolts of pleasure through her. Over and over, Sarianna cried out against his kiss as he relentlessly played her body to crescendo. Some part of her mind wondered why he tortured her thus when he could press his heat into her without fear of consequence and find release from his torment. But she could find no voice for her questions as her Prince was then sucking at her nipples in turn while his hand still worked its magic on her.

“Niku, please... please...”

At Sarianna's soft and hungry plea, Nikulainen shifted immediately. He gently moved one of her trembling legs to rest on his thigh as he pushed his entire length into her in one smooth stroke. There was no waiting this time. As soon as Nikulainen was sheathed in her, he was moving. His mouth claimed hers again while he pumped his hips into her willing body. She clutched his hair, holding that hungry mouth to hers. How long he moved within her, she could not be sure. All her mind knew was the waves of pleasure that were building inside her. Then it hit her. She felt him surge, filling her even more fully. His cry was so drenched in absolute pleasure that it vaulted her into ecstasy as well.

When Sarianna next came back to herself, she was in the bathtub, and her hair was being carefully lathered. Nikulainen's expression was as blissful in caring for her hair as it was when she was lathering him.

"You have returned to me," he said. His voice was soft and mirthful. "You seemed so far away."

"I was drifting in a dream," Sarianna sighed. "What have you done to me?"

"I ravished you," he growled in her ear.

"That was well worth the wait, Beloved," she replied dreamily as he dipped her hair to rinse the soap away. "And I love the way you do my hair."

"I live to serve, milady."

Sarianna smiled, remembering just how well Nikulainen served.

"Why do you smile so sweetly, Beloved?" Nikulainen asked from very near her.

Sarianna had been so lost in thought she had not realized that Nikulainen had returned. She was glad the hood of the cloak hid her blush. "I find I barely remember the bath you gifted me."

"I will make sure the experience is repeated often so you can concentrate," he said with great seriousness.

"You are most considerate," Sarianna quipped. "What waits on the road ahead?"

"A camp. Our camp. The advanced guard left more prepared than I knew. There are tents and meats roasting over fires," he replied. The surprise was evident in his voice.

"Captain Rajotin's direction on Father's orders, I am sure," Sarianna said with a smile. "The Great King knew we would not accept such an offer. Though I am glad he did it now. I am famished."

"As am I," Nikulainen admitted.

Within an hour, the company rode into the encampment. It was off the road in a field on a slight rise. They had a vista that covered all approaches. Sarianna could hear rushing water nearby. Esko, the marchwarden, came forward to greet them.

"Regent, Princess, on behalf of the King, I bid you welcome," he said with a bow. "His Majesty has arranged for safe encampments throughout your journey. There are tents for you and your servants. Food will be ready when you've settled."

"My thanks, Esko. This is far more luxury than a warrior expects," Nikulainen said. "And it is most welcome."

"Indeed," Sarianna agreed. "My thanks as well."

Her legs were stiff when she swung down from Kelata. She looked at the Regent plaintively, causing him to smile. "Shall I see to Hanna?"

Sarianna chuckled. "Nay. If I sit now, I shall never rise again."

"I will see to the horses," Nikulainen replied.

Hanna was limping when the Princess found her with Jorgen further back in the company. The maid valiantly straightened her posture as Sarianna approached, but that small movement caused her to wince.

"Princess, I will have your meals ready as soon as they are finished cooking," she said haltingly.

"No, you will not," Sarianna said firmly. "The soldiers have people to take care of this company. You will let Jorgen tend to your aches, and you will rest."

Her brave façade crumbled a fraction. "But what can be done? There are no hot baths out here."

"I can heat rocks to place in your bedroll," Jorgen offered. "The heat will ease your aches and allow you to sleep."

"Let him take care of you," Sarianna said more gently. "The Regent will tend to me. You and I will have duties at the fortress. We must be ready in every way."

"Yes, Princess," she sighed. "Truth be told, I am very weary."

"That's my girl," Sarianna said. "Thank you, Jorgen."

"It is my pleasure," he said with a shy blush.

Before going back to the tent near the center of the camp, Sarianna walked around the area, working the stiffness from her legs. The soldiers were respectful though she

could tell most were either confused or amused at her attire. Eventually, she made her way to the corral where Nikulainen was brushing down Kelata.

"Hanna will survive. Jorgen is tending to her," she said, stroking her mount's nose. Kelata was a happy horse. "I think this one could go on for hours more without complaint."

"Both mounts happily would. And how are you faring?" Nikulainen inquired as he put away the brushes.

"Less stiff and very hungry," she quipped.

"Then come with me, milady," the Prince said brightly. "I have remedies for both."

Sarianna was excited about this first as well. She had long heard stories about the soldiers' camps and what happened in them. She doubted the songs would be as bawdy with her tent near the center of everything, but she had hoped to hear some exciting stories. The tent was larger than she expected, though only half the size of their bed chamber

"I will help you take off your bracers and your sword belt. I am not needed for watch, so I can remove mine as well," Nikulainen said once they were alone.

"Do I need a shift to sleep in?" She asked. It sounded silly to her ears, but she did not know. Somehow, sleeping naked didn't sound wise.

"Nay, when we go to sleep, you undress down to the tunic. Keep your leggings close though. I will do the same," he replied. "But first, we eat."

They settled themselves on a thick pile of furs outside the tent near the main fire. A company cook presented them with a tray heaped with roasted meats, pieces of bread

and cheese. The other tray contained roasted root vegetables and cut-up fruit. After a heartfelt thank you to the cook, the food was set upon as if by ravenous wolves. Sarianna would have thought herself unseemly, but the soldiers were impressed with her appetite. She could not help herself. The food was simple, but it was very tasty, and it disappeared very quickly.

The Princess was enjoying everything from the food to the crispness of the night air to the conversation of the men. But as soon as her belly was full, her eyes began to droop. Nikulainen sensed it immediately. Despite her protest, the Prince had her up on her feet.

"We thank you for your service and protection," Nikulainen said. "Now, we must take our rest. Rajotin and Meikka, you are to rest as well. Allow the marchwarden and his men to watch over us."

With an assent from his men, Nikulainen turned and guided Sarianna into the tent, closing the flap behind them. "They will post a guard near the entrance and one at the other side of the tent. We should not need them, for we have been given a safe encampment."

"I am not afraid, Niku," she said softly. "You are with me."

He smiled at that, then reached to remove her bracers. "Now then, we must get some rest. Dawn comes quickly."

"Aye. And as much as I would enjoy a dalliance, I am as weary as dear Hanna," the Princess yawned.

They stripped down to their tunics quickly. Sarianna slipped under the blankets and furs, feeling vulnerable with a mere tent's fabric separating her from all those men. Nikulainen smiled at her as he joined her, holding her close and putting his body between her and the entrance.

"Do not worry. No one would dare trespass," he murmured, kissing her hairline.
"They know that I would regretfully injure them severely."

"But it would be regretful," she chuckled sleepily.

"Of course," he sighed.

Soon Sarianna forgot where she was and just enjoyed the comfort of the pallet and the safety of her husband's arms.

Chapter Twenty One

It seemed to Nikulainen that everything was better with Sarianna in his life. Waking up in camp with her was certainly far better than without her. He woke gently rather than barely sleeping on the cold ground. His face was pressed against the skin of her lovely neck. The luscious length of her backside was pressed against the front of his body. Her lovely rump was pressed against his hardness in the sweetest torture he could imagine.

"My military duties were never this pleasant," he sighed, knowing his bride was awake.

"I am glad to hear it," she replied softly. "There are enough battles to fight over you at the fortress."

Nikulainen squeezed her tight, kissing the skin his lips rested upon. To his surprise, Sarianna pulled from his embrace, then turned to face him. Her eyes were full of the heat of desire.

"You will tell me that we must dress swiftly and have our meal, but there is time and this morning I will not be denied," she whispered urgently. "They will not leave without us."

Before Nikulainen could express his surprise, Sarianna pulled him on top of her and hooked a smooth soft leg around his waist. One elegant hand was firmly clutching his

hair to guide his lips to hers while the other spanned his rump to guide him into her heat. He could think of no reason to resist. He could not really think at all. Instead the Prince did what her body and his demanded, pushing into her.

“Am I to be ravished then?” Nikulainen growled against her mouth.

“I would say it is time,” she gasped. “I love how you fill me. I feel your heart pounding within. Please, Niku... please.”

How Nikulainen loved to hear her pleas in that soft voice drenched in hunger. It amazed him how she claimed him even as she gave herself. He would thoroughly take what she offered. While the Prince claimed her mouth once again, he moved into her tight warm sheath. The urgency of the moment and the possibility of interruption brought about quick and intense completion.

“I cannot hold you as I would like, Beloved,” he sighed as he cleaned her. “But there are some things I can do.”

“You have done much this morn, Niku,” she sighed. “And so very well.”

Nikulainen smiled at that. He felt ready to take on an army. A short while later, he was on his way to do just that.

Nikulainen rode at the head of the company most of the day. His senses and his mind were cast far ahead. If he could sense his mother’s presence for many, many leagues, it was a certainty that he could sense an entire army of his people. It bothered

him anew that he only knew a fraction of what he was about. Much of him prayed for peace so that he could have many of his questions answered.

Thus, Nikulainen cast his mind as far as he could. It was farther than he had ever searched before. There was no fear in this as there once had been. He had tried many times to reach the Forest People over the winds when he was a boy. But he never went too far. His mother warned that he could be lost in his mind beyond all reach without a tether. That was something he had never understood until the bonding with Sarianna. She both supported and held him so that he could fly free. And in that freedom, he felt something faint in the great distance. It was a large looming presence that was growing near.

"What comes, Niku?" Sarianna asked when he returned to her. "Why are you so weary?"

"They come, Sarianna. They are moving slowly and cautiously, but they come," he replied. "It is a powerful and angry force that approaches. I do not know what I can do."

"Have you found Lord Valtias?" She asked gently.

He shook his head in frustration. "They are too far or I am too weak. I cannot reach an individual."

"Then you may not despair," she said with quiet confidence. "Let us quicken the pace."

Nikulainen was buoyed by Sarianna's words and her smile. He ordered the company on at an accelerated pace. They would rest at intervals of a few hours through Enewald.

The roads were well marked, and there would be a bright moon. They would ride through the night.

All through the journey, Nikulainen spent most of his time alone ahead of the Company. His mind was always farther away than his eyes or his ears. The looming presence was growing, but far more slowly than his company was advancing. He still could not reach an individual though he sensed a very strong presence was aware of him.

When they rested, Nikulainen kept Sarianna near him. She would sit in front of him, leaning on his chest with his arms around her. Her nearness comforted him and brought peace to his tired mind. The Princess did not ask him what he had seen or felt. It seemed to him she did not need to. They rarely spoke. He needed the quiet to rest his mind. But Sarianna was content as long as they were connected physically for a little while.

"She makes a fine wife for a warrior," Nikerym said as they crossed into Ritvala with the first light of dawn. "Were you to allow it, she would ride with you into battle."

Nikulainen smiled. "Aye, she would. And with a little more training, I may allow it."

"What say you about our strategy?"

"The Suurimetsa wait in the forest on the western border," he replied quietly. "They wait, but I know not for how long."

"We will reach Lanakae Fortress just before nightfall," Nikerym replied. "We can take to the forest with first light with Ritvala."

"Nay. The Arinperan company shall stand between the forest and Lanakae Fortress. I take to the forest alone," Nikulainen replied. "We must keep the factions apart."

"Sire, it will be near dusk when you enter the forest," the captain said with alarm.

"I can run through those trees in my sleep, old friend," he replied. "And I do not fear the Suurimetsa. They wait for me."

"What of the Princess?"

"She will carry my wishes to King Magnus," Nikulainen said. "Ride with her until Prince Julin comes out to meet her. Then you take the point on these soldiers and hold the line until I return."

"Yes, Regent."

The rest of the trip was made in an amicable silence, but the tension of anticipation of battle was growing steadily. Nikulainen knew he would have to charge these men carefully not to attack despite the formidable forces they would stand between. But first he had to charge Sarianna.

His lovely wife listened carefully as Nikulainen laid out his argument while he carefully wrote the letter of entreaty. After speaking for much longer than he normally would, the letter and his instructions were finished. Upon looking up, Nikulainen found Sarianna smiling ruefully at him. He looked at her expectantly.

"I am coming to Lanakae Fortress for the first time in a warrior's attire to demand that the King not fight an invading army," Sarianna said in amusement. "You do not make things easy for me."

Nikulainen smiled. "You would not be bound to me if you did not do the most exasperating thing possible before the court."

"I see," she replied dryly. "As long as it is expected."

A surge of warmth came over him as he looked at her. In the next instant, Nikulainen crushed her against him to kiss her deeply and reverently. Then he held her close stroking her hair.

"We will be parted for at least one night," he said softly against her hair.

"I know." She sighed. "How many nights?"

"I know not. You will stay in my chamber, not the guest chambers," he said.

"You want me in your bed," she said with a smile in her tone.

"Aye," Nikulainen sighed. "I could not dream of a more incredible woman in my bed."

Sarianna squeezed him to her. "I love you, Niku. You must return to me. I cannot suffer your loss and survive. And please, do not tarry."

"I swear that I will return. And I will not tarry," he said softly. "I am not whole without you."

The embrace ended with great reluctance. Nikulainen smiled sadly. "Were there time, I would have you ravish me once again."

"All the more reason not to tarry."

A few hours later, Nikulainen crested the familiar rise before Lanakae Fortress came into view. The Prince took a moment to take in the grand beauty of his home. Though called a fortress, the primary city of Ritvala was an elegant circular design that rose from the gentle foothills. The walls and building rooftops were made of a red-brown stone. At the top was an imposing yet elegant structure made from the same stone.

"Your home is majestic," Sarianna said.

"My home is with you," he replied simply. "Though the fortress was a fine place to grow up."

"Will I be welcome?" she wondered.

"They shall adore you, Beloved," Nikulainen said confidently.

For a while they remained silent as the company filed up alongside them. Nikulainen waited until he could be heard by all. In that time, he savored his beloved's presence and her eyes upon him.

"How far are they now?" she asked quietly.

"Just beyond the trees. There are scores and scores of them," he replied.

"Do you sense Lord Valtias?"

"There is one voice that I am hearing above others. I hope that is he," Nikulainen said. It was time to part from her, and that made his heart heavy. "I will have your kiss before I charge the men."

Sarianna raised a graceful brow at him. "Is that a military tradition?"

"It is now," Nikulainen smiled, leaning toward her. The kiss was clingy and sweet and moving for its brevity. He pulled away to look at the love in her eyes once more. Then he rode ahead so that all the company could see him.

"Soldiers of Arinpera, the Great King Vauraus has charged us with a solemn duty. We are here to prevent war from darkening the Known Lands," he began. "Our numbers are small compared to those we stand between, but our mission is true. You must hold your ground. You cannot allow either side to shed blood. Stand strong and there will be no battle! Do this for your Princess. Do this for your Regent. Do this for your King!"

There was a cheer that rippled through the company before Nikulainen spoke again.

"Nikerym! Muster your men! Princess, to the fortress! Meikka, you are with me!"

With that, Nikulainen thundered across the land that skirted Lanakae Fortress and toward the forest beyond. He was aware Meikka was a hair's breath behind him and that Sarianna was not far behind his guard. He heard Nikerym sound the horn of their arrival. As he rode toward the forest, Nikulainen spied Julin riding out of the main gates toward Sarianna. Nikulainen's entire focus shifted to the presence just beyond the trees.

Meikka slowed as they reached the trees and darkness was falling.

"Sound the horn if Ritvala attempts to strike. Do not fear the Suurimetsa, my friend. These are my kin," he said.

"Yes, Regent. Good fortune."

Ajaa rode forward, but there was wariness in his gait. There were eyes in the forest. Nikulainen spoke softly to the horse and urged him on. When his gait picked up, the Prince leaped up onto his saddle, then onto the branches. He moved quickly to the highest reaches of the trees where there was the greatest risk of falling. Up where there was more sky than leaves, one had to know which branches would hold and which would give. Nikulainen knew well, for he had fallen from them often enough.

As darkness gently fell, Nikulainen no longer merely felt his pursuers, he could hear them. They were skillful and nearly silent, but he could hear them still. They moved swiftly, and so did the Prince. He leapt far and seemed to swing wildly, but his path was no different than the one he had taken in the rain just over a month before. There were voices crying out as the wrong branches were chosen. And there was more alarm down below as Nikulainen neared the place where the strongest voice was calling.

Nikulainen knew where that voice was. It was a favorite place near the center of the woods and a wise place to place the leaders of an invasion and a few scores of men. It had good cover from the ground and its own source of water. The rest of the soldiers were no doubt beyond the woods. The fortunate thing was that there were usable branches till the very edge of the clearing. Thus, as he had planned, Ajaa cantered into the clearing, then ambled to the nearby stream for a drink. The guards left the tall golden man in the most regal of armor to investigate the horse's behavior. When the Monarch stood alone, Nikulainen dropped gracefully to the ground, then sunk to his knees and bowed his hood-covered head.

Swords were unsheathed and voices rose as the guards and about a score of the soldiers rushed over, but the Monarch stilled them.

"If he wished to harm me, he well could have," the deep, musical voice said calmly. His was the voice Nikulainen heard over others. It soothed him deeply.

"He rode from the fortress, Sire."

"He does not wear their colors," was the sage reply. "He does not move as they do. Who are you, child?"

"You know who I am, Sire."

"Your voice is familiar to me... you have been speaking to me these last days," he said. "Why do you seek to impede my progress?"

"You know who I am, Sire. You know why you can not spill his blood," Nikulainen replied softly.

There was a sharp intake of breath. The Prince felt the Monarch draw near despite the protest of his guards. "You ... you are her child... her son. You are my flesh and blood."

A gentle hand tugged the hood back. There was a gasp when his hair was revealed. "I will see your face."

Nikulainen looked on the serenely handsome face of Lord Valtias and found his own face and that of his mother's, but with a score's more age. His eyes though held the wisdom of great age mixed with great sorrow and anger. The Lord sank onto his knees, looking at him in complete wonder.

"My name is Nikulainen, Sire."

"I did not get to see you grow," he said faintly as he stroked the Prince's hair.

Nikulainen smiled. "You have been spared much consternation, Sire. For there was a great deal of mischief."

A smile tugged at the man's solemn lips as he grasped Nikulainen's shoulders. "So she has reaped what she has so generously sowed. That I would have enjoyed."

"I am here now. We can share much. I want to know you and my people."

"And you shall. I will send you to my home to wait the return of your mother," he said firmly.

"Nay, you will not, Sire."

The Lord's eyes flashed in anger. "Why will I not? You are of my flesh. I will not have you away from your people any longer."

"I am the Regent of Arinpera, a prosperous kingdom in the East near the sea," the Prince replied. "I have many duties to a people who have entrusted their faith in me."

"I care not about the matters of these men. You are Suurimetsa. You belong in the Forest Realm."

"I belong to the Princess who owns my heart. I will not part from her," Nikulainen said. "I have known love, and I am bound to her."

That gave the sire pause. He looked deeply into Nikulainen's eyes and into his very mind. The monarch could sense Sarianna's presence there. Valtias sighed.

"How extraordinary to have made such a match. Very well. We will have a brief time together. An instant to know a lifetime before I claim my daughter," he said sadly.

"Nay, you will not take her from Magnus," Nikulainen said resolutely. "Lady Reija loves him and has loved him since they first met. Magnus loves her. He made a foolish mistake that a young man makes when in love."

"You are a child who loves his father."

"You felt my bride in my mind, Sire. Look for my mother. I feel her now. Know that she is and has always been happy," Nikulainen said. "Please. You can be with your daughter and know me. You can heal your wounds and have peace. Please... Grandfather..."

This time, the presence in his mind was stronger. It was nearly painful in its intensity, but Nikulainen did not resist. The Lady Reija was very happy meeting her son's bride and knowing he was near. Her serenity and joy was evident as was her deep, abiding love for Magnus. Valtias seemed to bask in that joy. Then he released the Prince, who nearly collapsed.

"I do not understand... she was afraid when he took her from me," Valtias murmured, sinking onto the backs of his legs. "She has not left that fortress since she arrived. He called her his hostage, not his wife."

Nikulainen sighed. "My mother was afraid when she left you, because she was leaving everything she knew for an uncertainty. She has not left because she feared being spirited away from the man she loves. My father called her hostage out of fear that her loss to you would cause war with her kin. That was a mistake for which Magnus pays dearly. He does not want to fight, but he will not give up his love. Would you break her heart and cause her death by taking her from his cold, dead hands?"

An elegant hand reached out to caress Nikulainen's face. Those wise and solemn eyes held his. "You are wondrously fair with the grace of a warrior and a kingdom of your own. You have been raised in love and happiness."

Valtias pulled him into a fierce embrace. "Can it be so simple that we can just go through his gates to break bread like a family?"

"Yes, Grandfather. It can be just that simple," he replied softly. "Do you let it?"

Lord Valtias held Nikulainen at arm's length as if he could not get enough of looking at him. "I will. We will."

They rose to their feet and faced the soldiers. Two of them strongly favored Lady Reija. They looked on Nikulainen with great tenderness.

"Grandson, may I present my sons – your uncles. My eldest Uurion and my middle child Hesin," Valtias said proudly.

Nikulainen found himself enveloped in strong embraces and shared laughter. There was great warmth mixed with some sorrow. This family sorely missed their youngest and fairest.

"You are a fine nephew," Uurion said proudly.

"Indeed," Hesin agreed.

"Ready the men to go to the fortress," Valtias said.

"No, milord," Nikulainen said quickly. "We should move with daylight. There are complications to this situation."

"Complications?"

“Aye. Another kingdom seeks to foster instability in these lands for purposes we do not yet know. The ruler tried assassinating my bride to get her lands. Now, she seeks war between Ritvala and Suurimetsa,” he said. “There may be assassins in these woods. If you or I die before we make peace, war would follow.”

“That message was more than it seemed,” Valtias said. “It had the taint of malice about it, but I had to take the risk for my daughter.”

“I know and I am glad, grandfather,” Nikulainen said quietly.

“As am I,” the Lord replied warmly. “Let us have the evening meal and rest for the ride in the morn.”

The company stood down from their alarm and went back to routine camp matters. Nikulainen saw to Ajaa for the night. He owed the horse a treat along with his usual rub down for overcoming his skittishness and reaching the camp as planned. Once the mount was settled, he joined his kin around the fire.

“Your horse is very well trained. He is almost like ours,” Hesin observed.

“My mother bred Ajaa. He and his kin are special. They all but hear my thoughts,” Nikulainen said.

“You know how to travel the trees. What else do you know?” Uurion asked.

“Not as much as I am supposed to, I suspect. Enough that I am unique in my kingdom,” he replied. “I wish to learn more from my kin.”

“I sense your joy at this meeting, but you are also heavy of heart. I will know why, child,” Valtias said.

Nikulainen was pleased that his grandfather did not search out the reason for himself. That made him feel more at ease. "I am wed but a few days and already parted from my bride this night."

His uncles chuckled, reminding him much of his own brothers, but Valtias was sympathetic.

"I know that you are unaccustomed to sleeping without her, but you are very weary from the burdens of this day and from the demands of my mind," the Lord said quietly. "You fight to remain awake as we speak."

It was true. Nikulainen recognized his exhaustion just then. "I do not wish to miss this chance to talk with my kin."

The Lord smiled at him with such love that it moved Nikulainen to his core. "I know, child. But you have made a way to have more time. I bid you to rest your mind and your body. We will watch over you."

Valtias reached out to caress Nikulainen's brow. The Prince felt his body instantly yield to his exhaustion. He collapsed backward into strong arms that bore him up and took him away. A voice that he trusted told him sleep and not to fear. It was Lady Reija who told him gently that she loved him and thanked him, that his bride was safe and that they would be together come the morn.

Chapter Twenty Two

The last Sarianna saw of Nikulainen was his backward gaze as Julin rode forth to join her. She felt his focus turn to the forest beyond, and she let him go. There could be no distractions where he journeyed, and she had her own matters that required attention. Lanakae Fortress loomed, as did her very important mission. And then there was meeting the Lady Reija. With fierce determination, Sarianna quelled her trepidation and rode into the main gate with an air befitting her station.

Lanakae Fortress was not unlike her own home. It was as grand and as sweeping but somehow more austere. She reasoned it was because the kingdom was on the border with the wild that they would always be prepared to defend themselves. The Princess was not intimidated, because the people were not dour, even with an obvious state of alert. She was greeted in a friendly manner by those who crossed her path.

"Where is Magnus?" She asked.

"In his receiving hall," Julin said. "He awaits you. Do you want to rest first?"

"Nay, I have a letter for him from Niku," she replied.

Jorgen caught them before they entered the main halls. "Princess, please."

"Yes, Jorgen."

"Before you confer with the King, Hanna needs her instructions," Jorgen said. "Shall you be in the guest..."

“Nay, the Regent wants me in his chambers. I will rest there once I have spoken to the King,” Sarianna replied. “Is Hanna well?”

Jorgen sighed. “Sore and stiff, but stubborn and determined. She will not rest until you are settled.”

Sarianna chuckled. “Try to take care of her, Jorgen. I will be in the Regent’s rooms when I can.”

Magus called his home a keep, but it was far more grand and imposing than that. The style of the building, every carving and every stone arch spoke of power and wealth. It was clear their artisans were very talented. Sarianna swept alongside Julin noting all the attention they were receiving, especially from the female staff.

“How much has been said about me?” Sarianna asked quietly.

“A great deal, dear Sister,” Julin replied mildly. “You left a very favorable impression upon the soldiers. The women probably cannot believe anyone could be so fair. Or perhaps they want to see the one who captured Niku’s elusive heart.”

“He must have been well sought after to be elusive,” Sarianna commented.

Julin chuckled. “My brother had to keep his reflexes sharp.”

The Princess was not amused. She met the curious stares directly and with some frostiness in her expression. It was not often she acted in an imperious manner, but she certainly knew how. Thus, Sarianna had her most regal bearing when she entered the receiving hall.

"Sire, Lady Reija, allow me to present her Highness, Princess Sarianna of Arinpera," Julin said with as much formality as he could muster. He gave Sarianna a sidelong smile before bowing, then departing.

Sarianna glared at Julin before sweeping forward to curtsy before the royal couple. Magnus looked entirely different than he did at the wedding. He glowed with contentment in the presence of the Lady. The Princess could not blame him. The Lady Reija was as golden a beauty as her son. She had an inner light that filled Sarianna with the Lady's love and warmth. The Princess found she loved her new mother immediately.

"Great King," Sarianna said quietly. "I bring word from Nikulainen that you must read at once."

"And I shall, but I will embrace my daughter first," he said as he rose to envelope her in those great arms. "You wear the leathers well, child."

"You do indeed," Lady Reija said with a smile. "You look much like I did when I met Magnus. Come closer, my dear."

Sarianna handed Magnus the letter, then moved to the Lady's side and knelt there. Lady Reija gently caressed her face, then looked deeply into her eyes.

"My son has found a great love and a great light," she said softly. Sarianna felt a presence gently touch her mind. "I feel him with you strongly. I feel something else as well..."

"Perhaps you can feel what my son has in mind with this letter," Magnus muttered. "How am I supposed to not fight an invading army?"

"You must give him time to talk to Lord Valtias," Sarianna said. "Niku has been searching for him. He has been reaching out with his mind. He thinks he has found him."

"He has found him," Reija whispered as she stared at Sarianna. "They are together."

"He will keep Niku!" Magnus exclaimed in a voice that neared panic. "Then he will come for you."

"Niku will not stay," Sarianna said with utter certainty. "He swore he would return to me. Nothing will prevent him from keeping his promise."

Reija smiled. "The Princess is right. My father will understand they are bound. He knows the roles they are to play. And he knows to take Niku from her will kill him."

Suddenly, Sarianna could hardly hear the voices around her. There was something in her mind besides Niku. It was a very strong presence. She felt no malice, but it was disconcerting.

"How can he understand Niku's bond after knowing him for mere moments when he cannot see how you feel?" Sarianna vaguely heard Magnus say.

The presence grew demanding. Sarianna found herself reaching out to take Lady Reija's hand. Then there was a powerful arc of current between them. It was powerful, but not frightening. It was a flow steeped in love and tinged with sadness. Then it faded considerably.

"Are you both well?" Magnus demanded. "You look so strange."

"Everything will be fine, my Love," Reija said serenely. "Niku has found a way to Valtias' heart. He understands that we are bound. He wants to come see us."

"How can you know this?" Magnus asked incredulously.

"As clearly as you can hear me in your mind and heart, I can hear my father," she said in a voice choked with tears. "For the first time in such a long time, I can hear him. Listen, Beloved."

Magnus stilled for along moment. Sarianna again felt the powerful arc as Magnus started, staring at his Lady in wonder. When the presence faded once again, he sagged in his chair.

"I cannot believe it would be so easy to make peace," Magnus said. "I cannot believe I have wasted all this time. But I cannot deny what I have heard in my mind. Very well, Daughter. I will not attack the Suurimetsa when they come to the gate."

"I need more than that," Sarianna said boldly. "I need your promise that you will do nothing until you can hear directly from Niku's lips to do so."

The King's eyebrows went up, then he shook his head. "My son is well matched in you, Princess. I see the warrior you will become."

Sarianna was puzzled but undeterred. "What say you, Great King?"

Magnus laughed then. "Very well. I give you my word."

Sarianna smiled at Magnus. She felt filled with shimmering warmth that was not entirely because of the love in that room. Nikulainen was very happy, though she strongly felt his longing for her.

"You have brothers?" Sarianna asked suddenly.

"Aye!" Lady Reija exclaimed brightly. "They are with Niku as well?"

"They are... oh my!"

"What is it, Sarianna?" Magnus asked.

"I am suddenly so exhausted. I can barely stay upright," she murmured.

"Niku is exhausted. His mind has been taxed more than his body," Lady Reija said.

"Lord Valtias has a powerful gift. It can overwhelm if a mind is not accustomed to it. Father will make Niku rest. You are feeling the affects of that powerful suggestion."

"What do I do?" Sarianna whispered.

"Let go, child. Let sleep claim you as well," she said. "You will rest more easily that way as you are apart from Niku."

Sarianna had wondered how she would sleep without him. She felt herself falling into the grasp of very strong arms.

"Niku's room... I am to be in Niku's room," she mumbled.

"Very well, little warrior," Magnus said. Somehow she knew the King was smiling.

With that, Sarianna drifted into a deep sleep.

Nikulainen awoke slowly and pleasantly. He was aware that he was not alone, but knew Sarianna was nowhere near. A pleasant humming filled his ears and his mind. As the Prince became more aware of himself, he realized he slept outside on a very pleasant pallet and covered in warm blankets. His hair was being petted. Occasionally, a gently hand stroked his brow or traced the features on his face.

"Does my touch trouble you, Nikulainen?" Valtias asked. The Lord had the same near-musical way of saying his name as his mother. That made him smile.

"No, my Lord," he replied quietly, opening his eyes. "You have a soothing hand."

It was just after dawn, and already Nikulainen could see the morning would be a beautiful one. Lord Valtias' pallet was near to his. He had but to reach out to touch him. The Prince frowned at Valtias.

"Have you had rest, my Lord?"

Valtias smiled as if he had been caught in something naughty. "Perhaps a little. I could not help but look upon you. I have missed many years of watching you."

Nikulainen smiled. "I do not mind."

The Prince rose from his pallet after pulling on his boots. Valtias moved to the fire where food was being prepared. He found he was very hungry and accepted the tray heaped with food gratefully. As he ate, Nikulainen looked about the camp. It had been largely packed up.

"You let me sleep," he said softly. "I would have helped with the camp."

"It is not very late, and we have enough hands," he replied. "And you were very tired."

"Where are my uncles?" he asked.

"The scouts have found evidence of others in the woods. They are trying to find them," Valtias replied.

"They are assassins," Nikulainen said quietly. "They will be difficult to find."

"Agreed. The evidence of their presence is faint, even to our senses," Valtias replied. "But they cannot be invisible when they move."

The Prince nodded thoughtfully. "I will send word to my guard at the perimeter. I'll have the Arinperan soldiers meet us"

"That is prudent. Write the missive, and I will send it while we finish breaking camp," the Lord replied. "How was the food?"

"It was very fine, Grandfather," he said.

"You have your mother's appetite," he said dryly. "Is the Princess a delicate woman?"

"Nay, she has very strong appetites," Nikulainen said with a blush. "And a warrior's heart. You will love her. Everyone does."

"Let us ready ourselves to meet her," he said.

Nikulainen wrote the note to Meikka, then helped with the rest of the camp. Within an hour, they were ready to move.

"The key to triggering a war would be Lord Valtias' slaying or my own," Nikulainen said to his uncles. Keep our path clear until we can reach my company."

"And if they succeed, promise me you will stand with King Magnus and not against him," Valtias said. "I will have this family united once more even if I do not see it."

The young Lords agreed.

"Good fortune to us all," Nikulainen said.

The Prince took the point and kept Lord Valtias half a length behind him. They were only a short distance from the camp when he heard the first arrow. Nikulainen had his bow in hand and an arrow in flight in the next instant, stopping it. The second arrow he loosed an instant later felled the assassin. More arrows flew, but the Suurimetsa were in

action. Nikulainen wished he could watch the fight, but he had to take the cleared path and lead his grandfather away from danger. They rode very swiftly, cutting through the trees and back again along a path that few would be able to see.

Nikulainen could just see the trees clearing, and he could hear his company assembled. There was safety just ahead. The next arrow came from ahead of them. The assassin had to expose himself to the company to shoot. Nikulainen had an instant to react. There was no time to defend. He could merely turn so the arrow hit him and not Valtias. The burning stabbing pain threatened to unseat him from his horse. But then strong arms held him against an armored chest.

"Hold fast, Nikulainen," Valtias said deep in his mind.

Sarianna awoke to the most beautiful singing. As she opened her eyes, there sat Lady Reija in a window seat shining in the glorious morning sunshine.

"Good morning, Daughter," the Lady smiled. "I hope you are ready for a bath and some food. Your maidservant has been most anxious."

Sarianna laughed. "She is very loyal and determined. I am ready."

"Are you rested?"

"Aye, milady," she smiled. "I slept very deeply in a weave of happiness."

"More of my Lord's doing," Reija said. "He likely watched over Niku all night... I cannot wait to see them."

"I know. I feel the same way."

Hanna entered carrying a tray of food. She looked none the worse for the journey despite the scowl on her face.

"Ah, you are awake," she said more brightly. "Your bath is drawn, and I have some food. You did not have an evening meal."

Sarianna was instantly famished. "I know. And I am missing it now."

"Hurry and bathe then, so you may eat," Hanna said.

Sarianna looked at her maid in puzzlement as she helped with the bathing. The scowl persisted despite doing the tasks she was so determined to complete. "Hanna, what gives you such a sour look?"

"'Tis nothing I cannot cope with, Princess."

"Hanna!"

"Your maidservant is most likely plagued by those maids who sought my son's affections," Reija said. "I am relieved your dear servant came. I did not want you ill-treated. But I will not tolerate this any longer."

"What will you do?" Sarianna asked.

"I will send them from service in these halls if I do not hear the right tone in their apologies," she replied. "We will deal with them after Niku returns."

That erased Hanna's displeasure. The rest of Sarianna's morning preparations were uneventful. She chose a lovely but less formal dress of blue. The Ritvala court was more informal than Arinpera even with guests. She dressed her hair so it was mostly unbound. The Lady Reija approved.

"You are very beautiful, Sarianna. The songs did not do you justice."

"I am flattered by such words from an incomparable beauty," Sarianna said.

"Eat, child, eat," Reija said playfully. "Much is stirring. All that confusion can only mean my son's return is nigh."

The Princess obeyed, nearly attacking the wonderful meal before her. Between bites, she asked things she knew would be difficult to answer later. "What was Niku like as a child?"

The Lady chuckled, then sighed. "He was beautiful, but I thought him possessed by a demon. He could find mischief in the most benign of places and situations. His physical antics and lack of fear kept me in constant worry over his safety... but he was so bright and so full of mirth and so very kind to all. Anything he did, one had to forgive... eventually. Do not worry; I believe you will have more than one of them."

Sarianna gaped at her. Just then Jorgen was knocking at the door. Upon entering, they were informed a messenger had come from the Arinperan company. Magnus required their presence at once.

"Assassins are in the western woods," Magnus said quietly. "Niku sent word they are going to make for the company awaiting him."

"There is more," Sarianna said.

"He has asked that if he or Valtias is felled, there be no war."

Sarianna barely heard Lady Reija's gasp. Or Julin's surprise. A searing pain shot through her shoulder. She cried out, expecting there to be blood on her hand, but there was none. Then there was the voice in her mind crying out her name.

"Niku!" she gasped. "He has been felled!"

Before anyone could react, Sarianna ran from the room. She did not know how she knew the way, for she had hardly paid attention when Julin had guided her the previous day. With the graceful swiftness of a gazelle, she ran out of the keep to the main gates. Nikerym's horn was sounding. She did not have to scream for them to open the gates.

A large white horse was suddenly in front of her. On it was a tall, golden man in magnificent armor made of leather. He looked like Lady Reija. He was holding Nikulainen to his chest.

"Niku!" she cried out again in emotional agony. "No!"

She reached his side before anyone else and clasped one limp hand. It closed around hers instantly with a grip that kept her in place. There were many men around her then. Julin tried to pull her away.

"We have to get him help, Sarianna. You have to let go," he said.

Before the Princess could protest, the man holding him spoke. "She may be the only thing holding him here. Help me get him to his bed. Send my daughter to him. I need her aide."

Thus, Julin and Nikerym bore the Prince down and carried him to his chambers. All the while, he clutched Sarianna's hand. The Princess glanced occasionally at Lord Valtias, who met each gaze with compassion and warmth. He made her want to cry for some reason.

"You must not despair, Sarianna of Arinpera," he said as Nikulainen was placed in the bed. "He needs your strength as a beacon. You must not allow him to let go."

"Go? He may not go!" she exclaimed with a flash of anger. "You promised me, Niku!"

Nikulainen moaned, bringing a smile to Valtias.

"Father!" Lady Reija exclaimed from the entrance. "Niku!"

"Help me with him, Daughter. We shall reunite later," Valtias said. "Cut his clothing off."

Sarianna met Julin's eyes for a moment. Both were uncomfortable with a sudden urge for mirth. Valtias smiled at them. "If it is your way to tease him, do so. We have to ground him with the living."

Nikerym handed Julin a knife. The older Prince sighed. "I was merely thinking that his clothes should be made to tear away. It would make things simpler... I have never seen him really hurt."

"Nor have I," Magnus said as he entered. His face was pale and his eyes sheened with unshed tears. "He has never even been ill."

Valtias looked at Magnus for a long moment with an appraising gaze. "He is incredibly strong, your Highness. And he has a lot to live for. But first, the arrow must come out. Sarianna hold onto him with all your might."

It was a hideous thing made of blackened wood. They broke the feathered end off the shaft, then pushed it through his shoulder. Sarianna held Nikulainen's hand while wiping his brow with a damp cloth Jorgen pressed into her hand. Meanwhile, Reija pressed Magnus into service helping to prepare some sort of herbs in a bowl with water

from Valtias' water skin. Reija chose the herbs while Magnus used his strength to crush the herbs and mix them.

Nikulainen moaned plaintively as the arrow was pushed the rest of the way out his shoulder. Tears streamed through his closed eyes. Sarianna held on, cooling his brow and brushing away tears and whispering him that she was there and would not leave him. She had hoped his pain was over once the arrow was gone, but there was much more he had to endure. A funnel with a long tube from Valtias' store of supplies was inserted into the wound. The herbal mix was poured in. While Reija and Valtias placed hands on the wound and chanted in their native tongue, Nikulainen seemed to glow for a long moment. He cried out then, wailing in agony for what seemed like an eternity. Then he collapsed.

"Niku!" Sarianna exclaimed. Tears sprang to her eyes as a cold panic seized her heart. He still held her hand, but he had gone completely still. "You come back to me this instant! Niku!!"

Nikulainen gasped suddenly. His eyes fluttered open and met hers instantly.

"Sarianna..." he whispered.

"Do not speak, child," Valtias said quietly. "Drink deeply from this skin. The waters from my home will strengthen you."

Nikulainen obeyed and drank a lot of the water. He settled back on the bed with a weary sigh. Valtias stoked his brow gently.

"The herbs have rid you of the poison. They will heal you and make you sleep," he said gently. "Once you are properly bandaged, I will take my leave of you until later."

"Julin, Nikerym, my thanks to you both," Magnus said. "If you would aid the company and the Suurimetsa in finding the assassins and securing the area, I would be grateful."

"Of course, Father," Julin said. "I will also see that all the visitors are properly housed and fed."

"Thank you," Magnus said again.

The Great King was deeply shaken by nearly losing Nikulainen. He was grateful to everyone. Lady Reija finally took his hand to calm him. Once the Prince was bandaged, each parent kissed his brow.

"Rest, my son," Reija said softly. "We will all see you this evening."

"Sarianna... must stay..." he said weakly.

"She will, but you must let her hand go so that she can tend to you and herself," Reija said with a smile.

He nodded at that with a faint smile, releasing Sarianna's hand.

"Come, Magnus, Father. Niku has Sarianna and his servants to tend him. He must rest," Lady Reija said. "We all need a moment to recover so we may speak of many, many things."

"Perhaps some wine," Magnus said dryly. "Or something stronger."

"It is very early, my love," Lady Reija said.

"I know."

"I have brought strong drink from my home," Valtias suggested. "That would aid in our recovery."

Magnus nodded. "Let us have some right away. We shall retire to my main hall and await the outcome of the skirmish."

Once the room was empty save for Jorgen and Hanna, Sarianna sagged onto the bed. Hanna stepped forward.

"If I may, Princess?"

"Yes, Hanna?"

"I will see that soups and meats are prepared for the Regent's midday and evening meals. Jorgen can bring water for a wipe-down in the evening," she said. "We will check in on you to see if you need anything."

"I will have a page outside in case you need to call us," Jorgen said.

"Thank you," Sarianna said. She looked at Nikulainen, who was staring at her with heavy lidded eyes. "Niku, you must rest."

"Stay with me... here," he murmured.

Sarianna was suddenly weary despite her long rest that night. All that fear had drained her. Hanna was at her side with her night shift. The Princess accepted the aid with her clothes gratefully. She climbed into bed, allowing Nikulainen to loop an arm around her waist to hold her along his uninjured side. Hanna covered them both.

"Thank you for staying," she whispered against his chest.

"I promised," he sighed. "And I did not tarry..."

She felt him fall asleep.

Chapter Twenty Three

There were many curious things occurring when Nikulainen next woke. It was not quite sunset. He could not tell if he had slept through the night and another day. Had he only been asleep several hours, it was most curious that there was little pain in his shoulder. There was an ache that he felt deeply and an odd tingling in his fingers, but not the pain he had had before. The most curious thing though was the sound of a sword unsheathing. From the movement in the bed, he knew it was Sarianna pulling the weapon, but he could sense no urgency in her nor could he sense any danger.

"Sarianna..." he whispered.

The Princess silenced him with a lovely finger on his lips then eased out of bed. Sarianna crept to the door of the sleeping chamber which was slowly swinging open. In an impressive show of speed and strength, his beloved had seized the intruder and backed her against the door with the tip of the sword at her throat.

"What is your business here?" Sarianna demanded.

It was Nona, one of the bolder maidservants. Nikulainen sighed in exasperation. He had known the girl to be very forward, but this was beyond the pale. He did not feel sorry at all for the terror in her eyes.

"Answer me!" The Princess demanded.

"I... I was told that the Prince needed... needed to be bathed..."

"No one told you to come here with your services," Sarianna said quietly.

"No-no... I just thought... I am one of his servants, after all."

"That's not true," Nikulainen said softly. "You are under my mother's command. She would never send you thus."

"Hush, Niku. You should be resting," the Princess said in a soft tone. "And you shall be leaving and never returning."

"I meant no trespass."

"Oh, yes, you did. You thought me a delicate slip of a Princess that would acquiesce to anything told me in this foreign place out of fear of a misstep," Sarianna said in a cold voice. "I have no reason to fear anyone where the Regent is concerned. He is mine. You may tell those other harpies that, if they wish to keep their hair or their limbs, to stay away from me and stay far away from him."

Her voice was so quiet and confident that it chilled Nikulainen, and he had no reason to fear – or so he hoped. Nona's eyes were huge in their fear. And then Hanna and Jorgen were entering the room from the sitting area.

"Nona!" Jorgen snapped. "This really is too much! You have been warned about this."

"Really? And I was going to let her go with a warning," Sarianna said. "Perhaps the loss of a limb will bring you around."

Nona's lip trembled. She was about to cry. Nikulainen wanted her and everyone else out of his chambers so he could hold his wife. But to have that solitude, he had to end this skirmish.

"Sarianna, leave her to Jorgen. I'm certain that no one else shall trespass again," he said gently. "Come back to me."

Sarianna did not hesitate. She returned to the bed and re-sheathed her blade. Once she was near, he took hold of her once more.

"Claim my lips, Beloved. It has been too long," he whispered knowing that Nona still watched.

Sarianna understood what he was about as well. She smiled at him before covering his parted lips with her own. The kiss was gentle but it moved him deeply. He barely heard Nona being pushed out of the room by a very irritated Jorgen. His heart beat too loudly in his ears. And the kiss felt too good for him to care.

"You were protecting me," he said in wonder once the delicious kiss ended.

"Of course."

"No one has thought I needed protection before."

"There was one who did," she said. "But that was when you were very small."

Nikulainen thought for a moment. "Julin. I remember now. You two have been talking."

"Yes. He has been very kind."

"He was teasing me again," the Prince realized.

"It could not be helped, Beloved," Sarianna smiled, soothing his furrowed brow, then kissed him once again. "I know it was not your fault."

Jorgen knocked once again. Upon Sarianna's summons, he and Hanna entered.

"We have food if you are hungry," Jorgen said.

"I think you should eat, my Love," she said.

"Very well."

"Jorgen, help me sit the Regent up and rest him on the headboard."

"I have little pain, Sarianna," Nikulainen protested. "I can move."

"Perhaps so, but I'd rather you did not tax the wound," she said reasonably.

Nikulainen nodded without comment, allowing Jorgen to help him up. He did not know why he resented having to be helped, but he did.

"You have never been seriously injured or ill," Sarianna said gently. "You are unaccustomed to being less able than your usual perfection."

He laughed at that. "I am perfection?"

Her smile grew warmer. "I believe you are."

Nikulainen cheered at that statement, then began to eat his soup. Sarianna began to eat as well while Jorgen and Hanna bustled about the room. They cleared away the leftover bandages and straightened out the Prince's weapons. He glanced at the Princess, who was watching the pair intently. She glanced at Nikulainen, who nodded.

"You will not tax the Regent in telling him every single detail of what went on with that maid," Sarianna said. "But you may tell us the decision."

Jorgen nodded. "Lady Reija was not pleased at the intrusion while the Regent is healing. Her ire was felt by the entire staff at having to set what should be obvious boundaries around the Regent and the Princess."

"Lady Reija has ire?" Sarianna asked. "I cannot imagine her other than serene."

"She has a lot of ire when provoked," Nikulainen said dryly.

The Princess laughed while gently pushing errant strands of hair from his flushed face. "The Lady told me some of your childhood. I suspect you were the source of provocation."

Nikulainen would not say. He turned back to Jorgen. "What has been decided about the maid?"

"And her ilk?" Sarianna chimed in.

"Nona has been banished from the main halls of the keep," Jorgen said. "All other maids are to stay away from your chambers unless requested, and they are to show Hanna the utmost respect."

"I suppose that will do," Sarianna said glumly.

The Prince laughed. "I know you would have their hair hacked off and sent to shovel manure, but what would happen with their next transgressions?"

Sarianna glared at him before turning her attention to their servants. "Jorgen, the Regent requires new tunics."

"Yes, Princess. I have some in reserve always, but I will order more," he replied with a smile.

"How is Ajaa?" Nikulainen asked suddenly.

"He was right behind Lord Valtias into the gate. I have settled him," Jorgen replied. "I will take him treats tonight."

"Thank you."

"Princess, do you wish to dress for the Regent's visitors? I am told they will come after the evening meal," Hanna said.

"I think my robe would suffice. They are all family," Sarianna said with some wonder. "A short while ago, I had none but my father to call family. Now I have another father, a mother, a grandfather, brothers and uncles."

"Might I have that bath before I see anyone? I have gone without for days," Nikulainen said with a frown. "I wish a full bath."

"Niku, your wound..."

"I feel little discomfort, Sarianna. Look under the bandage," he said. "I believe the skin has mended."

It was clearly against her better judgment, but she did look. Her face was full of confusion and awe. "I saw the wound. It was jagged and bloody and angry. I see nothing now but redness on your smooth skin."

"Healing must be one of Lord Valtias' gifts," Nikulainen said.

"Still, your arm was torn nearly apart. And there was much blood loss," she replied. "We should take care at least until tomorrow."

"I will lean on you, Sarianna... Please."

His dark eyes were imploring her so sweetly. She wondered anew about the demons their children would be. Still, she could not resist his plea. "Very well, but you will take care."

"Aye," he agreed sincerely.

Nikulainen did as he was bid and rested quietly in a great chair by the fire where Jorgen deposited him. As he watched, the bath water was fetched, the fire was built up, and the linens were changed. Notes were sent to King Magnus delaying any visitors

until after he had been cleaned and dressed. He did not want to admit any weakness, as the feeling was so new to him, but he was greatly fatigued. That would not turn him from his plans. He had days of trail dust and residuals of his own blood on his skin and in his hair. He did not wish to lie with Sarianna in such a state. There would be a cost to his insistence, but it was important to him.

"I will leave on my shift in case I require Jorgen's help," she said simply, leaving him no room for argument.

"You will sleep unclothed with me," he countered just as firmly. Before she could protest, he continued. "I will ask that we have no unannounced visitors. I shall not be denied the pleasure of sleeping as we have been because of my family."

She nodded. Her expression softened and warmed. "I have missed your warm skin as well. And in moments of despair, I have felt cheated that our bonding has been so taxed by concerns outside ourselves."

Nikulainen pulled her into a brief kiss. "I know. But it will not always be so. I am ready."

Sarianna offered her surprisingly sturdy shoulders to hold onto as he stood. He was a little lightheaded and shakier than he would have liked, but his Princess said nothing. She merely wrapped both arms around his waist and gave him steady support to the tub. He was breathing heavily once settled into the hot, fragrant water, but it felt good to his taxed muscles. There were a few more shaky moments as Nikulainen dipped back in the water to wet his hair and then to rinse it. For the most part though, he lost himself in Sarianna's pleasure in bathing him.

Sarianna's eyes had gone as dark as they did when they made love. Her movements were languid as if she did not wish to hurry that time with him. Great care was given to detangling his hair. She did not tug it even once. The brushing nearly put him to sleep. But then the Princess was smoothing warm and creamy suds all over his body, turning any thoughts away from sleep.

"Your eyes make promises that I do not believe Lord Valtias would permit you to keep," she smiled as he stood before her.

"I find no harm in thinking about it. The thoughts are very pleasant and make me concentrate on getting my strength back," Nikulainen replied with a contented smile as she rinsed him with hot water. He held onto the back of a heavy chair for balance. The same chair was used to aid his standing while she dried him.

Nikulainen settled himself on the bed. He sighed in pleasure at the feel of the linens on his clean skin. It was prevailed upon him to put on a night shift for company after the bandage was replaced. Once satisfied that he was comfortably settled and warmly covered, Sarianna put on her robe.

"And what is your wish of me once you are stronger?" she asked with an air of innocence. Her face was flawlessly so, but her eyes were all heat.

He met that heat with his own. "I would regain my strength so that you may restrain it and take your pleasure from me."

"Truly?"

"We have not done so since our wedding."

"There has been no time."

“’Tis true, but that was not the only reason for it,” Nikulainen said in a soft but serious tone. “I choose to let you take my strength. You would not ever try to diminish who I am. Rowsdower’s foul handling has not changed that feeling.”

“Ah, Niku...” Sarianna sighed. She leaned in to kiss him. It was certain that she meant it to be a brief one as she tried to pull away quickly, but Nikulainen would not let her go. Then he deepened the kiss, coaxing a delicious moan from her.

And then there was the sound of a throat clearing. The pair ended the kiss and looked up to find Lord Valtias smiling at them. He was wearing a long robe-like garment that was a rich, dark green with muted gold accents. There was a simple gold crown circling his head of a similar design to that Nikulainen had worn. His eyes sparkled in amusement at them though he was slowly shaking his head.

“Nikulainen may seem strong. I have no doubt that his needs are strong,” Valtias said. His voice was serious, but there was mirth in his eyes. “But the arrowhead and the poison have taken much from him. He must rest.”

Sarianna’s face went red as she backed away from Nikulainen to sit next to him.

“Do not blame her, my Lord,” Nikulainen said squeezing her hand. “I have not made the way easy for her.”

“Then you must be healing,” Magnus said as he entered the room. The King looked in good humor and stood easily beside Lord Valtias.

“I am, Sire,” the Prince replied. “Where is Mother?”

“She is with her brothers and will see you shortly,” Magnus replied. “I bring you news of the skirmish.”

"Have all my men returned?"

"Aye, there were other arrow wounds, but Lord Valtias' sons are skilled healers as well," Magnus replied.

"I wish I could visit the wounded and address the rest of the men," the Prince said wistfully.

"They will understand the delay, Niku," the King said. He gazed upon his son with great pride. "I wanted you to know that Nikerym caught one assassin alive. I must question him at once."

"Take my sons with you, Sire," Valtias suggested. "They know when someone is lying."

"I will. Thank you," he said. "I will leave you to visit, Niku, and see you later."

Magnus gave Valtias a bow, then departed. The elder Lord moved to the top of the bed, where he gently examined Nikulainen's wound before carefully examining his eyes. Finally, he laid his palm on the Prince's brow.

"You are very strong, Nikulainen," Valtias said quietly. "Rest in this bed until the second sunrise from this day, and you will be as you were."

"That does not seem so long, does it?" Sarianna said.

"It will to a man who could never sit still from one moment to the next," Lady Reija said. She was radiant with a gladness that Nikulainen had never seen before in his serene mother.

"I was very small then, Mother," the Prince replied dryly though he did smile.

"I have found that when men are ill or wounded, they become like small boys," she replied merrily. Her gaze fell upon Sarianna, who looked innocently away.

"How go things, Mother?" he asked by way of changing the subject.

"I have had a day that I thought could only exist in my dreams," she replied. "I will not tax you with details, but I will thank you both. I have my Father and my Love, and they broke bread with my brothers in peace."

"I had not thought it possible, but this day was so joyful that all my sorrow can be forgotten," Valtias said softly.

There were tears in Sarianna's eyes. Nikulainen felt some threatened to spill. He sensed that the people in front of him still had volumes of time to make up for. With the brothers busy with Magnus, this would be a great opportunity.

"I think you should continue your reunion with each other. I am told to be still anyway," Nikulainen said.

"Niku, that is very thoughtful of you," Lady Reija smiled. "And it works out that you have your beautiful bride to yourself."

"You have said that he is wise," Valtias commented. "And he is right. He needs peace and quiet to let the healing finish. Your brothers bring anything but peace with them, and now they have that other Prince to urge them onward."

"Julin?" Sarianna asked.

"Yes," the Lord replied ruefully. "His strange sense of humor appeals to them for some reason. The last thing they need is encouragement."

Nikulainen understood then why his mother enjoyed the lively banter between him and his brothers once they were older. A pang of sorrow hit him once more over the absence of Armas. Sarianna squeezed his hand. Both the Lord and the Lady looked at him intently.

"There, there, my son," the Lady said gently. "Peace means no sadness. We will leave you with Sarianna."

"You will check in, will you not?" he asked, feeling guilty about suggesting they leave.

"Of course," she assured him. "Come father. I shall show you the gardens. Jorgen will be in with your meals shortly."

With that, they were alone. Nikulainen looked at the Princess, who was brushing a tear from one eye. "There is always some sorrow mixed with happiness. That is the way of things. Had Armas been here, I do not think the reunion would have been as smooth."

"I know," he admitted quietly.

Sarianna inched over to Nikulainen's side, once more she held him gently and rested her head on his uninjured shoulder. He quieted then and let himself just feel her presence.

"Do you mind keeping me company while I heal, Sarianna?" He asked at last. "I know it is bothersome to be confined to my chambers."

Sarianna rose to look on his face. She smiled at him, then gently kissed his brow. "Where else would I be but by your side? It is my duty and my honor and my joy to aid in your healing."

He risked a quick kiss to reward her sweet words. "Jorgen is coming. He and Hanna seem in better spirits if the laughter is a gage."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Did you notice that they both carry the scent of arnica oil?" He asked with a naughty smile.

"Nay, I did not," she laughed merrily. "I am glad to hear that as well."

Chapter Twenty Four

Sarianna had watched Nikulainen with his mother and his grandfather carefully. He was very excited to be with them. She knew he wanted to spend more time in their presence. That caused her to wonder if his suggestion they continue their reunion without him was in part for her benefit. Though the success of the reunion made her very happy, Sarianna had not relished the thought of all those people crowded into Nikulainen's chambers.

"I pray you did not send you Mother and the Lord away on my account," Sarianna said as they awaited Jorgen and Hanna.

"Nay, I knew you would not begrudge my time with my kin," he said. "But there seemed no way to see some and not see all. I must admit that I am fatigued... and we had been apart..."

Jorgen and Hanna arrived then. They seemed to be sharing some secret amusement that threatened to make them burst into laughter.

"We have more soup for the Regent and meats which Valtias says you must eat," Jorgen said.

"Do I have food as well?" Sarianna asked.

"Of course, Princess!" Hanna laughed. "The tray is well-laden with a wonderful repast. Valtias suggested you have some wine to help you relax. For the Regent, there is a tea the Lord prepared himself."

"You are to drink it when you are ready for sleep," Jorgen chimed in. "It will help you sleep deeply."

The food was arranged between them on the bed. The wine was placed on a table next to Sarianna's side. The tea was set on a table nearest Nikulainen.

"Thank you, friends," Nikulainen said. "The evening is young, Jorgen. You should show Hanna the city."

"I had hopes to, Regent," Jorgen said glancing shyly at the maidservant.

"First things first," Hanna chided gently. "There is fresh water in the pitcher by the basin and drinking water next to the wine. Is there anything else you need?"

"Please get word to Lady Reija to allow us to rise and dress before anyone visits," Sarianna said, managing not to blush.

"Yes, Princess," she said. "Goodnight."

With that, Hanna turned to leave. Jorgen stood rooted to the floor unsure of what to do. Before the maid left, she turned to him.

"I thought we were to see the city," she asked innocently.

Jorgen smiled brightly. "Goodnight, your highnesses."

They were gone then. Sarianna looked at Nikulainen and laughed.

"Were we that obvious?" Sarianna wondered.

"We could not have been, or there would have been more challenges to the union," he said. "We may have lost our servants."

"I do not think so," she replied. "I hope not."

The food was delicious and more than welcome. Sarianna's meals had become sporadic since leaving Arinpera. She was famished. Nikulainen did not attack his food the way he would normally, but he was slowly eating all that was placed before him.

"My apologies, Sarianna," he said after a time. "It seems we share less conversation since we have wed."

She shrugged. "I am not uncomfortable with our silence, Niku. I am heartened that I do not feel the need to fill the air with words around you. I still feel that your focus is upon me."

"Always," he smiled.

"Your color has returned," she said softly. "You are no longer like marble."

"I feel my strength seeping back steadily," he said. "I do not like feeling this way. I will be better prepared for the next battle."

"Beloved, no one can be perfection each time," she said gently. "You are as finely trained as possible."

"I was too confident," he said. "I knew the woods well and was too assured of my own speed. I wore no armor. All of the Lord's men wore it, and they have the same skills as I."

"Their armor looks very light," she said.

"It is, but it is very strong."

"Perhaps sharing such armor would be a fine wedding gift," she suggested.

He nodded at that. "A prudent plan, Beloved. I have much to live for after all."

For that comment, a kiss was granted. They finished the meal in silence. After clearing the tray away, they undressed and settled under the blankets. Sarianna sipped her wine while Nikulainen had his tea.

"I will be asleep before long," he said. "How will you amuse yourself?"

"Aside from watching you sleep, I will write my father that we are safe. I suspect that we will be here until your parents wed," she said.

"Yes, that is very likely," he smiled. "But they will not tarry. They know we must return as soon as possible. By the time I am allowed to leave my bed, I am certain that we will know."

"What should I include from you in my letter?"

"Give the Great King my regards and thanks that you are with me. Thank him for his advice about my Grandfather," he said in a quiet voice, heavy with sleep.

At the sound of Nikulainen's fading voice, Sarianna rose to take the cup from his hands, then settled him back onto the mattress. His eyes were barely open, but he was fighting.

"You will remain beside me?" he asked with a heavy, fuzzy voice.

"I am just getting my writing supplies. In just a moment, I will return to your side," she said, hurrying to her trunk. She returned quickly with vellum, pen and ink to find Nikulainen still stubbornly awake.

“Sleep, Niku. I am here to watch over you,” she said, gently stroking his brow.
“Close your eyes...”

Nikulainen obeyed. With a contented sigh, he fell asleep.

Sarianna wondered why he felt so vulnerable. Even in sleep he reached for her. Nikulainen held onto her, placing a hand on one thigh before he stilled. It touched her that he sought her support and protection. She gently brushed his brow, then set about writing the letter to her father.

A bittersweet feeling spread through Sarianna as she began to think about her words. She suddenly missed Vauraus deeply and worried if he was very sad without her. She swallowed the lump in her throat and let her feelings of excitement and wonder during the trip come through instead of the sorrow felt at her absence from him. The missive took on a life of its own as she found herself relating everything with the same enthusiastic detail as she would while telling Vauraus a tale at home. Before she knew it, there were pages filled in her precise hand. And from the state the candles were in, she knew that hours had passed.

Nikulainen grew restless just as she set the letter and the writing implements aside on the bed table. As Sarianna discarded her robe and night shift and settled in beside him, the Prince grew distressed. His breath came in shallow pants, and sweat broke out on a furrowed brow. Sarianna tried to soothe him by petting his hair and wiping his brow. She was reluctant to wake him from much needed sleep. And for a while, it seemed she would not have to. He quieted once again and seemed to be sleeping

peacefully. Sarianna waited for a time, watching him. She did not want to go to sleep when he might need her. The wait was not very long.

“Nay, do not,” Nikulainen whispered in a tone so desperate it made her heart ache. “Please, do not do this...”

His breath caught for long moments, frightening her. Then he would let out a soft sob and begin pleading once again. Sarianna could not bear to see and hear him in such a state.

“Niku,” she said soothingly. “Niku, hear me. You are safe. No one can harm you...”

“Nay!” He gasped in a strangled tone. “Please... please...”

“Niku! She said in a louder and firmer voice. “You must hear me!”

“He cannot,” a voice said from the door, startling Sarianna badly.

“Forgive me, child,” Lord Valtias said sincerely as she scrambled to cover herself. “But I had to intrude, or we would lose his consciousness to another plane.”

The Lord quickly moved to the bed and placed a hand on Nikulainen’s damp brow. Immediately, the Prince stilled.

“Call to him gently as you were.”

“Niku,” Sarianna said softly. She hoped her voice betrayed no upset. “You are safe. No one can harm you. You are in my arms.”

She slid down into the blankets and pulled him to her. Nikulainen rested partially on top of her with his head on her shoulder. He scented her skin and her hair, then sighed with a slight smile.

“What happened to him, my Lord?”

"The tea sent him onto the dreamscape," Valtias replied. "He was seeing something that was very personal and disturbing. But he is untried in such journeys. He had no detachment from what he was witnessing, thus he was feeling and hearing as well as seeing."

"It seemed something to do with Armas and some turmoil," Sarianna murmured. "I couldn't see clearly."

"But none can see another's dreamscape," Valtias replied in a whisper. "I could only feel his pain."

Sarianna was puzzled anew. "'Tis only the bond between us."

"The bond would not allow you to see into another's dreamscape. Nor would it allow you to see into the heart of King Magnus where others were blind," Valtias replied. "But talk of your gifts can wait. My grandson's recovery is paramount now."

"Thank you for coming to his aid."

"I ask you to forgive my foolishness," Valtias said. "Nikulainen should never have been given a tea at full strength. I should have known this."

"You are forgiven. I am certain that Niku will agree," she said.

"I will leave you now," Valtias said. He extinguished the candles in the room, leaving it cast in moon and firelight. "Rest."

Once the door was closed, Sarianna gently turned in Nikulainen's embrace so that her back was spooned against him and his arms were wrapped firmly about her body. The sword and staff were in reach if she needed them. She let sleep take her.

Nikulainen felt very strange. His eyes were open, and he was moving, but it did not feel as though he was awake or in any sort of reality he'd ever known. The colors were garish, and it did not feel as though his feet were on firm ground. He was in some sort of encampment. The strangeness of the colors and symbols made it hard to identify whose it was. With a start, Nikulainen realized that he was in Queen Taraasta's encampment. Along with sight, Nikulainen could hear and smell everything, yet no soldier he ran across seemed to see him.

"I must be in a dreamscape," Nikulainen thought. He had heard of the experience from Lady Reija often but had never experienced it.

Nikulainen seemed to be traveling a path that was of someone else's choosing. That path led to a large and opulent tent in the middle of that company. There he found a tableau that was so shocking, it drove the breath from his body. There was Armas completely naked, chained facing a post. The elder Prince's skin was brightly bruised from his shoulder to his buttocks. Those brighter bruises were atop of older, healing bruises.

Nikulainen wondered when this happened or if it had happened. He wondered who had been abusing his brother. Then, as if by his unuttered command, Taraasta was in the tent, stalking around the pole. Armas was trying to keep his head down. This seemed to amuse her.

"So you can learn," she sneered. "Or is it that you simply do not relish being left alone."

Armas did not reply. He kept his eyes down. Taraasta moved closer to him but still did not touch him.

"No, you do not like being alone at all," she murmured. "The attention must always be on Armas. He of the biggest battle tale or the biggest stag. You would rather suffer under my hands rather than be ignored."

Taraasta had a whip in her hands. She suddenly took the handle, whipped it over Armas' head to press it against his throat with both hands. Suddenly, Niku found he could not breathe. Fear seized his heart with icy cold fingers.

"Nay, please do not," he pleaded in his mind.

Nikulainen his breath was leaving him again. He pleaded for himself and for Armas, but Taraasta would not hear. She was pressing that thing against his throat and taking his air.

"Your pleasure... nay, your very life is mine," she whispered as she tortured him. "You will never do anything that I have not commanded."

Armas was yielding. There was a strange and intense pleasure building in the older Prince's belly. Nikulainen thought he was dying. Suddenly, the feelings were gone. Though still a witness, the tactile sensations were faint. He felt familiar presences around him. One was a source of deep comfort. The other was gently calling to him. The voice was soothing and compelling. Sarianna was calling him to her. She was telling him that he was safe. His body headed toward that beguiling voice until he found her scent and felt her warmth all around him. For an instant he woke, and found

himself pressed against her body with his face against her shoulder. He breathed her scent deeply, then his mind found sleep again.

The next time Nikulainen knew anything for certain, he was waking. Sarianna's soft hair was near his nose and her lovely backside was pressed against him. He held her firmly against him, but it did not distress his bride. She was sleeping peacefully as he stirred. Only when he tried to pull away from her, did she wake.

"You do not have to move from me, Beloved," she said sleepily. "Just because I cannot fulfill that need that is insistently calling, does not mean I would banish you from this embrace."

Nikulainen smiled against her skin. "Alas, if I stay in this embrace, I will be far more agitated than would suit Lord Valtias. And our morning meal shall arrive soon."

Sarianna released the arms she had imprisoned with a sigh, then turned to face him. Those lovely deep blue eyes considered him carefully before reaching out to smooth his hair, then caressing his face.

"You grow stronger, but I can tell your sleep was not undisturbed," she said quietly.

"That is true, but not for the entire night," he replied.

There was a gentle knock at the door before he could answer. Sarianna quickly pulled on her robe before climbing back into bed beside him. Once properly arranged, she nodded, and Nikulainen bid the visitor to enter.

Lord Valtias entered looking resplendent in his robes and the early morning sunshine. He smiled at the pair as he came to stand at the top of the bed nearest Nikulainen.

"I see that you are healing well despite last night's disturbance," he said.

"You were here?" He gasped. "Did you see?"

"I heard you cry out in pain, but I could not see the cause. No one can," Valtias replied.

"Forgive me," the Prince said in a voice filled with quiet anguish. "I do not wish to keep secrets from either of you. What I saw was not meant for others to share. I dearly wish that I had not witnessed it myself."

"I do not seek to know the exact nature of your vision, but it would help you and Sarianna if you unburdened yourself of how that dream made you feel," Valtias replied mildly. "An eye with some distance may be better able to give meaning to what you saw."

Nikulainen nodded but remained silent for a long moment, collecting himself. Finding the right words was difficult, and he blushed despite himself.

"I saw Armas, my brother, and Queen Taraasta," he said quietly. "It seemed that she has a powerful influence over him in many ways."

"It seemed?" Sarianna asked.

"My heart told me something different from what my eyes witnessed," he replied. "Though it was twisted and base, it seemed that he enjoys her attentions. But the enjoyment was not for pleasure. It seemed to fuel a hatred."

"What sort of hatred?" Valtias wondered. "I have had an erroneous opinion of King Magnus, but I can say resolutely that he did not raise his children in hatred."

"Himself," Sarianna said almost to herself. "He hates himself."

The Prince nodded mutely. "It blazes within him. He knows his feelings of conflict with the family are wrong, but he cannot overcome his pride. The self-loathing could eventually consume him."

"You do not believe his rash behavior has peaked," Valtias said.

"No, I do not," he replied sadly.

Sarianna considered Nikulainen intently. "Still, you feel sorry for him."

"I do," he sighed.

"Your tender feelings do you credit, Nikulainen," the Lord said. "But when you seek to find forgiveness for his failings, consider Prince Julin. He is an odd man, but he is a very good soul. His life was the same as that of Armas."

"How can this be so?" Nikulainen wondered. "How could they be so different?"

"Some metals need a hotter forge than others to purge them of impurities and make them strong," Valtias replied. "Others do not need such heat. Armas grew up in a time of peace and privilege. He did not have to endure great trials that would test his courage and his mettle. There was just the power to be had with the title he held and would hold."

"You and Julin always had trials because you were not first born," Sarianna said. "It served you in good stead."

"I understand," he sighed.

"Do you?" Valtias asked. "A day may come when you must defend your people against him."

"I know, my Lord," he replied. "A little of me will perish that day if it ever comes, but I will do all that is required."

Lord Valtias stroked his furrowed brow. "Enough. I do not mean to upset you while you heal."

"Grandfather, you bring me naught but good counsel," he replied. "I cannot but thank you for helping me in this matter."

"Now that you are at ease, you must continue to obey my strictures," he said. "I have included a weaker tea for breakfast. If you take it well, you may see your mother and father at lunch. They are burning to tell you something."

He smiled brightly at that. Sarianna chuckled.

"I believe it is something he is burning to hear," she said.

Valtias took leave of them then. Nikulainen felt his spirits lifted considerably. Later, he ate all of his breakfast and did not protest when Sarianna announced that she was having a bath behind a screen for Hanna's sensibilities. The tea put him in a light sleep, thus he was only vaguely aware of the bath and the accompanying chatter. He believed that Hanna was saying that Lord Valtias' sons and their soldiers had replaced him as objects to be pursued by the maidservants. The men of the Forest Realm were confused by the attention. Sarianna seemed to still favor hacking off their hair and having them shovel manure, but her derision had much less heat to it than the day before.

Nikulainen drifted along very pleasantly listening to the bustle about the chambers. New tunics had arrived to much fanfare. The fears of his public nakedness had once again been abated. Jorgen was thus focused on moving his things and the Prince's back

to the citadel. There was much concern over the larger pieces of furniture and how they would travel the distance. Thankfully, Sarianna ended the turmoil by promising that any furniture needed would be fashioned in Arinpera. Nikulainen did not want to lead a vast army of wagons back home. He wondered if Sarianna knew how he felt and was acting accordingly. Their bond was still very new, yet he felt her presence in his mind even more strongly than he did his mother's.

When next he awoke, sunlight was filling the room. Sarianna was sitting alongside him writing in a journal. She smiled without looking at him.

"How do you feel?" She asked, putting down her work.

"I feel... better... Fatigue still holds me, but each time I wake, it has a weaker hold than before," he replied as he sat up beside her. "I feel my limbs returning to their usual strength."

That made her smile even more brightly. "I would kiss you in celebration, but that seems to be some signal for visitors."

Nikulainen tilted his head, listening to the sounds in the hallways. He chuckled. "Your senses are as sharp as mine, it seems. Visitors do approach."

There was a knock at the door a moment later. At his call, the door opened, and his parents came inside. Julin followed them. Sarianna looked at the trio curiously.

"No, we did not ask Lord Valtias about Julin," Lady Reija said in response to the silent inquiry.

"We thought it important that both sons hear the news at the same time," Magnus said. "And he has promised not to be too taxing."

"I value my hair, after all," Julin said. "You are quite the warrior, little Sister."

Sarianna made a face, but she seemed more amused than angry. "Wait until I master the use of the sword."

"I'll not provoke you further. I've been cut up enough by your husband," he chuckled.

"Julin, behave," Magnus rumbled. "We have an announcement to make."

"Yes, Father?" Nikulainen asked with a most innocent face.

The King smiled brightly at the Lady Reija, who smiled back. They looked like nervous children. Nikulainen found them completely touching.

"On the morning after tomorrow, I will wed my Lady Reija and formally make her queen," Magnus said as he gazed at her. "A day of celebration will follow."

"This is wonderful, Father!" Nikulainen said sincerely.

"I am very happy for you, Father," Julin said. "I truly am. I will be proud to stand with you."

"As will we," Nikulainen said.

His family did not tarry long. Lady Reija said that Lord Valtias would know if she strayed too far from his strictures. Nikulainen supposed that the family trait was shared by his mother. She always seemed to know when he was up to mischief. Though he wanted them to stay, getting well was the stronger urge. Lying next to Sarianna without leave to touch her as he had was not something he wished to continue beyond the next morning. Their bond had to continue to grow. To that end, they both needed to reclaim

one another. Nikulainen meant that to begin in the morning. From the flash in Sarianna's eyes as his family left, she heard and agreed.

Chapter Twenty Five

The day passed pleasantly for Sarianna. There was a surprising amount of activity for a woman who barely left Nikulainen's bed. Jorgen spent a great deal of the morning fretting about the move back to Almourol Citadel. Sarianna was very patient and understanding with him. She could not imagine having but a few days to uproot all she had and move far away. Jorgen had to do that for two people. Or that was how he perceived the problem. The Princess had no doubt that Nikulainen would assist with his own things when he was on his feet. But that morning, all he could see was the enormity of the furniture on those wobbly wagons.

It took some time, but Sarianna gradually penetrated the panic and assured him that if the Regent desired, all the pieces of furniture could be replicated in Arinpera. All the while, the Princess had the strong feeling that her beloved was amused by what was happening in the room around him. His face was still and placid. Not even a hint of a smile tugged at his lips. And yet there was a shimmer of mirth to his presence in her mind. Perhaps he did need to be chained down and tormented for a time. He did look very tempting bathed in sunlight. It was all she could do to keep her hands off him.

The furniture crisis gave way to the joy of the wedding announcement. Those few moments with Nikulainen's kin threatened to upend all of his tranquility. There was much emotion in that room, and though it was good feeling, the Prince needed to be

still both in mind and body. She suspected that Lord Valtias knew of this upending. The tea he sent at the mid-day meal was potent. Nikulainen faded into deep sleep before his tray was taken away. Those potions were amazing to her. No matter how deeply he slept, Nikulainen woke when he was supposed to wake and with clear eyes and a clear head.

By the evening meal, her husband was nearly at his full health. There was only the barest hint of fatigue about his eyes. And she began to sense the power he kept well restrained beneath that placid exterior. Sarianna loved Nikulainen's strength. She knew just how much physical power he held in check every day. And Sarianna knew she had been courting its release.

Thus, Sarianna expected that should Nikulainen be well on that morning, there would be a reckoning for her. She was, however, very surprised to awaken in the throes of exquisite pleasure that burst through her body with white heat. Dimly, she became aware of the cool silk of her lover's hair along her thighs. Strong, elegant hands pinned her to the bed and held her open to an intimate and thorough kiss. Sarianna awoke fully, crying out her pleasure and writhing under Nikulainen's talented tongue.

The waves of pleasure were still moving deeply within her, and she had hardly caught her breath when Nikulainen had moved up her body. He claimed her mouth in a kiss that tasted of heat and of herself as he pushed his hardness into her body. The pleasure she felt had not abated when the powerful strokes from her lover's hips began to build it anew. That morn he was without mercy, driving into her with all of his strength and pent up hunger, but she had been well prepared to receive him and had a

hunger of her own. Sarianna rolled her hips, meeting each of his thrusts. Her kiss sought to devour him as much as his sought to consume her. Their passions were well matched, drawing out their lovemaking far longer than it ever had lasted. When release came, it was with an intensity that made them cry out loudly and collapse completely.

Long moments passed with Nikulainen's weight pleasantly pressing her into the mattress. They lay quietly waiting for their hearts to return to a normal rhythm. Sarianna suddenly realized that it was still dark outside.

"Niku, 'tis not even dawn," she murmured. "How are you even awake?"

"I know not," he replied with a contented sigh. "I merely woke feeling very much myself, with your lovely backside pressed wantonly against me."

She felt his smile against her skin. Still, she reached around to soundly smack his bare bottom.

"Wantonly indeed. I believe I was attacked in my sleep," she replied with as much indignation as she could muster.

He raised himself up to look into her eyes. Sarianna almost moaned at how tempting he looked with his hair mussed and his face still flushed from their shared passion. His smile was pure mischief.

"Did you mind very much?" He asked softly.

"No," she admitted with a naughty smile of her own. "Not very much."

Nikulainen kissed her again more tenderly this time. Then, he rolled onto his back, pulling her onto his body. "I believe I have healed."

Sarianna could not help chuckling. "I believe so as well."

"Beautiful Sarianna," Nikulainen sighed. "My fierce warrior. Your ardor matches mine. You take as much as you so sweetly yield."

"You take with an elegant savagery, my Love," she murmured. "I would be frightened if I did not know your gentle spirit. You are so powerful... you have my love and my body... yet you still want me to restrain you."

"Yes..."

"And use you for my pleasure..."

Nikulainen moaned and squeezed her tight. "Yes... Sarianna... anything..."

The Princess rolled him over to cover him, then rose up to look down on him. She gently stroked his hair, then traced his elegant brow. "Tell me why you want this from me. You have my trust. I do not fear you..."

"I want to be helpless for you, beautiful Sarianna," he said softly. "When you have me that way, all I have to do is feel. I do love taking you the way men do and I will do so whenever the opportunity presents itself. But I adore the way you take me. The pleasure is beyond compare. I crave that as well."

Sarianna shifted to straddle Nikulainen at his hips, loving the way his warm, silken skin felt against her thighs. She slid her hands along his arms to his wrists and grasped them firmly. Nikulainen moaned as she pulled his arms up to hold his wrists above his head.

"I confess I do like you this way," Sarianna whispered. "Such strength... such beauty... mine for the taking."

She took his parted lips in a rough kiss forcing a delicious moan from him. The sound thrummed through her body, rekindling her desire. She broke the kiss to taste the smooth skin along Nikulainen's throat.

"I have nothing to bind you," she groaned.

"Mmmm... I brought along your gift... I have the manacles," he gasped as Sarianna gently bit the curve of his shoulder.

The Princess smiled against his flushed skin. "I do love you, my beloved Regent."

Nikulainen went still, then he sighed a great sigh. This startled Sarianna, who looked up at him with concern.

"Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head. "Nay, my love. Our servants are coming at an uncommonly early hour."

Sarianna collapsed against him in irritation. "Why?"

"I suspect something has happened with the prisoner," he replied, holding her in a comforting embrace. "I thought Magnus had something else on his mind besides his wedding. Valtias likely forbade him from telling me before now."

The Princess knew there was no way of lingering after already spending days in bed. She groaned in protest anyway. Nikulainen rubbed comforting circles along her back. His touch was soothing but did nothing to cool her ardor.

"I will suffer in anticipation," he whispered. "I will suffer until you give me release."

Sarianna grasped Nikulainen's hair, then graced him with a deep and near-bruising kiss. "For tormenting me, yes, you shall suffer. Maybe, if you please me, I will give you release."

"Then I shall endeavor most hard to please, Beloved."

The fire in her Prince's eyes would indeed torment Sarianna. That fire would also sustain her throughout the day. She rose and pulled on her robe before Hanna and Jorgen arrived.

The whole of Lanakae Fortress was different from the first time Sarianna had walked its halls. There were no maidservants glaring at her. What few could be found were too preoccupied to notice them as she and Nikulainen passed arm in arm. The dining hall was considerably more festive than the first time she visited. It was the laughter that was new. Lady Reija was deeply amused by her two brothers. Even Julin's usually dry and dour expression had broken into open mirth. Magnus was beaming at the Lady's joy. Lord Valtias rose as soon as the pair entered. He smiled warmly at them.

"You look very well, Nikulainen," he said with a smile. The Lord gently cupped his grandson's chin and tilted his face up to look in his eyes. "Yes, you have fully recovered."

"Thank you, Lord Valtias," Sarianna murmured. "Niku is returned to me at full measure."

Valtias raised a brow, then leaned in to kiss Sarianna on the forehead. "You have much to do with his recovery, my dear."

Magnus drank in Nikulainen's smile as they were seated. Sarianna nodded at Lady Reija's striking brothers. The Suurimetsa certainly were a people of incredible beauty. What was even more incredible was the ease at which they sat with the man who had stolen their kin. The meal passed pleasantly with the simple chatter over daily events that any family would have. There were questions about the wedding ceremony and the celebration to follow. Despite the flurry of activity to come, everyone was relaxed and eating heartily.

Sarianna felt the warmth in the room and basked in it as well. It was especially pleasing to see Nikulainen smiling that small bright smile he would get when he was very happy. He talked quietly with his uncles about their lives in the great Forest Realm. Julin joined in with his brother, making it a family affair. Magnus' gaze fell upon them often as he spoke with Lady Reija and Lord Valtias. The Great King was very pleased at the tableau before him. He met Sarianna's eyes and smiled.

"Princess, Nikulainen tells me you are learning weapons," Hesin said.

"Yes, he has begun to teach me the quarterstaff and the sword," she replied.

"You should spar with our sister," Uurion said. "She taught us more than one lesson."

"Mother?" Nikulainen said with wide eyes. "I remember you sparring with me as a little boy, but I thought it was play."

"I met your mother on the battlefield," Magnus said with a smile. "She is very dangerous still."

"I practice every morning," she said. "Once you were older, I practiced in private. It seems female warriors are not the custom in most places."

"You should have seen our head of protocol when she saw my leggings," Sarianna chuckled merrily. "I am hoping to come back in body armor."

Lady Reija laughed as well. "And I would grant that request, however unseemly it appears."

"Indeed," Lord Valtias said. "We would gift you and Nikulainen with armor of our realm. It is light, flexible and strong."

"You can make the armor here?" Julin asked. "I would be interested in knowing the way of it."

"We can," Hesin replied. "We carry pelts to make repairs or replace pieces. It is a simple technique to harden it and shape it."

"We would be happy to share it," Uurion said. "And we would also like to spar with you and Nikulainen if he is full strength."

"Oh, he is," Sarianna remarked before she could stop herself. Then she blushed profusely, as did Nikulainen.

After the chuckles died down, Julin spoke up. "I do not suppose any of you fight with your feet on the ground?"

"Most of the time," Uurion replied amicably.

The older Prince sighed and gave the young lords a longsuffering stare.

"But to spar is not to fight," Hesin said mildly. "It is to test skills. If we get an opening where we can strike, it is merely a tag. We do not injure one another."

Julin's stare turned to Nikulainen, who shrugged.

"If you will recall, older Brother, I was usually defending myself against the level of force inflicted," the Regent said. "Eventually, it became custom. But I can spar without injuring."

"Come and watch, Prince Julin," Uurion invited. "Then join in if you wish."

"I would be honored," Julin replied.

"And Sarianna will take some lessons with me," Lady Reija said.

"Before that, I must speak to the Regent and the Princess," Magnus said. "If you would excuse us."

King Magnus rose with Nikulainen and Sarianna following him. They were led to his receiving chamber. The doors were closed behind them. Magnus sat solemnly on his throne and bid them to sit before him.

"I speak now not to my children but to the Regent and the heir to the throne of Arinpera," he said. "What I say will be sent out to the rulers of the known lands, for we all must decide."

"Yes, Sire," Nikulainen replied expectantly.

"The assassin that was captured revealed that he was sent by Queen Taraasta herself to kill you and Lord Valtias. He still held a royal decree promising great rewards for accomplishing the deed," he began. "For Arinpera and for the Forest Realm, this is an act of war even if the intent was the general instability of the Hanyanoore."

"What will you counsel the other rulers to do?" Nikulainen asked quietly.

"I would advise that under the Grand Accord, Taraasta should admit to her treachery and offer reparations to the offended parties," he replied. "Should she not, her land shall be shunned by all others. There will be no trade nor communication with her until this wrong is righted."

"That is what the Accord calls for," Sarianna said. "But even if she agrees, I find that little comfort. She works in stealth."

"And I have heard from you and seen for myself the behavior from the rulers who neighbor her lands," Nikulainen said. "They would agree to shun her, but I suspect their business would remain the same unless they were caught."

"You would move against them in war?" Magnus asked.

"You would not support such an action? There is more than enough provocation, and I agree with the Princess, she is not finished with this campaign," Nikulainen said.

"Especially now that she has Armas."

"Have you spoken to Lord Valtias?" Magnus asked.

"Nay, Sire. Why?"

"He has said much the same thing," the Great King sighed. "I cannot believe that Armas would make war against his kin."

"Talk to Julin about his brother," Sarianna advised quietly.

Magnus was startled by that. "I shall, but I know that I have no stomach for war, especially against my eldest child. And beyond that, you will find that the majority of the rulers will feel the same."

Sarianna knew that was true. Nikulainen nodded. "I know, Sire. But it is a mistake to fail to act together and quell this aggression. This action will give them time to build alliances and resources. In the end, there will be war."

"And it will be aimed at Arinpera," Sarianna said. "Armas and the Queen see us as weak militarily, and we are a rich prize."

"A march against you will bring fourth the other lands in a defensive alliance," Magnus countered.

"She will strike in darkness with assassins and poisons," Nikulainen muttered.

"Armas would not allow that!"

The men glared at each other. There was a lot of hurt and anger in their eyes. Sarianna calmed Nikulainen with a gentle touch.

"We will not argue about Armas," the Princess said quietly. "And we understand that the rulers do not want war. But you must understand what we must do."

"You would wage war on your brother?" Magnus demanded.

"Nay, Sire. But not because of a blood tie that he appears to disdain," Nikulainen said evenly. "We know that we would stand alone. But know that we will be preparing for that day. Our borders will not be as friendly, and our alliances will be uneasy."

"And if you are wrong?"

"We make no move against our neighbors. We make no accusations," Nikulainen said.

“Our friends will understand. Our family certainly should,” Sarianna stated quietly. “Your son is doing what his Sire would. He is protecting his family and the people he has sworn to serve.”

The King relented, sagging in his throne. “Forgive me. It is not right for me to be cross when you are trying to be the ruler I raised you to be. You make me very proud, Regent Niku.”

The title brought a small smile to Nikulainen’s face. They softened toward each other. The Great King reached out with a hesitant hand to touch his son’s cheek the way Lord Valtias had.

“Our borders will always be open to you, Sire,” the Regent whispered, moving to embrace him.

“You were right about Valtias, and my life is better for your counsel,” Magnus said. “I cannot commit such an aggression toward Armas, but Ritvala will stand in readiness should you need us.”

“We will leave you to draft your messages, Sire,” Nikulainen said.

“I will give the message for Vauraus to you in order to add your own,” he said.

With that, they left him. But instead of heading for the courtyard where the sparring was to begin, Nikulainen sought out the closest Suurimetsa warrior.

“Where might I find Lord Valtias?” he asked of the man.

Moments later, they were in a lovely garden off Lady Reija’s receiving room. Lord Valtias was seated under a glorious flowering tree. It was nothing like the trees Sarianna had seen along the Ritvalan countryside.

"My daughter found a seedling from our Realm on her way to this place," he said wistfully. "Somehow, she made it grow away from our soil and our water."

"It is beautiful," Sarianna said. "Are all the trees in your realm like this one?"

"All of the trees in the realm are beautiful, but this one is my favorite," he said.

"It is the first tree I climbed," Nikulainen said.

"You seek me out, Regent and Princess of Arinpera," he said. "Your talk with the King has left you troubled."

"You know the conflict that awaits," Nikulainen said.

"A war fought in shadow through terror," he replied. "A war where the enemy is never seen and there is no honor on the battlefield."

"Yes, my Lord," Nikulainen replied. "Arinpera cannot stand alone against the Hakuni."

"And I do not wish to live in fear for the lives of those I hold dear for the rest of my life," Sarianna said.

"A sudden building of our forces will make our neighbors suspicious and defensive, especially if we accept the decree against Taraasta," Nikulainen said.

"Ritvala may be unwilling to stand with you at this time, but the Suurimetsa will," Lord Valtias said solemnly. "I have already sent a messenger to my Realm. After I have seen my daughter married and had some time with her, we will march with the full strength of my forces the length of these lands to your citadel. All who see will know what an ally you have. And this ally is not bound by the Accord."

"We are honored to have such protection at our side," Sarianna said. "But how do we protect ourselves from the threat of assassins?"

"That cannot be determined until I see your lands and meet your people," Valtias replied. "I am certain we will find a way."

"There are ways to help ourselves with new armor and new ways of thinking about defense," Nikulainen said.

Sarianna thought for a long moment. "Our people are understanding. They are proud of their lands and would not give them up easily. Train the men of all Arinpera to fight if called upon. We would have the forces we need if necessary without looking like warmongers. But train our soldiers in the ways of the Forest Realm. Make them a fierce force."

Nikulainen smiled at that. "That is a wise plan, Beloved."

"The Princess and you are well suited," Valtias said. "Your reign shall be a long one."

"Thank you, my Lord," Nikulainen said.

Valtias rose to embrace them both. "Go now and enjoy your kin. They wish to know you and have much to teach you."

Chapter Twenty Six

Nikulainen had been taught to judge a man and that man's opinion of him by the way he fought. The Regent learned that day his father respected him as a ruler even while they disagreed. That pleased him immeasurably. There was some sadness as he realized that while he was forever his father's son, he was no longer his father's child. That dour feeling was diminished by the knowledge he would become his father's friend and ally. Nikulainen hoped Magnus would talk to Julin about Armas. Perhaps the strife over their older brother would cause the King to see Julin as the ruler he was destined to be. Though their father was in no way so aged that he was diminishing, Nikulainen believed it was time for the King to consider a future beyond his rule.

After his meeting with Magnus, Nikulainen allowed himself to get caught up in the excitement of sparring with his kin. The coming shadow could wait for a little while. He did not wish dark thoughts to mar the time he had with his new-found family. Sarianna changed into her tunic and leggings before donning her sword. The Princess was very excited to take up arms with Lady Reija. On some level Nikulainen knew he should have been worried about his wife learning deadly arts, but he had a stronger notion that it was wise for Sarianna know how to defend herself.

The prospect of that spar with Hesin and Uurion made his heart pound faster than its norm. Nikulainen was not afraid, but this was to be the first time he ever faced an

opponent who had absolutely equal footing. They actually may have had an advantage on him because of their greater knowledge and experience with those unique physical skills.

Others had sensed this spar would be different. A goodly number of spectators awaited on the fringe of the courtyard. Hesin and Uurion stood at the center. Julin, Nikerym and Meikka were at the front with the onlookers. Each of the uncles held weapons made of what appeared to be a lightweight wood.

"We could not find practice weapons in your armory, so we brought some of ours," Hesin said, handing Nikulainen a pair of blades.

"Practice weapons?" Julin exclaimed, giving Nikulainen a pointed look.

"You first came after me with a real blade when I had but seven winters behind me," Nikulainen retorted.

Julin smirked at that. "It made you very quick."

"Truly?" Uurion asked. "Then let us see how quick you are with us both. Fight, dear nephew. Show us your storied skill and strategy."

"Strategy?" the Regent smiled. He tossed a blade to Nikerym. "Your good right arm!"

"Yes, Regent!"

The Uncles smiled at that, then attacked. They were as fast as Nikulainen with the same feline agility and a love for the air as he. The fight was at an exhilarating pace. Hesin was Nikulainen's primary opponent. They parried and feinted and struck at one another. When a blow landed on his opponent, he was praised. When Nikulainen was

struck, it was with an instruction on his miscalculation. Most of the witnesses did not see what the praise or the instruction was about. They moved far too quickly for most to see. Fighting them was not easy.

The pair switched off against them and changed tactics as they went. Nikulainen knew they were patient. Their strikes were fierce, but he felt a calmness in them that was almost unnerving. He knew they were wearing him down and did not know how to change that. But he fought hard and as creatively as he could. Even when he sensed they decided to end the exchange by escalating the attack, Nikulainen fought harder still. He made them work to take him. In the end, they had to distract him by making Nikulainen cry out. In the split second he took to assure himself that his captain was not harmed, he took a blow to the chest that sent him to the ground.

"Well played, Nikulainen," Hesin said as he pressed his blade to his nephew's throat. "You are highly skilled. You have learned to use your abilities to an impressive degree, and you have trained your captain well. Now, we begin again."

Hesin gently held Nikulainen's face between his large hands and looked into his eyes. "You are wise to wait for the attack. But let the opponent spend the energy to try to defeat you. I know it is tempting to use your skills as you do battle, but it is most prudent to save your strength and last, then finish undiminished."

Like Lord Valtias had when they first met, Hesin touched his mind. Nikulainen felt his serenity. Despite his extreme exertion, Hesin's heart beat slowly as if in sleep. Nikulainen could feel Uurion's mind as well. He was just as serene as his brother.

"I understand," Nikulainen murmured. "We will begin again."

The Regent heard Nikerym sigh, but he took up his stance beside him and readied his weapon.

“Prince Julin, you above all others know that spectators can get drawn into battle,” Uurion said amicably. “You did very well. Ritvala has fine warriors.”

“Then why can I not raise my own goblet of wine?” The Prince demanded, though without any anger.

The uncles laughed, coaxing a smile from Julin. Nikulainen’s brother had fought well despite being surprised into battle. Julin had been listening well to his uncles during the first spar. He was far more patient than he would normally have been. And Julin knew this to be true. Had he fared poorly, there would have been no ease at the dining table. There was a lot of ease and good feeling. The men respected each other. Far more had happened that day than good sparring. His kin were very wise.

Hesin and Uurion had settled with the two Princes at the dining table. Magnus had sent word that he was still at work on the messages to the other rulers and would dine in his receiving hall. Lord Valtias was tending to some matters that kept him away. Nikulainen was about to wonder where Sarianna was when he heard the clash of practice blades coming nearer in the corridor. Suddenly, the women were in the dining hall. Lady Reija was in her leggings and jerkin, and she was laughing like a young girl amidst instructions to Sarianna. Their battle was clearly more of an exercise than a fight, but the Princess parried and blocked with great enthusiasm. Nikulainen found he was

excited the way she grunted and growled when the blades stuck each other. Lady Reija ended it with a quick series of moves that disarmed Sarianna, then pointed her blade at her daughter-in-law's heart.

"I yield," Sarianna said with a giggle.

"Well played, Princess," Lady Reija said. "You are a fine student and a fearless fighter."

Their great mirth buoyed Nikulainen's spirits even higher. He had always been happy in his father's halls, but never had he experienced such joy. They shared a fine meal. Julin managed to get some wine in him. And there was a great deal of shared laughter over tales by siblings about childhood misadventures. Sarianna laughed so hard at tales of Julin and Nikulainen that she could barely catch her breath.

As always, Sarianna had the biggest impact on Nikulainen of anyone in the room. She was a fierce beauty at that table with her hair in a loose braid down her back. Wisps of hair had escaped, tempting his fingers to tame them. Her lovely face was flushed from fighting. Her eyes flashed with humor. His Princess was enchanting everyone in the room. But when her eyes met his, there was a spark of a different kind. Sarianna was caught appraising him with appreciation. He wondered why she liked looking upon his sweat-soaked hair and clinging clothes. But she did. There was hunger in those amazing dark blue eyes that stirred him as powerfully as ever. Thus, while he enjoyed the family camaraderie at the table, a tension made his body sing deliciously in anticipation. He wondered how she would act on her hungers. The meal was made all the more intriguing because of the palpable tension between them.

There was no clue for Nikulainen as to what the intent was in Sarianna's provocative gaze. She did not hurry through her meal. Like the others at the table, she was in very good humor and unwilling to end the conversation. He enjoyed Sarianna enjoying his kin even while his beloved subtly tormented him with her simmering glances and smiles. Thus, he did not press for their departure. He enjoyed the conversations and the torment until his lady could take no more.

"If you would excuse us, milady," Sarianna said. "We must write King Vauraus of our decisions in light of King Magnus' news."

"Of course, dear ones," she smiled. "I will retire for the rest of the day to prepare for the wedding. I will see you all on the morrow."

Nikulainen wondered as they took their leave after the meal whether they too would be retiring for the rest of the day. He and Sarianna had gone through a great exertion that morning. There were strong indications that more exertions were to come. He wondered how long a day his bride could endure. Perhaps he could persuade her to make him rest for the rest of the day. He was just finished healing. She would want to care for him, especially after using him.

Sarianna looked at him with curiosity as they made their way back to their chambers. He supposed she sensed the mischief brewing in his mind. That made him smile. His Princess would have to wonder about the flash in his eyes this time.

It did not take long to find out what was on Sarianna's mind. She pressed him against the door just as he turned from closing it. Her elegant hands reached up to frame his face much the way his kin had been doing.

“What do you feel when they touch you thus and gaze so deeply in your eyes?” She demanded softly.

“Great love and... tenderness...,” he replied in a whisper. “And some urgency... they have so little time to know me, yet they will not press into my mind...”

“They glean what they can as they can,” she said.

“Yes,” he replied. “It pleases me that they no longer seem sad when they connect with me.”

“Your kin knows they will be a part of your life,” she said.

“Our lives. They love you as well.”

Sarianna smiled at that. “I love to see you so filled with joy.”

She pulled his head down gently for a sweet kiss. “What do you feel when I touch you?”

“Heat,” he whispered against her lips. “Sometimes it is a gentle thing that warms me and heals me and makes me feel safe. Sometimes it burns me and consumes me.”

“You do not fear it?”

“Nay,” he moaned as her hands moved down his body. “The fire consumes but does not destroy...”

Sarianna cut him off with a more demanding kiss. She pressed him more firmly against the door while she ravaged his willing mouth. Nikulainen had to strongly resist the urge to crush her luscious body against him. He very much wanted her to use him and did not want to distract her when she was of a mind to do so. All of her allure and her desire were focused on him.

"You will get the manacles, then you will remove all of your clothing," Sarianna said softly.

"Yes, milady," he replied huskily. Nikulainen was eager to remove his clothing. His leggings were suddenly tight almost beyond endurance.

Nikulainen did not look at Sarianna as he did as he was told. Her undressing was a potent distraction that would delay his compliance. His clothing was quickly discarded, and the manacles were retrieved in time to see his beloved shimmying out of her leggings while bending over.

"I feel your thoughts, Niku," she murmured. "Kneel on the bed and lower your eyes."

"Yes, milady," Nikulainen said. He was not really repentant. Such a glimpse of that enticing bottom wiggling before him was worth any punishment.

"Free your hair," Sarianna softly demanded.

Nikulainen complied, unraveling the single braid down the back of his head that kept his heavy tresses from his face. The golden veil obscured his eyes and made it easier for him to remain still. She removed her clothing then put away their bracers, boots and weapons. He smiled when she suddenly dashed about the chambers bolting the two entry doors. That was something he hadn't thought of in the excitement of anticipation. The last thing either wanted was another well-meaning interruption.

"Spread your thighs and rest on the backs of your legs," Sarianna said as she gently took the manacles from his grasp. "I will not bind you to the bed this time. There is much of you that I do not get to see that way."

Sarianna hooked the manacles together, then fastened Nikulainen's wrists in front of him. He risked a glance at her through his hair. Her face was lovely with her intent expression. A blush beautifully colored her cheeks, but she was determined to have him. And she remembered to free her own beautiful hair. It tumbled down her shoulders in rich waves, making him ache to touch it.

"Am I so much to look at?" Nikulainen asked. His voice was just above a whisper to keep from breaking the magical feeling that surrounded them.

The Princess met his gaze briefly before moving behind him. She lifted his heavy fall of hair and pushed it to one side. Her soft palm ran along his spine to cup his buttocks, drawing a sharp gasp from him.

"I've had to draw a sword to keep your virtue safe," she replied mirthfully.

Nikulainen gasped loudly when he felt Sarianna's erect nipples brush against his back. He moaned when she bit him along the curve of his bared shoulder.

"I am well aware that many a maidservant in this keep knew of your horse-grooming habit when it rained," Sarianna whispered in his ear before licking it, then gently tugging on his earlobe with his teeth.

"Ahhh," he moaned. "I am not... immodest... just overly... practical... ahhh..."

"Your back is bruised," she said quietly. "I would have your uncles take better care of what is mine."

Sarianna kissed him along the necklace, then gently bit him again before pressing her body against his back. Everywhere their skin touched was like fire. He could feel her breasts as they softly dragged along his skin. He could even feel the softness of the curly

hair between her thighs it brushed along the curve of his buttocks. The torture continued as Sarianna brushed, then gently pulled at his nipples.

“You shall have to be less practical, Beloved,” she retorted lightly scratching one sensitive nipple.

“Yes, milady!” He cried out.

Sarianna’s touch gentled, then and became more soothing. Her face was pressed in his hair at the nape of his neck. She deeply inhaled his scent. “You are so magical, Niku. Salty sweat over the sweetest skin. Your scent is the headiest of perfumes.”

Her arms wrapped around Nikulainen in a firm embrace and rained gentle kisses along the side of his face and neck. They were still aroused, but the Princess managed to douse the fever raging between their entwined bodies. As their breathing neared normal, Sarianna’s hands began to gently roam his warm skin.

“I love touching you this way,” she murmured. “You do not know how hard I fight each day to keep from always having my hands upon your skin.”

“I shall make a royal decree that you be allowed to touch me thus whenever you desire,” he sighed.

Sarianna laughed softly. “How would you word such an edict, Beloved? From this day hence, the Crown Princess shall be allotted time to stroke her husband’s thighs, tease his nipples and fondle his member?”

Her hands had skimmed along his thighs to cup, then fondle his hardening member making him gasp.

"I would say anything you like, anywhere you wish, to have you do this to me," he whispered, arching into her touch and leaning his head on her shoulder.

"I wish we had a mirror," she sighed into his hair. "I love seeing your face in pleasure."

Nikulainen moaned at the thought of watching her torment him with those lovely hands. "We will have one commissioned with the next message to Arinpera."

Sarianna laughed, then kissed him on his temple. Her touch became more rousing. She stroked him to hardness, then teased his nipples once again. Nikulainen was soon trembling with want of her.

"Sarianna..." He murmured pleading to her.

"Worry not, Beloved. You are far too tempting to leave you be," she said.

Nikulainen lamented the loss of her body pressed against his back, but then Sarianna was in front of him. Her eyes were dark with passion and her cheeks were flushed.

"Sarianna... so beautiful..." he sighed as she covered his mouth in a kiss that threatened to consume him in flames. She held his head still by his hair and ravaged his mouth while he reveled in the sweetness of hers. All the while those nipples tormented his skin.

"Please..." he pleaded once her lips left his to taste the skin along his throat. "Beloved... take me..."

"I shall... soon..." she replied. "I would have more from you."

Sarianna still held Nikulainen's head still by his hair as she rose up a little to offer her breasts for him to suckle. He complied almost greedily sucking at the rosy nipples

until she was writhing against him. The sounds she made drove him to the point of near madness, but he was helpless to guide her body onto his hardness and end his torment.

Somehow, she sensed his dire need. Perhaps it was because of her own. The reason did not matter. He whimpered happily when she pulled away from his mouth to slip his bound arms over her head then steadied herself by holding onto his shoulders. With a loud moan, she lowered herself onto his stiff, leaking member until it was fully sheathed within her incredible, tight heat.

“Oh, Niku,” she breathed. “Please... move...”

Sarianna was straddling him at a perfect angle for him to thrust his hips upward. With his first move, she moaned before claiming his mouth in another searing kiss. Nikulainen began to move. His thrusts were almost brutal, but the Princess did not shrink from them. She met his hips with movements of her own until they were crying out in the middle of that desperate needy kiss. In the aftermath, Sarianna collapsed against him, giving him almost all of her weight. Her lips fell away from his as her head slipped down to rest on his shoulder.

“Sarianna...” Nikulainen said softly. She mumbled something in response, but it he couldn’t make it out. All of the day’s exertions caught up with her at once. She was asleep.

Nikulainen chuckled, then rejoiced that his bride had given him manacles he could get out of on his own. A quick twist of the wrist freed his arms. He then carefully lowered Sarianna to the bed. After covering her, he pulled on a robe, then set about unbolting the doors and stoking the fire, for the room had grown chilly. That was where

Jorgen and Hanna found him. They carried a pitcher of water for the basin and one for the bedside.

"The Princess must have over exerted with her sword," Hanna said with a sincere face. Had it not been for her wry tone, Nikulainen would have believed her.

"Yes," he replied. "I too have over extended myself. We will have a nap before the evening meal."

"Shall we choose clothing for the dining hall?" Jorgen asked.

"Nay, we will dine in our chambers. We must send a message to King Vauraus on the morrow," Nikulainen said. "There is much to tell him, and I wish to do it before the wedding."

"Yes, Regent. We will have food brought here this evening," Hanna said. "And for the baths?"

"They can wait until morning," Nikulainen said.

"Please lay out our attire for the wedding this evening," Sarianna mumbled from beneath the blankets.

"Yes, Princess," Hanna said, smiling at the sleepy voice.

"My thanks," she mumbled.

"We will leave you to your rest, Regent," Jorgen said.

Once the door was closed, Nikulainen poured a mug of cool water from the pitcher. He had Sarianna sit up and lean against him. "You need to drink a little before your sleep. Today has taken much from you."

Sarianna muttered grumpily, but drank much of what was in the cup before slumping back onto the mattress. Nikulainen drank deeply as well before removing the robe and settling in the arms of his Princess under the blankets and following her into sleep.

Later, Nikulainen thought there would be some guilt in remaining alone with Sarianna for the evening. There was not much time left to spend with his kin, and he already felt a sadness about leaving them. But he treasured his time alone with Sarianna. He felt almost possessive about it. During his recovery, he had not been awake for long enough to enjoy her company. He felt no guilt in whiling away his evening in her comely presence.

They did not dally for the entire evening. The Regent and the Princess carefully composed a missive to accompany the edict from Magnus. And true to his vow, Nikulainen commissioned a large mirror for their bedchamber in Almourol Citadel.

After their official duties were well completed, the pair ate a quiet meal. Nikulainen shared all that he had felt that day from standing before Magnus as a strong leader to the easy laughter shared with Julin and his uncles. His heart had been so full, and the experience was made even more precious in sharing it with Sarianna. It pleased Nikulainen beyond measure that his bride also felt close to his family. Sarianna shared her pleasure in getting to know Lady Reija and admitted to being very attached to Lord Valtias. Because they spent time sharing happy thoughts about his kin, Nikulainen knew they would feel the presence of the absent couple.

There was no guilt in spending the evening with Sarianna. He found their bond required more than physical contact. They shared a great intimacy that did not involve anything physical. Nikulainen found he felt closer to his bride than ever. Tomorrow, he belonged to his kin and his father's people. For that night, he was very happy to just be hers.

Chapter Twenty Seven

As much as Sarianna cherished the memory of her beautiful wedding, she found she enjoyed being an honored guest more than being a bride. It was not that she was lacking attention befitting the bride. The people of Ritvala had not really seen her with Nikulainen. Thankfully, Hanna understood how important her appearance would be. The dress she chose was a deep blue that suited her eyes and accented the blue-black of her hair. She wore her crown in the same way as she had on her wedding day. The only other jewelry was Nikulainen's talisman and her ring. Sarianna hoped she was properly attired without being ostentatious. Drawing attention from the bride was not her desire. She was uncertain of how well that plan fared.

Nikulainen gazed at her with wide, reverent eyes. "I fear you leaving these chambers. I do not wish to battle my kin for you."

Sarianna blushed. "You do have a bit of a poet in you, Beloved. It is more likely I who will be battling for your honor."

Nikulainen did look wonderful in the supple fawn-colored tunic and leggings. That fabric was sensual to the touch and suited his coloring. It also went well with the bracers and boots. He wore his crown and his hair the same way as he did for the wedding. Her Prince was a regal warrior and as beautiful as ever.

"I may have to arm myself," Sarianna sighed.

“Nay,” he laughed. “Let us cleave to each other and enjoy the wedding. There are many distractions for the ladies of late. None shall pay heed to me.”

Sarianna appreciated Nikulainen’s considerable modesty. She liked that he had no idea how much of an impact he had on women. That trait made him all the sweeter in her eyes.

As they entered the main hall, there was a hush that stilled the crowd. The Suurimetsa court was there and stunning in their royal finery, but all eyes were on them.

“Presenting Prince Nikulainen, Regent of Arinpera, and her Serene Highness, Princess Sarianna, daughter of King Vauraus of Arinpera,” the herald intoned.

Sarianna always wondered about the ‘Serene’ part of her title. She never felt particularly serene, but that day she felt proud to be on Nikulainen’s arm. The gathering of Ritvala’s leading residents and representatives from Valtimeri and Enewald murmured approval as they passed. At the front of the room at the balcony doors stood Julin, Uurion, Hesin and Lord Valtias.

All of the men looked very impressive in their finery. Julin wore his dress military regalia as he had for their wedding. He looked very handsome and actually smiled. Lord Valtias wore simple but elegant robes of a deep green, luxurious fabric. His sons were in tunics of the same fabric with matching leggings and capes. Their bracers and boots were a deep brown. The three of the Forest Realm were incredibly fair and serene. They smiled as Sarianna and Nikulainen drew near.

“Greetings, my Lord,” Nikulainen said as he bowed.

“Grandson,” Valtias said with great reverence. Once again those elegant hands framed Nikulainen’s face for a long moment before gently kissing his forehead.

Sarianna stepped up as Nikulainen moved to greet his uncles.

“Granddaughter,” Valtias murmured. He gently took her face in his hands and gazed into her eyes. She felt incredible warmth from him. It was a feeling of love. She smiled at him as he kissed her on the brow.

She received the same greetings from Uurion and Hesin and knew that they loved her as well as her husband. Julin bowed and kissed her hand as she curtsied before him. He winked at her as she took her place beside Nikulainen.

Once the family was in place on either side of the balcony, the Prefect moved into place, and the musicians began to play. Because of their long time together, the couple thought it unnecessary to arrive separately. Thus, as the music swelled, King Magnus and Lady Reija walked arm in arm down through the guests to stand between the halves of their family and in front of the Prefect.

King Magnus was very handsome and resplendent in his royal robes of heavy, rich blue fabric and crown. He had a beauty of his own that was strong and masculine. Sarianna could clearly see the sire in both his sons. Lady Reija was the fairest woman she had ever seen. Her hair was unbraided. The heavy, silken tresses were pinned in just a few places where the crown would be placed. Her dress was a very pale green, nearly luminous fabric with wide sleeves that, like the hem, flared out. She seemed to float alongside the King like some mythical creature.

The ceremony itself was simple. With a few short sentences, the royal couple pledged themselves in a union for life with quiet voices filled with emotion. Sarianna was certain the King's hands trembled as he placed the ring of the Queen on Lady Reija's slender, elegant finger. There were clearly tears in their eyes as they parted from a very gentle but intense kiss. As soon as they parted, the Prefect picked up the crown and raised it before the assembled.

"She who is wife and the King's closest counsel and mother to his heirs shall be named Queen," the Prefect intoned.

The assembled guests and the crowds beneath the balcony cheered as the crown was placed upon the golden head of Queen Reija. Nikulainen grasped Sarianna's hand to center himself. Her Prince was so full of emotion that he was near bursting. She turned to him to gently stroke his cheek. His eyes were such that their expression brought tears to her eyes, so happy was she for him. When they greeted the royal couple, Nikulainen embraced each of his parents almost fiercely. They were joyful in their response to him and to Julin's equally heartfelt though more awkward embrace. For her part, Sarianna curtsied most elegantly before the couple, then gently kissed each Monarch and thanked them for giving her husband such happiness.

With that, the King and Queen turned to greet their subjects below the balcony.

"A King is nothing without his subjects," Magnus said in a loud clear voice. "I am humbled before you today because of your great patience with me and your love of my Queen. Because of your unwavering allegiance, we have come to this joyous day. In

honor of this great day, Ritvala shall celebrate for three days. So go forth as we shall and celebrate your families and your allegiance to this land."

A thunderous cheer rose from below. The couple turned to the guests inside. They were beaming.

"My good friends and revered kin," Magnus said. "I honor your presence by not speaking over long. Let us eat and drink and dance in celebration of this grandest of days."

Sarianna did indeed like being a guest at the wedding. Only the occasional toast to the newlyweds interrupted her meal. She and Nikulainen conversed amicably with Julin, who was in fine humor.

"I must thank you, my Brother and Sister," Julin said raising his goblet to them. "Yesterday, I gave counsel to my father for the first time."

"Julin..." Nikulainen smiled.

"We talked about Armas for a long while. Then he asked for my opinion about how to respond to the threat of Taraasta," he continued. "We did not agree, but he listened well and understood."

"Will you give counsel again?" Nikulainen asked.

"Yes," he said proudly. "We shall meet daily from now hence."

Sarianna smiled at that. "I think the King has found good counsel and the freedom to enjoy his bride."

Julin eyed his sire and the Queen with a warm smile. "I believe what is true for Magnus is naught if not wise."

"Aye, brother," the Regent replied. "He also chose wise counsel."

"Niku, I am glad that Lady Reija is our Queen as I have always been glad to be your Brother," Julin said. "I believe we will work well together in matters that concern our peoples and the Hanyanoore. I shall get to see my new sister and the children."

"And a fine uncle you shall be, but as far as I know, it will not be for some time," Sarianna laughed. "But your chambers shall always be ready at Almourol Citadel."

The official celebration lasted until late in the afternoon. Sarianna enjoyed dancing with Nikulainen more than at her own wedding because most eyes were not on them. They laughed in each other's arms and even joined in the singing with the performers. It was the joy radiating from the couple that made almost everyone giddy. Sarianna had never seen anyone as happy as Lady Reija. Her hand never left the grasp of Magnus throughout the feast. Of course, that made eating and drinking a challenge. The couple did not seem to care.

"Did we look like them at our wedding?" Sarianna wondered aloud.

"Aye," Nikulainen replied softly. His eyes seemed to glow with happiness. "But it seems our joy grows and deepens with each day."

Sarianna stroked her husband's downy cheek with a smile. "Each day is a joy with you. Each day is a journey of discovery."

They looked down the table at Magnus and Reija once again. Sarianna's gaze moved to Lord Valtias. If the couple was the portrait love, the elder Lord was one of supreme serenity. He had a strong and beautiful family. Sarianna understood his happiness. It made her wonder why he was alone.

“What happened to Lord Valtias’ lady?” She asked, knowing that had Reija’s mother still lived, nothing would keep her from coming for her daughter.

“The plagues of years ago did not spare the Forest Realm,” Nikulainen said. “The same plight that took Queen Ana from Magnus took the great Lady Kemina from Valtias.”

“And my mother from me,” Sarianna said quietly.

“My Princess is wise. She said that with joy, there is sadness,” Nikulainen said, kissing her on the forehead. “Without that sorrow, I would not be here.”

“I know, Beloved,” she said drawing him close. “We honor them by living and loving.”

And there was much life and love at that celebration. As the event wore on, Nikulainen suggested he and Sarianna grant the same gift to the King as he had given them. Sarianna suggested they include Julin in the offer. Her husband quickly agreed. Thus, the trio came to stand before the Monarchs and gave them their freedom from the proceedings. And as Magnus had advised them at their wedding, Nikulainen bid his parents to leave quickly. Being wise monarchs, they did.

They had done a very good deed in releasing their elders to enjoy that first evening together as newlyweds. But Sarianna had not realized how much imbibing of spirits came with hosting a long celebration. Even though the pair drank much more slowly than most of the guests, the obligatory sips with each of the many toasts began to take their toll. As the afternoon drifted toward evening, Sarianna grew uncertain about her

steadiness on her feet. Thus she stayed in her chair, sitting bolt straight and hardly moving.

Departing guests seemed happy enough with a smile and a nod of her head in good evening. The depth of the nod could not be too great as that would make her dizzy. Nikulainen observed this method of seeing off guests and adopted it as well. The last time he tried to stand and bow, he nearly fell over onto the table face-first like Julin had a short while earlier. Somehow, the room was empty save for his Forest Realm kin. Lord Valtias was standing before them smiling.

"You have fulfilled your duties admirably," he said. "It is time that you retired."

"A wonderful idea, Lord," Sarianna replied equably. "But I do not believe I can walk that far."

"I shall carry you," Nikulainen declared with a slur in his voice.

"No, you will not," she replied. "We will end up in a heap on the stone floor."

To her supreme annoyance, Lord Valtias laughed quite merrily.

"Forgive me, Lord Valtias, but you are not being helpful," Sarianna said. "Can you not cure this wine-induced malady?"

"I could, but I have always found experience is the best cure," he replied. "I can try to lessen the impact of your condition in the morning."

He handed her his ever present water skin. "Drink deeply. Then give it to Nikulainen."

Sarianna complied, then gave the skin to Nikulainen. She felt a little better but no less wobbly. Nikulainen drank deeply as well, then looked over at Julin, who had begun to snore at the table.

"Shall I give the water to Julin?" He asked.

"Uurion will see that he drinks when he settles him in his chambers," the Lord replied. "Hesin will take you to yours."

Uurion gently picked up Julin then lifted him over one shoulder and walked away. Even to Sarianna's bleary eyes, it looked like the elder uncle walked with little difficulty.

"By your leave, Nikulainen," Hesin said.

"With my thanks," the Regent replied.

Hesin wrapped a strong, slender arm around their waists, then slowly helped them to their feet. Sarianna laid an arm against his back along Nikulainen's. They did not sway very much on the way to their chambers, though it did seem as though the corridors had grown longer and steeper since the morning. She was surprised that it was still barely sunset when they reached their chambers.

"Do you need further aid?" Hesin asked as the couple slumped onto the edge of the bed.

"Nay," Nikulainen replied. "Sarianna and I are good at getting into bed."

"Niku!" Sarianna exclaimed. Her indignation, though, was undermined by a peel of giggles.

Hesin smiled at them fondly. "I wish you good night then."

“Good night, Uncle,” Nikulainen said with a lopsided smile. “Thank you.”

After the door securely closed, Nikulainen set about undressing his Princess. It might have gone more smoothly if Sarianna had not decided to help him with her clothes and then his. Her fingers would not work properly, and she was plagued by fits of giggles. The effort drained the rest of her strength. By the time Nikulainen clumsily pulled the blankets over their naked forms, Sarianna was already drifting into sleep.

Morning came with blinding light. Sarianna shrank from it, burrowing beneath the blankets to cling to Nikulainen’s warm body. Her mouth felt like it was full of wet wool, and there was a strongly pulsing pain in her head. It seemed that some foul spell had caused grave illness. She suddenly feared Nikulainen was stricken as well. She was about to check on the man loosely holding her when there was a great crashing in the room. Through the pain amplifying in her head, Sarianna recognized it was merely Jorgen and Hanna attending to their duties. But never had she heard them raise such a painful din. She knew there was truth in her feelings when Nikulainen moaned plaintively while tightening his grasp on her.

“Jorgen! Why must you torture me?” He wailed. “Can you not see that I am dying?”

The servants laughed, much to Sarianna’s shock and surprise. The sound grated against her nerves. In an indignant fury, she pushed out of Nikulainen’s arms and fought out of the blankets to sit up.

“How can you laugh when we are suffering so?” She demanded.

Hanna had the good sense to look at her with sympathy. "I would never jest if you were truly ill, milady. 'Tis merely too much wine that causes your head to ache."

"Oh, how can that be, and why are you shouting?" Sarianna moaned as she fell back into Nikulainen's arms. He groaned but wrapped his arms about her anyway.

"You will be right as rain with some water and some food and a hot bath," Jorgen said.

"I shall never eat again," Nikulainen moaned. The servants laughed again though more softly.

Somehow, the diabolic pair coaxed Sarianna and Nikulainen to sit up and drink water. They gave them only small amounts. It seemed to take forever before the wool was gone from her mouth. And once the sun did not cause them pain, the couple consented with great reluctance to bathing separately. The hot water felt good. The heat eased the pain in her head. And all during the bath, Sarianna and Nikulainen were encouraged to sip small cups of water. By the time they were dressed, she was beginning to feel hungry. Nikulainen looked fatigued about his eyes but was otherwise beautiful.

"Magnus never seemed to have this problem, and I have seen him have much wine at celebrations," Nikulainen said with dismay. "Am I lacking some strength of will or body?"

"The Great King does not partake of drink as much as it seems," Jorgen said. "He feigns drinking, and his servant feigns pouring. In a long night, he may have only two full goblets."

"Magnus is a wily monarch," Sarianna chuckled. "He would never lose his control around others."

"I wonder if they will be at the morning meal."

The Royal newlyweds were indeed hosting their guests. They looked radiant with happiness. Julin, much to Sarianna's annoyance, looked as he always did. She glowered at him as they sat down together.

"You had Uurion cure you," she accused.

"I had only the water," he said.

"Does your head not hurt?" Nikulainen demanded indignantly.

Julin laughed. "A little when I first awoke. But, my dear Siblings, I hoist a goblet more often than you with Armas or the men. It builds tolerance."

"And why have you not shared this training?" Nikulainen asked mildly. "I would have thought you and Armas would find my fumbling about full of spirits amusing."

"Indeed we would," Julin admitted. "And we really wanted to see that. But Magnus feared you might take to the trees in that condition."

Nikulainen laughed merrily. "I likely would have."

"I am glad you did not," Sarianna said.

The morning meal continued the feeling of warmth and good fellowship of the day before. And after the family and the guests were well fed, the Monarchs asked Sarianna and Nikulainen to join them in the Lady's favorite garden. The Princess sat near the Monarchs. Nikulainen knelt before them. Queen Reija gently stroked his hair and smiled at him.

"My beautiful son," she said softly. "You are wise beyond your years."

"I am wise enough to listen to my beloved," he replied.

"That is the best wisdom a husband can possess," Magnus said with a chuckle.

"We owe you both great thanks," she said.

"That is what families do," Sarianna said. "I am pleased to find I have such a large and beautiful family."

"I know you expect nothing in return for your counsel and action," Magnus said. "But we would reward you just the same. Nikulainen, beloved son, you and your bride must be divided in your attentions no longer."

"I do not understand," Sarianna replied.

"Your heart pulls you home, beloved daughter," Queen Reija said. "And your heart belongs with Sarianna, Niku."

"Mother?"

"Your mother is saying that we would keep you here forever, but your home is with Sarianna and her people. We want you to not feel you must stay and spend time with us," Magnus said. "Your forest kin will soon grace your halls, and we will not stay away for long."

"You want us to leave?" Nikulainen asked. His voice was colored with hurt.

"Nay, my son," Queen Reija said. "A parent never wants a child to leave. But you want to begin your life together. It has been too long delayed. And I know you want to begin your tasks as rulers. You should sacrifice no longer."

Sarianna found herself placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. He immediately leaned back against her, then dropped his head forward.

“Forget your guilt, Niku,” Magnus said. “The heart wants what it wants.”

Nikulainen nodded as he reached back to clutch her hand. “We will depart with the dawn. I only ask that we share this day’s meals.”

“Of course,” the Queen smiled. “But spend this day showing Sarianna your birthplace. Enjoy each other here.”

Nikulainen looked back at Sarianna with a blinding smile. “I will show you my trees.”

After a heartfelt embrace from both parents, the pair left to do as they were bid and enjoy the day. First, Sarianna insisted a return to their chambers was in order to change for the ride. She was not interested in getting her hair or her clothing tangled in unfamiliar branches.

“I will have to find a page to locate Jorgen,” Nikulainen said absently. “He and Hanna need to know of our plans as soon as possible.”

Sarianna was in the midst of agreeing that surprising Hanna was the last thing she wanted to do, but the comment died on her lips as she opened the door to their receiving room. There she found her trusted servant pressed against a wall by Jorgen, who was thoroughly kissing her. Hanna was passionately clutching at Jorgen’s hair and returning the kiss in kind. The Princess quickly pushed Nikulainen back into the corridor, and then she shut the door.

“I will change for the ride,” Sarianna said loudly. “You find the page to get Jorgen.”

When next the door was opened, the servants were at different ends of the room trying to look busy. They both managed to look somewhat surprised at the arrival of their charges. Sarianna surmised that they really hadn't noticed their presence. That must have been quite a kiss. She was happy for Hanna.

"Princess, what brings you back so soon?" Hanna asked. "Is something amiss?"

"Nay, all is well," Sarianna replied. "I am going to change into my leathers to go riding."

"But there has been a change in plans," Nikulainen said. "We have been released from our obligations. Thus, we depart with the dawn. I need you to send a messenger to those who wait at our borders to Enewald for permission to camp. Send another to those who await us at our borders to ready our camp there."

"Yes, Regent!" Jorgen said. Sarianna could hear the tightening in his voice.

"Jorgen, my trusted friend," Nikulainen said gently. "Do not take this on yourself. We had Thora's formidable staff prepare our journey here. Get whatever help you need."

"I will make sure of it, Regent," Hanna said. She gave Jorgen a long look. "We must be well rested for the trip."

Jorgen set his jaw stubbornly, but under her gaze, he nodded. "All will be ready."

"Do you need help changing, Princess?" Hanna asked.

"Nay, you have much to do," Sarianna replied. "The Regent will assist me."

They left without argument, which surprised them both. As soon as the door closed, Sarianna took her Prince into her arms. "Your family is not sending you away."

"I know," he murmured into her hair. "It is my own longing causing me guilt. I had not realized until my mother talked to me, how much I resent the burdens on our time together. We have had to steal moments like lovers forbidden to one another. Yet I somehow feel selfish in my desire to take you home and build what my parents have. And the heavens forgive me, but it is my hope that my forest kin take their time in arriving."

Sarianna chuckled. "I understand, Beloved. Your feelings mirror mine, no matter how shameful they seem. But I do believe Lord Valtias would understand the feelings and respect them."

She felt his nod in response, then he tightened the embrace briefly before letting her go. "Let me help you get ready. There is much that I would share with you of my home, and now there is very little time."

Kelata was bursting to run. Sarianna could barely contain her energy as she thundered across the field toward the forest, so she did not. Instead, she relaxed into the ride, keeping her body close to her mount and moving with the lovely beast. Nikulainen rode just a length ahead of her. His instructions were to stay close to Ajaa and follow where he led. They would meet in a clearing the Prince loved. It was a harrowing ride even to the reckless Princess. If there was a trail between the densely placed trees, she could not see it. She just rode keeping her head down and her limbs close to her body. It became apparent while whipping through the trees there was a

reason Nikulainen had insisted on her hair being braided and secured. She could easily lose her head if it those unruly tresses got firmly caught.

Nikulainen disappeared almost immediately upon entering the forest. He amazed Sarianna by leaping upon his saddle, then up into the branches. Once among the boughs and branches, she could not see him properly. His movements were defined by the rustling of the boughs and sudden movement of birds. The Princess suddenly understood how the Suurimetsa were so intimidating. To move without being seen while facing waves upon waves of deadly arrows must have been terrifying. Had she not known who was moving above her, Sarianna would have been frightened as well.

The denseness of the trees thinned as the forest yielded to a beautiful glade where the sunshine filtered through the foliage, filling it with soft light. Nikulainen dropped onto his saddle just before Ajaa reached their destination. He looked very much like an ethereal creature made of light and magic. But it was not his beauty that moved her. It was his joy at being in that place. His smile was brilliant as he moved to help her down from Kelata.

“Is it not all I have said?” He asked.

“Yes, Niku,” she replied. “It is glorious.”

They walked through the glade while Nikulainen spoke about his childhood and all that he had learned from that place. She would never see a forest the same way once she learned to look through his eyes. Those few hours brought her even closer to the man she had married, and she was grateful for it. But once again, their moments alone were threatened by outside influence.

"How is it that I know your uncles are near?" Sarianna asked quietly.

Nikulainen smiled. "They are not trying to hide. Valtias probably wants us protected."

"But your kinsmen want to play in the trees with you, dear Niku," she smiled.

He ducked his head sheepishly. "I know. But they will not press upon us."

Sarianna caught him by his chin and gently made him look into her eyes. "You want to play with them, too."

"Aye," he said with a blush. "There is much that I still want to learn from them."

"Go then," she said gently. "I will have you to myself soon."

"You really do not mind."

"I might if we were not leaving. I cannot be selfish over one afternoon against a lifetime," Sarianna said sincerely. "I will cherish what we shared here."

"I do adore you," Nikulainen said, then kissed her soundly. "Follow Ajaa out of the forest. He will wait for me, but go on to the fortress. I am certain Valtias has guards there to see you back."

With that, Sarianna headed back, intent on helping Hanna pack and speeding their return to Arinpera.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Nikulainen wondered anew at just when loving Sarianna would not be tinged with guilt over some matter outside of their bond. Perhaps they were paying the price for falling in love so easily. He contented himself with knowing that they would soon be on their way home. Forgiving his uncles was easy then. They had not known him growing up. It seemed a small price to pay to soothe their grief.

"I hear you, my Uncles," Nikulainen called. "You are uncharacteristically noisy."

"We apologize, Nephew," Hesin's voice drifted from above. "We did not wish to interrupt, but you are here and the trees are here."

"You will not be here tomorrow, Nikulainen," Uurion said.

"Let us enjoy them then," Nikulainen said as he leapt up onto a low branch.

They chased each other through the sun-dappled boughs, moving swiftly around the trunks as if chasing a deadly enemy. Nikulainen was swift but ever-thinking a few steps ahead of his prey. But his uncles were as clever, nearly catching him in maneuvers that would have bested his most talented men. He had great satisfaction in startling them by turning their gambits against them. But numbers were against the Regent, and he knew his kin could communicate without words. Thus, he was not surprised to be caught about the waist as he attempted to evade a pursuer.

“Well fought, Nikulainen,” Uurion said as he immobilized his prey against the trunk of the tree he was using as camouflage. “You have forced us to use our best skills to catch you.”

Nikulainen relaxed in the clench, then he was released. Uurion moved to sit on a branch near him. Hesin seated himself on another branch. They had ended up at the edge of the forest. The Regent could see Lanakae Fortress from his perch. Hesin passed him a water skin into his hand.

“My thanks, Uncle,” Nikulainen said. “You have taxed me as well.”

He relaxed completely, finally allowing his guard to drop, then he felt their minds. He smiled at the warmth and wonder in their thoughts.

“You knew how to shield your mind from us,” Uurion said.

“Nay, I merely guessed you would try to touch my mind, and I kept my feelings hidden,” he replied. “Mother never trained me. She was not sure how much I could do with projecting my thoughts.”

“You have all the skills and abilities of your Forest Realm kin,” Hesin said. “And you use them very well.”

“We thought you may have missed some important things in not growing up among us,” Uurion said.

“There is still much that I am learning from you, Uncles,” Nikulainen said. “And there are moments like this where your presence soothes and nurtures me. I will miss having these moments.”

"The trees will soothe you and bring you memories of your kin," Hesin said. "Do you often sit in the trees thus?"

"When I was here. I plan to explore the Arinperan forests when I return home and enjoy them as well," he replied.

"May we show you something?" Uurion asked quietly.

"Of course."

"Brace yourself securely," he said reaching over toward Nikulainen. "Close your eyes and clear your mind."

Nikulainen felt a warm hand on his brow, then he heard a sound that was familiar. He had heard the sound in that very place.

"You hear the trees, Nikulainen," Uurion said softly. "You hear them sing their happiness. You have heard them howl when they are in fear or in pain."

"Never have I heard them so clearly," the Prince said in wonder.

"It is in you to do so," Hesin said. "My brother has just shown you how to listen."

"Their song will soothe you. Their cries will give you warning," Uurion added.

Nikulainen smiled as he opened his eyes. "My thanks, Uncles. Let us sit then and listen."

Thus, until the sun was high, they sat enjoying the sweet song of the trees and the fragrant breeze, which gently caressed their skin. No more words were exchanged, but somehow Nikulainen felt as though they were learning one another better that way. It seemed that they were deeply satisfied with their time together. Without words, they returned to the fortress to share the mid-day meal with his family.

The company was well on the way to the border with Enewald before the heaviness in Nikulainen's heart fully lifted. Parting with his parents had been very difficult. There were smiles and embraces and even some laughter. Still, it was difficult to leave. For a long time, he rode at the head of the company listening to what was ahead so he would not be tempted to listen to what was left behind. Nikulainen tried to keep his thoughts ahead of the company, but he could not resist the pull of one voice that trailed him. That voice pulled him back into the center of the phalanx.

Sarianna was there riding alongside Nikerym's wife, Krista. The Princess was proudly wearing her brand-new Suurimetsa body armor. The helmet hung from the horn of her saddle. She had bristled when he told her how adorable she looked in it. He did not regret the choice of words, for she did look adorable. She was still fetching with her hair in a thick braid and her cheeks gently flushed by the cool breeze. The ladies looked at him expectantly as he fell in with their easy cadence.

"What awaits us on the road ahead?" Sarianna asked.

"'Tis quiet for many leagues," he replied. "Where is Julin?"

"At the rear with Nikerym and Meikka," she said. "Should I be concerned?"

"Nay, there is nothing amiss," Nikulainen replied absently. "He is being cautious."

"The men worry about assassins," Krista said with huge eyes. "I heard my husband whispering with Meikka before we left."

"Do not worry, Krista," Sarianna said. "The Regent would know if there was any danger. Our journey to Ritvala was very safe. And the Arinperan guard awaits us at the border of Enewald. We will never be unescorted."

She nodded at that but still looked troubled. "I have never slept in a camp."

Sarianna laughed softly. "Do not worry. There are more comforts than expected. My father would not have us sleeping on the ground. You and your husband will have a warm tent with very comfortable bedding."

Krista sighed with relief. "You are very kind, your Highnesses."

"Not at all," Nikulainen said. "Your peace of mind is important."

"Yes, you are moving away from all you know," Sarianna said gently. "Some qualms are to be expected."

Krista nodded gratefully.

"Nikerym rides toward the rear of the company alone," Nikulainen said. "He would certainly enjoy your company."

The woman brightened considerably then. "Thank you, Regent."

With that, Krista moved to the side of the road, then turned her mount toward the rear of the long procession. Sarianna smiled at Nikulainen. It was like a reward for a good deed.

"You are very sweet, Niku," she said.

"I know the pull of the heart," he said with a wicked smirk. "My parents were wise to thrust us from the fortress."

"Oh? I had feared that your heart was heavy with grief."

Nikulainen felt a hot blush spread across his cheeks. "I thought so as well. Now I realize that it was more likely guilt."

"Guilt?" Sarianna frowned.

"Aye. I now know I was longing to return to the place where you first claimed me," he said huskily. "With our bed and our new mirror... and the new tub."

"Tub?"

"I also had a new tub for two made," he chuckled.

Sarianna laughed with a delightful peel. "I wonder if Thora survived."

"Do you approve?"

"Very much so," she replied with a wicked flash in her eyes. "And I thank you for your admission. I too was feeling guilty about wanting to be home with you."

"There was never a question of where my heart was," he said softly. "It beats for you. It is only your voice that moves me. It is only in your presence that I am at peace."

His beloved's eyes darkened as her cheeks flushed more deeply. "You are wicked, Niku. Your lovely words tempt me to do things I may not for some time to come. I think you seek to torment me."

"Never. I am not so foolish," he smiled. "I speak what I feel whatever the consequences."

"Pray remember that when I torment you in kind," she said softly.

Nikulainen's breath caught at the intensity of expression in her eyes and the desire that laced her voice. He hardened almost uncomfortably in his tight leggings. A rueful smile tugged at his lips.

"Your nearness already exacts some penance, Princess," he murmured. "For I am surely suffering."

Her gaze softened sympathetically. "I do not wish that, Beloved."

"'Tis the curse of a man in finely tailored leggings and a beautiful, provocative wife," he laughed. "I am doomed to many instances of discomfort."

She laughed at that though her expression remained sympathetic. They were both pulled from their own musings with a murmur through the company. Then Julin was riding alongside them. He smiled, but his eyes held a melancholy that Nikulainen knew earlier in the day.

"Brother, the border with Enewald draws near," Julin said. "I soon take my leave of you and the lovely Sarianna."

"I know, Brother," Nikulainen replied. "And my heart is heavier for it."

Julin gazed at them knowingly. "I know it is now. But your melancholy will ease when your privacy returns."

"And yours will once you realize there is no one to spar with," the Regent countered easily.

Julin chuckled at that. "Fair played, Brother. Though you know I shall miss your presence even with the pain."

"As will I, Julin," Nikulainen replied.

"And dear Sister," he said. "You have found a place in my heart. I shall miss your lovely presence."

Sarianna smiled sweetly at him. "As will I, dearest Brother. Be well and happy, sweet Prince."

He put a fist over his heart then bowed his head. "I take my leave. Safe journey."

Nikulainen mirrored the gesture as Sarianna bowed her head. "Safe return, Brother. May we see each other again soon."

With that, Julin gracefully turned his mount and rode back toward Lanakae Fortress. Nikulainen felt a heaviness return to his heart as he listened to his brother's horse fade behind him. But then he felt Sarianna's gentle hand on his arm. When he met her eyes, the warmth returned.

"We make camp soon, do we not?" Sarianna asked softly.

"Aye," he smiled, sensing the comfort she offered. "I take the point again to make sure that all is ready."

An hour up the road, Esko the marchwarden waited on the border of Enewald with several Arinperan guards. He greeted Nikulainen with a smile.

"Greetings, Esko. What word have you of Arinpera?"

"Greetings, Regent. The celebrations are nearly at an end. All remains well within the citadel walls," Esko replied.

"We will return before the celebrations end. You and your men shall have time to enjoy them," he said.

"Thank you, Regent. I also have a message from the King that arrived a little while ago."

"How does the King fare, if you know?"

"He has been seen at many of the celebrations and is said to be well."

"Good, the Princess will be pleased to hear that," Nikulainen said. "The company is little more than an hour away."

"I will send word to make the camp ready," Esko said. "We had word of the numbers coming and have plenty of food and comfortable tents."

Within a few hours, the tired company made camp. Though Sarianna did not look as fatigued as she did during the outbound journey, there was relief on her lovely face as she dismounted. It was likely the armor had taxed her. Though it was very light in weight, there was some added to the shoulders and the back. Nikulainen could feel the strain in his shoulders from wearing it. He made sure to help Sarianna out of hers before addressing anything else in the camp.

Sarianna took a slow, deep breath once she was free, then smiled at him before reaching to unfasten his armor.

"I cannot imagine how exhausting metal armor must be," she said ruefully.

"That is why I resisted wearing it," Nikulainen replied. "I would be sorely taxed even before a skirmish began."

He embraced her as she pulled the last piece away, savoring the feel of him against her. Sarianna laughed softly as he pressed his face into her hair, then inhaled.

"I am so damp!" She exclaimed.

"I do not care. You feel good," he sighed. He released her. "I have a message from your father."

Sarianna looked up with concern. "Is anything amiss?"

“Nay. Esko reports that he is well,” he replied, handing her the vellum.

Sarianna took the sealed missive from him and carefully opened it. She began to read it aloud. “I hope this message finds you well and happy. Because of the urgency of King Magnus’ message, I received both letters at the same time as your first. I thank you, my Son, for giving my daughter a grand adventure while keeping her safe. I share her joy at the reunion of you with your Suurimetsa kin. I look forward to lengthy discourse on both subjects. As for the matter of Queen Taraasta, I understand the reasons for King Magnus’ decision. Those of us with long enough memories know well the reasons to avoid war.”

Nikulainen’s hear sank at that statement, but Sarianna’s expression did not darken. Nor did her pleasant tone change.

“However, I believe that you two have made the best decision for Arinpera,” she continued. “It is very easy to take the path less-resistant when there are no brothers and sons at risk. That is the way most of the rulers will proceed. Magnus is no coward. He seeks to avoid bloodshed against his son. I find no fault with him and am pleased that you did not. I commend the brave and delicate way in which you dealt with the matter. We will plan further upon your return. Safe journey, beloved children. Vauraus.”

A single tear slid down Sarianna’s cheek. Nikulainen gently brushed it away.

“Why do you cry? It seems we have done well in his eyes,” Nikulainen murmured.

“We have,” Sarianna replied shakily. “It is merely that I suddenly feel the weight of his absence.”

The brief kiss Nikulainen bestowed upon her caused unexpected laughter. He eyed her curiously. She shook her head.

"I laugh at my own foolishness," she explained. "I am but a day's ride away, and I am beset by melancholy."

"Your feelings are your feelings whenever they appear," he replied. "In this instance, you have been spared little time to think about other than matters immediately at hand until now."

Sarianna nodded. "I suppose you are right."

Hanna announced herself at the entrance of the tent. The maidservant was tolerating this journey well. She smiled brightly as she leaned inside.

"Is there anything that you need, highnesses?" She asked.

Sarianna took her in with a smile. "Nay. We will eat with the men as before. But I would have you look in on Lady Krista to see if she needs anything."

"Yes, Princess. You have a good night," Hanna said.

She watched the maid leave with considerable amusement. "She does not even put up a pretense of argument over lighter duties."

"I make no complaint," Nikulainen said. "Her and Jorgen's pursuit of each other leaves me free to tend to you."

"Really?" She asked in a voice that was suddenly low and husky. "Then, feed me, and I shall advise you about my other needs."

"Yes, milady," he smiled.

That night, they ate with the men of the company, then stayed to share stories around the campfire. All but Nikerym were there. Nikulainen was glad of that. His trusted captain knew far too many stories that were amusing at his expense, and he was very willing to tell them. Fortunately for the Prince's pride, Nikerym decided to tend to his wife. The mood in the company was different that night. Great fatigue and the prospect of an early and hard ride did not hang over the camp this time. Sarianna was thus able to hear the tales of the men as she had not before. And though her expression was often incredulous, she nonetheless enjoyed the yarns spun.

"Sarianna, it is time for you to rest," Nikulainen said softly. "They will talk all night as long as they have such an audience."

"Very well," she sighed. They bid the men goodnight and retired. He smiled to himself a short while later when he heard the men end their discourse for that night.

Sarianna appeared to be asleep when Nikulainen crept under the blankets once the lamps were doused. But she turned in his arms once he settled beside her. There were no light words of seduction. She nuzzled his throat while a hand restlessly stroked along his arm. Nikulainen stilled her with a long and gentle kiss. While they were pressed closely in that kiss, she snaked an arm around him, then rolled onto her back causing him to settle on her and between her legs.

He gasped, then deepened the kiss when she canted her hips upward. It had been his intent to bestow a warm good night kiss, but she had ignited his hunger for her. The slender, shapely leg that hooked around his thigh and the growl in her throat let him know that there was no need to tarry. Nikulainen pushed into her during the kiss,

stifling her groan. She was more than ready for him, and that slick heat almost undid him. He had to pause for a moment before continuing. He took her a little more slowly as the kiss went on. Sarianna's completion was almost silent, but it was powerful nonetheless. Her pleasure tightened that warm sheath around him, wringing his release from him.

Sarianna clung to him sweetly afterward until she dropped off to sleep. Nikulainen wondered why she had turned to him thus. Her need spoke more of a want of comfort than mere desire. Nikulainen cleaned them both with a damp cloth he managed to prepare by light of the moon through the slits in the tent opening, then he took her in his arms and held her close while they slept.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Sarianna was not sure what made the need of her husband's affection so overpowering. Something had unnerved her that night. Perhaps it was an errant thought during one of Meikka's tall battle tales. She wondered briefly how many of the men so beautifully heralded had not made it back to such campfires. But that was only part of the disquiet. Something about Nikulainen's embrace that night suddenly made her worry about not seeing him again. The feeling was elusive and inexplicable at the time and should have seemed silly in the morning. But Nikulainen was restless as dawn broke. It was not the kind of restlessness that resulted in her writhing naked beneath him. The restlessness disturbed him just before waking and distracted him through the morning meal.

"What troubles you, Niku?" She asked softly as he helped her with her armor.

"I do not know," he replied uneasily. "I hear nothing amiss, but something is wrong. The trees are ill at ease."

Sarianna smiled at him. "Before meeting your kin, I would have thought that statement strange. Now, I advise you to take to the trees and find out why. Take Nikerym and your best men. The company has enough protection with Esko and the guard."

Nikulainen seemed relieved by her reaction. He took her by the shoulders and looked her deeply in the eyes. "Should I sound an alarm, ride hard for the border. Do not worry about me. I cannot fight well if I am concerned for your safety."

Sarianna did not like the notion of leaving, but she liked the thought of distracting him from a fight even less. "I will seek safety. You must return to me."

Sarianna wore her helmet that morn as they set off. Meikka and Esko kept the company in a tighter and faster moving formation than the day before. Nikulainen and his men soon disappeared into the woods. The Princess pushed aside her misgivings to scan the road ahead, lending her eyes to the others keeping watch.

After a time when nothing ill transpired, she felt herself being lulled by the rhythm of the road. Sarianna remained vigilant, but relaxed enough that she was not drawn as tight as a bow. It was then that she too felt a general unease. Sarianna noticed Meikka and Esko were looking about more keenly even while it seemed they were casually taking in the road. Meikka casually made his way to her side.

"Something besides our men rustles in the trees," he said grimly.

"What will you have me do?" Sarianna asked quietly.

"I will move Lady Krista, Hanna and Jorgen forward. At my signal, ride hard with me and the guards for the border. Try to stay with the men, but leave if they have to engage the attackers. Help awaits at the border," Meikka said.

"I understand," she replied.

"Fortunately, we are the only ones who know you wear armor," he said. "It is a fine disguise."

Sarianna smiled ruefully at that, wondering whether being a Princess or a soldier made her a bigger target. There was no time to dwell on that notion. Moments later, a wide-eyed Krista and Hanna rode up with Jorgen and Meikka. A guard took each of the riders to escort and matched the speed of their charge. Sarianna felt strangely calm. Nikulainen was heading her way. He was not in danger. The Princess realized she was nearer to the threat. Sarianna drew her sword as Meikka notched his bow.

“Archers!” Meikka shouted then sounded his horn. The guards rode forward and readied their shields.

Sarianna saw them then. Five archers spanned the road in the distance. But before any arrows flew, the attackers were being felled from a volley of arrows flying from a position adjacent to theirs. Meikka looked as confused as she, for their defenders were in front of the attackers, but not to one side. More arrows flew from behind them as Nikulainen and his men thundered past.

“Break a way through for the Princess!” Nikulainen shouted. “Do not stop, Sarianna. Ride!”

“Aye!” She exclaimed.

Sarianna and Meikka sped up and led their party through the skirmish. The guards kept the other riders with them. With the element of surprise gone and the archers’ advantage of distance thwarted, Nikulainen and his men had matters well in hand. The way was clear once she passed the battle. She heard the women gasping at how close they were to the fray, but the party cleared it quickly.

And then the way was not clear. A lone archer suddenly appeared in the center of the road. His bow was notched and ready. Sarianna found that she had to stop and so did the others. No one but Nikulainen could take him without dire consequence. But that did not mean he would be unchallenged.

Sarianna raised her sword and startled Meikka and his men by charging the archer. Nikulainen was near enough to strike, and the archer knew it. She pressed on until only a short distance separated them.

"Lower your arrow, Armas!" Sarianna snarled.

To her surprise and infinite relief, he did. The elder Prince then took in her attire with a well-raised eyebrow.

"Princess?" He queried in amusement. "Do you lead this company?"

"Nay," she replied. "Niku comes."

"But you would defend it."

"Do not doubt that," she said quietly.

"I shall never again underestimate my dear sister," he replied. There was something odd in his tone. It lacked the hardness of some weeks ago.

"Armas!" Nikulainen shouted as he charged from the waning battle behind them.

"Be calm, Brother. I have not come to strike you as a vile assassin," Armas said levelly. "Those were my arrows that took away their advantage."

Nikulainen halted beside Sarianna. "You are coming home?"

Armas shook his head slowly. "Nay. I have found a place where I wish to be. But I do not fight this way. I would not have you die from an attack you cannot see. If I make war with you, it will be with honor in the light of day."

"Will your Queen not punish you for such an action?" Nikulainen asked. "Why would you return to face being harmed?"

Armas looked at his brother sharply, but recovered quickly. "No one will harm me there. You imagine things."

"Magnus has ordered Taraasta to make amends or be shunned," Nikulainen said. "Her plans have been for naught."

"Perhaps so and perhaps not. Only time will reveal what the fates have planned," he replied. Again, his tone was steeped in some emotion Sarianna could not identify.

"Why must there be even a question of a war between you?" Sarianna implored. "Magnus would welcome you home. He wants his son back."

"I know," Armas replied. There was a hint of regret in his tone. "But I am where I belong."

"Nay!" Nikulainen exclaimed with a ferocity that startled his bride and his brother. "You deserve more than... that!"

"You do not know the matter of things," Armas said quietly.

"Armas," Sarianna said gently. "Her heart has already turned against you. Beyond that, your fate is with your kin."

The elder Price was startled by her words. "So the Light of Arinpera shines upon me now. What was done is done. Too much has occurred to turn back."

Nikulainen flushed angrily. "I can take you now and return you to Ritvala."

"You would force me?" Armas said with a wry smile. "That is unlike you."

"We cannot part like this," Nikulainen replied levelly.

"Niku..." Sarianna said quietly. "Forcing his return would be a temporary solution. Armas would leave unless kept in chains. That is not the way."

"Your wife speaks the truth," Armas said quietly. "I did not wish to see you harmed, but we no longer walk the same path."

"Think what you will, but you are still my brother," Nikulainen said. His voice held some sadness despite his resolve. "Farewell, Armas."

The older Prince nodded curtly, then turned and rode into the woods. Nikulainen was still for a long moment afterward, listening. When Sarianna sheathed her sword, he turned his attention to her once more.

"Let us return home, Beloved," he said quietly. His dark eyes were a little sad, but they were warm as well. "We have a life to begin."

The company rested for the night just inside the border of Arinpera so they could arrive with the early morning and greet King Vauraus. Esko and his men rode ahead to the citadel to announce their arrival. Thus, when Sarianna and Nikulainen approached the main gate that morning, the welcoming horns were sounding, and the people had assembled to greet them.

Captain Rajotin awaited them at the main gate. He smiled broadly at the couple as he fell in alongside Nikulainen.

"Greetings, Regent, Princess," he said. "You have become quite the warriors."

"You shall hear about the armor in due time, captain," Nikulainen smiled. "How is the security of the citadel?"

"All is well, Regent," he said. "We had no trouble during your absence."

"That is because all the trouble followed us," Sarianna laughed.

"Aye," Nikulainen said with a chuckle of his own.

Nikulainen's spirits had lifted considerably since the encounter with Armas. He smiled brightly at Sarianna as they entered the walls to the cheers of their people. The Princess smiled as well. She was elated to be back home and relieved her husband had recovered himself from melancholy.

King Vaurus awaited them at the main entrance to the citadel itself. Neuvoja stood beside him. Both men were a welcome sight to Sarianna's eyes. Her father looked well. He had not overly taxed himself as she had feared. Neuvoja looked less strained than when they had departed. The crowd hushed as the Regent and the Princess came before the Monarch and knelt before him.

"Welcome back, Regent Nikulainen and Princess Sarianna," King Vaurus said. "What news do you have for your King?"

"We bring the thanks and gratitude of King Magnus and Queen Reija of Ritvala," Nikulainen said in a loud, clear voice. "And I bring an entreaty from Lord Valtias of The Great Suurimetsa Forest."

The crowd murmured as the King and his advisor looked at Nikulainen with great interest.

“What is this entreaty?” The King asked.

“Lord Valtias wishes to visit this land to extend the hand of friendship to Arinpera,” Sarianna said.

“They will visit during the time of the next new moon,” Nikulainen said.

“This is news of great wonder and promise,” Vauraus said. “You have done well, my dear children. Rise and greet your father.”

The crowd cheered as Sarianna embraced her father joyously. His embrace was strong, and his laughter echoed through her.

“How I have missed you, dear Father,” she breathed.

“And I you, my lovely Light,” he replied. “My heart is whole with you here.”

They parted. Sarianna found her eyes brimming with happy tears as Nikulainen embraced his sire.

“Thank you, Niku, for returning her,” he said happily. “You have brought love to my daughter’s heart and strength to our halls.”

“You and yours are my life, Sire,” Nikulainen replied.

“Come, children! Let us break bread and share your tales!” The King said. He then turned to the people. “The celebrations continue for two days more. We now celebrate a victorious homecoming!”

Sarianna swept inside the citadel on her father's arm. He drank her in much as Valtias had with Nikulainen. It both warmed her and pained her that he had missed her so much. She squeezed his arm and rested her head against his shoulder.

"Do not fret so, Sarianna," Vauraus rumbled. "What sorrow I felt was eased with one glimpse of your fair face."

She nodded at that, reaching her free hand to grasp Nikulainen's. "I know, Father. I just want both my men near this moment."

They shared a warm and amicable meal. Neuvoja dined with them. The advisor seemed to have regained his inner strength and confidence. He spoke at some length about the time spent with the farmers during the celebrations. Many ideas and plans for the new road were shared and modified. That most difficult group of the King's subjects forgot about Neuvoja's earlier opposition to the project and embraced his counsel.

"I am not implying that the way will be smooth with the farmers upon your return to your duties," Neuvoja said. "But the way has eased."

"Any ease would be welcome," Nikulainen smiled.

"You have done well, old friend," Sarianna said with a smile.

"Enough of us," Vauraus said. "We have not been the ones having adventures. While I may, I wish to hear of this entreaty and the Suurimetsa."

Nikulainen smiled at that and told the tale of finding his grandfather and his uncles. His eyes were warm with the memory of the reunion with his kin and their care of him and their support of their decisions. The King and his advisor were riveted.

“Lord Valtias is very powerful. I can feel his presence even here,” Nikulainen said. “Forgive us for not telling you of this proposed alliance. We did not want to risk the message being diverted.”

“That information should not be trusted to messages,” the King replied. “This is most extraordinary news. It shall have a profound affect on the Hanyanoore.”

“For good or ill, Father?” Sarianna asked.

“For good I believe,” Vauraus replied. “There is much restlessness amongst the rulers. Their offspring are coming to power. They are the sum of their parents’ resentments over the Great Accord and their own ambitions. Taraasta was wise in attempting to strike before this unrest spreads.”

“But how would this alliance help other than Arinpera?” Sarianna asked.

“It would increase the cost of aggression beyond what most will be willing to pay,” Vauraus said. “Perhaps this alliance will give your rule time to make its own accord with the upcoming rulers.”

“Perhaps with the mantle of a kingdom on his shoulders, Armas will have a different view of conquest,” Nikulainen said.

“There is hope yet with the Prince,” Vauraus said. “No matter what his reason, saving you from attack was a bold act. It speaks of independence from Taraasta.”

“If he survives,” Neuvoja said. “Taraasta does not like to be thwarted.”

“Aye, but Taraasta will not release her prize either,” Nikulainen commented. “However, she does have a healthy fear of the Suurimetsa.”

"Knowing one of its offspring as I do, makes me excited to meet these magical people," Vauraus said.

"They are magical, indeed," Sarianna said. "As fair as my Niku and just as mysterious."

"I am not mysterious," Nikulainen said.

Vauraus chuckled. "I agree. Even I can tell the Regent is anxious to enjoy your chamber modifications."

"Father! Really!" Sarianna exclaimed blushing profusely.

"You have been very patient about indulging an old man's curiosity," he continued. "And you have more than fulfilled your duties to this court. Go, my children, and enjoy the last days of the celebration."

"But, Sire, we have only just arrived," Nikulainen said quietly.

Sarianna loved Nikulainen for that. She knew he wanted to be alone with her, but he was genuinely interested in spending time with her father. Vauraus smiled at the sentiment. He patted the Regent's shoulder as he rose from the table.

"We will continue our talk tomorrow," Vauraus said as he embraced Sarianna. "All this excitement has taxed me. Until then, children. Come, Neuvoja."

Thus, they were alone in the hall save for the servants clearing away the meal. Sarianna leaned in to kiss Nikulainen.

"You are a very kind man, and the great King loves you," she said. "That is why he has released us."

Nikulainen smiled. "We should take advantage before Captain Rajotin realizes we are free. That is, if you want to."

Sarianna found herself smiling wickedly as she rose from the table, then leaned close to speak softly in his ear. "That you could ask such a question confounds me, Niku. It is all I can do to keep from having you right here and now."

Nikulainen looked up at her with eyes that had gone black with passion. He swallowed hard, taking a deep, slow breath. "As always, you make matters very simple. Let us away then."

Their chambers were somewhat transformed from when they had left. The mirror across from the bed made the room seem larger. There was an enormous tub in the corner nearest the fire. Some of her things had been moved to the room. Her pillows were on the bed. Her brush and combs were on the long table near the bed along with her jewelry box. Hanna was fluttering about arranging things while Jorgen was having the tub filled.

Sarianna and Nikulainen entered the room looking about with interest. Sarianna was less curious about the room as she was about the servants leaving. She did not rush them. They needed to get back to their routine as much as she and her husband needed to be together. Thus neither protested when the servants insisted on removing their armor. Once free of the tough leather, Sarianna sank onto the bed and lay back with her feet still on the floor. The mattress felt so good, it made her want to moan. Nikulainen followed suit. They lay there staring up at the ceiling while Hanna and Jorgen went about their tasks.

"I enjoyed the camps on the road, but I missed being in a bed," Sarianna said with a sigh.

"Aye," Nikulainen murmured. "There is something to be said for comforts."

"Thora had a summoning bell put in," Jorgen said indicating a braided silk cord hanging near the headboard. "The King wants you to say when you need us, so you'll have more privacy."

"There are also bed curtains for further privacy," Hanna added.

Sarianna knew how tired she was at that moment. She hadn't even noticed the alteration to the bed.

"I like that," Nikulainen said with a wry smile. "I like all the changes in the room."

"How is Thora?"

"She is not very happy," Hanna replied. "But she says that new rulers bring change."

"That sounds very reasonable," the Princess said doubtfully.

"I am concerned as well," Hanna laughed.

"Will you be having your evening meal here?" Jorgen asked.

"Yes," Nikulainen said. "And until Lord Valtias arrives. We will have our morning and mid-day meals in the dining hall."

"Yes, Regent," Jorgen said.

"The bath is ready," Hanna said.

"Thank you, Hanna," Sarianna said with a yawn. "I am sure we will get there before it cools."

There was silence in the room then, but Sarianna knew that the servants were no longer bustling about. She sat up on her elbows to find out why they were just standing by the bed. Nikulainen did the same.

"What is the matter?" Sarianna asked.

"Nothing is wrong, Princess," Hanna replied.

"It seems that something is on your mind," Nikulainen said.

The pair looked at each other, then at them. They looked panicked for some reason.

"It can wait until later."

"Hanna!" Sarianna exclaimed. "I will be distracted by it all night."

"Please, do not distract the Princess," Nikulainen implored. "Jorgen, tell us."

The valet swallowed hard. Hanna smiled at him in nervous encouragement. "Hanna and I wish to marry, Highnesses."

The royal couple sat up completely. Sarianna smiled brightly. Until that moment, the couple looked petrified.

"We think that is wonderful!" Sarianna said.

"Yes! Congratulations to you both," Nikulainen exclaimed. "Why did you fear telling us?"

"We worried that you would not have liked us... courting... while we worked," Jorgen replied with a blush.

"Thora will have a lot to say about that," Hanna said dryly.

"Do not worry about her," Sarianna said. "You have never been lax in your tasks and never behaved inappropriately."

"Then we can remain in your service?" Jorgen asked.

"Of course," Nikulainen said. "We are pleased that you wish to remain."

"When do you wish to wed?" Sarianna asked.

Jorgen blushed again. "We would like it to be very soon."

"We understand," Nikulainen smiled.

"But you need some time to prepare," Sarianna said thoughtfully. "How about in seven days?"

"We will not need that much time. It will be a very small event," Hanna said.

"Nonsense, we will have a feast and music," Sarianna replied. "And you must have a place to live. Your small rooms won't do for two."

Sarianna rose to pace for a moment. "Ah, the Governess' chambers in this wing stands empty. Those will do."

Hanna eyes grew large and tears threatened to spill. "Princess, 'tis too much."

"Nay, accept this and we are both well served," Sarianna replied, embracing her maid.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"We will discuss my gift on the morrow, Jorgen," Nikulainen said placing an affectionate hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, Regent. We leave you now. There is food for the mid-day meal in the sitting room," Jorgen said. "Ring if you need anything."

The door had barely closed when Sarianna found herself pressed against Nikulainen's strong, warm body in a fierce embrace.

“Welcome home, Niku,” she whispered before he kissed her.

Chapter Thirty

Nikulainen deeply appreciated the new tub for a number of reasons. It was a marvel of design like nothing he had ever seen. There was actually a drain that led to a short sluice, which ran under the courtyard doors and out through the garden. Jorgen was impressed that the servants wouldn't have to empty all that water. While this was a wonder, Nikulainen would have to admit, if pressed that he was more impressed with being able to sit at one end of the tub and watch Sarianna bathe at the other.

They had been in the water a long time. It had been quite hot when they eased into the tub. The water was very warm as they washed each other's hair. They were a very long time in doing it. Neither of their servants would have approved of the time and splashing involved, but the task was accomplished and with great satisfaction. Sarianna knelt behind him in the tub to lather his hair. Never had Nikulainen endured so much joy in being tortured. She massaged his scalp while she lathered his hair easing away the fatigue from the road. All the while, she managed to brush her nipples across his back with almost every move. By the time she helped him rinse the soap away, one sort of tension had seeped away and was replaced by another, more pleasant sort.

Somehow, his beguiling Princess managed to torture him while he lathered her hair. Sarianna's nipples taunted him as she arched back into his touch while her lovely hands stroked along his thighs. Her touch seared him even through the hot water. After he

rinsed her hair, Nikulainen could not help turning her in his arms for a kiss. She yielded her mouth to his rough kiss, moaning as he tasted her sweetness.

“Are you trying to drive me mad?” Nikulainen demanded softly.

“Yes,” she sighed. “I am only giving you fair return.”

“When have I tormented you thus?” He growled.

Sarianna claimed his mouth in a fiery kiss. “I have been next to your warm and beautiful body and not permitted to touch you for night after night while you healed. All that bare, golden flesh laid out before me and yet forbidden.”

She ran her hands over his shoulders and down his chest. “I have suffered much.”

“How do I make amends?” Nikulainen gasped.

Sarianna moaned against his lips. “I have naught the patience to enjoy you as I wish this moment. Take me, Niku! Please.”

Such a sweet, urgent plea could not be ignored. Nikulainen deftly maneuvered so he was sitting on the backs of his legs. He then guided her to straddle his hips. Sarianna braced herself by grasping her beloved’s shoulders then eased his hardness into her body. They moaned then desperately sought each other’s kiss while beginning to move against one another. Sarianna’s hunger must have been great, for Nikulainen felt her begin to climax after only a few thrusts. As the pleasure rolled powerfully through her body, he found his release as well. They didn’t stop that long, searing kiss until he softened enough to ease from her.

The water was still quite warm, so they moved to opposite sides of the tub to watch each other bathe. Though sated for the moment, watching Sarianna slowly smooth soap

along her graceful limbs was still delightful torture. He was heartened to see the affect was not one-sided. Her eyes were hooded and nearly black from passion as they followed the soap as it traveled over his skin.

But as powerful as their wants were, the warm water and their long day began to take a toll. By the time they finished rinsing each other and combing each other's hair, their limbs and their eyelids had grown very heavy. Nikulainen helped Sarianna to the bed, where he gathered her in his arms then pulled the covers over them both.

"It seems fatigue outpaces passion," Sarianna sighed against Nikulainen's chest.

The Prince squeezed her gently. "Aye, but I am well satisfied for now. And I shall be full of vigor after some rest."

He felt her smile against his skin. "I shall hold you to that."

Something was pulling Nikulainen from deep slumber. A crackling heat ran across his nerves to settle in his belly. There was no danger, but there was an urgency that pulled at his consciousness. Just before opening his eyes, the Prince realized he could not move. Then he felt a warm, wet tongue swipe the sac beneath his arousal.

"Sarianna..." he moaned loudly. She did not answer. He looked down toward the end of the bed in time to see his beloved engulf his member whole in that sweet, hot mouth. He cried out at the incredible feel of her surrounding him. The awkward determination first used to take him thus had been honed to a devastating skill. Sarianna did not use her hand this time. Those lovely lips and that incredible mouth

was all she used on him. It was enough. The look of love and lust in her eyes and the feel of her mouth drove him to release with a strangled cry.

Nikulainen had closed his eyes with his release and was lost in a reverie for some moments. He then felt sweet lingering kisses along his hairline and then on his eyelids.

“What more can you want of me, witch-woman?” He asked with a groan. “You have drained me dry.”

She laughed softly into the ear she was nibbling on. “I hope not, milord. I have not finished with you.”

Sarianna looked down on him as she rested her head on her hands. “I gave you release so that I may take my time enjoying your beautiful skin.”

With that pledge, the Princess lavished all the skill of her talented mouth to explore and enjoy his honeyed skin from his forehead to his toes. All the while, Nikulainen writhed and gasped beneath her. By the time she reached the foot of the bed, his arousal had returned and was once more demanding release. Sarianna was dazed with her own hunger and barely able to think through a way of acting on it.

“Sarianna... please,” Nikulainen moaned desperately. “Let me go. I need you... please...”

Nikulainen’s words and his tone reached her addled mind. Sarianna climbed up his body, then freed one of his wrists. In the next instant, she was on her back with her limbs wrapped around that lithe body. He had pushed inside her in one thrust and was sending her toward ecstasy with each thrust. Sarianna met his driving hips almost lazily

while he ravaged her mouth. The long wave of pleasure crested. She cried out just before her beloved. The bond was singing between them as she drifted to sleep.

With the end of the days of celebration, Sarianna's life drifted into a satisfying routine. She and Nikulainen assumed King Vauraus' court duties full time. Construction of the northern roads began almost immediately. They held audiences in the morning as was customary. In the afternoon, Nikulainen split his time between training the soldiers in his way of fighting and supervising the fabrication of Suurimetsa armor. An edict was set fourth that all able-bodied men were to be trained in methods of combat for the defense of Arinpera. Once the Regent trained the soldiers, they were to train the male citizens. Sarianna supervised the training of the women on how to tend to the weapons and keep proper provisions in case of an attack. Hidden sentry posts were built along the borders to monitor any unusual activity.

The people responded to the edict better than the Princess had thought. Sarianna had worried that the command could cause a panic. The citizens were not unaffected by the attack on Almourol Citadel. However, they welcomed the notion of being able to protect their homes themselves. Nikulainen's involvement in the training brought the men closer to their Regent. Their acceptance of him grew stronger. Their rule was beginning on a strong and positive path. King Vauraus and Neuvoja were very pleased.

Nikulainen found time to explore the forests to the east in the foothills. He spent long hours there riding with Ajaa to make trails in the dense forest as he had in Ritvala or

sitting amongst the high branches listening to the trees. Sarianna did not mind the time away from him. It soothed and nurtured her beloved and bound him closer to Arinpera. And he always found time for her. They sparred together often. Her skills grew enough that she even sparred with Nikerym and Meikka with confidence.

They also made time to be alone. The tub and the manacles were well used. Sarianna finally learned Nikulainen as well as she wanted, as her husband had learned her. Their lovemaking became even more intense and satisfying. The bond sang in her veins. She could hear Nikulainen in her mind clearly even when he was in the farthest reaches of the trees.

Their lives and their duties were very pleasant indeed. One of Sarianna's most favorite duties was to stand as witness with Thora at Hanna and Jorgen's wedding. Nikulainen stood with Jorgen, and the Monarchs hosted an opulent feast for the newlyweds and the regular household staff. The couple took up residence in the newly redecorated chambers in the royal wing. Sarianna was most pleased that she had no argument from them over their lighter duties. Leaving the royal couple to tend to themselves at night left their servants free to form their own bond. That left everyone very happy.

Three cycles of the moon had passed in this routine when rumors and stirrings from beyond the borders of Arinpera reached their ears at court. A great force was making its way across the land. The whole of the Hanyanoore stirred with the news. Messengers began arriving from the rulers to the west. They had granted safe passage to what looked like an army from the Suurimetsa. They admitted that the mythical people

passed through with gifts and good wishes, but still they feared what this visit meant. King Vauraus answered that a grandfather was coming to visit his grandson and meet his wife's people. None who were friend to Arinpera need fear. And then one day a messenger arrived from the traveling company. His golden beauty caused quite a stir in the citadel. The young warrior came to herald the arrival of Lord Valtias that next morn.

All of the citizenry turned out along the road to watch the fearsome and striking procession. There was an impressive phalanx of armored warriors, but there were also wagons and wagons laden with all manner of goods. Sarianna watched in amazement as they filed into the courtyard. They were both impressive and intimidating. And then a single rider came forward to where she, Nikulainen and Vauraus stood waiting. Lord Valtias dismounted to stride proudly towards them. Once near, he sank to one knee.

"I thank you, Great King, for bidding us welcome," he began. "I have come to pledge the protection of the People of the Great Suurimetsa Forest to the land of my beloved grandson."

When the cheers diminished, Vauraus stepped forward. "Arinpera is pleased to welcome Lord Valtias and his extraordinary people. We gladly accept his offer as we offer our kinship to him."

The men embraced. Then Valtias turned to his grandson. Sarianna watched as the elder Lord cupped Nikulainen's face in his hands, then gazed upon him with a smile. They passed a moment in silent communication that warmed the Princess with its unabashed love. When Valtias greeted Sarianna in that manner, she felt a shimmer of

surprise from him and then incredible joy. She was drawn into a heartfelt embrace that puzzled her and her husband.

“You do not know,” he said quietly as he pulled away.

Sarianna looked at him deeply puzzled as he smiled kindly at her. “Come, let us go inside. You must get off your feet.”

It was during their morning meal together that Lord Valtias informed Sarianna that she was with child. The couple was incredulous until he made them still and guided them to hear the babe within her. King Vauraus was overjoyed. Nikulainen mirrored Sarianna’s reaction – happiness mixed with fear. Valtias calmed them both. He had his healers with him along with waters and herbs from the Great Forest. Sarianna was assured that there was nothing to fear. They would send for Queen Reija when her time drew near. Meanwhile, he would remain to take care of her and the panicked Nikulainen. Valtias had left his sons in charge of his kingdom, thus he could tarry there as long as necessary.

Something in the Lord’s serenity calmed Sarianna. When the fear diminished, her joy about the babe grew. Nikulainen, she found, had to be persuaded. That night, he tried to hold her chastely in bed as they settled for the night. Sarianna responded by turning her husband on his back and straddling him.

“I am the same woman who nearly bested Meikka in quarterstaff yesterday,” she said with quiet intensity. “I will not go without the pleasure of your body and have you treating me like a fragile doll for months.”

Nikulainen's large, dark eyes mirrored his uncertainty. "But surely there will be restrictions."

"And I shall obey them," she soothed. "But I need you, Niku. Our child will need to hear the bond that sings between us. You are a gentle soul. I am certain my very creative love can find a way to make love without harming the babe."

With that, Sarianna gently kissed him, igniting a quieter fire between them. Nikulainen could do naught but obey she who owned him that night and every night hence until she was great with child. The fierce Princess was forced to put down her weapons until well after the birth, but she was never without her husband's ardent attention.

Lord Valtias was a wonder during that time. The teas and foods he instructed Sarianna to consume greatly eased discomfort or sleeplessness that would occur. His hand on her brow could calm her most tempestuous moods. He even had an affect on King Vauraus. The elder Monarch's mind was clear for longer during the day. His life force seemed to stop fading and even grow a bit stronger. Sarianna was convinced the Lord had used his healing arts to give her father more time on the mortal plane.

Many were involved in the care of Sarianna while she carried her child. Hanna was a tireless help during the days when the Princess was to go no further than her chambers or gardens. Thora was ever present to help her with the merchants who sought contracts for the babe's needs. Even Minos helped by finally taking on apprentices. He was thus free to exercise Kelata once she was forbidden to ride.

Even with all of the attentive care lavished upon the Princess, it was Nikulainen who tended to her alone once his duties were completed. Even the arrival of his mother did not change that. And he was at Sarianna's side when the baby was born. The Princess had clutched his hand when the pains of labor began one night during their evening meal and would not let go, but she was certain Nikulainen would not have left her in any event. He was the first to see their son. He gently placed a beautiful golden-haired infant with large dark blue eyes into her arms. Tears of joy filled his eyes as he thanked her over and over. Sarianna could not understand why he would thank her. It seemed that she was the one who had everything.

Like their marriage, the birth of the royal couple's child was a matter of state. King Vauraus sent a proclamation announcing the birth of Alkarin. With that missive, word also spread of the alliance between Arinpera and the Suurimetsa. In the name of the newborn child, Lord Valtias gifted the kingdom with plants from the Great Forest. There were herbs for teas and healing, and there were saplings for a long, narrow forest at the northwestern border. They were a gift to the farmers, as they protected the farthest fields from the wind. But the royal couple knew what the trees really were. Valtias had left them the most hidden of sentries to protect their borders.

There were royal visitors in Arinpera for nine lunar cycles all told. Lord Valtias remained until Alkarin was crawling and climbing. He was reluctant to leave even then so enchanted was he with his beautiful and mirthful great-grandson. King Magnus and Queen Reija stayed until Sarianna was back on her feet. Julin arrived after his father's return to Ritvala and became fast friends with his jovial nephew. The moody Julin

actually smiled when with the babe. He wrote silly poems that made Alkarin laugh. The royal couple didn't mind the visitors. They found great joy in sharing their son.

When the visits ended, Sarianna and Nikulainen found a new routine that involved a very active baby. It was amazing to the Princess just how much could happen in barely two years' time. Nikulainen found her pondering the swift passage of time in the library one evening after he returned from a patrol with the men.

"I have been looking for you," he said softly. Nikulainen wrapped his arms around Sarianna and peered over her shoulder at the tapestry she was considering. "How is Alkarin?"

"Slumbering deeply," she replied, sighing into his embrace. "He is exhausted from a day filled with mischief. How are the saplings?"

"They are very tall for so short a time," Nikulainen replied, kissing her neck. "They already have voices."

"It is still too fragile to hold together," Sarianna said looking down at the tapestry.

"You are still concerned about the final decree from the rulers," the Regent observed.

Sarianna shrugged her lovely shoulders. "I could have understood a decline to Magnus' proposal. I just never expected them to lay blame on Rosdower when it is clear he did not have the authority to act. Only the Sijanen monarchs seem to have any sense."

"I agree, Beloved. But in blaming the dead prince, the acts can be decried without losing a powerful ally and trade partner," Nikulainen sighed.

"What are we to do?"

“Worry not. Arinpera is safe. Ritvala is safe,” he replied quietly. “We have the strength to weave a new one someday.”

“Aye,” she sighed as he bit the curve of her shoulder. “I cannot believe all that has transpired in so short a time. When last I stood here thus, I had no idea what to do with a man. I could not imagine even wanting one.”

“And now you own one,” he murmured against her skin.

“Mmmmm, I do indeed,” she sighed once more. “I could never have fathomed surrender being so sweet.”

“Nor could I, Beloved,” he replied. “Please, remind me, Sarianna.”

Sarianna turned in his strong embrace with a wicked smile. “Get the manacles and await me naked in bed.”

Nikulainen smiled his most incendiary smile before taking leave of her. With a final look at the old tapestry, Sarianna doused the candles, then headed off to claim what was hers once again.

The End