



**Savage**

Book Two of *Zinah*

Lila Dubois

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Dedication**

For Kari:

Thanks for all the encouragement. I was going to dedicate “Sultan’s Sacrifice” to you, but since that thing died a slow, clichéd death, you get this book instead.

\*

And for Kate:

Thanks for coming back to edit this one.

We survived fire, flood, famine, mental breakdown, and major abdominal surgery to get it done.

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe many thanks to Stacy and Tara, who read this in its icky first-draft incarnation. You ladies are the best!

## **List of Principle Characters**

Anleeh: Lord Justice for the new monarchy, formerly the third ranking Zinah. A warrior of Den, Anleeh came to the Temple to train with their warriors, but was chosen to be a Zinah instead.

Cryessa: Queen, wife to King Tamlohn, formerly High Priestess. As Priestess, Cryessa, with the aid of her Zinahs, tried to protect the Great City from the sadistic King. She was meant to treat them as slaves, but Cryessa cared for the Zinahs, and though it was forbidden, loved Tamlohn. Her story is told in *Forbidden*.

Jahrl: Anleeh's uncle and leader of the Clan.

Moregon: Minister of Agriculture for the new monarchy, formerly fifth ranking Zinah.

Rohaj: General of the combined Temple and Palace armies for the new monarchy, formerly the second ranking Zinah.

Siara: Head Mistress of the Temple College. After a lifetime in the Temple, Siara longs for adventure. Her companion on the journey is Anleeh, whom Siara has secretly loved for years.

Sedrick: Anleeh's father.

Sesah: Minister of Ceremonies and Protocol for the new monarchy, formerly fourth ranking Zinah.

Tamlohn: King, husband to Queen Cryessa, formerly Prima, or first Zinah. His story is told in *Forbidden*.

## **List of Terms**

Den: Land to the far west of the Great City. Known for their fierce warriors and independent nature, the people of Den want nothing to do with outsiders.

Great City: Capitol city to the Land Between the Sea, home of both the Temple and Palace.

Land Between the Seas: Great kingdom that houses all peoples and culture. The kingdom has fractured over 1000 years of poor reign by the old monarchy. The new King and Queen seek to re-unite the kingdom.

Zinahs: Five chosen warriors who served the High Priestess of the Temple as both trusted advisors and sexual partners. The Zinahs were disbanded when the old King was defeated and the Priestess became Queen.

Prima: title used to denote the head Zinah. Tamlohn, before becoming King, was Prima Zinah.

## Chapter One

“Are you a virgin?”

The startling question ruptured the silence in the stone chamber. The final word seemed to echo off the floor and ceiling, bouncing into the books that lined most of the walls. What little wall space was not consumed by books was made up by windows, and the dust mote-speckled rays of sunlight haloed the question’s intended target.

Siara, Headmistress of the Temple College turned Royal Scribe and historian, completed her sentence, finishing the final letter with a precise flourish, and set down her quill. She wiped her ink-stained fingers with a rag as she sat back in her chair. She looked up, steady golden-brown gaze focusing on the speaker.

“Could you please repeat your question?” Her voice was smooth and well-modulated, that of a seasoned teacher.

Anleeh, Lord Justice of the new monarchy, carefully examined Siara’s face in case he gave offense, but found neither disgust nor anger in her features. Her smooth face was as controlled as ever.

“Are you a virgin?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Your answer is vital to our mission.” Anleeh stressed the possessive.

“I fail to see how my state of sexual knowledge has any bearing on an ambassadorial mission.”

“Then you prove me right. I should go alone. If answering this simple question in the comfort and seclusion of the Palace bothers you, you will never survive this mission.”

Her back straightened, though Anleeh hadn’t thought it possible. She looked as if she were strapped to a board.

“I assure you, Lord Anleeh, that I am more than capable of accompanying you on this mission, and am fully committed to completing it.”

“Committed enough to answer my question?”

Siara turned her face to the side, the sunlight striking cheeks that were crimson with a blush. “If it is so important for you to know, then I will tell you. Yes, I am a virgin.”

Her shoulders slumped slightly, and suddenly she was not the stiff Head Mistress but an embarrassed young woman. Anleeh cursed himself. He was being cruel to her, deliberately so, and she did not deserve it. He leaned forward and touched her hand, drawing her attention to him. Working to suppress his anger, Anleeh smiled at her, the cocky half-grin he’d cultivated as part of his debonair attitude.

“I ask only because your answer will affect our mission and the story we will tell to explain your presence.”

“Why must there be a story?”

“The people of Den would neither understand nor accept you as a delegate of the Great City.”

“But your people will accept you back to your homeland.”

Anleeh didn’t want to be reminded of that. It was days before their planned departure and his stomach was already knotted. He rose from his chair and went to the window. They’d commandeered this antechamber in the Palace for the headquarters of their

operation. Preparation for the journey had begun only a week ago, the moment after Anleeh caved to the pleadings of the King and Queen to accept this mission.

Strangely, in all that time, he and Siara had spent very little time together. He knew her, of course. Had known her since he came to the Temple. They were of an age, and had each come into positions of power, he as Zinah, she as Headmistress, around the same time.

Despite these similarities Anleeh could count their conversations on a single hand. As Zinah, Anleeh had very few dealings with any woman besides the Priestess. Siara's domain of innocent young girls and learning was far removed from his darker world of sex and war.

But now she would be his companion in the single hardest thing he'd ever done: returning home.

Anleeh turned, putting his back to the window, and examined his new companion.

She should have been plain. Her body appeared as one massive lump beneath the heavy brown cloth of her shapeless dress, no defining curves anywhere. Her hair was also brown, braided down her back—a woman decidedly fashion-unfriendly and uniformly brown. And yet, her face. Her eyes, too large, were a pale brown with a rim of black around the iris. Her other features seemed unremarkable when compared to those eyes, but upon closer inspection, he realized she possessed well formed lips, the bottom one pleasingly plump, a small nose with a slightly pointed tip, and an equally-pointed chin.

Siara stared back at him, seemingly fearless in the face of his regard, and it was in her eyes that Anleeh found that which separated her from other women.

They sparkled. Not with humor or lust, both emotions he'd seen light a woman's eyes. Siara's brown eyes shone with the light of fierce intelligence.

He stepped away from the window, moving to stand before her, shadowing her with his body. Testing her, he cupped her chin. Siara did not turn from his touch. This close, he felt that he could drown in all he could see in those eyes—passion and anger mingled with strength of spirit. Dismissing the thoughts as flights of fancy, he released her chin.

But as he turned away, his fingers tingled from just that brief moment of contact.

\* \* \* \*

Siara watched as Anleeh turned away from her, roaming like a caged cat around the perimeter of the room. She waited until his back was turned to drag in great gulps of air, slumping as she did so.

"You have read much. What did you read about the women of Den?"

The moment he asked she snapped to attention, all nerve endings tingling awake once more. She'd read everything there was in the library on Den, and had been preparing for this journey by doing selected re-readings, so she readily answered his question.

"The women of Den are known to be strong and willful. There are stories of the women raising arms and fighting to defend their homes when the men are away."

"Yes, my aunt was severely injured while fighting to defend my Uncle's Hall."

"Did she die?"

"Yes." He said it with neither remorse nor grief. "What did you learn of the men and women of Den and how they relate to one another?"

Siara's brow furrowed. "I don't remember reading anything specifically about that."

“Very well,” he said, and then returned to his chair next to her. He sat for a moment, tapping his fingers on the table, before speaking again. “I will train you as we travel.”

“Train me?” Siara considered the rather odd choice of words. For someone as devoted to the written word as she, deciphering the nuances of speech was one of her greatest strengths.

“Yes.”

“Don’t you mean teach me?”

“I say what I mean. I must train you to act like a woman of Den.”

“How do they act?”

“In some ways you are much like them: strong and outspoken and determined.”

Siara felt her cheeks heat with pleasure at the compliment, and turned her face into the sunlight, hoping to hide her blush.

“Than why do I need training?” she asked once she was under control.

Anleeh sighed, “In Den, while it is true that the women are strong and independent, they must always, *always* submit to their man.”

Siara blinked once, very slowly. “I do not understand.”

“Women are like—like animals.”

“Animals?” Siara heard the shock in her own voice. He was supposed to be a learned man. For all his care of fashion and power in battle, he was intelligent and knowledgeable in many things. Anything less would have made him unworthy of both his previous title as Zinah, and now the title of Lord. His words betrayed the ideal of him in her mind. That struck Siara, and she stopped to examine the complex idea. So intent was she in her study that she almost missed his next words.

“Let me explain.” He returned to his chair, resting one hip on the armrest. He leaned forward, his eyes brilliant and intent, forcing her to return her attention to him. “They are like wolves, wolves that have been trained. When given their freedom, they are fierce and dangerous, but at their Master’s call they heel and obey their Master’s will.” He stopped, and Siara waited for more explanation. When it was clear no more was forthcoming, Siara did her best to understand what he’d said.

“The women of Den are ... slaves?”

“No.” His denial was immediate, but footnoted by his next comment. “Though if there were written laws there, as we have here, women would be the property of men. A man reveres his mother and protects his sisters, but a man’s wife is his, obedient to him in all things. A beautiful woman who is both wild and obedient is prized above all others.”

Siara’s mind raced, piecing together all his words and actions. “That is why you were upset I was a woman, and why you ask if I am a virgin.”

Anleeh turned to face her. “Yes.”

“We must ... marry?” Siara rubbed her fingertips against her cuffs with such vigorous intensity that the fabric grew hot. The thought was terrifying and thrilling. It would be insulting to take the sacred trust of marriage in vain by committing only for the sake of their mission, but he would be hers. Even if it were meaningless, he would be hers.

*Don’t be foolish*, she admonished herself. But the euphoria remained.

She’d loved him from the first moment she met him.

Siara knew, with painful clarity, how pitiful her unrequited love was. She’d become a scholar of his homeland for no other reason than she wanted to be near him, had never

married or looked to another man for companionship because of her unwavering regard for him. It was madness that what should have been no more than a school-girl crush carried on for five long years.

It was her greatest secret. Siara was a background character, a player unnoticed on the stage of life. She could have lived like that, could have spent the rest of her days loving him from afar, if the revolution hadn't happened.

Many things had changed when the usurper-King was overthrown and the former High Priestess and one of her Zinahs were placed on the throne as Queen and King. A nation that had lived in darkness for a thousand years learned to hope again, remembered what it was to plan for the future.

Siara's passion had always been for books detailing the explorations of travelers, especially those to Den. In the time of peace, 1000 years before, the Land Between the Seas had been a place of great learning. Explorers had traveled to the far reaches of the land, to the sea and beyond. Many had written of their travels, detailing worlds that Siara could only dream of.

When the calm after the storm of the revolution revealed a multitude of paths open to Siara, she'd chosen to leave behind her safe life in the Temple, and had requested the position of Royal Historian and Scribe, making her a vital part of any exploration. She longed for the adventure of travel with a fierceness that scared her, but she'd never even been beyond the borders of the city.

When the King and Queen told her that the first expedition to leave would be an ambassador mission to Den, one of the wildest and far-flung parts of the Land Between the Seas, led by Anleeh, she'd volunteered without hesitation.

She'd intended to leave behind her hopeless regard for him when she left her old life behind, but here she was, at the dawn of her greatest adventure, closer to him than she'd ever been before.

Afraid her thoughts were visible, Siara lowered her eyes, staring at his knee, hoping he would not know that the treasonously loud pounding of her heart was caused by desire.

"I would not force you to do that, but we shall say that we plan to marry."

Siara's heart gave one more thump, and reason returned. Of course she did not want a forced marriage of pretense.

"We shall be betrothed?" She clarified, voice steady, eyes still on his knee, outlined by the fine cut of his dark leggings.

"Yes."

"If we will not truly marry, why does it matter if I am a virgin?"

"Den is a sexual world, decadent by the standards of our city, and the way that women are trained, and the most expressive aspect of their submission, is through sex."

"So you will ... train me ... to submit, when we ... have sex."

Siara could barely force the words out. Her conclusion seemed preposterous. Two days ago she was not sure he knew her name, and now they sat calmly discussing how he would train her through sex.

"I will teach you to submit in all ways necessary, but the training will come when I touch you, yes."

Siara shuddered in pure, vibrant arousal. To hear Anleeh speak of touching her, his explanation imbuing the word "train" with deep sexual connotations she had not known it



could have, brought a flush of heat, chased by a shiver, to her skin.

\* \* \* \*

Staring down at Siara's bowed head, Anleeh clenched his fists as he watched her shudder in horror. Hating himself for what he would do to her, Anleeh mentally cursed the King and Queen once more for saddling him with her.

Den was a savage land, and would have been hard for any person not of the culture to visit, let alone a woman. When they'd told him that morning who his companion was to be, Anleeh had threatened to quit, stating that any man would be better than a woman. His arguments had not swayed the Queen, who possessed the insane notion that women could do anything a man could. When this journey changed Siara, taught her to want things that were taboo and decadent in the great city, made her crave a man's touch on her flesh, it would be on the Queen's head.

But he would be the one to change her, to teach her passion and then control her with it. He would not hurt her, at least, not more than was absolutely necessary to make her understand, but however pure his intentions, it would change her. She was a woman of great strength and steady nature. She should remain at the College, marry and birth babies she could raise with a steady hand. Come to think of it, she'd be perfect for Moregon. She should not be dragged halfway across the world, stripped and subjected to his lust, for the sake of a kingdom she'd already served long and well.

"If there is a boy, someone you desire, I suggest you go to him before we leave." The thought of Siara with a solid or simple farm boy, who would no doubt be a clumsy and selfish lover, displeased him. Realizing he was frowning, Anleeh ran a hand over his face, as if he could scrub away his thoughts.

"There is no one."

The rubbing had not worked, but her simple statement, spoken as nothing more than fact, pleased him. His honor, though, forced him to be sure. They were little better than acquaintances and she was surrendering her virginity to him, with little time to find any alternative.

"Are you sure that you want your first time to be at my hand?"

Siara nodded.

Anleeh prowled around the room, touching books and papers that could not hold his attention.

"Siara, I have told you that this must be done, that to survive our time in Den you must learn to submit, but if you cannot do this of your own free will, I cannot take you." He turned to face her and she raised her head to meet his gaze. Her expression was unreadable, an assembly of features with no animation behind it, but her eyes gave her away, dancing with intelligence and bright intensity. "Siara, I will not rape you."

She jerked at the words, lips parting with the shock of his brutal words. "Lord Anleeh, I did not think you would. I am ... quite willing." Her face returned to its passive mask, but her jaw line and cheeks flushed a dull cherry.

The blush lent veracity to her words, and he noticed the way her fingers twisted in her lap, worrying the cuff of her gown. Relief that he would not be asked to coerce a woman who parted her legs only for the good of the kingdom inundated him.

"When would you like to ... have sex? Tonight? I have no plans. Or shall we wait until we begin the journey?" This time her modulated tone failed her, and Anleeh heard

the emotion beneath the words. She both wanted to postpone it and was eager to partake of what he was offering her. She rose, apparently aware of what her words had revealed, and started clearing off the table.

“Siara.” She continued stacking books. “Siara, look at me.” Again she ignored him.

Anleeh grabbed Siara’s wrist, spinning her to face him. He wrapped his fingers around her hips and lifted her, seating her on the table. As she gaped at him, he grabbed her wrists and forced them behind her back, holding them with one hand. With the other hand, he tilted her chin up. It felt good to handle her this way, her still hidden body full, solid and luscious in its hidden mystery.

For the first time her carefully guarded features revealed emotion—emotions his words had unveiled. Her dark eyes widened with shock, her lips parted. She looked delectable.

“Much better,” he purred. Moving his hand from beneath her chin to curl loosely around her throat, Anleeh brought his lips to hers. Siara, her lips still parted, gasped at the first soft brush of his mouth. Her gasp drew his breath into her so that she breathed him in. His lips sealed to hers, their mouths molding together. Anleeh watched as her eyes fluttered closed and she made the smallest of noises, like the mewling of a cat. With a shudder of arousal Anleeh released her wrists, sliding his hands to her waist.

Slipping his tongue past her parted lips, he touched the edge of her teeth, gentling her to the invasion. As he ventured further, Anleeh concentrated on exploring her only with his mouth. Though his hands twitched with the need to cup her breasts, he kept them at her waist. She had begun to worry him.

Siara’s stillness was an anomaly he’d never experienced before. He did not know if the suddenness of the kiss had dumbfounded her, the pleasure of it had stunned her or, he thought with a jolt, if she were astonished and still because this was her first kiss. He was neither ignorant of his appeal nor so vain as his actions may portray, and Anleeh started to break the kiss, already preparing a suitably self-deprecating and dismissive remark.

With a final peck to the edge of her mouth, Anleeh leaned back, a half smile hiding his embarrassment and worry. “Divine lips you have, Sia-”

Siara literally threw herself at Anleeh. The force of it knocked Anleeh off his feet. He landed hard on his ass and then rocked onto his back as she came down on top of him.

“What...”

Siara grabbed his ears and kissed him. There was no practiced precision, no gentle exploration. Her lips pressed against his so hard that their teeth knocked together. Anleeh opened his mouth to help her deepen the kiss but she’d moved away, raining small pecking kisses over his face, her grip on his ears keeping him still.

“Sia—Siara, what...”

Siara braced her elbows on his chest and looked down at him. Her eyes were nearly black, the pupils were so wide. Her breathing came in short hard pants and her eyes darted over his face, coming back to his lips each time.

With great deliberation, Anleeh licked his lower lip. Siara shuddered.

*She is aroused. She is so aroused she trembles with it.* Anleeh grinned, and licked his lip again. On a moan, Siara leaned down and bit his lower lip.

Beneath her, Anleeh jerked.

“I’m sorry.” Siara scrambled off Anleeh, turning her head, cheeks flaming with a vermillion blush.

“Siara, do not apologize.”

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“I think you do.”

Siara refused to turn, despite his chiding tone. “Lord Anleeh, please accept my apologies.”

“Why are you so formal with me?” He knew the answer, knew that she was hiding behind formality and ceremony, but wanted her to acknowledge it.

She ignored the question. “Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

“Yes, we need to discuss what just happened.”

“I believe it is called a kiss. There are many examples in the library if you would like me to find you an appropriate passage.” Her tone had grown almost snippy and Anleeh smiled behind her back, enjoying this far more than he should.

“It is the manner of the kiss we must discuss,” he goaded her.

“There is no need. We kissed. From what you said, we will do so again.”

“Yes, that and much more.” Finally he asked the crucial question, all humor gone. He needed to know her answer. “Why did you...”

“Please,” she whispered, cutting him off, and then wrapping her arms around her stomach and squeezing.

Anleeh moved up behind her. Her distress, the protective way she held herself, contained answers, but he did not want to make vain assumptions. “Are you frightened by what happened?”

“No.”

“Are you upset? Ashamed?”

“No, my Lord.”

“Anleeh,” he corrected her.

“Anleeh. I beg your leave, there is much to do.”

“There is,” he conceded. Siara finished stacking the parchments rolls and books, her shoulders drawn up to her neck, and hunched forward protectively. Awkwardly gathering an armful of reading materials, Siara executed a quick bobbing curtsy in Anleeh’s general direction and started for the door.

“Siara, wait.” Siara paused, considered his words, and then kept walking. Anleeh blinked. Her deliberate manner, the obvious way she considered and then dismissed his words, shocked, and to be truthful, aroused him.

“Siara, stop.” This time it was an order, his voice hard and deep. Siara stopped.

Anleeh came up behind her once more. He lifted the heavy braid away from the back of her neck,

“I will not let you hide from me. Before this is done I will see your body and soul laid bare before me.” Anleeh kissed the exposed nape of her neck. “Until tomorrow, lover.”

\* \* \* \*

Siara avoided him until the day of their departure.

Though she had been offered lush quarters at either the Temple or the Palace after the revolution, she’d selected small chambers near the library and spent most of the past two days there, reading. Anleeh’s words, his warning, about what took place between the men and woman of Den had piqued her curiosity.

It was only late at night, when her hands, without conscious effort, roamed over her naked body, stroking, pressing, and pinching, that she would acknowledge she was hiding in her study to escape her feelings and his reaction.

Dawn of the departure day found Siara checking and re-checking her packing. They intended to leave at noon. A parade was planned to usher them out of the Great City. This expedition symbolized the return of so many things that had been lost.

When a knock at the door came, she was relieved. "Mistress Siara?"

"Coming." She opened the door of her chamber. A Temple servant stood in the corridor, head bowed respectfully.

"Good morn, Mistress Siara."

"My packs are there." She indicated a side wall where the two large canvas satchels rested.

"Yes, Mistress. I will have them brought down directly."

"Where is Lord Anleeh?"

"He arrived a few moments ago."

"He is here?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"I thought we were leaving from the Palace?"

"Yes, Mistress, Lord Anleeh came to escort you."

Swallowing her nerves, Siara left the man to bring her bags and made her way down to the courtyard of the Temple.

As she came through the doors, the powerful noon sunlight brightened everything in the courtyard and haloed the object of her desire. Dressed in a short tunic with thick leather pants, his dark hair lit with deep fire by the gold of the sun, Anleeh was god-like. Sunlight reflected off the polished silver of his sword. He would have been faceless, backlit by the sun, had her memory, so well versed in his visage, not sketched the lines of his perfect lips, high cheekbones and dancing green eyes, into the dark shadow of his face.

"Siara." Anleeh moved forward into the shadow of the Temple, his features appearing as if the god had chosen to reveal himself.

It took a moment for Siara to understand that the throbbing in her chest was due to more than her rapidly beating heart. Releasing the breath she'd been holding, Siara forced her face into its smooth, watchful mask.

"I am ready, Anleeh." He smiled and looked over her shoulder, presumably for the bags. "The boy is bringing them."

Anleeh lifted Siara onto a grey speckled mare. Hiding her nerves, Siara took the reins, doing her best to pretend she knew what to do with them. After waiting to be sure that her bags had been secured, Anleeh swung onto his own, much larger, bay stallion.

Clicking to both horses, Anleeh led the way out of the Temple. Try as she might Siara could not stop herself from turning around, glancing one final time at the building that had been her home.

\* \* \* \*

"We don't need..."

"Yes, you do," the Queen countered.

"Goddess bless me. *Prima*," he implored the King. "Help." Tamlohn shrugged,

staying out of the Queen's way as she directed the stable hands to secure the bags she was sending with the expedition.

"We are traveling light," Anleeh reminded the Queen.

"I sent nothing overly heavy."

"But you added four bags!"

"They are gifts," she said, as if that explained everything.

"My Lady." Siara's interruption caught Anleeh open-mouthed with his next rebuttal unuttered. "Have you a list of these items? As we did not see the bags packed they will be of little use to us unless we know what each pack contains."

The Queen pulled out a folded sheet and read off the listed items to Siara, who stood sedately by her side.

Anleeh watched them together. His eyes traveled the length of the Queen's elegant back, each curve of her upper body hugged by the heavily embroidered and strapless gown she wore. Sooner than was flattering to the Queen's beauty, he turned his attention to Siara. She wore another mud colored dress, shapelessly falling from her shoulders.

"What do you see?" Tamlohn asked quietly.

"She is hiding." Anleeh answered the King's question before he stopped to think.

"What from?"

"That I do not know. Her past? But not as I do. She hides from the world, yet is eager to explore."

"An interesting woman."

"Yes. I think more than anything else she hides from herself. There is great passion in her."

"Have you..."

"A kiss only," Anleeh said.

"You kissed her?" The King's deep shock resonated with past pain. Among the Zinahs, a kiss was forbidden, and so had come to mean much to these men.

"I did, but, more importantly, she kissed me."

"You mean she kissed you in return?"

"No. I broke the kiss, leaned away, and then she, well..."

"What?"

"...she flew at me, knocked me to the ground and kissed me."

Tamlohn looked at Siara, his red-brown eyebrows high on his forehead.

"Truth," Anleeh insisted.

"If you say."

"I do."

They stood in silence for a moment, Anleeh's eyes still on the silhouette of his traveling companion. The King's hand on his shoulder startled him. When he looked over, Tamlohn wore a serious expression. Anleeh straightened, mentally preparing for news of the worst sort.

"What is it, *Prima*?"

Tamlohn shook his head. "Just a warning, my brother."

"There is no need for warnings. Caution will be my constant companion."

"This warning is in regard to Siara."

"I have warned her of what this may cost her, may cost us both."

"I know, and Cryessa has spoken with her also."

“Than what is your warning?”

The King paused for a moment, and when he spoke it was with a slight hesitation, as if he had trouble finding the words. “Protect her.”

“I will. Den is a dangerous place. I will lay down my life to protect her if necessary.” Anleeh wanted to promise the King, and himself, that Siara would come to no harm, but he did not think it a promise he could make.

“I do not mean her body and mind, but her heart.”

“I doubt her heart is involved,” Anleeh protested. Though he could not deny the passion in her kiss, lust and love were far different things.

“I worry it already is.”

“What?” Anleeh, asked, voice sharp. He turned his attention from Siara to examine the King’s face. It was clear from the brackets around Tamlohn’s mouth and the set of his brows that he was not joking.

“Cryessa said something that made me think there may be more to Siara’s motivations than we know.”

“If you know something of her motivations that would jeopardize my cause, I would ask that you tell me. I believe she craves adventure, to experience the world outside the Temple and to serve this kingdom, and the Queen, as she has all her life. The kiss was a matter of passion, not of the heart.”

“It is nothing to jeopardize your mission, but you should never underestimate the secrets in a woman’s heart. Simply take my warning for what it is.”

“Then be clear. What is your warning?”

“Don’t break her heart.”

\* \* \* \*

“Indeed, my Lady, this is a very comprehensive list and I thank you.”

“I hope that it is not too much.” Cryessa looked over her shoulder at the loaded horses and winced.

“It is best to be prepared for any eventuality.”

The Queen turned back to Siara and smiled. “This is truth, but do not underestimate the power of inspiration.” Siara bowed her head slightly in acknowledgement of the wisdom. “Before you go, there is one other thing I wanted to talk with you about.”

“Yes, my Lady?”

Cryessa raised her hands and cupped Siara’s face. Heat tingled through Siara’s cheeks where the Priestess’s hands touched. “May I?”

“Y-yes.” Siara didn’t even know what the Queen was asking her.

Against her face, the Queen’s hands warmed from tepid to scorching. Siara drew in a deep breath as the heat penetrated her face, seeping into her, until she could taste magic on the back of her tongue. Light crowded the corners of her vision as the Queen’s skin began to glow. Golden light filled her vision and Siara sucked in a breath. Though she trusted the Queen, it was unnerving to be blinded by the light. Just when she feared she could not abide it for a moment longer, it began to fade.

Siara blinked rapidly as the Queen removed her hands, the previously clement air feeling frigid upon her heated cheeks.

“Siara, I will ask something of you.”

“Yes, my Queen?”

“Be careful.”

“I have every intention of doing so.” Siara found her request odd. She and the Queen had been acquainted for years. Surely she knew Siara’s actions were always deliberate and careful.

“I am confident that you will take care of yourself. It is for Anleeh that I ask.”

“I do not understand.”

“Be careful with him. His scars run deep.”

Siara looked over her shoulder at Anleeh and then turned back. “I promise, I will do everything I can to aid him.”

“In your mission, yes. You are both loyal and strong. What I worry for is what will happen between the two of you.”

Siara dropped her eyes. “This is a monumental task you have set us on, the first peaceful ambassador delegation to be sent from the Great City in 1000 years. I would not jeopardize that.” Her words were sharp and defensive.

“I do not accuse you of anything,” the Queen soothed, “but I think we both know that emotions beyond duty to your country are already involved.” Startled, Siara looked up. “There is little that I cannot read in your mind and heart, though you are skilled in shielding your emotions on your face.”

“My—my feeling for, for Lord Anleeh...” The protests fell futilely from Siara’s lips, halting completely when the Queen raised her hand.

“Your feelings are your own. I only ask you to be careful, both of your own heart, and of his.”

“I’m sure Anleeh will be fine.”

The Queen shook her head. “He is more vulnerable than you know. It is *his* broken heart for which I fear.” The Queen briefly cupped Siara’s cheek, then leaned in and pressed a kiss to Siara’s forehead.

“Come.” Linking arms, the Queen led her back to the men. “The time is upon us. I feel the excitement of those who line the streets to see you off.” The Queen let go of Siara and turned to examine the preparations.

Tamlohn stepped back from Anleeh and signaled the men to mount up.

“It is time,” the King said as stable hands brought their horses forward.

Neither Siara nor Anleeh moved. They stood, three paces apart, simply staring at one another, the secrets of their thoughts concealed behind impassive faces.

Tamlohn looked at Cryessa and then moved forward. “Siara, allow me to help you mount.”

Without a word, Anleeh stepped forward, blocking the King. Putting his hands on Siara’s waist, he lifted her onto her horse, helping her to swing her leg over and situate her skirts once she’d settled. He eased each foot into its stirrup, his hands holding her calves over the deerskin leggings she wore beneath her skirts.

Reaching up, he corrected her grip on the reins, threading them through her fingers. Neither said a word.

Turning away, Anleeh vaulted onto his own horse and then looked at the King and Queen, touching his hand to his heart, forehead, throat and lips.

Cryessa stepped forward. “May the Goddess bless and protect you.”

The gates swung open, the Great City revealed in its panoramic glory, the gold and brown of the buildings framed by the green mountains that protected it and sheltered by

the blue sky above. Anleeh led the way, a more recognizable figure than Siara. As his horse stepped out from the shadow of the wall, cheers rose, blanketing the City, spreading a dull roar across the land, rolling over the rows of houses and businesses, seeping into the stones of the street.

Anleeh reared his horse, displaying the horsemanship Tamlohn had taught them and the crowd roared louder. The first expedition of the new reign had begun.



## Chapter Two

Siara had never been so cold in her life.

Heavy rain slowed their progress so that now, on the 20th day of their journey, they had finally reached the border of Den. Bundled in a cloak, the muscles of her thighs aching from so many hours in the saddle, Siara sunk into herself, unable to do anything more than focus on the mane of her horse.

When the caravan stopped, Siara looked up, her eyes struggling to focus. Around her the men were a flurry of action. Numb and exhausted, she waited for someone to instruct her. At the beginning of their journey she'd helped set up camp each night and organized the equipment in the morning. By the tenth day she'd been too weary and sore to do more than listlessly eat what was put in front of her. The storm and reports of trouble in the outlying areas they passed through had consumed Anleeh's time. At night he sat with the lead guard, plotting their route, leaving her alone in her misery.

Now that she was no longer moving, the aches and pains of her body rose up to make themselves known. Siara hunched her shoulders and pitifully wondered what would happen if they all forgot about her. Would she freeze atop her horse?

"Come on, lover, time to get off."

Siara turned blankly to the speaker. "Hmmm?"

"Damn. Siara, can you see me?"

"Yes."

"Who am I?"

"Sounds like Anleeh, but I have not seen him in so long."

"This has not gone exactly to plan, has it?"

A single pitiful tear slipped down Siara's cheek. "I hate it when things don't go according to plan."

"I know, lover." Strong hands lifted each boot out of the stirrup in turn, then moved to her waist and pulled her off the mare. Siara cried out as her numb limbs were forced into new positions.

"Shhh, lover, I know it stings."

"My legs!" Strong arms swung her up, pulled her tight to his chest. The world swirled dizzily, and, had she eaten anything, it would have come up.

"Hold still, precious." Siara was laid down on strong thighs. Her ice-encrusted skirts were raised, exposing her leggings, and large warm hands began to massage her legs. Siara whimpered and then cried out as needles pricked up and down her skin.

"I know it hurts. I'm sorry, lover, I didn't realize what bad shape you were in."

"Anleeh?" she whimpered. He pulled Siara upright and wrapped one hand around her back, the other still working the muscles in her legs.

"Yes, lover. How are you feeling?"

"Cold. Hurts." Speaking was too much effort. The world spinning around her, Siara dropped her head onto his shoulder.

"Siara?" Anleeh jiggled her. "Siara, sit up and talk to me."

"Too cold, tired."

"What did you have to eat today?"

“Too cold to eat.”

“Siara! You didn’t eat?” Anleeh called out to one of the men to bring warm water and bread. “You should know better.”

“Didn’t know, didn’t understand, so cold.”

“Have you lived your whole life in the warmth of the Great City?”

“Mmhm.” Siara gave up the fight with consciousness and slipped into the inviting dark.

\* \* \* \*

Damned foolish woman.

Suppressing his worry, Anleeh soaked the chunk of bread in warm water and held it to Siara’s lips. “Open up, lover.” He jiggled her shoulder to get her attention and when her lips parted he slipped the chunk of bread between her teeth. He stroked her throat and then sighed in relief when she chewed and swallowed.

“Will she be alright, Lord?”

“She will. Did she eat nothing when we stopped earlier?” During the middle of the day, their outriders had spotted a group of bandits. Anleeh had ridden out to scout their options while the rest of the group stopped to rest and hide.

“I know not, Lord.”

“Very well. Bring me a bit of cheese if we have any.”

“Yes, Lord.”

“Siara, lover, wake up, you need to eat; your body cannot fight the cold with no food.” Rather than wake, she slid her face into the crook of his neck. On a sigh, Anleeh laid his cheek against her hair, holding her close.

He knew she must be truly ill to behave this way. He imagined that a well Siara would not allow herself to be held and cared for, independent creature that she was.

“There is a bit of cheese left, Lord.” The guard handed him a piece of cloth-wrapped goat cheese.

“Thank you. Have the horses been taken care of?”

“Yes, Lord. A few are hurting from the cold.”

“Are any in danger?”

“No, Lord. We are prepared to leave tomorrow. Are you sure you would not like us to ride with you the rest of the way?”

“You would not be welcome. Concentrate on getting home safely.”

“Yes, Lord. We have Lady Siara’s bedroll. Where would you like it?”

“Bring it to me.”

When the guard returned with the extra bedroll Anleeh had him roll out both. He held Siara as her frigid stillness turned to shivers, which faded as her body warmed. Anleeh unlaced the bodice of her traveling dress, easing it down and off her shoulders exposing the deerskin shirt that matched her leggings. As she muttered in her sleep about the cold, he stripped off the shapeless brown dress and threw it behind a log. She would not wear it again.

Lifting her, he quickly slipped her beneath the fur lined covers and then stripped off his own outer garments, popping bites of cheese and bread into his mouth as he did. When he was stripped down to leggings and shirt, Anleeh slipped in beside her, wrapping his arms around her.

He'd never slept with a woman in his arms and it took him time to figure the best way of it. Anleeh rolled onto his back and pulled Siara across his chest, protecting her from the frozen ground and heaping the blankets of their doubled bedroll on her to protect her back from the wind. Her legs tangled with his and her head rested on his chest. Wrapping the blankets tightly around them Anleeh willed himself to sleep.

He dreamed of her.

\* \* \* \*

Blinding white light woke Siara. Blearily she looked around, her movement lifting the blanket enough to allow a blast of the early morning air to sneak into the warm cocoon. On a yelp Siara lay back down, snuggling into the warm body beneath her.

Warm body?

Careful not to allow heat to escape, Siara turned her head to visually confirm on whom it was she slept. In the brightening dawn light, Anleeh's hair shimmered with highlights and his dark lashes and brows were a startling contrast against his pale skin.

Breathing carefully so as not to wake him, Siara tried to remember how they had ended up like this. Her memories of yesterday were distorted by numbing cold. Shifting beneath the covers, Siara could feel a stiffness in her legs. She wiggled her toes.

"How do you feel?"

Siara jerked, startled by his voice, and Anleeh yelped, grabbing her hips beneath the covers.

"Watch it, woman, you almost did me an injury."

"I'm sorry."

"Not to worry. How do your legs feel?"

"A little sore and achy."

"Can you move your toes?"

"Yes."

"Can you feel all your toes?"

"I-I think so."

"You should be fine, but when we rise I will check."

"How did we come to be like this?"

Anleeh rubbed his hands up and down her back. "You mean how did you come to be sleeping in my arms?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember much of yesterday?"

"I was just thinking on it and I do not remember much."

"You had eaten nothing, so your body went into a numb state because you did not have the strength to fight the cold."

"I-I wasn't hungry."

"You should know better."

"I have never known cold like this before." Siara protested.

"When our journey started out I asked you if you were prepared for the cold."

"I'd read about it, but the books didn't explain how even breathing would hurt."

"I wish you'd told me you were suffering so."

"I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" At his mocking tone, Siara threw off the covers and rose, breath hissing

out as the cold hit her like a wall, pressing down on her.

“Siara.”

“Where is my dress?”

“Siara.”

She scanned the ground around their bedroll, the surface of her skin gone to gooseflesh beneath her clothes. They were situated in a tight stand of trees, the doubled bedroll lying atop a cushioning layer of moss. Ducking under a low hanging branch, Siara looked out into a clearing. The forest floor showed signs of human occupation: blackened fire pits, discarded fruit rinds and chunks of stale bread.

Siara made her way out into the clearing. It was obvious the soldiers had made camp there last night, but where were they? It was barely dawn.

Four horses, including her grey mare, were tethered on the far side of the clearing. Packs hung from the branches of a tree, out of the reach of any curious forest animals. The other horses were gone, the men nowhere to be seen. A hard knot of anxiety formed in Siara’s stomach.

“The men are gone.”

“Yes.” Anleeh moved into the clearing, stopping beside her.

“We are alone.”

“We are. Are you scared?”

Siara shook her head, and tried to pull down the mask she’d learned to wear, to hide behind a passive façade and observe, but it would not come. Her nerves, desire and curiosity all prevented her from hiding.

“No? You should be.” With that he moved away to check on the horses.

“Where is my dress?”

“Gone.”

“What do you mean gone? Did something happen to it?”

“I threw it away. It was ugly and you will not need it.”

“I cannot wear only this, I will freeze!”

“I will give you something to wear. By the time we reach Den, you will only wear garments I have given you.”

“Why don’t you just give them to me now?”

Anleeh looked up from checking a horse’s hoof and then slowly lowered the leg to the ground, patting the animal’s flank. When he started towards her, Siara once more tried to pull down an impassive face, but again could not. Anleeh’s expressive features were stern, but there was a spark of fire in his eyes.

“The point, lover, is that I take away your clothes and you wear only what I choose to give you. What you wear, and when you wear it, is no longer your choice, it is mine.”

“Is this to teach me submission?”

“Yes.”

“But you cannot expect me to go around improperly clothed for the cold. That is unfair and...”

Anleeh stepped forward and pressed his fingers over her lips. “Do you honestly believe that I would put you in danger that way? I, who held you in my arms last night to be sure that you warmed up, who hand fed you?”

“N-no.”

“Than your protests are nothing more than a way to seek control.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Maybe not, but that is what you are doing.” Anleeh stroked her cheek and Siara shivered, but not with cold. He made a sound, low in his chest, almost like a rumbling growl. With a rough movement, he wrapped his hands around her arms and jerked her to his chest, his mouth coming down on hers. One arm, strong as a tree branch, wrapped over her back, the other across one shoulder so he could grip her hair. Siara felt caught, mastered, protected.

Her hands twitched at her sides, wanting, nay, needing, to be free to touch him, to claim him as he claimed her. Siara wiggled and his grip tightened; she tore her mouth from his.

“I want...” she panted.

“What? Tell me.”

“To touch you.”

“Beg.”

“Beg?” Surely she had not heard that right.

“Beg to touch me, tell me that you will die if I do not allow you to touch me.”

Shocked, Siara stamped on his toes. “I will do no such thing.”

On a grunt of pain, Anleeh released her. His heavy lidded gaze tracked her as she stomped away. Siara reached up and smoothed down her hair, her shock at his words, at his insane demand and her reaction to it, allowing her to find the cool center she was used to.

Carefully folding her hands together in front of her, Siara let her quiet mask drop down over her face.

“Anleeh, I find your request degrading and disgusting,” she stated with calm logic.

“I can see that, and you have retreated into your shell. But know this, I have seen the passion you hide, have tasted it, and you will not hide from me forever.”

“I will see the mission through. I am not adverse to experiencing passion in the process.”

Anleeh laughed, but it was a quiet, brittle sound. “How stupid of me to have assumed some of that fire was for me. Perhaps you just need a good fuck.”

Outraged at his words and surprised at the hurt she’d put in his eyes, Siara said nothing. Her words were half truth. It was only Anleeh that made her burn. But she could not tell him that, could not make herself that vulnerable. She had thought only to protect herself, and not that she had the power to wound him.

Anleeh moved towards the horses and used a long stick to lift down the bags. He pulled out two short fur cloaks and a bundle of skins. Leaving those hanging over a low branch, he set about packing the other bags on the horses. When Siara saw him load up her mare, she almost protested. She was not so confident in her riding skills that she would enjoy riding any horse but her own. Had their kiss not turned bitter she would have said something.

“Come here.” Anleeh picked up one of the cloaks and held it out. Siara reached out to take the garment but he pulled it out of her reach. “I need you to let me dress you. For the sake of the mission.” He would not meet her eye and his lips twisted cynically.

An apology sprang to her lips, but Siara simply nodded, hoping her obedience would be apology enough. Anleeh wrapped the cloak over her shoulders, fastening the bone buttons at the top.

“There is a hood.” He stepped closer and lifted the deep fur lined hood, settling it around her face. She looked up at him from beneath her lashes, her face shaded by the garment. Anleeh reached inside the hood, his fingers brushing her neck and cheek, and pulled out the thick rope of her braid. “Keep your hair loose. It will help protect your neck from the cold.” He unknotted the leather thong at the end and then worked the braid loose, laying the heavy fall of hair on her chest. Against the dark brown pelts of the cloak, her hair looked rich and wild, like the fur of the animals she wore, or the earth itself. The braid and long days of not washing had turned the normally straight locks wavy, so that they framed her face, softening it.

“The outer pelt is bear,” Anleeh stroked her shoulder, “and the lining mink.” He slid his hand inside the cloak, the back brushing against her breast, and stroked the ultra-soft inner lining.

Her anger and worry forgotten, Siara bit back a moan, hating herself for the simplicity of mind and spirit that had her aroused at the barest touch. From the recesses of the hood, she devoured him with her eyes. The curve of his lips and cheek, the strong tendons of his neck all begged for the touch of her lips and teeth. She bit the inside of her cheek to stifle the urge to lean forward and nip at the line of his jaw.

His eyes, which had been focused on the cloak, suddenly met hers. Their gazes locked, each acknowledging the return of desire in the other, before he moved away.

Beneath the cloak, Siara wrapped her arms across her stomach and hugged herself.

“These go over your leggings.” Anleeh picked up the smaller skins, each cut to a different size. Dropping to one knee he lifted one of the larger skins. “Part your legs.”

“Pardon me?”

“Your legs, lover, part them.”

His casual and repeated use of the delicious pet name finally caught up with her. Her heart lurched, her cheeks flushed, and more than anything, she wished he wouldn’t do it; she could not protect herself from both his touch and his words.

Breath coming slower with each inhale, Siara spread her feet, widening her stance. Anleeh laid one hand on her left thigh and Siara moaned. She both hated and loved how the simple touch of his hand brought heat to every part of her. It was magic of the flesh, a consuming force that seemed to be worse the farther they got from the Great City.

“I am pleased that your passion has returned,” Anleeh said, his fingers flexing gently against her leg.

Consumed with the desire to force his hand against the flesh at the juncture of her legs, Siara shook her head, having no words to give him.

“Your beast rides you, does she not?” Anleeh asked. Siara struggled to understand his question, her confusion and concentration driving away some of the overwhelming desire.

“Beast?” she asked.

“Yes, your desire, your passion. In Den, each man and woman has a beast, and that beast has many forms. It can be felt in many ways—in battle and fear, but a woman’s greatest beast is in her passion.”

“I feel...”

“Tell me.”

Struggling to understand this new concept of ‘beast’, Siara spoke the truth without editing. “I want to take your hand and force you ... force you to touch me.” The moment

she finished speaking Siara's stomach knotted with embarrassment, but Anleeh did not laugh.

"Your beast does ride you, as she rode you a few moments ago, but your logic, your fear, suppresses your beast, allowing you to repress that need." Anleeh slid his hand higher on the inside of her thigh. "I will strip that away, until you can no longer control or hide your beast. I will teach her to submit to me."

"Touch me." Siara whispered, his talk of stripping and submission flaming her passion once more.

"No."

At his flat denial, Siara's arousal fled. She tried to jerk away from his touch, but he tightened his hand.

"Let go of me."

"No."

"If you will not touch me as I want, then let go of me."

"I will touch you in ways you cannot imagine, but not just yet." His hand started to knead her thigh, but it was a comforting touch, not an arousing one. "I will touch you, arouse your beast, until you would fly at me in a rage if I denied you."

"But you said I must learn to submit. Is anger and willingness to strike you not the opposite of submission?"

Anleeh shook his head. "It is hard to explain, but there is both passion and defiance in submission."

Confused, slightly dizzy from the emotional upheaval of the past hour, Siara nodded, "Indeed."

Anleeh laughed, "Yes, indeed."

Lifting the fur, he wrapped it around her thigh, asking her to hold it in place as he secured it with a complicated wrapping of leather thongs. The process was repeated on the other thigh and then on each calf.

When she was completely attired, Anleeh stood and looked her over. She still wore the close-fitting, if not particularly flattering, leather leggings and long sleeved shirt beneath the garments he'd given her. Her upper body, to her hips, was draped by the cloak, the hood framing her face, the layered browns of the bear fur highlighting her eyes so that they appeared large and liquid within the vulnerable oval of her face. Her legs, now revealed to be curvy and lovely, were protected from the cold by the skins, wrapped fur side down over her calves and thighs.

He was surprised by how strongly seeing her dressed in garments of his people affected him. He desired her, more strongly now than the sweet stirring he'd felt in the Temple.

"You are beautiful," he told her, and Siara looked down at herself, lifting both eyebrows. "You doubt your beauty?"

"Are you sure I do not look like a lumpy mass wrapped in dead animals?"

Anleeh threw his head back and roared with laughter. The horses danced nervously.

"What a thing to say." Anleeh pressed a hand against his aching belly and shook his head. "You look lush and beautiful."

"Perhaps you have missed seeing women dressed in the ways of your homeland."

"Yesterday I would have denied that statement, but you might be right, lover. I must not let myself forget how smart you are." Anleeh went to the tree and picked up his own

furs. “But do not use that logic to try and dismiss my words, I speak the truth when I say you are beautiful. You, Siara, are beautiful, and I think that I would not find any other woman so attractive dressed in those furs.”

“I... Thank you, that is a beautiful compliment.”

“It is most sincerely given.” Anleeh swung on his cloak. “I will warn you that when we return to the Great City I am having your clothes burned and will commission a whole new wardrobe for you.” Siara remained quiet. “What is this? No quips, no protests that you like those ugly dresses or that they are practical?

“They are practical, but I have often longed for beautiful clothes.” Her voice held a tentative note he’d never heard before, almost childlike with its simple and sweet longing.

“Why did you not purchase them?”

“I did not think there was a reason to do so. There was no need for me to dress with an eye to anything but function, and I did not want to appear vain. There is little enough cause for vanity.”

Again she hinted at poor self-image, and Anleeh almost addressed the issue, but he knew that there would be a better way to show her how wrong she was about herself. He would wait until he could truly show her, using his hands and mouth, rather than mere words.

“Clothes are not a matter of vanity, they are a matter of pleasure.”

“I would appreciate your input regarding a new wardrobe.”

Her appreciation was so formally expressed that Anleeh smiled and couldn’t resist teasing her.

“It would be my pleasure. By the time we return to the Great City, I will know your body so well that you won’t even need to be measured for garments. I will be able to tell the tailor your sizes.”

Even in the shadow of her hood, he could see her eyes widen. Anleeh smiled innocently at her and bent to wrap the furs over his legs. With his head bent, face hidden from her, Anleeh let his smile blossom into a grin. She was a delight, and the more he saw of her, the more of her old life that was stripped from her, the greater his desire for her grew. He was first attracted to her desire; a woman who could experience passion was a beautiful thing. Now her body, with its lush curves, was adding its own lure. Above it all was her fierce mind and heart, traits no thinking man discounted in a woman.

Lost in his musings, Anleeh fumbled with his furs. After two failed attempts to wrap the skins to his own legs, Anleeh asked for her help.

“I am out of practice,” he admitted ruefully, “I used to be able to wrap these without assistance and in a matter of seconds.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

Anleeh smiled. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes.”

“Good, we have a long day, but if we make good time there will be a cabin to sleep in tonight.” Anleeh helped her get one foot in the stirrup and then boosted her up and over the horse’s back. Seated atop the horse, so close in appearance to a woman of Den, Anleeh felt a stirring of his own beast. Panic rose swiftly. Ruthlessly suppressing it, he checked the lines from the pack horses to his own and then swung into the saddle, pulling his hood up.



### Chapter Three

“Why did you not tell me you’re unable to ride?” Anleeh’s shout startled three crows from a nearby tree. They rose, cawing angrily.

“I can ride.”

“No, you learned to do what your horse told you, instead of the other way around. That is not riding!”

“I know how to ride,” Siara insisted stubbornly.

Anleeh threw his hands up in frustration and turned away. Siara dropped her forced calm demeanor and let her knees and hands shake.

The ride had been going fine until Anleeh decided to up the pace. Siara was only comfortable with walking and trotting. She’d read that a canter and gallop were both easier seats than a trot, and so had thought it would not matter that she’d never actually gone faster than a trot.

The canter had been frighteningly fast, but survivable, the gallop, as it turned out, was not.

“Look! You’re shaking!” Anleeh shouted.

“I’m not shaking.”

Anleeh grabbed her wrist and held her hand before her face, her trembling fingers only an inch in front of her nose. “Look at yourself.”

“Stop yelling at me!” she yelled back, her voice high and thin. Siara swallowed hard, trying to force the knot of tears at the back of her throat to subside. She hated that she was so emotional, hated feeling afraid and vulnerable.

“Ahhh, lover, I’m sorry, but you frightened me.” Anleeh wrapped his arms around her and pulled her stiff form against his chest.

“I was ... concerned, also,” she mumbled into his chest.

His laugh rumbled through his chest and into her. The insane urge to cry subsided and Siara took a calming breath. Anleeh’s hand slipped under her cloak and moved up and down her back.

“Are you ready to continue?”

“Yes, as long as we do not gallop.”

“Galloping is fun and easy.”

“Canter?”

“Very well, we’ll canter. And next time you’re frightened, pull back on the reins—do not dig in with your heels.”

“I was pulling back on the reins.”

“Yes but you also used heel, more heel than rein, which signaled to the horse that you needed to get away, as fast as possible.”

“Well how was I to know that?”

“Did you never have riding lessons?”

“No.”

“In the name of the Goddess, woman, how did you know what to do at all?”

“The Temple has an extensive Library, and I watched the mounted soldiers train.”

Anleeh grabbed her upper arms and gently shook her. “Not everything can be

learned from books.”

“Much can.”

Anleeh shook his head. “You are a very brave woman to have mounted a horse with no training. I could tell you did not have much experience, but had no idea you’d never had lessons. When we reach my Uncle’s hall, you will learn.”

“But for now, no galloping?”

“No galloping.”

Anleeh helped her back into the saddle and corrected her posture, forcing her heel down, correcting her grip on the reins and explaining why they had to be held that particular way.

She filed away his instructions and explanations, fitting together the whys and hows of each thing he said.

“Good, that is enough for now.” After reattaching the leading ropes he’d been forced to unfasten in order to go chasing after Siara’s runaway horse, Anleeh mounted. They’d made good time and would reach the first cabin by sundown.

\* \* \* \*

They chased the sun into the horizon. As pink and orange light bled through the cold air, the small caravan reached the first night’s destination. Weary but warm inside her fur garments, Siara was able to dismount without assistance.

After pacing back and forth to regain control of her numbed legs, Siara helped Anleeh unload the horses, setting their bags before the door of the small cabin. There was a large covered stable to one side. Siara poured piles of oats for each horse as Anleeh lowered hide panels on three sides of the structure. The hides served as a windbreak for the horses, and the horses would serve as warning for them. If anything came near, animal or human, the horses would let them know.

After the last bridle had been removed, replaced by a simple leather harness that freed the horses to eat, they left the animals, grabbed their packs and made their way inside. The door of the cabin had a large musky smelling hide stretched over it. Siara wrinkled her nose as Anleeh lifted it from its hooks and the smell increased.

“What is that?”

“Bear urine.”

“Ugh.”

“It keeps all the other animals away.” He rolled the skin and placed it beside the door, which was unexpectedly beautiful, the work of a master carpenter set in a rough-hewn cabin.

“The door is wondrous.”

“Aye. One of my people’s—Den’s—greatest secrets is woodworking skill.”

“Such work would fetch a very fine price in the Great City.”

“It would, but there is a reason Den likes to keep secrets.” Anleeh peered at the door for a moment, and then carefully touched a series of symbols. First a swooping set of lines that looked like a bird’s wing, then a threatening bear claw, and finally the outline of a rising sun.

As he tapped his finger on the rising sun each of the symbols he’d touched filled with pale light. The light, cold white-gold like the winter sun, bled into each line of the carvings, highlighting the exquisite detail. The pattern of feathers on the wing became

visible, as did the impression of fur on the claw and the rays of the rising sun.

"A bird's wing, a bear claw, and the rising sun." Siara murmured.

"How do you know the sun is rising?"

Siara cocked her head and considered the question, puzzled by her own certainty. "I don't know. It would make more sense if it were setting, as this is Den, the land where the sun sets."

"It might, but you are correct; it is the rising sun."

"Is the combination, the pass code, the same on every door?" The light faded from the carvings and the door of the cabin opened with a faint 'pop.' Anleeh ushered her in.

"No. The symbols relate to the one who begs entrance, not to the door."

Siara looked at him, surprised. "You mean to say that each person must touch a different set?"

"Yes, and they are not always the same. What you touch must reflect what is in your heart. I have traveled far and wide, as a bird does. The second thing is emblematic of yourself; the bear was my first kill and is always a part of me. Finally, thoughts of the future: the rising sun because my life, and our world, is at the dawn of a new time."

"Had that not reflected what was in your heart..."

"The door would not have opened."

"This is incredible! I have never read of anything like this. We must document it; it will be the first part of the book I will write." Anleeh turned his head away, busying himself by hanging the bags from hooks on the walls. Siara paused, the next question poised on the tip of her tongue, but left unuttered. Her companion's pregnant silence could not be ignored. "You are uncomfortable with this."

"The magic of Den is secret."

"Our mission is to document these people."

"No, that is your mission. Mine is to broker a treaty."

"Better understanding will improve relations. Better relations will strengthen the treaty."

"Enough. You are correct." Anleeh hung the last pack and leaned one shoulder against the wall, head bowed. "My reluctance to relate Den's secrets is not something I expected."

"I did not mean to ask for more than you are willing to give."

"I must be willing to give all if we are to succeed."

"Your reluctance is understandable, this is your home, these are your people."

"No. Den *was* my home. I no longer claim its ways. That makes my reluctance all the more troublesome."

Siara opened her mouth to offer further reassurances, but Anleeh turned away. Leaving him to his thoughts, Siara inspected the cabin.

It was a single large room, constructed of entire tree trunks laid atop each other. The space between the trunks was filled with a pale substance. Poking at it, she discovered the substance was hard, clearly some sort of plaster or mortar. The roof had appeared thatched from the outside, but from within she could see that the structure had been roofed over with small planks, the thatch covering the planks.

Anleeh left for a few moments to climb onto the roof and remove a cover from the chimney. Siara held a blanket up in front of the hearth to control the dust that fell when he used a long branch to clear it out.

"The cabin is in good repair. How often is it used?" she asked as she swept up what dust had escaped to scatter over the cabin floor.

"Often enough, but patrols will stop by and clean it, make repairs if needed, on their rounds."

"We are so close to your Uncle's house that there are patrols? I thought that we still had several days' ride ahead of us."

"We do. There are regular patrols that travel far and wide, protecting the borders and spying on the other Clans."

"How many Clans are there in Den?"

"I do not know for sure. There are several large ones, and my Uncle's is one of them. There is much fighting between the peoples, but they will unite against a common enemy."

"Like the Great City?"

"Yes."

Anleeh left to hunt, asking Siara to build a fire while he was gone. Siara waited until he was well away to begin experimenting. She'd never made a fire before, but she'd read about it.

When Anleeh returned an hour later, bringing a cold blast of night air with him, Siara was seated on the floor before the hearth, a tinder box and pile of small twigs at her side. The fire roared, far larger than he would have built, and when she turned to look at him, her cheeks were rosy. The smile on her face had him wondering if her flush was from excitement or the heat in the cabin. He smiled—her joy was infectious—taking the cleaned and spitted foxes and rabbits he'd caught and slipped them into grooves high in the hearth so they could cook over the flames.

"What are those?"

"Rabbit and fox."

"There are four, why so many?"

"We will eat what is left for tomorrow as we travel. And we have need of the skins."

"Why? We have more than enough skins. I was plenty warm, were you cold? Also, do they not take a great deal of time to tan?"

"So many questions."

Siara refused to be embarrassed or ashamed. "That is why I was sent. To question and learn."

"I know, forgive me. We need the additional skins because they will become a part of the clothing you will wear. Normally it does take a long time, but there is a special ointment we use; it will cure the skins quickly." Anleeh rose and pulled a large squat jar from a chest against one wall. "This is kept stocked in each of these cabins." As the meat cooked, Anleeh showed Siara how to apply the salve to the inner surface of the skin.

If he expected her to scream at being shown the slightly bloody skin of a freshly killed animal, he'd sorely misjudged her. Siara claimed one of the skins for herself and experimented with the salve, asking question after question, until Anleeh's exasperated exclamations convinced her that she'd exhausted his knowledge of the origin, ingredients and preparation of the product. After stretching the skins on frames to dry and cure, they ate, munching silently and washing each bite of food down with the stream water he'd brought back.

Seated cross-legged, which felt quite scandalous without a skirt masking her limbs,

Siara propped her head on her hand, elbow against her knee, and drowsed.

"Wake, lover, we must attend to something," Anleeh said, his voice barely registering in her food and warmth induced lethargy.

"Mmm..."

"Siara." Warm fingers brushed her face. "You must get up."

"I'm awake," she whispered sleepily.

"Nay, but you will be." Anleeh dipped his fingers into the chilled stream water and then set his fingers to the side of her neck. Siara yelped and straightened, rapidly blinking her eyes and brushing at the cold water tricking under the neck of her tunic.

"Was that entirely necessary?"

"Yes, you were not going to wake otherwise."

"It is late. Why did you not let me sleep?"

"Nights in Den are long; there is yet enough time for sleep."

"Indeed."

Smiling at her prissy tone, Anleeh rose and held out a hand. Slipping her fingers into his, Siara allowed him to raise her to her feet. He then motioned her to stand in the center of the cabin, which she did, her brow furrowing in puzzlement.

"What are we..."

"You may not speak."

"Pardon me?"

"You will obey each command the first time it is spoken." Anleeh paced away from her and when he turned, his face was hard, his eyes glittering, the light of the fire casting shadows over his face.

A thousand questions sprang to mind, but Siara swallowed them, nodding instead.

"Good. I feared your loquacious tendencies would make you disobedient."

Siara opened her mouth to retort—how dare *he* accuse anyone of being loquacious?—remembered his order, and closed it.

"This is the beginning of your training. When we train, I will be hard on you, harder than I would normally be. It is rare that a woman is trained, for it is rare that an outsider is brought to Den. I have only seen one woman trained, and it was an unforgiving and ruthless thing. The man who'd kidnapped and brought her to Den was known for his heavy hand."

Siara took a step back, her heart thumping and skin prickling in a sudden rush of fear.

"Yes, I see you begin to panic. He beat her, daily, until she gave in, until she stopped begging for her freedom and the life she had known."

Frantically Siara shook her head. *No*, what he said was barbaric, no one would do that to another human, kidnap them, beat them.

"Had I never come to the Great City, had I never seen training, experienced training as I have, that might have been your fate. Every instance of disobedience would have been replayed with a beating, your body played with and worked until you could no longer see, speak or think, but for the pain and pleasure."

*Pleasure?* He spoke of torture. She didn't understand. Heart thumping, features closed to hide her fear, Siara didn't realize she was still slowly backing up, didn't realize that her movements told him of her fear more clearly than words would have.

"Remove your clothing."

Siara's back hit the cabin wall. She could retreat no further.

"Return to your place and remove your clothing."

"No."

"I told you not to speak."

"I-I won't."

"Do you refuse to obey me?"

"I refuse to submit to torture!"

"Do you trust me?" Suddenly he was the Anleeh she knew, warm of voice and expression. His firelight flickered features no longer seeming forbidding.

Confused, her fading fear causing her to shake, Siara wrapped her arms around her belly. "How could you say those things to me? Threaten me with them?"

"I spoke nothing but the truth."

"I don't..."

"Want to do this? Has the pleasure in the adventure fled?"

"I should not have to submit to daily beatings to complete this mission."

"You agreed to do what it took, and I warned you."

"No, you didn't explain..."

"I will return you to Den's border in the morning. You will only be a day behind the raiding party. You can return to the Great City. Though I must admit, I expected better of you."

Anleeh turned to the fire.

Siara stared at him. She could not believe he had dismissed her. It was not unreasonable for her to refuse to submit to what he asked; no one could expect her to do it. If Den really was what he said, she was not sure she wanted to go there. The men sounded barbaric, the women, pale beaten shadows.

She would not go; he would have to go alone.

Siara's mental tirade slowed and stopped. He'd told her that he feared what would happen to him, what he would become. His description of the men gave her an idea of what he'd been. How remarkable that he changed to become the man he was now. Inching forward, she looked at his back. She took a few more steps; he didn't move. Fingers trembling Siara returned to her place in the center of the room. Still Anleeh didn't turn. Bending to unlace her boots and then pull them off, Siara let her hair fall forward to hide her face, hide the fear, shame, trepidation, and excitement he'd aroused in her.

Next she undid the ties around calf and thigh that held the skins in place, shivering as the skins fell from her legs. Though still completely covered by the riding pants she nonetheless began to feel vulnerable, exposed.

She picked at the ties that held the neck of her tunic closed. When they were loosened, when there was nothing left to do but strip, Siara grasped the hem of her tunic and pulled it off in one smooth motion. Dropping it quickly, she raised her arms to cover her breasts.

"No, drop your arms." Through the tangles of hair hanging in front of her face, Siara could see Anleeh seated with his back against one side of the hearth. Though his pose was casual, one leg extended along the floor, the other bent with a forearm resting on it, there was intensity, the same hard intensity of a few moments ago, in his shadowed features.

Reluctantly she dropped her arms. The tips of her hair flirted with her nipples, which

beaded up hard and tight in the cool air.

“Finish.”

Siara loosened the laces of her leggings, hooking her thumbs in the waist and stripping them down her legs. She remained bent, working the tight ankles of the garment over her heels.

“Gather your clothes; bring them to me.”

Using his order as an excuse to remain bent, and therefore concealed, Siara picked up each of piece of clothing and gathered it to her chest. When she was sure the bundle in her arms concealed her breasts and hung low enough to shield the juncture of her thighs, she straightened. A few steps brought her to Anleeh.

“Drop them.”

Standing so close to him, the details of her nakedness would be more apparent, highlighted by the same fire that left him in shadow.

Siara closed her eyes, and released her grip.

The silence, and the tension from the silence, grew until Siara’s hands curled into fists.

“Look at me.” When their eyes met there was nothing but power and strength in his gaze, no condemnation or disappointment. Her fear that he would find her lacking began to fade and she relaxed into his control. Her fingers uncurled.

“Watch me, watch me look at you.” When she nodded in understanding and acceptance, Anleeh broke their shared gaze, instead carefully perusing each inch of her exposed flesh. From the slender curve of her neck to the heavy hang of her breasts and indentation of her waist, he examined her. He ordered her to step back, moving her body out of the shadow created by his, so that firelight danced in the brown curls of her sex and revealed the padded flesh of her hips and thighs.

“Turn.”

Her back received the same treatment, though it made her nervous to be blind to any action he might take.

“Turn back. Now, spread your legs.”

This time the order meant so much more, for it would expose her, expose places that had been seen and touched by none save her. Anleeh lowered his bent knee, creating a V with his legs. “Place one foot on each side of my knees.” Carefully stepping between his legs, Siara tentatively placed her left foot on the outside of his right knee. Several times she started to move, but could not bring herself to do as he asked, could not bring herself to take the step that would completely expose her. A small noise, part whimper, part growl, escaped her.

“Your order is not to talk. I did not say you could not express yourself.” Surprised, she nodded. “Now, do as you’re told and expose yourself to me.”

Siara responded to the steel in his voice, stepping her right leg over his left and situating her foot by his knee.

“Good girl.” Anleeh leaned forward, his hands wrapping around her calves. “It is not uncommon for people to openly express their opinions of another’s physical attributes. This can be upsetting to those not from Den. From now on I will speak often of your body so you become accustomed to this. Do you understand?”

Siara nodded.

“Let us start down here.” Anleeh slid his hands to her ankles, able to completely

wrap his hands around them. "Your feet are long and slender, pretty, and these ankles are delicate, almost strangely so. I will see them adorned; whether with bracelets or shackles is dependent on your behavior." His hands slid up to their previous position. "These calves are nicely muscled, though I like to see them stronger. I will make you work them until they please me." Siara hung her head, her face flushing with painful embarrassment.

"You must not hang your head to hide from me." Siara turned her head to the side so her hair further curtained her face.

"Look at me!" Anleeh quickly slid one hand up her inner thigh, bringing it close enough to her sex to get her attention. Siara gasped and looked down at him. "Do not disobey again. What you must learn is that what I say, what anyone says, reflects upon them and their wants and needs, not upon you.

"Were I your husband, my opinion would carry more weight, and you might work to change yourself to please me, but I am not your husband, so you must remember that my wants are only words, and have no power over your heart." He squeezed her inner thigh. "Can you remember that?"

She nodded.

"Good. Than I will continue."

The hand on her inner thigh slid down to her calf once more. Anleeh kneaded her calves for several minutes before venturing his hands up to the back of her knees. His fingers played over the soft crease, causing her to giggle, and then pressed hard, forcing her knees to bend slightly. Her legs trembled as he forced her to hold the bent knee position.

"Straighten your legs."

Fingers spread, he explored the front, sides, and back of her thighs, avoiding her sex and buttocks.

"Step inside my legs and kneel, keeping your legs spread." She did as ordered. "Put your hands behind your back and grasp your opposite wrist with each hand. When I am inspecting you, this is the position you will take. Do you understand?" Siara nodded.

"Look at me. Watch me."

Anleeh laid his hands on her waist and squeezed and Siara sucked in her breath and her belly. She watched him, watched him devour her, claim her with hands and eyes. He slid one hand to the center of her belly and buried the tip of his thumb in her belly button, his other fingers splayed up, the tips slipping under the heavy hang of her breasts. His free hand came around her back, slipping beneath her arms to play over the small of her back.

Holding her front and back, Anleeh pressed in, pushing his hands toward each other, forcing her spine straighter, and controlling her breathing until it came in small pants.

"Do you feel it, lover? Feel how I control you?" Using the thumb in her belly button like a hook he lifted while pushing at the front of her body, bowing her backwards over his hand at her back.

Unable to see him, Siara closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. Her hands were sweaty where she cupped her wrists, her breasts, now pointed straight up at the ceiling, felt swollen and vulnerable, lifted and exposed. Between her legs her sex pulsed with her heartbeat, the folds slick with the arousal his mastery had brought.

A soft mewling noise escaped her.

"Are you aroused? Your body, the helpless noises you make, tell me you are."



Moving the hand on her belly around to her back to help support her, Anleeh leaned forward and pressed his lips to her stomach in a close-lipped kiss. When he spoke, his lips moved against her flesh.

"I love looking at you like this, lush breasts, raised up for my pleasure. I love your full breasts, but will make sure you are tightly laced, for I like to see large tits raised up, tightly confined." He licked her, and then blew on the wet spot, sending shivers up and down her skin. "Do you like that?"

"If you enjoy it now or not, you will come to, for it pleases me, so I will do it to you often. Can you imagine what it will feel like when I lave your nipples with my tongue and then cool them with my breath?"

Siara whimpered in arousal, her body twitching in his hold. Her bowed position made breathing hard, and the blood had filled her head until she could not think.

Her head tossed side to side and she started to move her hands, needing a touch, even if it was her own, against the flesh between her legs. With his hands still supporting her lower back, Anleeh felt her fall out of position.

"No. Put your hands back in position."

Siara growled, the sound so close to animal that she startled herself.

"Siara, put your hands back into position."

Caught between her desire to pleasure herself and obey him, Siara did nothing. Anleeh lifted her, straightening her back so she could look at him. Removing his hands from her, Anleeh leaned back.

"Siara, you already earned punishment for your earlier defiance. Will you add to it?"

They stared at one another, Anleeh's gaze hot and demanding, Siara's half wild with arousal. Forbidden to speak, Siara snarled at Anleeh, letting herself sink into an animal-like state, so different from her normal controlled exterior.

"You will submit to me. Submit, knowing that you might go unsatisfied, that if it does not pleasure me to see you pleased, you will find not release. You will submit and allow me to continue my inspection of your body."

Hair curled and tangled, a single lock hanging over one side of her face, lush body gold and red in the firelight, Siara looked wild, like a sexual beast. Anleeh leaned forward, invading her space but not touching her, his will demanding her submission.

"Hands behind your back." He snarled it, voice cruel and biting.

Siara's gaze lowered, her hands moving together behind her back. For a moment it seemed that Anleeh had frightened her, but when she raised her head her gaze was still bright with desire. She growled at him. He leaned forward and blew on her left nipple. The growl disintegrated into a moan of pleasure.

He leaned in closer and kissed her neck. "You are beautiful, lover." He leaned back and her eyes had quieted. "Stand and turn."

Carefully she stood, keeping her hands behind her. She turned and then, again without prompting, spread her legs, placing her feet outside his knees. Anleeh wrapped his hands around her knees, cupping them to brace her.

"Bend forward."

Siara bent, her upper body folding forward, her knees pressing into Anleeh's bracing hands. Breasts hanging, the normally hidden undersides exposed, hair brushing the floor.

Knowing she would not be able to hold it for long, Anleeh lifted one hand from her knee, reached between her legs, and traced a line from her belly button to her sternum.

“This is the ultimate position of submission, either standing or on your knees. To assume this posture exposes the most vulnerable parts of your body to me.” Anleeh blew against her sex and Siara yelped. “You are sensitive and needy from much play. Normally I would need to separate the lips of a woman’s sex, but you, you are so aroused that your body has parted naturally, begging me to enter you and play with you.” Anleeh licked the back of her thigh. “Can you imagine what it will be like to have my tongue on your sex, licking at you?” He licked the other thigh. “You may now speak. Tell me what you want.”

“Touch me, touch me.” Her voice was rough.

“Beg.”

“Please, please touch me. Put your hands and mouth and body on me.”

“Where do you want me to touch you?”

“Lips and breasts and between my legs.”

“This is your sex; you will refer to it as such.”

“My sex, touch my sex.”

“Is a touch all you want?”

“No... I want you to lick and pinch and bite and rub and tease...” Siara’s head began to thrash, her hair flying over the floor.

“You think I should pleasure you?”

“Yes.” She hissed the word out.

“No.” Anleeh raised his hand and brought it down hard on her left buttock. Siara let out a short scream. He spanked her right ass cheek. “Stand up.” She stood, trembling. “You deserve 50 more swats, for your poor behavior.”

“What—why...”

“Your first thought should be of my pleasure, not your own, selfish girl. Turn and kneel.” Siara whirled and dropped to her knees, closing her legs so she could rub her thighs together and pleasure herself that way. Wise to what she was attempting, Anleeh grabbed her knees and forced them open. “Naughty, naughty, lover. You must learn to pleasure me, then, perhaps, if you beg, I will give you pleasure.”

Siara, near tears with frustration, bit hard on her lip. “Please—I need.”

“You want. It is different.” A single tear slipped down her face and Anleeh licked it away. “I like you this way, legs spread, naked breasts bathed in firelight, begging for my touch.” Siara snarled, her tears evaporating.

“Arrogant bastard.”

“That’s right. I am. But you will pleasure me.” Anleeh fisted his hand in the tangled spill of her hair and brought her face near his. “But first, a kiss.” Their lips met and in the kiss they fought, tongues dueling for mastery, teeth nipping. Anleeh broke the kiss, his heavy breathing matching hers.

“Have you ever taken a man in your mouth?” Chest heaving, Siara shook her head.

“Good. I want to be the first. You may release your wrists.” Anleeh took each of her hands and helped rub the stiffness from them. “Now, open my pants.”

Siara looked down at his breeches. Like hers they were closed with laces in the front. Sitting back on her heels, careful to keep her knees spread, Siara reached for his laces, trembling fingers picking at the knot. Her knuckles brushed over the large hot bulge the laces contained and a strangled moan escaped his lips. Siara pulled her hands back, unnerved. Bewildered eyes rose to meet Anleeh’s gaze. He smiled and raised one hand to

cup her cheek. "You are such a sensual woman, I forget you are innocent." Siara lowered her eyes and let her head rest on his hand.

Anleeh rubbed his thumb over her lips and then worked the tip between them to rub on the front of her teeth. "Open." Siara lowered her jaw and let his thumb in. When he touched it to her tongue, she tentatively licked, and he encouraged her with a smile.

Soon her lips had closed around him, her tongue stroking the pad of this thumb in a quick rhythm.

"Good. Now, keep your eyes on mine and reach down and open my pants." She nodded and her teeth grazed the top of his thumb. "Careful, lover." A soft wet brush of tongue over the abused flesh served as an apology while her hands dropped to his groin. Her fingers slowly worked the knot free then began loosening the laces. She jerked and made a questioning noise around his finger when his body twitched beneath her hands.

"Do not worry or wonder, lover. Soon you will know my cock well enough to understand him. The movement you feel is because I am aroused. At your touch my body leaps to know you better." His thumb still in her mouth, she cocked her head to the side. "You will see, lover."

Siara pulled the tie free of its last hole. Anleeh pulled his thumb from her mouth, being sure to spread the moisture over her lips.

"Now, open the placket of my pants." The leather clung to itself, forcing Siara to peel the first side away from the backing before she pulled back the other side. His cock, freed of its confines, rose up, standing out from his belly, swollen, the head dark pink.

Siara tilted her head to the side again and examined him. Reaching out with one finger, she poked it.

"Mercy, woman, have some respect."

"You examined me, why may I not do the same to you?"

"I did not look at you as if you were an interesting new species I would like to dissect."

"I've never seen one look like this, so big and stiff. And it's pointed the wrong way. In the anatomy books, they were all pointing down."

Anleeh gaped at her for several moments, then shook his head.

"Give me your hand." Anleeh guided her hand to his cock and wrapped his fingers around hers, forcing them to curl on his cock. "Its size and stiffness are what allow a man to take a woman; a soft cock would not be able to traverse the deep dark of her body."

Shivering at the image his words presented, Siara gave the tool in her hand a testing squeeze. Anleeh's hips jerked slightly and his breath hissed out. With his head tilted back against the hearth, the strong line of his throat stood out, highlighted by the fire.

Following her impulses Siara leaned forward and licked a long wet path up the side of his throat and blew on it as he'd done to her. His shiver rippled all his muscles in his chest, clear down to his legs. She could see them twitching beneath his close-fitting garments.

"I want to see you," she whispered, hating the garments that hid him from her.

"In time. For now you will learn to take my cock into your body."

"We will..."

"Nay, not yet, you have yet to earn that." He tossed her a cocky smile and Siara snarled in return. Then she remembered what she held in her hand, but even as she started to squeeze, he grabbed her forearm, digging his fingers between the twin bones, forcing her fingers open.

“Naughty, naughty. Your punishment grows. Now, kneel here at my side.” Siara moved so that she knelt at one of Anleeh’s hips, body perpendicular to his. As his hand slid along the curve of her spine, Anleeh directed her to lean forward, planting her left hand on the ground between his legs, freeing her right hand to wrap around the base of his cock.

“Lean forward, rest your head here against my thigh while you get in position. Now I want you to arch your back down, thrusting your buttocks up. Good. Now spread your legs a bit more.” Anleeh slid his hand from her back, over the curve of her buttocks, and down her thigh.

“You are to take my cock in your mouth, but do not touch it with your teeth. Wrap your lips around my cock so you are squeezing me with your lips. What brings me pleasure is the rapid movement of your mouth up and down and your tongue working on the sensitive tip. Keep your hand wrapped around the base of my cock. As you go up and down, you must take me far enough in your mouth that your lips meet your hand. Do you understand?”

Anleeh resisted the urge to overwhelm her with more instruction. She would have more than enough to concentrate with pleasuring him and dealing with her own pleasure.

“It is easiest if you begin by licking all over; it will allow my cock to slide in and out easier.”

Her eyes now focused on his cock, Siara didn’t even move, merely leaned forward and sent the first tentative lick across the head of his cock. Anleeh drew in a deep breath and watched her through slitted eyes. Siara turned to look at him; it was still a learning experience for her. He did not want her to intellectually examine the process; he wanted her mad with passion as she’d been before.

“You taste salty.”

“That is my seed. When I am very aroused, some seed precedes the rest.”

Siara licked him again, covering the head before she changed the angle and carefully licked the shaft down to the top of her fist. Anleeh started kneading her buttocks with one hand while the other pushed her hair out of the way so his view was unobstructed.

Though he longed to hurry her, Anleeh waited, saying nothing as she continued to lick him up and down. When, at long last, her lips wrapped around the head, he moaned in pleasure and his hand moved from her buttocks to stroke the lips of her sex.

Siara gasped around Anleeh’s cock when his fingers teased her sex. Anleeh parted her outer lips and stroked her drenched inner folds.

She was wet and warm, willing and eager. His desire for her grew, with every tentative movement of her mouth. Siara was a woman apart, unique in her strength. Combined with her ferocity of spirit and intellect, she was something above the ordinary, special. His guilt at what he was doing to her, taking her because they needed to have a sexual relationship to survive the culture of Den, attempted to swallow him once more. Siara’s lips around him, the feel of her hot flesh on his fingers beat back the guilt. She was willing, he believed that. And if it were only sex she was interested in, be it with him or another man, he would accept that.

He would, of course, gut any other man who tried to touch her, but he could accept that it was her passion and curiosity about sex that had her so willingly taking him into her mouth.

The important thing was that he was in control. He felt passion for her, but it did not

consume him. Control would keep them both safe.

Her tongue hit the sensitive spot beneath the crown of his cock, and Anleeh jerked, fingers digging into her sex so that she moaned around him. Surrendering himself to the pleasure of her mouth, Anleeh stopped thinking, stopped worrying, and let himself feel.

\* \* \* \*

Careful of her teeth, Siara leaned down, pushing the length of Anleeh's cock through the vice of her lips. With her eyes closed, she didn't know how close she was to reaching her hands, but began to worry when the wide tip nudged at the back corners of her mouth. When she was sure she would gag, her lips hit her hand. His words stopped her retreat.

"Hold there, suck, and use your tongue."

Unsure exactly how it was supposed to work, Siara did as he asked and sucked on the thing filling her mouth, feeling her cheeks hollow as she did so. Above her, Anleeh moaned in pleasure and two fingers rubbed over her clit. His fingers felt huge and rough against flesh swollen with arousal. Siara's closed eyes fluttered and she sucked harder on his cock, earning another rub to her clit.

"Up—up and down now."

Some instinctive knowledge, combined with Anleeh's instructions, had Siara slowly drawing her head up, sliding his cock out of the vacuum of her mouth. Once at the top she swirled her tongue over the tip before quickly sliding down once more, sucking as she did so.

"Yes ... Siara, lover."

Anleeh's fingers pinched her slick clit, then rolled it. Siara shivered as darts of pleasure shot down her legs and curled her toes.

"Don't stop."

Siara continued her up and down movement. Each lick to the head of his cock resulted in a two-finger rub over her clit, while a complete head bob earned a delicious pinching twist. His other fingers settled around the lips of her sex, cupping and surrounding them, cradling her sex as he worked her flesh.

A knot began to build low in her belly. Focused on the feeling, Siara didn't realize she'd stopped moving until his fingers left her and he gave her two hard swats on the ass.

"Do not stop. I am close. When I reach completion, my cock will expel seed into your mouth. Swallow it."

Siara began her cock sucking once more, and whimpered when his fingers didn't immediately return to her clit. The whimpering earned her another swat to the ass, but then his fingers returned. With his hand cupping her mound, Anleeh's thumb settled on her clit, rubbing in straight lines then circles, alternating with hard presses.

The quiet of the cabin was filled with the wet sounds of her mouth around his cock and his hand in her sex. When his breathing sped up, Siara knew he was close to completion. Wanting, needing, to please him, Siara worked the hand at the base of his cock and increased the pace of her head.

Suddenly warm, salty cream filled her mouth. Siara sank her head down to meet her fist and swallowed, as more of his seed hit her tongue.

"Yes ... perfect, lover." He was breathless and somehow sleepy sounding. "Your turn." With her mouth and hand still on his cock, Anleeh brought his index and ring fingers into play, scissoring them around her clit, caressing all sides at once.

Once, twice, and on the third time she came, her belly muscles drawing tight, toes curling. Siara yanked her head off Anleeh's cock and a low moan of pleasure echoed through the warm cabin. Siara collapsed down across Anleeh's lap, gasping for breath as his fingers continued to press her, keeping her on that teetering edge. When her gasps turned to pleas for mercy, Anleeh removed his hand and Siara curled against him, closing her eyes.

\* \* \* \*

Anleeh let her sleep. Tempted though he was to bring her again, to see how much she could take, Anleeh settled for giving her clit a parting stroke.

She curled up on his lap, legs sprawled on the floor. He could tell from her even breathing that she was not wholly conscious, though he doubted she'd had time to slip into deep sleep. He played with a lock of her hair as he rested his head against the hearth behind him. There was a strange and pleasant peace in lying here with her. It satisfied him to no end that she'd so enjoyed herself as to need the sleep. She was such a quick study. Teaching her to pleasure him, training her, would be sheer enjoyment, but watching her awaken, watching her learn, would be a unique and thrilling thing.

He let the peaceful interlude stretch for a while longer, the pop of burning logs the only sound. They needed to rise and get into bed; the cold would soon leach in, the fire burn low. Anleeh opened his eyes, grabbing another chunk of rich brown hair to toy with. In the light of the fire she looked like Autumn made flesh, golden skin accented by every shade of brown. Grabbing her around the waist, Anleeh maneuvered her onto his lap, her thigh cushioning his spent cock. He kissed her sweaty brow, nuzzling her hairline.

"Did you enjoy that, lover?"

"Yes, oh yes," she murmured.

"You were very beautiful in your pleasure." Her head ducked; she was embarrassed. "I will not let you hide from it. You were beautiful tonight, from the beast that rose in you when I inspected you, to the innocent touch of your mouth on my cock, to the fierce pleasure of your orgasm."

"Thank you."

Her stiff comment was somewhat ludicrous under the circumstances, but Anleeh merely kissed her forehead once more.

"That is enough for tonight, but there is so much more we must explore. For one thing, these luscious breasts were woefully ignored." He cupped one in his hand, and rather than hunch her shoulders Siara arched her back, giving him better access. The weight of her breast in his hand was almost enough to turn Anleeh from thoughts of sleep, but he knew they needed rest. He would not let passion rule him. He released her breast and slipped out from under her,

Anleeh helped her to her feet and then rose himself, closing the placket of his pants but not bothering to re-lace them. "Stay here by the fire for a moment, love." Lifting down their bedrolls, he set-up the double roll and then motioned her over.

Anleeh helped Siara slip in and then removed his boots before sliding in behind her. When he settled, he found Siara already deeply asleep, her lips parted and eyelashes lying vulnerably against sex-flushed cheeks. Carefully situating himself behind her, he reached over and cupped a breast before closing his own eyes and willing himself to sleep.

## Chapter Four

Wrapped in the cocoon of furs, his body molded to Siara's, Anleeh contemplated the woman whose naked breast he'd held throughout the night. A few moments ago he'd woken to find himself in the same position he'd fallen asleep in, Siara's back snuggled against him, his arms around her.

Carefully slipping his arm from beneath her head, he replaced it with a mound of the fur they lay on. Flexing his arm to return the circulation and then propping his head on his hand, Anleeh studied his companion.

How different she looked from the day they left: hair no longer a straight curtain, now curled and wild, her complexion pale and lovely, eyes bright with curiosity, though those eyes were currently veiled by soft brown lashes.

The temperature in the cabin had dropped, but it was not freezing. He could tell from the way the air tasted that they were close to snow, and he wondered how one such as she—a lifelong Great City dweller—would handle the foreign substance.

Anleeh realized that he was grinning as he contemplated her reaction. Would she be intrigued or disgruntled? Most likely she would be both. While she didn't seem to like the cold, she would most assuredly enjoy something new. Delighted by the picture his imagination painted, Anleeh gently squeezed her breast. Siara's back arched, pressing herself further into his hand.

Anleeh, no longer able to ignore his morning erection, settled for a rubbing himself against her buttocks a few times before slipping out of the bedroll. Carefully tucking the blankets around her once more, Anleeh hobbled to the door of the cabin. Slipping outside as quick as he could to minimize the amount of cold air that snuck in, he gritted his teeth when the cold washed over him, eating at him. That took care of his erection. He paused long enough to re-lace his leggings.

Stepping away from the cabin, wearing only his breeches, his boots still inside, Anleeh spread his arms, letting the chill air swirl around him.

The bite of too cold air in his lungs and the needle-like press of the frigid ground against his bare soles invigorated him. Cold, and the ability to withstand it, was a test of strength. He'd grown soft living in the warmth and golden sun of the Great City.

Anleeh raised his arms, his flesh pebbled in goose bumps, the cold biting at his nipples and the sensitive flesh of his belly. Rotating his arms and shoulders he went into a practice routine, pantomiming the thrust and swirl of an elegant sword battle. When he'd run through that routine twice, he switched, mentally equipping himself with the battle-axe he'd favored as a young warrior. Instead of thrust and retreat his movement became about momentum, the swirling turns necessary to keep a battle-axe moving. Imagining the weight in his hand, Anleeh lifted his arms over his left shoulder, his muscles remembering how far he could go before burying the axe in his own back, and brought them down in a smooth arch, following the blow by turning to the left and spinning around in a level swing.

Again and again he worked, forcing his body, from his laboring lungs to his chilled flesh, to remember what it was to operate in these conditions. At the end of the exercise, a battle roar rose from him, ripping from his mouth, a challenge to any who would fight

him, to Mother Nature's frosty earth.

The echoes of his battle roar were interrupted by a small sound, an exhalation of air with a word trapped in it. Turning, he found Siara standing in the open cabin door, one of their fur blankets wrapped around her shoulders, leaving her rounded calves and delicate ankles and feet bare in the cold.

Chest heaving, breath fogging before his face, Anleeh stared at her. How long had she been watching? The distance between them was too great for Anleeh to read her expression. Low in his belly his long-denied beast, stirred by his fighting exercises, rose higher, aroused by the sight of the woman whose scent still clung to his skin, now mingled with his own.

Siara whirled and disappeared into the cabin.

Anleeh swallowed and closed his eyes, forcing his beast deep inside himself, gritting his teeth when savage needs—to fight, to roar like a beast, to ride like a man possessed, to fuck her without mercy—refused to subside. The closer they got, the more he became a man of Den, the harder it was becoming to subdue his beast. He'd controlled the beast last night, but this morning control was weak.

The soft sound of padding feet had him opening his eyes. Siara emerged from the cabin carrying his sword. Anleeh's heart took two hard thumps; she would not be able to kill him with it, but she might be able to get in some good blows before he disarmed her.

One hand holding the fur closed, the other curled around the leather wrapped handle of his sword, Siara stepped down from the cabin, wincing as her bare feet touched the ground. Her steps were unsteady as she walked on the edges of her feet, toes curled against the cold, but her pace never slowed; she moved with purpose. Anleeh started forward, hoping to get close enough to read her intentions in her face.

"Siara..." He stopped walking when she did, only two paces separating them. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks pink from the cold and her lips parted.

"Again."

"What, lover?" He used the endearment to soften her. If she'd woken this morning angry enough to stab him, it would take a lot of sweet talking to disarm her.

"Again." She held out his sword. He nearly jumped when she thrust out her arm, but it was the handle, not the blade she pushed towards him.

When he took it from her, brow furrowing, Siara turned and danced back to the cabin. Leaping into the doorway she huddled in her fur, and, even from a distance, Anleeh could see her legs twitching with shivers.

"Siara," he raised his voice. "Go inside, you cannot be naked out here."

"No. I want to watch."

"Watch what?"

"You, again." Anleeh looked down at the sword she'd brought him, and understood.

Turning his back to her, he hefted the sword. Once more he started his practice. Thrusting forward, whirling, passing the sword from hand-to-hand as he fought an imaginary opponent. As he moved, working in a circle, Anleeh increased the force of each movement, imagining the way the sword would sink into flesh or armor, compensating for the momentum, each swing created by forcing his muscles to reverse the blow. His shoulders, arms and chest bulged and flexed.

Feet numb from the cold even as sweat dripped down his face, Anleeh whirled once more, faster, harder, nearing the end of his set. Thrust, whirl, stab back, a waist-level



blow with enough force to chop a man in half, another two-handed overhead strike that would cleave a body from shoulder to opposite hip.

Turning to fight the invisible foe behind him, Anleeh had only a split second to check the blow. Siara stood there, her eyes on his face, never even glancing at the tip of the sword, which was stopped less than a hand's span from her chest.

"I could have..." he gasped.

"No. You wouldn't have."

Anleeh flipped the sword in his hand and drove the tip into the ground. In his belly the beast clawed, scrambling up, claws raking at him. She hadn't allowed him to finish his exercised, had interrupted him near the zenith of the set. His muscles twitched, his breath labored.

"You should not have interrupted me." His voice was a growl, the beast's growl.

"I know."

He shivered uncontrollably as the cold air dried the sweat on his skin. "Why?"

"Because I wanted to see you do it with the sword in your hand."

"Why? What do you see in me?"

She shook her head. Anleeh snarled and grabbed her, one hand curling around the back of her neck, his thumb forcing her jaw up, the other fisted at her back, pulling her towards him. Her hands still held the blanket closed across her chest and his movement trapped her arms between their bodies.

Anleeh's mouth came down and Siara stretched onto her toes to meet him. Teeth raked and nipped, tongues forced between lips to duel. Siara fought for the kiss, fought for control of it, but Anleeh used the grip on her jaw to force her submission, battling her back until their tongues played within the warm hollow of her mouth.

Bending his knees, Anleeh wrapped one arm around her upper thighs and lifted her. A few long strides brought them to a tree. Keeping her toes off the ground Anleeh pressed her against the tree and leaned into her. Turning his head to the side, he allowed her to nip at his jaw while he loosened her hold on the blanket.

Understanding what he wanted, Siara let go of the fur and wrapped her arms around him, one hand tangling in his hair.

Free to press fully against her Anleeh leaned in and then helped her wrap her legs around his hips. Her eyes went wide when she realized how the position had opened her sex. Grinding his hips between her spread legs Anleeh turned his head and reclaimed her mouth. The kiss and the position of her body had softened her. Now her mouth welcomed him, lured him in, submitted to his kiss.

Her body was soft and yielding against his, her flesh giving way, allowing him control. Pressed between the tree at her back and his hard muscled chest, her breathing was limited, controlled.

"I want you. I want to take you here and now. Spill your virgin blood here on the earth."

"Yes. Please, I need you."

"Goddess, how you tempt me." Anleeh rested his cheek against hers, breathing in her smell. As he pressed his face to hers, he forced his beast down; her submission and clear willingness loaned him control. She was innocent, and he would not take her here against the tree. Her first time would be wild and perfect, tender and pleasurable.

Siara wiggled against him, her beast clearly still active, her arousal not dimmed by

the concerns that plagued him.

“Please,” she begged.

“What?”

“Touch me.”

“Where?”

“Between my legs, my ... sex, as you did yesterday.”

He wanted to give her what she asked, wanted to please her, but this wasn't really about them, and their wants. It was about training her, teaching her to submit. “Beg,” he commanded.

As he'd expected now that she knew pleasure, it did not seem unreasonable to beg. She was fast becoming addicted to the molten potency of arousal singing in her veins.

“Touch me, please. I want you, need you, to touch me and pleasure me. I will do whatever you want, touch you, please you, take you in my mouth, for the pleasure of your fingers on me.”

Her eyes grew darker with arousal at her own words, her breathing labored, her chest struggling to rise against the pressure of his body on hers.

“You need it, don't you? The pleasure flowing through your body, my hands on you.”

“Yes, oh yes.”

Anleeh hitched her up a bit higher, supporting her thighs as he opened her legs wider and then carefully settled his confined cock against her. His aroused flesh pushed at the front of his leggings, straining the lacings.

Siara moaned as his leather covered cock, textured by rough lacings, pressed between the lips of her sex.

“How does that feel?”

“Rough and hot and hard and good.”

“Ride.”

“I—I do not understand.”

“You do. Listen and your body. Your beast will tell you how to bring yourself pleasure with what I have provided you.”

Siara closed her eyes and tipped her head back against the tree. She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, and the sight of her white teeth biting her plump pink lip was beautiful. Innocent and sexual, like Siara herself.

Just when Anleeh thought he could hold still no longer, when he was tempted to take her hips and move them, Siara started to rock against him. Though at first she was unsure, her movements jerky, soon she found a rhythm. Her hips ground up and down along his, raking the soft flesh of her sex over the lacing of his pants. Even through the thick hide he could feel her heat, and the ease of her movements let him know she was wet.

Again and again she ground herself against him, and when her soft cries of pleasure turned to growls, and her movements lost rhythm as the approaching orgasm fractured her concentration, Anleeh took her hips in his hands and aided her. Holding her still by the hips, he rubbed himself against her, up and down. His cock pulsed against her, the laces abraded her clit.

When her orgasm came, Siara dug her nails into his back, raking them over his skin and when that wasn't enough, she leaned forward and bit his shoulder, hard, driven by

instinct.

Anleeh's beast rose again, called by the primal act. Pulling back slightly he slipped his fingers down into her sex, which still quivered with her orgasm. He raked a finger over her clit.

Siara un-sunk her teeth and moaned, "No more."

"Again." His fingers stroked.

She cried out. "I am—I am sore, too sore."

"You will come again, because I command it."

Siara tried to protest but his fingers playing over her clit brought her body to another orgasm, this one painful in its intensity, every muscle going rigid, the pleasure-like pain a razor sharp power.

Anleeh pinched her clit and then lowered her, pushing her to her knees. Still blurry eyed with the force of her pleasure, Siara needed no instruction. With quick movement, she undid the sopping laces of his pants, jerking them open.

His cock, dripping with need, sprung free. Before the cold could overtake him, Siara raised both hands and wrapped them around the shaft, taking the head into her mouth.

As she licked the tip, Anleeh repositioned one of her hands over his balls, protecting his sac from the cold. He was wet enough that she was able to slip her lips down around him in one long tight stroke.

She squeezed her fist around him and sucked hard, and he came. Cupped in her palm, his sac moved as his seed filled her mouth. She swallowed and squeezed him again. Anleeh cried out, reaching out to brace himself against the tree with one hand. Lips still tight around him, Siara looked up, and the sight of her, lips wrapped around him, cheeks flushed with her own pleasure, was primal. Anleeh closed his eyes as her actions pulled a second dry orgasm from him.

"Enough."

Siara's tongue and hand did not stop. Anleeh slid his thumb into her mouth and forced it open, pulling himself out.

"Naughty girl."

"You did the same to me."

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. "It does not work that way with men."

Bending, he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the cabin.

"Careful," she warned.

Anleeh glanced at the ground. "Careful of what."

"You're carrying me. Please be careful."

Anleeh cock a brow at her.

Siara looked away. "I'm heavy," she told him quietly, and Anleeh finally understood what she was saying.

He stopped.

"Are you entirely serious?" Siara, avoiding his eyes, glanced down at her own naked body in his arms, noticed the way this position caused the flesh of her belly to bunch unattractively, and let go of his neck to cross her arms over her stomach.

"Siara. Answer me."

"Yes I am serious. I am heavier..."

"Heavier than what?"

"Than ... a person you should be carrying. Put me down."

"I will not. And I assure you, you are not heavy."

"Do not mock me."

"I don't." Anleeh bent his knees slightly and then tossed her in the air. She had time for one short scream before he caught her.

Siara clutched at his shoulders and glared, the ferocity of which was marred by the large quantities of hair that had fallen over her face.

"Do not do that again," she ordered. Anleeh cocked a brow and she hastened to rephrase. "Please. Please don't do that again."

"Very well. But as punishment for being such a bossy bit of goods I'll have to carry you like this." Anleeh swung Siara up and over his shoulder. Emitting an inelegant 'umph' when her belly made contact with his shoulder, Siara planted her elbows in his back and propped her chin on them.

"I am not bossy."

"Yes, lover, you are." A few more steps brought them inside the cabin. Anleeh bent slowly, lowering Siara until her outstretched toes touched the floor. He kept his hands on her hips as he straightened and pulled her naked body against his barely clothed one.

"Good morning, lover," he breathed, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"Good morning," she whispered into his neck.

Wrapping his arms around her, he set his cheek against the crown of her head. Siara tipped her head to the side, cheek against his chest, and breathed in.

"This is not how I intended this morning to go," Anleeh admitted.

"You had a plan?"

Anleeh smiled and tried not to be insulted by the surprise in her voice. "As you might say, 'Indeed.' You are not the only person who makes plans."

"But mine are usually better than everyone else's."

Anleeh shouted with laughter and swatted her ass. Siara yelped and grabbed her bottom with both hands. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"Spanking you?"

"Hitting me."

"Lover, that's not hitting, that's spanking, and you'd best get used to it. A nice hard spanking will calm down even the wildest of women."

"Indeed." Her prissy tone made him smile.

"Don't forget your disobedience last night. You will be punished for that, and part of that punishment will be a spanking."

Siara shivered, but it was not with fear. Was there something wrong with her that she would find such a thing exciting? The idea of his firm hand on her flesh?

"Ah, lover, how you tempt me, when your eyes go dark with passion, and your breasts heave so temptingly." Anleeh lifted her left breast in his hand. The nipple was still pebbled tight from the cold and when his warm thumb flicked it, her head tipped back on a long moan of pleasure. "Have you ever pleased yourself?" Anleeh leaned close to whisper to her ear, his thumb rolling her nipple, the fingers of his unoccupied hand trailing up and down her backbone.

A hard flick with his thumbnail brought another moan but no answer.

"Have you? Have you put your fingers between your legs and stroked yourself, brought yourself to peak?"

"Yes."

“How often?”

“Every time I saw...”

“Yes?”

Siara moved her hips restlessly, pressing them forward into Anleeh. “I can’t think.”

“Do you want more?”

“Yes, more. Touch me.”

“I would, lover, but we have no time for me to arouse and calm your beast.” Anleeh bent and kissed each nipple. “I am going to bathe.” Anleeh grabbed a satchel containing drying sheets and soap, slinging it over his shoulder.

“Siara?”

“Yes?”

“You may not pleasure yourself while I am gone.”

Siara folded her arms beneath her breasts, smiling with satisfaction when Anleeh’s eyes dropped there. “You shall not stop me.”

With visible effort, he brought his gaze to her face. “I shall. For you have only known the pleasure of my fingers in your sex. If you pleasure yourself against my orders, if you refuse to submit control of your body’s satisfaction, you will never know the touch of my lips against you. Imagine my kiss, but against your nether lips. Imagine my tongue and teeth and lips covering every inch of you.” His baritone voice dropped lower. “Can you feel it, my tongue between your legs, my lips upon your bud of pleasure? I see you can, I see you are aroused, your breasts heaving, knees pressed together. But if you disobey me, all you will know is my fingers, and, eventually, my cock.”

Anleeh stroked the back of his fingers down her cheek and across her lips.

“You.” He kissed the corner of her lips. “Will not.” He kissed the other corner.

“Pleasure yourself.” His hand slipped around her throat, his thumb forcing her jaw up and kissed her, hard.

When he pulled away, Siara was left gasping, her body heavy and wet with the arousal his words and touch had brought.

“I will return.”

Siara bobbed her head, waiting for her foggy mind to clear. As Anleeh opened the door, inviting a gush of cold air, the question arousal had pushed to the back of her thoughts, resurfaced.

“You are going to bathe ... outside?”

“Yes. Most men do, in streams colder than this will be. I need to reacclimatize myself to the temperature.”

“Should I come?”

“No, we are not so barbaric to make our women bathe in melted snow.” With a wry smile he closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

Siara dragged what was left of their pallet closer to the fire and sat down, moving one of water skins closer to the banked flames. Slowly she added one log at a time, stoking the fire, using the time to sort out her muddled thoughts.

Used to long stretches of time in which she could think, Siara was overwhelmed by everything she had to ponder. From the cold, and its effect on her, to the change in the way the air tasted. The unexpected magic of the door carvings, to the internal ‘beast’

Anleeh spoke of.

Anleeh.

How could it be that his words and actions, some so sweet, some so sinister, aroused her equally? Was he correct that a beast, a beast of power and strength, lived in her? She was not of Den, not one of its people, so how could this be true?

Her infatuation with him was growing worse. She'd half hoped that contact with him would cure her of this aching need for him. But it was like hunger, never fully satisfied. Now she would never look at his lips without remembering their taste, nor his hands without knowing the calluses and ridges. Try as she might, Siara could not help herself from thinking of their return to the Great City. His commitment to helping her choose a new wardrobe seemed to promise a continued relationship.

As the flames licked the wood, she let her thoughts circle. When the harsh snap of a breaking log startled her from her reverie, Siara cleared her mind and carefully packed away her thoughts. This was merely wasted time. She was in the middle of a journey, a great adventure; she should not waste a moment of it worrying and wondering about a relationship, and a man who would most likely disappear from her life when it was over.

Ignoring the plummeting of her heart, she grabbed a rag and small pad of soap. Using the warmed water from the skein she'd set by the fire, Siara bathed.

It felt glorious to be clean, even if the little wet rag was pitiful when compared to the bathing chambers of the Temple, which had pools big enough to submerge one's entire body in and water scented with oils and heated till it steamed.

She finished by standing and wiping herself down, letting the excess water drip to the floor. Siara patted herself dry and then pulled a cloak around her shoulders. She remembered Anleeh's order regarding clothing, and, except for moments of self consciousness or those times when he touched her, she was able to forget her nudity.

Siara pulled a small journal from her sack. She'd brought many such journals with her. Due to her years of reading both more serious studies and personal journals, Siara knew that it would be foolish to chronicle her personal life in these pages. As much as she had loved to read those personal accounts, and as much as they had taught her about life, Siara did not want to let anyone, even some future student, to know the innermost workings of her heart. She knew that no journal of this journey would be complete without the explanation of why she'd volunteered, and therefore a written admission of her love for her companion, but that was a secret she could not bear to reveal, even in the silent pages of a journal.

Unscrewing the cap of the inkwell she carefully dipped the already sharpened quill into the dark ink. One of Siara's vanities was her penmanship, practiced over long years of teaching young women to read and write.

"A Journey to Den. Journal One."

Smiling in pleasure at setting the first ink to the page Siara carefully noted her name in the bottom corner and turned the page.

\* \* \* \*

Anleeh, well and truly frozen, cursing each icy step he took, nearly collapsed in relief when he reached the door to the cabin. Ripping it open, he stepped in, dropping the satchel and his clothing from numbed fingers.

"I need to get rubbings of the door, would you do that? I don't want to forget. I have

several questions. If you like I can make a list of them so we may discuss while we ride, or we can go over them now..."

Ignoring her, Anleeh stumbled to the fire, collapsing beside her, almost upsetting the inkwell.

"Careful! You almost..."

Anleeh drew his legs up. The drying sheet wrapped around his hips was cold from the water and air, but too much of an effort to remove.

"Anleeh." Gone was her scolding tone. "What's wrong?" She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Goddess, you are like ice!"

"It was to-too-too..." Clenching his teeth to still their chattering, Anleeh merely shook his head.

"Too cold." Her hand touched his cloth-wrapped hips. "This is wet and cold. Remove it." Siara prodded him to his knees, unwrapping the cloth from his hips. Trying not to think about the fact that she would see him completely naked for the first time, when he was so cold and therefore smaller than normal, Anleeh let her ease him down onto the furs. The warmth of the fire against his front, and the furs on his side, was painful.

Some noise must have escaped him because she laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes."

Siara pulled the furs over his back and side, covering those parts of him not touched by the fire. Anleeh took a moment to twitch a section of the fur down over his cock.

"I've read about this..."

"Of-f c-course you have."

"Is now really the time for such comments?"

"There is always t-t-time for such comments."

"As I was saying, I read that if the flesh becomes too cold, it can die."

"I know this, b-bu-buuu." Overcome by shivers Anleeh could not finish his sentence.

Settling at his feet, Siara wrapped her hands around them. "You are very cold." Anleeh could see real fear, spurred by whatever horrors she'd read, written upon her face before her expression closed down.

Carefully lifting his feet, she settled them against her belly, the cold flesh of his soles flush with her warm, soft skin. She neither flinched nor made a sound, as she bent low, wrapping her arms over the tops of his feet.

He'd always found her to be a courageous woman, even when he did not know her the way he did now. Her quiet strength had been one of the pillars of the Temple, and her calm manner a comfort to those in her care. Upon discovering her passion he'd thought her repressed, a woman forced to hide her passions, and there might yet be truth in that. But lying there, watching her warm his feet, her face the calm mask he'd always known, Anleeh marveled at her force of will, equal to that of his own or the Queen herself. She'd understood his need and acted on it, the intensity in her face indicating that if sheer force of will could make something truth, he would already be warm.

All of his youth had been spent in bitter cold winters, so he had experience with digits killed by the cold. Carefully he wiggled each of his toes, concentrating to make sure each one moved. Siara, upon feeling the movement, looked at him.

"Is all well?"

“Yes, though there is some pain as full feeling returns.” Even as he spoke, the first stabbing prickles shot through his ankle. Anleeh turned his face to the fire and clenched his jaw.

His foot jerked against her as the next wave of pain came. “Release me. I fear I might do you an injury.”

“How can I ease it?”

“Time will...”

“How?”

“If you rub the—the flesh.” His words were spoken through gritted teeth.

Siara released his now twitching feet and began rubbing them hard. It brought relief, and Anleeh closed his eyes, nodding to silently ask her to continue. Siara flipped around. Straddling his knees she squeezed his legs with her thighs to hold him still as she worked each leg in turn, lifting the upper one off to give herself better access to the lower.

After long moments the tingling abated. Aware of her turned back, Anleeh blinked tears of pain from his eyes, grimacing inwardly at what his father and uncle would have said upon seeing such a display.

“I am well now. Thank you, lover.”

Siara lifted off him and turned, the cloak she wore settling around her body. Impatiently she removed the garment, warmed by her body heat, and tucked it around his feet and ankles.

“Thank you.”

She nodded and moved away, unselfconsciously nude. Returning with the remains of last night’s meat and some oat cake, she knelt near his head and broke off a piece of oat cake, holding it out to him. Anleeh started to free his arm to take it from her, but Siara stretched out her arm, pressing the morsel to his lips.

Taking it between his teeth Anleeh chewed and swallowed. Next she held out a piece of rabbit.

“I was saving that for...” This time she shoved it into his mouth. Choking on a laugh as he chewed, Anleeh ate each bite she offered him. Just before he was preparing to tell her he was ready to burst, Siara started nibbling on the last oatcake.

“Eat, lover,” he admonished, “it will be a long day, and now we have a late start so we need to ride hard.”

“But no galloping.”

“No galloping.”

Easing into a sitting position Anleeh tested his body, loosening the muscles before the warmth of the fire. When he finally rose, it was to find that Siara had packed everything, save the bedroll he still lay on, and their garments.

“I need to dress,” she said.

Anleeh nodded. He started to turn around but turned back when he saw how she wiggled into her tight pants. Her back was to him as she shifted her hips side to side, working the garment, dark brown against her pale flesh, up her thighs. The wiggle increased as she eased it up over her buttocks and Anleeh’s eyes widened at the delectable jiggle of her backside. By comparison the quick pulling on of the shirt was tame. Anleeh schooled his face so that when she turned, he showed none of his amusement. Instead he was entranced anew by the way she pulled her wild locks from under the shirt and shook them out.



“You are beautiful.”

In the middle of lacing the ties at the top of her pants Siara looked up. She smiled, and it was tentative, hopeful, her cheeks heating in a blush, but just before she ducked her head, he saw her brows furrow.

“You doubt my words?” he asked.

“No. Merely the context.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Perhaps I am beautiful to you now. Here, away from other women for comparison and dressed in the garments of your homeland. When we return to the Great City, I doubt it will be so.”

“If you insist on using my previous behavior to judge the truthfulness of my regard you will never believe me, and that is unacceptable, for my regard is sincere.”

“Indeed.”

“Don’t dismiss my words.”

“I do not, but you will change when we return, you will once more become the dapper and graceful Lord Anleeh, sly-tongued purveyor of justice in our world.”

“Siara, listen to me. My behavior in the Great City was governed by rules a thousand times more strict than those I have given you.”

“Did the Queen...”

His face hardened. “The secrets of the Temple are still sacred.”

“I wasn’t asking...”

Anleeh rose and pulled on his own garments, hoping his back to her would convince Siara to drop the subject. He could not speak on what he’d learned and saw as a Zinah. While he would never regret his service to the Priestess, Anleeh no longer wanted to think about that life and he did not want Siara to think of him that way either. He didn’t know how much of the truth of the Zinahs she knew. Was she aware that they were slaves to the Priestess, bound to her by magic and faith, as bodyguards, sexual servants, and slaves? Or did she believe the official propaganda, that the Zinahs were elite bodyguards and nothing more?

He liked being the sexual aggressor with her. He’d missed it. After being released from his servitude to the Priestess, Anleeh had sampled the flesh of many willing women, relearning how to be the aggressor in sex, but it had never felt as good as it had with Siara.

Once he was dressed, Anleeh picked up their furs and turned, motioning her over. Dropping to one knee he wrapped the furs around her, lacing them in place. Finally he swirled the cloak over her shoulders, leaving the hood down.

Siara dropped to her knees to help him with his own wrappings and it was a struggle to keep from getting aroused at the site of her on her knees, her mouth so tantalizingly close to where it had been this morning.

Swirling on his cloak, Anleeh gathered up the bags, and opened the door.

Hoping to dispel the tension, Anleeh smiled. “Let’s ride, lover.”

## Chapter Five

It was midday when they spotted the first bank of snow.

Anleeh saw it coming, its glittering white unmistakable, but it wasn't until they were almost upon it that Siara asked about it.

"What is that? Is it snow?"

"Yes, there will be more as we rise in the mountains. Here it is too warm and the snow melts." They were riding at an easy canter, the horses' gaits synched so that conversation was easy.

"Too warm? How much colder will it get?"

"At the peak of the mountain, where we make camp tonight, the cold can consume you. We will light a fire in the stable for the horses, for it is too cold even for them."

They passed the small patch and Siara twisted in her seat to continue to look at it. A few moment later, they rounded a curve in the path. There, in the shadow of a small rise, lay a wide piece of land, blanketed in snow.

Siara reined in her horse, causing confusion and nervous sidestepping as the other horses also stopped. In a matter of seconds, she was off the horse and headed for the snow.

"Siara, come back, there will be plenty of snow when we make camp tonight!"

"I want to touch it now."

Anleeh leaned down and stroked his horse's neck. "Well boy, looks like we will be taking a rest." Swinging off his horse and grabbing Siara's mount's reins, which she'd carelessly dropped, Anleeh led all the horses into the trees that lined one side of the path.

The trail they rode followed the edge of a great forest up to the peak of the mountains. While the incline was gradual on this side, going down they would be forced to traverse step trails and paths no wider than a single horse. He wondered if Siara was afraid of heights.

Not wanting to waste the stop, he headed into the trees. If memory served, there was a creek located not too deep in the forest.

With all four horses in hand, he was forced to take a winding route between the trees. When he finally came upon a little clearing beside the stream, he left the horses, making his way quickly back between the trees, concerned that Siara would be frightened by his absence.

The closer he got the more worried he became; he'd not been gone for long, surely nothing could have happened to her, he would apologize for leaving her all alone...

He found her sitting in the center of the path, hood pushed back, snow cupped in both hands.

Anleeh took a knee beside her. "I'm sorry, lover, I won't leave you again."

Siara took a moment to look up, and when she did it seemed to take her a minute to recognize him. "Did you go somewhere?"

"I should have known... It doesn't matter." Anleeh sat beside her. "Tell me, what do you think of snow?"

"The color and coldness are both quite different. I have never seen anything in nature, save flowers, so white. But the consistency puzzles me."

“How so?”

“When I first picked it up, the snow was light and fluffy, like down, now it is hard, and when I press it together, like this,” she compressed her palms, “it turns hard as rock, but at the same time melts. How can this be?”

Anleeh smiled at his little scholar, imagining the frantic scribbling in her brain as she tried to note every observation. Her reaction was more interesting that he’d imagined. As he’d grown up with snow, he’d never stopped to consider the exact properties of the substance.

For the next hour they sat in the road beside the snow as Anleeh slowly and carefully explained what he knew of snow. Talking with her made him realize how very little that was.

“Here,” attempting to distract her from the barrage of questions—it was starting to hurt his ego to know nothing—Anleeh scooped up a handful of snow and hard-packed it into a ball. Standing, he moved several feet away and then lobbed it to her. Siara, still seated, watched the snowball arch and fall, smashing against the path with a pitiful ‘plegh’ sound.

Siara looked up expectantly. “Yes?”

Anleeh, his head in his hands, no longer knew if it was despair or mirth which filled him. Bending, he made a second snowball. “Stand up, lover. I will teach you a game.”

“A game for adults or is this a childhood memory?”

“It is a game played by young and old, women and children. This,” he held up the hard packed snow, “is a snowball.”

“That” she pointed, dutifully repeating his words. “is a ball of snow.”

“No. It is called a snowball.”

“But it is a ball of snow.”

“Yes but ... never mind. The point is that you take these balls and throw them at the other players.”

“You take something as hard as a rock, and cold, and throw it at people?”

“They are not that hard, and they explode when they hit the other person.”

“Explode?”

“That was a poor choice of words. Here,” he held out the snowball, “now throw it at my chest.”

Siara, with a worrisome lack of concern or questions regarding the order, flung the snowball at him. It exploded when it hit, covering the front of his cloak with specks of snow.

“Ohhhh, that is actually quite satisfying.”

“I hope you mean throwing a snowball, not throwing something at me.”

“Both items have their strong points, but for now I mean throwing the snowball. What exactly are the rules of the game?”

“Well there aren’t really any rules.”

“Of course there are. All games have rules.”

“In this game, the rules are decided by those persons who want to play.”

“That hardly seems effective. Wouldn’t each person lobby for the rules to be set in their favor?”

Anleeh sighed and then stooped low, scooping a handful of snow in a loose packed ball. Half bent he lobbed it at Siara, who ducked.

“That is all there is to the game,” Anleeh commented, even as he ducked a flung handful of powder. “You have to pack it together, squeeze it with your fist.”

“Like this?” Whoosh. Splat.

“For the love of the Goddess, woman! That hurt!”

“You said pack it hard.”

Anleeh scooped up another handful but instead of throwing it, ran towards her. It took Siara too long to figure out what he was doing, and her retreat only lasted a few steps. He wrapped an arm around her waist.

Pressing her back to his chest, Anleeh raised his hand and touched the palm full of snow to her lips. Siara squeaked and wiggled but he held her still, her lush lips ruthlessly chilled by his action.

“Hold still, lover,” he ordered, and she stilled. That she would obey, despite her lack of understanding and her discomfort, stirred his beast.

Anleeh dropped the handful of snow and spun her around. Even as she took a breath through her bright pink lips, Anleeh brought his mouth down to hers.

She tasted of winter and woman. Roughly he warmed her lips with his, nipping to draw the warm blood to the surface and letting his hot breath fan against her chilled cheeks. When her tongue came out to touch her cold flesh, Anleeh caught it with his lips, sucking gently, before pressing their lips together once again.

“Tonight,” he whispered.

Siara blinked eyes dark with arousal. “What happens tonight?”

“Tonight I will take your virginity.”

Siara shuddered, in what to Anleeh was clearly disgust, and he clenched his back teeth. He was foolish to have thought that the passion she showed meant that she was ready for this, or that her feelings toward him were anything more than awakening desire. How could she help but dread his touch after the way he’d treated her?

Lost in his dreary thoughts, Anleeh was unable to keep his balance when she flung her arms around him. Together they toppled backwards into the snow, Anleeh landing on his back. Then again, maybe it wasn’t disgust...

Siara leaned over him and nipped at his jaw before tracing the tip of her tongue up his neck to his ear. Cheek pressed to his, she whispered, “Good.”

\* \* \* \*

What had come over her?

It was the second time that she’d knocked him down. She’d often reprimanded girls for calling others ‘wanton,’ as it was a favorite insult among the students, but now she felt that description applied to her. What else could cause her to behave in such a way?

Scrambling off Anleeh, Siara stood and rearranged her cloak, brushing at the snow stuck to it. “Please excuse me.”

Anleeh rested his head in the snow and closed his eyes. “Why are you apologizing?”

“For knocking you down.”

“Do you really think that I want an apology because you showed me how great your desire is? How strong the beast of your passion is?”

“I am...”

“Incredible.”

“Wanton.”

“Wanton?”

“Yes.”

“Why would you say that?”

“When I was younger, still a student at the college, there was a girl older than I, who was...”

“Wanton?” His voice lilted in amusement.

“Yes.” Siara voice was cold and stiff in reaction to his amusement. “She lay with many of the guard, and as time passed, the guards began to threat her differently ... poorly. They would say mean things to her, and pinch at her and grab her, but she still pressed herself against them, smiled even when her eyes were sad.”

Anleeh sat up, his face gone serious as her story unfolded. “What happened?”

“We, the other girls and I, didn’t understand. When we asked the Head Mistress what was wrong, she told us the girl was wanton, and that to so shamelessly admit desire and express it to men was to invite their contempt.”

“Siara,” Anleeh rose, cupping her chin and tilting it so their eyes could meet. He wanted her to see the seriousness in his face. “That girl’s behavior was dangerous. The guards are men, only that, and what her behavior taught them was that she did not value herself or her sexuality, and so they did not value it, or her.”

“What she did ... is what I now do with you.”

“No. What you do is listen to your beast. It is your own pleasure you seek, not my touch. I am the first man you have allowed close, and so your beast demands that you force me to satisfy it.

“It is not me you lust after, but your own pleasure and satisfaction, and that is a very beautiful thing, one I am privileged to share.”

Siara lowered her eyes, hiding her reaction to his words. He might wish it were different, that her desire were truly for him, but it was not so. She was a sexual being, and should not be ashamed of it.

He stroked a thumb across her lower lip as a strong gust of wind whipped her hair around her face, locks of hair curling around his wrist like ropes. Anleeh took a breath that smelled of green trees, dark earth, and ... a storm. His thumb stilled against her lip, Siara sensed a shift in his attention.

“Anleeh?”

“We must go.”

“What’s wrong? What do you hear? Are we in danger?”

“It is not what I hear or see, but what I smell that presents the danger.” Slipping her hand into his, Anleeh started off between the trees, tugging her behind him.

“What do you smell?”

“A storm.”

“You can smell storms?”

“Yes.”

“Can you smell all weather?”

“Storms and summer showers, and only in Den.”

Reaching the horses they separated, Siara going to retrieve her mare who’d wandered away from the other three. Anleeh was glad they’d give the horses a chance to rest, for they would not stop again.

Grabbing his horse’s bridle Anleeh started leading the animals out of the forest, Siara

leading her mare behind the other three.

Back on the path Anleeh helped Siara mount, making small adjustments to the saddle and Siara's stirrups. Resting a hand on her knee, Anleeh claimed her attention.

"We will ride, and ride hard, until we reach the cabin."

"I do not understand the danger."

"There is a snowstorm coming in. With it will come snow and bitter chill. We are too far up the mountain to retreat to a place where the snow will not fall. If we do not find shelter the snow will cover us and freeze us, slowly. I did not plan to die today."

"I'm ready to ride," she said

With a distracted nod he moved away and mounted his own horse, spurring all the animals into action.

Raising the pace to a canter, Anleeh tasted the air once more. They might make it.

\* \* \* \*

"Grab the blanket!"

"What?"

"The blanket!"

Following his pointing finger, Siara turned and saw one of the horse blankets lying outside the stable. Though it could only have been there for a matter of moments, it was already half buried in snow.

Racing to the stable door, she snatched the blanket and shook it out. Looking up she was frozen by the sight of the world outside.

Everything was white. The ground, air and sky were all the same pale color. Had she not been able to feel the earth beneath her boots, Siara would not have been able to distinguish sky from ground.

"Siara! Grab the blanket and close the door!"

His words were barely audible over the howling of the wind, which accompanied the flurry of white. Siara grabbed the stable door and pulled it closed. Anleeh had barely been able to push it open wide enough to get the horses through. The noise dimmed once the door was shut, but air still screamed through crevices in the walls.

Siara rushed the blanket to one of the newly unburdened horses and tossed it over the animal's back. Head bent low, coat twitching with shivers, Siara wasn't sure the horse would survive the night.

"Anleeh, look at this one, look how she shivers."

"They'll be fine; they have water, warmth and food. As long as they are inside they will warm up. They, like us, are just very cold."

Siara could see snowflakes on Anleeh's lashes, and as he spoke he blinked them away. He turned to look around the stable. The saddles and bridles were stacked in one corner, their bags stacked near the center of one of the long walls.

Siara had expected something similar to last night's roofed area, but this was a real stable. There were six stalls all at one end of the room; the rest of the space was open, though a large pile of firewood and several chests indicated that, like the last cabin, people took care of the dwelling. Anleeh stepped out of the stall and pulled the simple rope across the opening, hooking the loop over a press-stud in the outside wall of the stall.

"Come, now that the horses are settled, it is time for us to be."

Together they gathered their bags. Anleeh opened the door connecting the stable to the cabin, this one again protected by symbol-magic, and led the way into the one-room cabin. It was pitch dark, frighteningly so, and Siara hovered in the doorway. The light from the small fire they had burning in a brazier in the stable for the horses did not illuminate the murky interior of the cabin.

Light flashed as Anleeh struck the flint, sparking thin strips of wood he would use to start the larger fire. The longer she stood still, waiting for warmth, the harder Siara's shaking grew. When the tinder caught, Anleeh placed several of the larger logs into a triangle shape over the baby flame.

"It is not warm yet, but come close to the fire."

Siara made her way over, each movement pressing frigid garments against her body. Anleeh seated himself on one of their bags and opened his legs. "Come sit."

Siara stepped between his legs. For a moment it felt that her beast would come to life as her memory of last night surfaced, but even her beast was frozen.

Turning her back to Anleeh, Siara seated herself between his legs. Leaning forward, Anleeh molded his body to hers. The growing fire warmed her front as he warmed her back.

"Your-r-r feet?" she asked.

Cheek resting on her head, he opened his cloak, wrapping it around her also. "What was that, lover?"

"Feet."

"Ahhh, my feet. No, I am fine."

"But-t-t you need to be careful, already got so cold today."

"You are right, but my body is beginning to remember the cold, and knows how to cope. You do not; your body has never felt this before."

"It was like being inside a cold wet cloud."

"Yes it was." They were silent for a moment, watching the logs slowly catch. "Thank you for helping with the horses."

"Of course."

Siara turned her head and rested it against Anleeh's chest. They hadn't beaten the storm, instead they'd raced with it. The edge, where only light flakes fell, had been their companion to the top. When the cabin came into view, the storm had started in earnest, leaving them and the horses to fight thought icy pellets.

"Breathe, lover."

"I am."

The higher they climbed, the harder Siara had found it to breathe. Between the height and the cold, each breath felt like dagger through her chest, but she was so accustomed to it now that Siara no longer even heard the rattling sound of her own breathing.

"I know this is hard on you. Had the storm not come we would have gone slower, stopped to let you rest."

"I'm fine."

"Nay. You are not, but you will be."

Wrapped in his arms, Siara slowly warmed, and with the warmth came the deep need for sleep.

"I'm so tired." Siara let her eyes drift closed even as she yawned.

"The cold leaches the strength from you. It is barely late afternoon."

“Sleep?”

“Yes, go to sleep, I will wake you.”

Wrapped in his arms, safe and warm, she slept.



## Chapter Six

Anleeh held her until she was no longer chilled, and then he held her a bit longer because it pleased him to do so. He was amazed by her fortitude and bravery. Snow had been his winter companion since birth, and even he had feared the whiteout they had ridden through. He could only imagine what it must have been like for her.

Anleeh eased her down on her side, tucking the pack he'd been sitting on beneath her head and removing his own cloak to spread over her legs.

Her sleep was actually a blessing, for it allowed him some time alone to think and prepare for what they would do tonight. There had been no time to hunt so they would have to eat salted meat and the last of the bread. After that he would show her exactly why he had cured the rabbit skins from last night. And then...

Anleeh had been with a virgin once before, here, in Den, not long before he left for the Great City. The sister of one of his close friends had flirted shamelessly with him, arousing him only to scamper away. The teasing had gone on for months until he cornered her in the woods one spring day and stripped her down.

Looking back, Anleeh winced. He hadn't known the first thing about bed-skill, all he'd had was a nice sized prick. But that's what the girl had wanted. He'd ridden her hard after breaching her maidenhead, the girl holding tight to his shoulders. Her tight sheath had tempted him to spill within her but he'd pulled out, too much the young warrior to find the idea of a child appealing.

When he'd rolled off her, the girl had risen, kissed him, and then danced away to crow to her friends at having lost her virginity to the wild and ruthless Anleeh.

Tonight would be different. Quietly unpacking their bags, Anleeh smiled to himself. It would be a night Siara would never forget, he would be sure of that. Older, and oh so much wiser now, Anleeh was aroused by the idea of being her first and imagined the look on her face. Be it shock, nervousness, uncertainty, or fear, all would be wiped away by pleasure.

One item of concern was her beast. He no longer doubted that a beast, equal of any of the women of Den, lived in her. Control of that beast, enough so that she would not hurt herself tonight, would come through her submission.

Though he longed to wake her with sweet kisses, Anleeh knew it would be best to bend her to his will from the moment she woke. Softness towards her was not serving him well. The last thing he'd ever expected, to feel something for her, was beginning to happen.

His smile now wry, Anleeh finished unpacking their food. He, the former slave, known for his raffish manner and sense of humor, was falling for the stern and plain Headmistress of the College turned Royal Historian. What a strange path the Goddess had laid for him. His life was nothing like he'd imagined as a barefoot boy dreaming of a warrior's glory.

Despite, or because of, the unexpected path of his life, Anleeh was very religious, much more so than he liked to admit. Spilling to his knees, Anleeh placed a closed fist over his heart and bowed his head, whispering a small prayer to the Goddess, for both continued blessings and guidance.

\* \* \* \*

“Awake.”

Siara’s eyes popped open, her normal grumpy transition from sleep to awake forced away by the harsh tone. Heart thumping, she sat up and turned. Anleeh stood there and her heart calmed at the sight; the voice had been so harsh she’d half expected to see some dangerous stranger.

Slumping in relief as her heartbeat slowed, Siara rubbed her eyes and yawned.

“What’s wrong?”

“You are not to speak.”

Suddenly, Siara understood. The time for more training, and for her to lose her virginity, was upon them.

With purpose, she stood, and, though she was afraid, she would not show her fear. She shed her cloak and it pooled at her feet with his. Anleeh just watched her.

Stepping wide, Siara bent and efficiently stripped off the skins protecting her legs and unlaced her boots, stepping out of them. Letting everything drop in an untidy heap, she straightened and looked at Anleeh, her chin raised in challenge.

Anleeh unfolded his arms and took two steps forward, deliberately raking her up and down with his gaze. When their eyes met again, he acknowledged her challenge, her obedient defiance, and demanded that she strip, all with his gaze alone.

Stepping together once more, Siara unlaced her leggings and slowly stripped them off. When she straightened, her tunic fell to the top of her thighs, hiding her sex. Teasingly Siara paused, her legs slowly slipping against one another, her breasts and sex concealed.

Anleeh took a threatening step forward.

Siara stripped off her tunic.

Without prompting, she clasped her hands together behind her back and spread her legs once more; with a sigh of nervous anticipation, she closed her eyes and tipped her head back.

In her mind she could feel her beast, a sleek and dangerous animal, crouched low and circling ... circling with Anleeh’s beast. His beast was a dim shadow in the darkness of her mind, bigger than hers, its form not as visible to her. It snarled and the sound vibrated through her body, tingling in her nipples and sex. She moaned, the snarl became a growl, but this came from Anleeh’s mouth, not his beast. Eyes opening just in time to see Anleeh’s lips descend upon hers, Siara could not hold herself still as his tongue swooped inside her mouth, claiming it. Arms twining around his shoulders, she tore at his shirt with her nails. She sank her teeth into his lower lip, wishing she could feel his flesh beneath her hands.

Anleeh lifted her, fingers digging into the swell of her ass, and Siara wrapped her legs around his hips, wanting the friction of his laces against her sex. Without support she could not press against him the way she wanted. Unwilling to break their kiss to speak of her desires, Siara grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked.

Anleeh slid his grip to her hips, yanking her away from him. Siara’s feet hit the floor with a thump even as he broke their kiss.

“Go—to the wall,” Anleeh panted, his fists rhythmically clenching.

Siara ran to the wall, pressing her back against it, hungry eyes watching him, waiting for him, but he shook his head.

“Turn around, hands against the wall.”

Siara turned and pressed herself against the logs, the rough sensation just this side of painful. The bark scraped her breasts, feeding the storm of need that raged in her as surely as the snow storm raged outside.

Then Anleeh’s hands were on her hips, and she thought, *please let it be now*. Instead he tugged on her hips, making her walk backwards.

“Keep your hands against the wall.”

Forced to bend as he pulled her lower body away, Siara was soon crooked at the waist, arms outstretched to keep her hands on the wall.

Anleeh ran his hands up and down her thighs and ass, stroking her like he would stroke the flank of his horse. “I could take you like this, spill your virgin blood as you stand braced against the wall.” *Yes, please*. “But I will not.” *Curses*.

“Instead I will give you part of the punishment you deserve. A few spankings to remind you that you serve my pleasure, not the other way around.”

Stepping to the side, Anleeh raised his hand and brought it down with a hard smack on her left ass cheek. Siara yelped, but the blow jiggled her sex and the yelp ended in a moan of pleasure.

“Did that hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Did it feel good?”

“Yes.”

“Perfect.”

Smack! He struck her again, and then a third time. Each blow was harder than the last, the pleasure struggling through the pain to warm her sex.

“How many blows do you deserve for being such a wanton?” There was a smile in his voice as he used her word against her.

“I-I don’t know. How many should I have?”

“As many as please me of course.” Smack! Smack!

He landed the next blow even harder and she cried out in pain.

“Did that hurt?”

“Oh, yes it did, please, please...”

“Please what?”

“Stop, nay, don’t, don’t stop, please. It hurts.” Her words tumbled and rolled, out of her control.

“Did it feel good?”

She whimpered, head thrashing, her hair sliding against her back. “Yes.”

“Good.”

The pain came again and again, melted with the deviant pleasure she took from having him treat her this way. She’d never given up control as she did with him, never had someone strong enough to take that control away.

When a sharp blow landed hard on the crease between her left thigh and buttock, Siara gasped and bit into her lip, sinking into the pleasure and pain, until they were the same, until her mind stopped trying to dissect what was happening, and deep in her belly a new part of her, something not quite human, growled.

\* \* \* \*

He spanked her until her skin blushed rose, until his palm hurt and her hips no longer rose to meet his blows.

The pleasure/pain had her, prevented her from knowing when her abused flesh could take no more, but the way her knees sank to soften the blow, and the twitching of her thighs, told him what she could not.

Stepping up behind her, Anleeh pressed his palms, one hot from contact with her skin, the other cool, against her ass cheeks, just touching. She moaned as if he'd thrust into her.

"Now that you are calm," Siara turned her head to look down the length of her back at him, incredulity writ large upon her face "we can work."

Anleeh removed his hands and stepped away.

Siara slowly stepped forward and straightened, wincing as she did so. Anleeh placed his hands behind his back, grasping wrist with opposite hand, to prevent himself from reaching out for her, comforting her.

Gingerly she reached back, running fingertips over the swell of her ass.

"Hot, isn't it?"

She nodded, several locks of hair sliding down, and for a moment her face was painfully young and vulnerable. Anleeh felt his beast rise, but not to devour, to protect.

"Siara..."

She tipped her head back. The long lean line of her throat, hair now spilling down her back and vulnerably parted lips all spoke of female softness. Regret for the way he had treated her, for the roughness of the spanking, consumed him.

He would have moved then, would have taken her in his arms, but she turned, and there was no vulnerability in her eyes, there was power, pleasure, and the dawning awareness of the complexities of desire.

"Come here."

She came to him, but rather than standing before him she pressed herself flush against him and he chuckled in relief, bending his face to hers, kissing her firmly.

"Now, it is time to think about..."

Her pelvis bumped against his.

"—clothing."

Her lip curled, her hands sliding over him in an attempt to redirect his attention, and he had to work to keep his face stern. What a remarkable woman she was.

"I told you that you would not be able to bring garments from the Great City. I disposed of yours, and also told you that you would only be allowed to wear garments that I gave you."

Her eyes moved to the mound of furs and leather in front of the fire.

"Yes, you have been wearing the furs I gave you, but there is another thing you must know." Anleeh stepped back and scooped up the rabbit furs they'd cured last night.

"Once you reach Den the only clothing you will have are garments made from the furs of animals I have caught." He held up the rabbit furs.

Siara's mouth opened, closed, and then opened again. She growled and glared at him.

"Oh sorry, lover, you may speak," he smiled widely at her.

"I'm sure you are very sorry. Actually I'm sure you are a great liar."

"Watch it or you'll get another spanking."

“Ha! You will not distract me from my concerns. How am I to make garments from those? I have never made my own clothes, and there is not enough material in four small furs, even if I knew how.”

“I have made garments before.”

“The ultimately fashionable Lord Justice knows how to make his own clothes?”

“You mock, but I could make you go naked. I cannot make the fine garments of the Great City, but I know how to style a woman’s garment from furs.”

“There are not enough furs.”

“There are.” Anleeh made her turn and raise her arms. Reaching around in front of her, he placed the animal skin over her breasts, the soft fur against her flesh, the cured skin facing out, the fur peeping over the edges like a border. Instructing her to hold it in place Anleeh smoothed the rest of the skin around to her back. The rabbit’s legs barely touched; a large expanse of her back was left bare.

“This will be fine, much of your back will be left bare, but once we reach Den and I go on my first hunt, I will come back with something much finer than this for you.”

Anleeh left Siara holding the fur skin pressed against her breasts and picked up two others. There was one larger and one smaller. Moving to her front, Anleeh knelt and held the fur up, across her hips. If he positioned them crossways over her hips, front and back, too much fur would be wasted. He held the fur vertically and eyeballed the measurements.

Anleeh rolled onto his feet and held out his hands for the fur Siara still clenched. She shook her head.

“Give me the fur.”

“You may have the fur, but I hope that my supposition is wrong.”

“Are you aware that you use large words when you are nervous or angry?”

“Anleeh, please answer me.”

“First you must tell me what your ‘supposition’ is.”

“That I will wear nothing but those skins, and wear them in the manner you just indicated.”

“That is exactly what you will wear.”

“But I will be nearly—nearly...”

“Naked. Yes, you will.”

“I cannot walk about like that! My legs, stomach, shoulders, and arms will all be exposed! I will freeze.”

“I told you before that I will not let you freeze and I will not. But you will walk around wearing whatever it is I give you, or nothing at all.”

“The women of Den dress like that?!”

“When they are older many wear leggings and tunics similar to what you have now, but those who are young, young and beautiful, wear outfits similar to what you will wear, though the furs are finer and you will find them better tailored than what I will be able to provide.”

“So every woman in Den wears clothing made only from skins of animals their male protector has killed?”

“Yes.”

“But surely the men are able to kill enough animals to provide real garments!”

“These are real garments, though some women are more thoroughly covered.”

“I want to be one of them.”

Anleeh cupped the back of head and kissed her brow. “No.” Siara started to tremble and he pulled her against his chest, “I know this is hard.”

“I do not want them to see me. I am...”

“What?”

“Fat.”

“Lover, who taught you such things, who made you so unsure? Your body is beautiful and I will be greatly envied for my possession of you.”

“No one taught me that.”

“Truth now, do not hide this from me.”

“There ... there was a boy. I wanted very much to be with him, to have him touch me as you do now, but rarely did he speak with me, and more rarely still did his eyes really see me. He never made a comment, but I knew I lacked the physical beauty to attract him.”

“That boy is a fool. You are a woman of great strength and beauty.”

“Thank you.”

Anleeh smoothed his hand over her hair, gentling her. He smiled wryly against the top of her head and vowed that, when they returned, he would see that she had an entirely new wardrobe made. He had not lied when he said her lush body was beautiful, but those sack dresses had done nothing to enhance her fertile beauty. Little by little he let his hands travel further south until his caress ended at her well-spanked buttocks.

“Do you hurt?”

“I am a bit sore.”

“Can you sit?” he asked, still massaging her ass.

“I think so.”

“Good. If you start to hurt, tell me, but for now, come sit with me and we’ll make you some clothing.”

Anleeh gathered up her old clothing and their cloaks from before the fire, clearing room for him to lay down their bedroll. Siara eyes widened at the sight of it and he smiled serenely, simply gesturing for her to sit and frowning when she winced as her bottom made contact.

He pulled a small awl from among his belongings and grabbed two logs. Carrying his supplies to the bedroll, he sat across from Siara, who had curled up with her legs to the side. The firelight danced over her features as she stared into the flames.

Anleeh extended his legs and began stripping off the furs he still wore.

“What do you see in the fire?” he asked.

“A reflection of our beasts.”

Anleeh’s breath stopped. “You have seen our beasts?”

“In my mind’s eye, I could see them.”

“What kind of animals are they?”

“I do not see that clearly.” Siara shook herself and turned to him. “A flight of fancy, nothing more.”

Anleeh nodded, but his heart still pounded. It was odd enough that she had a beast he could feel when she was not of Den. Was it possible that she...

“What is that?” She pointed at the awl.

“This is an awl, used to make holes in animal hide.” Anleeh set one of the logs on

the floor, placed the edge of the first skin on it, positioned the awl, and then struck the awl with the other log, making the first of many holes.

With Siara's help—in the form of hundreds of questions—Anleeh constructed her garments. The top was simple; it would be laced together in back with no other work needed. The bottom was more complicated.

First he cut each of the skins in half, then positioned the four sections in a row on the floor. The sense of fashion he'd developed in the Great City demanded that he position and reposition until he was sure he'd found the combination that would look the best on. Carefully punching holes down each of the sides he then used thin lacing to sew them up, creating one long piece of fabric. The cut ends at the top were all even, the naturally jagged edges hanging.

Siara stared at what he had created, head cocked to the side, her interest academic now that she was not confronted with the reality of wearing nothing but what she saw.

"Are all men in Den able to create things such as you have?"

"Yes. When a woman is married, she is stripped and her husband dresses her in garments he has made, though often older men and sometimes a man's mother and aunts will help him create the garments. The wedding garments are often very fine, embellished with bone beads and other finery, so women only wear them until they have enough to make more serviceable attire."

"Surely they are not stripped ... at the wedding."

"Yes, in the wedding in the Great Hall, with all the Clan watching."

Siara's mouth hung open for a moment. "But what if..."

"For Den it is normal. From the time they are small, boys and girls both have been guests at weddings. There is no shame or titillation in a bride's naked body. Only her acceptance of her new life."

"The women of Den must truly be fearless. I wish I were such."

"You are."

"Nay."

"Many times have I called you fearless in my mind."

Siara looked away, blushing in pleasure. "Thank you."

Anleeh rose and put away the awl, draping the garments over one of their packs.

Keeping his back to her, Anleeh stretched, lifting his hands over her head.

"Will you disrobe now?" she asked. Her voice attempted calm but was riddled with strain.

He turned.

"I have never really seen you naked, I have only seen pieces," she mumbled.

"Then come over here and take what you want." Anleeh stepped closer to the fire, his stance wide and arms relaxed at his sides.

"Is that allowed?" Siara rose and moved in, her fingers, lacking any fabric to play with, nervously twisting together. "In the world of submission, am I allowed to do so?"

"I would hope that I have taught you that a woman's pleasure often eclipses obedience."

"I will admit that your rules seem rather changing and fluid."

"They are finite, but hard to explain. Let me simply say that you are doing beautifully."

"Not so well that I didn't need correction."

Anleeh bent to her ear and whispered, "Even if you never disobey again, I will punish you, just because it pleases me."

"That's not—that's not..."

"Fair?"

"Yes."

"I know. Were you planning to undress me?"

Jolted from her nervous state by his words, Siara grabbed the hem of his shirt and started tugging it up. The fabric was thick and heavy, stiff from long wear. When she got the bunched fabric to his chest, she was thwarted by his arms.

Siara looked at him and waited, Anleeh looked back.

"Well, move your arms."

Slowly, tauntingly, he raised them. With a small 'humph', Siara gave his left nipple a good pinch, and when he yelped, shoved the shirt over his head, jerking him forward so she could pull it down his arms.

Smirking she stood back as he straightened, clearly astonished at how neatly she had managed that. With a wicked smile he lunged for her but Siara anticipated his movements and dropped to her knees, grabbing the lacings of his pants.

"Is it true that men are very vulnerable here?" she asked, hand curled against his crotch.

"Yes, don't get any ideas."

Siara gently poked her fingers against the diamond shaped insets created by the crisscrossing lacings.

Anleeh groaned. "Are you sure you are a virgin? You seem to know what will drive me wild."

"If you would hurry up and bed me, you would know that for truth or lie."

"Then I will know by sunrise."

\* \* \* \*

Siara undid the tie and pulled out his lacings; opening the placard of his pants she tugged them down and off his legs. Tossing his garment away, Siara stood and stepped back, wanting to take him in.

From the subtle swells of muscle at his shoulders to the smooth hard plain of his stomach, Anleeh's body spoke of the strength. She'd never found the male body beautiful, simply functional, but he was beautiful, and she wanted him.

Siara raised her eyes to his. "Anleeh."

All she said was his name, but in that word there was so much more, so many needs and wants.

Anleeh took two steps forward and caught her face between his palms. His mouth gentled her as his hard cock slid against her stomach. Then he dipped and brought her up against his chest, one arm beneath her knees.

He lay her before the fire, and it was unbearably gentle. Shaking fingers smoothed her hair from her face and she caught his hand in hers, closing her eyes and bringing the pads of his fingers to her lips. What flesh was not warmed by the fire was heated by his hands. There was no part of her he did not touch, from the vulnerable underside of each breast to the soft skin at the bend of her elbow.

His lips and fingers played with her belly button and the indentations of her ribs, but



when he kissed down to the thatch of curls protecting her sex, she twisted her hips away.

“Let me in, lover.”

“I’m afraid,” she whispered.

“I’ve touched you here before.”

“This feels different.”

“I know.” He cupped her hips and eased them flat. “It is.”

Soft kisses and gentle stroking eased her thighs apart. It was with great care that he parted the lips of her sex, rubbing his thumbs over the inside, spreading the dewy wetness that had pooled within her body. Siara’s fingers curled into the fur beneath her as, with only a few strokes of the callus-hard pad of his thumb, Anleeh brought her to the first low glittering peak.

Trembling from the pleasure, Siara watched as he shifted to kneel between her legs. He sat back for a moment and squeezed the base of his cock. In the firelight, his body was glossy with the wetness he had produced.

“What is wrong?” she whispered it, scared to break the gentle spell of pleasure.

“I desire you too greatly. I don’t want to hurt you,” his lips curled with the familiar teasing half smile, “or disappoint you.”

Anleeh came down over her, and Siara’s heart skittered. He was so big, all heavy muscles and bone bearing down on her, but then he smiled and she trusted him, far more than she should.

Propping himself on one elbow, his hips snuggled against her thigh, Anleeh carefully slipped a finger into her. Siara tipped her head back and moaned at the strange new pleasure. It burned slightly when he added a second finger and her gentle whimpering had him pressing butterfly kisses over the upturned mounds of her breasts and then sucking a pink nipple into his mouth.

As sweet-sharp pleasure zinged from her tightly budded nipple to her sex, Siara’s hips began to move against Anleeh’s hand, rocking. She gasped when his fingers skimmed along the inside of her channel and moaned when he slowly separated his fingers, pushing against her tight insides.

“I’m going to come into you now, lover. It will feel full and tight at first. Be still and let your body learn mine.”

Nodding she focused on the instructions, grateful to have some directions she could concentrate on following. Anleeh shifted so he was propped up on his elbows, his forearms nudging her arms up so that her fingers tangled in the spill of her own hair above her head.

“Bring your feet in and bend your knees a bit, lover. Good. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes.”

Siara sucked in her breath as she felt him nudge her; even against her own heated flesh, he was hot. When the broad tip of his cock brushed against her clit, Siara moved her hips, seeking more of the sensation.

“Lie still for a moment, lover.”

Body crying out for more of his sweet touch, she obeyed. When she felt his broad tip opening her, forcing tight flesh to yield, she understood his command.

He held still for several long breaths and then eased in further. Bit by bit, he pushed.

“Are you alright, Siara?”

“Yes, it feels odd, so full, almost pain.”

“There will be pain yet, lover. I must breach your maidenhead.” Their voices were low, hers carried on a breath as the fullness below made her feel as though she could not draw in enough air. With each word he spoke, he touched her face, and he finished by pressing a hot kiss against her cheek.

“Put your hands on my shoulders.”

Her soft palms against his smooth flesh, her nails digging small worried crescents into this skin, were the signal he needed.

Inching back out slightly, Anleeh surged into her, taking something from her that could never be replaced, but taking it with such sweet care that there was joy in it. For Siara the pain was fleeting, the pleasure of finally becoming a woman in truth, and the tender consideration he, the man she had longed for and now finally had, showed her overwhelmed the pain of her flesh.

He appeared more concerned than she, raining reckless kisses over her cheeks.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, it did not hurt greatly.”

“I’m going to move, tell me if it is too soon.” Between her legs, his hips began to rock, the smooth push of his flesh into her body soon changing from foreign and uncomfortable to rich and welcome.

Bracing her heels, Siara dug fingers into Anleeh’s shoulders and rocked up against him.

“That’s it, lover, show me, let your body tell me what you need, how fast, how slow, how long.”

No longer content to lie passively, Siara lifted herself, wrapping her arms around him, her back raised from the floor, their sweaty chests pressed together.

Again and again Anleeh’s cock pressed into her newly opened body. His movements quickened, the angle of his thrusts changing so that each stroke pressed against her clit.

“Please, please...” she begged. She craved the pleasure she’d felt last night, instinctively knew that it would be a thousand times more powerful with his cock lodged inside her body.

“I’m close, lover, as soon as you come I will.”

“I need...”

“What?”

“Harder, or faster, or more slowly... I don’t know, but I need.”

“Then I will give you all that and more.” Anleeh shifted, nudging her to lie back, his straining arms flexing as he once more propped himself up, freeing one hand to roam down her belly and between the lips of her sex.

When he gently scissored his fingertips around her clit, Siara yelped in pleasure, the cry escalating to a scream when he added three long hard thrusts, slamming her into a deep, hard orgasm.

Unable to hold off, Anleeh pulled his fingers from between her legs, hooked his arms around her shoulders and slammed into her, extending her orgasm with quick hard thrusts. Pulling out at the last moment, Anleeh spilled his seed against her belly, his hot forehead coming to rest in the soft hollow of her neck.

Siara, overwhelmed by the evening’s activities slipped into a deep sleep.

## Chapter Seven

They did not leave the next morning. They could not. Great drifts of snow had sealed the cabin. Though the storm was gone, the world was marked with its chilling touch.

Siara, wrapped in a fur blanket and wearing half-laced boots, slipped out through the small space Anleeh had been able to clear by shoving the stable door open.

"This is snow," Anleeh's statement echoed in the unnatural hush.

He stood a dozen yards from the cabin, his body sunk to the knees in the white hills. Anleeh should have been dwarfed by the mounds of chilly white, but in his dark furs, the cloak building up his shoulders, Anleeh appeared threatening, a beast more cunning than any other in the woods, willing and able to take on nature itself.

"Careful you don't get cold," he called back.

Nodding, and grateful that he did not order her inside, Siara reached out one bare arm and sank it, elbow deep, into the mound of snow. The texture still fascinated her. It appeared solid but gave easily; it appeared soft, but the top had crunched as if covered with a hard skin.

"Please don't become distracted and leave your hand in the snow." His voice was laced with amusement and she wondered how long she'd been standing there, elbow deep in a snow drift.

"Hmmm? Oh yes."

Mind on the pleasant puzzle of snow, Siara retreated into the cabin, planting herself before the fire with her journals and carefully chronicling the things she'd learned. From the blizzard to the unique design of the stable and cabin, the texture variants of snow and the creation of her new 'clothing,' Siara dutifully chronicled her experiences, letting her quill flow, ink seeping into the lines of her fingertips as she filled page after page.

*I can still feel the spanking today. My muscles ache as if bruised, but there are no marks save a faint pink tint. The pleasure came both from the physical nature of the act and from his mastery over my body...*

Siara ripped out the page and threw it into the fire, alarmed that she had forgotten her self-made rules regarding personal feelings and experiences. She had to be more careful. After perusing her writings to be sure there were no other instances of her personal experiences seeping in, Siara packed away her journals. They'd eaten what bread was left for breakfast. Though there was little hope, in Siara's opinion, of catching anything, Anleeh had gone out to hunt. They needed food both for today and for the rest of their journey.

Though lacking in skills as a hunter, Siara knew enough to make a few simple oat cakes. Cupping a handful of the dry oat grain mixture, Siara dribbled water out of the bucket by the fire. Mixing the little cake in her palm Siara placed it on one of the hot stones of the hearth, quickly mixing another. As she was flipping the second cake over, Anleeh returned.

Though logic prevailed upon her to be calm, Siara could not help the small sound of fear that escaped her when his hulking figure, face shadowed by the deep hood of his cloak, stepped into the cabin, his booted feet vibrating the floor beneath her. She was naked, vulnerable, and he smelled of blood and sweat.

“Siara?” He threw back the hood, the stern lines of his face might have been brought on by concern for her, but his forbidding countenance, pale from the cold so that his eyes and brows stood out sharply, did nothing to calm the irrational beating of her heart.

He stepped forward and she scrambled back.

“Siara, what is wrong?”

“I’m—frightened.”

“Of me?”

“Yes.”

Anleeh strode quickly to the fire, slipping the three spitted foxes into their slits in the hearth, then turned and left.

Siara’s heartbeat dropped to a normal pace the moment he left.

What was wrong with her?

This was Anleeh, who had shown her great kindness, who had been gentle more often than fierce.

Cursing herself Siara scrambled into her leggings and tunic; knowing there was no way she would get the furs wrapped around her legs on her own, she settled for lacing her boots snugly and pulling on her cloak. Dashing into the stable she checked to see if he was with the horses. He was not.

Giving her mare’s nose a quick stroke, Siara headed for the stable door. It was hard to push open, and would have been impossible if Anleeh hadn’t already cleared away some of the snow from outside the doors.

Slipping out once more, Siara saw him, standing in the snow, his back to her, a dozen paces further out than where he’d been that morning.

“Anleeh!” Her voice echoed eerily, bouncing off the snow. He half turned at her words. Calling his name out again, Siara carefully stepped out into the snow, easing her weight into each footfall before laboriously tugging the lagging foot free.

“Siara, go back, I will come in.”

“Please, I want to discuss what happened.”

“Very well, but let us do so in the cabin.” He was headed towards her, his pace much swifter than hers even though his heavier weight had him sinking lower with each step.

“I wanted to apolo...” Siara put her foot down, leaned into it, and just kept falling forward. As her legs sank into the drift she lost her balance and toppled face first into the snow. With a hard ‘umph’ she sank, the shock of the cold against her exposed flesh and the press of the snow stealing away her breath, so that for a heart stopping moment she could not breathe.

Anleeh’s arms slipped around her waist and pulled her out. Siara gasped for breath as he turned her, holding her upright against his side.

“Alright?”

She nodded, mouth still open to drag in air.

“Shocked you, didn’t it?”

Siara nodded again.

“Come on, let’s get inside. Stay behind me, lean into my shoulder if you feel like you might fall, and walk in my tracks.”

They trudged back to the cabin, Siara’s fingers curled in the thick fur of Anleeh’s cloak. Once inside the dry safety of the stables Siara stood as Anleeh brushed the snow from her body, the way a mother might clean a dusty child before letting them into the

house.

"That did not go according to plan," she admitted ruefully.

"Turn. What was your plan?"

"I meant to apologize, not force you to rescue me."

"I quite enjoy rescuing you, so please don't apologize."

"The apology was for the way I acted a moment ago."

"There is no need. What I have done to you is monstrous. It is only natural that you fear me."

"No." Siara turned to face Anleeh. "You are not monstrous. You have been gentle and kind."

"I have also hurt you." Anleeh reached around and grabbed one of her abused ass cheeks, digging in his fingers until she squeaked. "Or have you forgotten?"

"I have not forgotten. Why are you now trying to frighten me?"

"Why are you not frightened? Do you know how easy it would be for me to kill you?" His hand slid up to her throat, his thumb and index finger slipping into the pressure point hollows behind her jaw and just beneath her ears.

Swallowing against the pressure of his fingers, she struggled to speak. "I am not frightened because I know that even if you hold no regard or caring for me, your orders were to protect me, and I have faith that you will obey the Queen."

Anleeh's hand dropped and he stepped away. "You know me well." Anleeh turned and headed for the door to the cabin. He shed his cloak and boots just inside the door. Barefoot, he looked back at her, standing just inside the stable.

"You will strip out here. You are not allowed clothing inside the cabin from now on."

Wondering if this were some sort of test, Siara stripped in the chill air of the stable, peeling snow dampened garments off her body. Not wanting to drop the damp things on the earthen floor, she draped them over one of the empty stall railings and darted back to the cabin, leaping inside and closing the door.

Anleeh was reclined by the fire, naked.

Siara bit down on her lower lip as she took in the back view. Each muscle in his back was well defined, the soft track of flesh over his spine trailing down to the lean swells of his ass. Unlike her own too plump behind, his ass was muscled, and when he bent one leg the muscles flexed enticingly. Siara was assaulted by a vision of Anleeh, hands on the wall; body bent double, legs spread, that hard tight ass reddening beneath her blows.

"Had your fill?" His tone indicated he knew fell well where her eyes fell.

"Nay."

"Well I have, come here. You wanted to talk about what happened this morning, so we will."

Siara, not in the mood to talk any longer, seated herself beside his reclined body. She couldn't help but notice that his shaft was soft. Clearly he was not as affected by her nakedness as she was by his.

Pulling her knees up to her chest, Siara wrapped her hands over her calves, and, though she wanted to tuck her head down against her knees, kept her back straight, pretending that she was not hiding from him.

"You were frightened."

"I was," she admitted.

“Why?”

“When you came in, you seemed ... so big. With the cloak on and your face hidden you seemed a stranger to me. A ... a...”

Siara trailed off, both at a loss for words and puzzled by the grin that spread across his face.

Anleeh grabbed her wrist and brought her palm to his mouth, kissing her.

“It is I who should apologize, love. There are things that must be explained to a woman when she loses her virginity, and in your case, I must speak both to Siara and to Siara’s beast.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have always been the man you saw this morning. The power to harm you, to frighten you, has always been in me. In the Great City it was restrained by the laws and by my position; when we first started out it was restrained by my duty to protect you. But since I began training you, since my own beast has begun to fight free, it has been your beast that protected you.

“Last night when I took you, gave you pleasure, your beast fed from it, and now she lies quiet.

“When I walked in this morning and you saw me as a threat, smelled the blood on me from the kill, knew my strength to be greater than yours, you were frightened. Always before, even if you did not realize it, your beast rose up in you, giving you the strength to meet me as an equal.” Anleeh tugged her other hand away from her legs and pulled them out straight. His palm glided up and down her shin.

“But your beast was still sleeping, well fed at last, and she did not rise up.”

What he said made a strange kind of sense. Always before when he entered a room, some part of her went on the defensive and that reaction had been missing this morning.

“You mean that I have no protection, no ... beast, if we’ve had sex?”

“No, your beast was just so well satisfied last night,” he grinned at her and kneaded her leg, “that she was very deeply asleep. We just need to wake her up.”

Anleeh rolled away from her and half rose, one knee down, the other foot flat on the floor, fingertips braced for balance. When he bent his head, swooping locks of dark hair slid down over one eye. Anleeh kept his eyes on the ground as he spoke.

“Feel the fire along your skin. I want you to touch yourself, run your hands over your breasts, the way you did in your virgin’s bed in the Temple.” Slipping under the spell of his words, Siara obeyed, hands tracing up her belly to cup her breasts, forefingers and thumbs pinching her nipples.

“That’s right, lover, show me how hard you like it, show me that you can take more, that I am too gentle with you.”

Again and again she pinched and rolled her nipples, her sex filling with moisture.

“Good. Can you feel your beast now?”

“Yes.” Within her something wild and fierce stretched, blinking sleepy gold eyes.

“Are you prepared?”

“Yes.” Siara did not know what she had agreed to, but she wanted it, be it pleasure or pain, she wanted it, wanted him.

Her eyes had drifted closed, but when the silence dragged she opened them. Anleeh’s head was still bent, his body poised, muscles bunched. Releasing her breasts, driven by instinct, Siara slid onto her knees, balanced on knees and bent toes, her hands on the fur

in front of her.

Something shivered over Anleeh's skin, like a shadow moving under the surface, and it was startling, and fascinating, enough that Siara almost slipped out of the sensual spell she was under, but then a low growl echoed in the cabin.

Slowly Anleeh's head rose. His lips were parted to reveal clenched teeth, and through them his growl echoed, a thing of the wild coming from a man who represented the grace and refinements of the Temple.

Siara's hair stood on end along her arms and neck. Eyes locked to his, Siara slowly started backing up. For each inch she moved back, he came forward, the growl growing in intensity.

*You can take him, he is yours, he is yours as you are his, take him. Make him pleasure you, taste his flesh, do not retreat, you are his equal, he is your mate.*

Her beast whispered to her, the seductive growl like fire bright honey in her veins. She stilled; she would retreat no further.

Anleeh came closer, his body still poised. In the flickering light of the fire his green eyes danced, and for a moment they changed, the pupils and irises growing, shifting, wild.

Testing him, Siara moved to the side. He tracked her with his eyes. Inside her belly, her beast rolled, demanding action, no longer content with the posturing of their foreplay. Gathering herself, Siara sprang at Anleeh, hands grabbing at his shoulders, her goal the dominant position.

Anleeh rolled beneath her, catching her waist and spinning her underneath his larger body. Siara dug her fingernails into him, drawing her knees up and pushing at him. Anleeh heaved her away and snarled when her nails drew scratches across his shoulders and back.

He yanked her hands from his shoulders, pinning them beside her head. Taking advantage of his shift in weight, Siara, with a fierce snarl, kicked him aside, yanking her arms free and leaping astride him, pushing down on his chest to hold him still.

Hair hanging tangled around her face, Siara grinned down at him in triumph and then bent, setting her teeth against his neck, biting down, demanding his acknowledgement of her superiority, under the threat of suffocation.

Anleeh's thumbs slid into the hollows behind her jaw, pushing in painfully, forcing her mouth open. Keeping one hand tight around her throat, he flipped her under him, catching her legs, lacing them with his, leaning his greater weight into her even as she bucked. His mouth descended, his teeth setting on her throat as she had done to him.

Anleeh's tongue moved along the captured flesh in his mouth, feeling the vibrations of her growl change to those of a purr. Inside her the beast pranced, the desire for the fight altered to desire of a different kind. Or maybe they were the same all along.

His mouth moved to hers, his tongue invading the hot wet cavern of her lips, his need to dominate, to prove himself her Master, only fueled by her beautiful, hard won submission.

Anleeh reached down, catching her left knee in his hand, bending her leg up, pressing it into her chest. His cock nestled against her sex, wet and ready for him. Pulling his mouth from hers, he set his teeth into her shoulder and bit her.

Siara screamed and he thrust into her, her beast lapping up the primal nature of the coupling, adding another complex layer to the pleasure. Her body was tight and she felt

every inch of him, her soft inner flesh fluttering in reaction to his invasion. He'd gone still, his teeth no longer sunk into her shoulder, now merely holding her.

Tears stung Siara's eyes and she whimpered, her head thrashing, hitting against his. Anleeh leaned into her, shifting and bringing her other leg to her chest, hooking his arms around her legs, bending her body, holding her still.

She was captured, controlled. Within her the beast tasted the confinement of his touch, and found it to her liking. Siara's nails dug into Anleeh's back once more, scratching him, but this time with a view to entice, arouse, with the small pain.

Lifting his head from her shoulder, Anleeh fastened his mouth to hers and began thrusting. Her legs hooked over his arms lifted Siara's ass from the floor, tilting her body to new angles, allowing Anleeh to touch different places inside her. When a long hard thrust had the head of his cock bumping a sensitive place inside her, Siara let out a long high cry of pleasure. Again and again his cock touched her there, and a low orgasm began to build, the kind that pulled at every muscle in her body.

Anleeh shifted slightly, and his cock slid away from the sweet spot. That was no good. Pulling herself up, Siara nipped at his jaw, biting his lower lip hard enough to let him know that she was greatly displeased. Anleeh tried to jerk away, but she held his lower lip between her teeth, growling at him.

With an odd huffing noise, he began thrusting again, changing the angle of his thrust each time, until she released him, lying back and whimpering her satisfaction.

Anleeh's thrusts increased in speed, his head dropping to her shoulder, his warm breath falling against her neck.

Siara opened her eyes, the beams and planks of the cabin roof slowly un-blurring. A curled lock of her hair lay over one eye, and she could feel it against her lips. Turning her head, she pressed her lips and nose into Anleeh's hair. He smelled of man and beast and snow. Of the tall green trees and beautifully stark landscapes.

Closing her eyes once more, Siara could see their beasts, dark shapes against a midnight landscape. They were intertwined, sleek and powerful, bodies fitted together. Siara pulled at her beast, wanted to see, to understand, her human nature hating the dark mists that hid the creatures.

The scene in her mind grew lighter, and against her breasts the muscles of Anleeh's chest twitched, as if in reaction to her calling of the beasts. He thrust, and in the pleasure of her building orgasm Siara lost her hold on the beasts, their undefined forms taken by the mist.

Anleeh released one of her legs, wrapping it over his back, and his free hand went to her breast. Thumb and index finger clamped down on the tender pink of her nipple, pressing and rolling.

The extra sensation was all that she needed.

With a cry of pleasure, like the scream of a mountain lion, Siara came, her body tight around his, one leg clamped over his back, toes pointed. Anleeh held himself in her as long as possible, pulling out at the last moment, spilling hot seed between their bellies and then collapsing atop her.

\* \* \* \*

"When do you think we will be able to leave?"

They lay together, Anleeh's large warm body molded along her back, the remains of



two of the roast foxes burning away in the coals of the hearth, the other packed away.

Anleeh toyed with her fingers, lifting her hand to nip the plump flesh at the base of her thumb before answering.

"If it does not snow tonight, we will leave tomorrow. It will be rough going, but the path, which wends through the forest, will have been protected from the worst of the snow. We are at the summit now; from here we will travel downhill. I doubt that they saw this much snow at my uncle's hall."

"How much longer do you think?"

"Before we arrive? A day and a half. If we leave before dawn tomorrow we might be able to make it in one day, but it is best if we arrive in full daylight."

"What will happen when we arrive?"

"I'm afraid I don't really know. It depends on how they accept me."

"Will you have to fight?"

Anleeh's sigh ruffled her hair. "This might have been easier if you weren't so clever. How did you guess I might have to fight?"

"You speak often of the hardness of the warriors of Den, that you traveled to the Great City to become a better warrior. It seems only logical that part of your return would be a display of those skills."

"Very perceptive, Royal Historian. You are correct. One way or another I will fight. The question is whether it will be a fight to the death, a true fight for our safety, or a fight for rank and superiority."

"Anleeh, what if..." Siara trailed away, unsure how he would react to her question. Male egos could be so troublingly fragile.

"I lose?"

"Or if they take you captive," she hastily amended.

"They would not take me captive, not without giving me a chance to fight, but it is valid that you ask what would happen if I were to be unsuccessful."

Anleeh moved away and eased Siara onto her back, leaning over her so that he could look into her face. "I want you to know that I will do anything, everything, in my power to be sure that I win any challenge placed before me. I will do all that I can to protect you."

"Because it is your duty."

He looked away. "Because it hurts me to think of what you might suffer otherwise."

"You are a good man to care for others so."

"Do not think better of me than you should, for my altruism does not run so deep. It is you, the thought of another man touching you, seeing you naked and having rights over your sweet flesh that drives me to madness."

She lost her breath. Did he care for her, truly? It seemed so impossible, as if her years of wanting to hold his affection made the reality of it beyond her realm of understanding. Surely she was interpreting too much. Perhaps he did not want anyone to touch her because, in his mind, she belonged to him, if only temporarily.

Afraid her face would give away her thoughts, Siara rushed in with another question. "What would happen to me if you lost?"

"You would be taken under the custody of my uncle, claimed as a spoil of war, and a great prize you would be. They would fight for you and the winner would have you."

"You speak of slavery."

“Of possession, for while the man who took you would do everything in his power to coerce you, he would never force you. Imagine days, weeks, of a man pleasuring you, his tongue and fingers always playing with your sex and breasts, but never letting you find fulfillment.”

“That is how they gain obedience?”

“Yes, it is one of the ways.”

Siara pressed her face into Anleeh’s chest, her heart torn by sick arousal and absolute dread.

“I would want no man save you to touch me so.”

“And I will do everything I can to ensure no one does.”

When she trembled, Anleeh rolled onto his back and pulled her upper body across his chest, stroking her back until her fear subsided.

“I begin to understand why you were so reluctant to bring a woman.”

“Though I regret the worry and pain I have caused you, and that I will yet cause you, I no longer regret bringing you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are beautiful and strong, and a better partner than any man could ever ask for.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, heart breaking a little as she fell more in love.

“It is I who thank you.”

Siara wanted, oh so desperately, to ask him what would happen when they returned to the Great City, who they would be to each other when he was once more the Lord Justice and she the quiet historian in a brown dress, but she didn’t. Instead she forced herself to be content with lying in his arms. For now, it was enough.

## Chapter Eight

The day of their arrival dawned clear and bright. Siara slept fitfully, her slumber disturbed by nightmares, and when she did finally slip into deep sleep it was only to be awoken by Anleeh tossing and turning in his own private hell.

He'd taken away her pants and tunic the night before.

Wrapped in a blanket, Siara snuck outside to relieve herself. They'd traveled down out of the high mountains, and as Anleeh predicted, left the snow behind them at the summit. Now the cold crisp air felt warm by comparison.

Siara took a moment to look up at the sky. Star and moon gazing was a common pastime in the Temple, for the night sky was the Goddess's pallet, and each night she wrote upon it her love for her people. Siara had watched the Priestess call up the moons and bring down the stars.

To the east the morning rays bled into the sky, red, powerful. Siara turned, looking to the western horizon, where the night still clung stubbornly to the black. There, low in the sky, the double moons hung. Normally *Akita* and *Ishlay* retreated long before the dawn came.

It was a sign from the Goddess, an omen and a blessing. Pressing her hand against her breast in a sign of supplication and thanks, Siara whispered a prayer into the wind.

Confidence bolstered, a mantle of peace around her heart, Siara returned to the cabin.

Anleeh was inside, the bags packed, an oatcake and several strips of meat waiting for her, the fire already banked.

"You are anxious to leave?" Siara indicated the packed bags and then picked up the food, chewing quickly. He merely nodded.

Since leaving their mountaintop cabin, Anleeh had grown distant. Last night they'd lain together but had not coupled. Unwilling to let troubles of the heart distract her, Siara refused to let herself think about it.

As Siara finished eating, Anleeh carried the bags out, two at a time, packing the horses.

"I need the blanket." Siara looked over her shoulder when he spoke, the first words he'd said since last night. "I need to pack the blanket," he clarified.

Keeping her back to him, Siara released the blanket, letting it fall at her feet. She made no move to hand it to him.

Anleeh stepped up behind her and Siara expected him to snatch up the blanket and leave, but, as she'd hoped, his hands settled on her shoulder blades, sliding down her back, over the swell of her ass, and then down each leg as he knelt.

His hands traversed a return path up her legs to cup her hips. Anleeh pressed a kiss to the small of her back.

"I am sorry, lover, but this will be hard for me, and so hard for you."

"Do not forget that I am here, to help you in whatever way you need."

"I remember. All I ask is that you remember your training, remember what I have told you of Den, and keep your beast alive and alert. They will expect you to be weak, and you are not."

"I will do my best."

“Are you afraid?”

With her back to him it was easy to speak the truth. “Yes.”

“Good. That will keep you alert.”

“I am afraid for you.”

“Ah, then you are wise, for I am afraid for myself also.”

“Anleeh...” but he’d risen and moved away, folding and rolling the blanket he’d scooped from around her feet.

Fastening a strap around the blanket to keep it rolled, Anleeh tossed it near the door.

“It is time to get dressed, are you ready?”

“It is optimistic of you to use the word ‘dressed’ as ‘dressed’ implies I have clothing to wear. That is not clothing.”

“I think I’m insulted. I made that for you.”

Smiling inwardly in relief at the return of his light, teasing tone, Siara adopted her best Head Mistress lecture voice. “And while I truly appreciate the fact that I will not have to arrive naked, I refuse to refer to those scraps of fur as clothing.”

“Be nice, lover, or I will not make you new garments from the pretty fox furs.”

“I won’t be excited until you catch a nice BIG animal, like a bear.”

“I will certainly work on that.”

“Please do.”

Smiling, their banter a break from the silent tension, Anleeh scooped up her garments. He held them out, sweeping one arm to the side in a courtly bow. “Your garments, Madame.”

Siara, naked, pantomimed a curtsy, eliciting a smile.

“Arms up,” he instructed.

Siara lifted her arms so Anleeh could slip the skin over her breasts. The soft fur rubbed against her nipples as he began drawing the laces tight.

With each tug, her breasts were lifted and pushed.

“Anleeh, that is too tight.”

“Let me look.” Tying a quick knot he came around the front. “No, it is not tight enough.” Slipping his hand down inside the fur Anleeh lifted each breast, settling them higher in the cradle of the fur.

Siara looked down at the lush mounds he had created, startlingly white against the dark fur.

“You cannot be serious.”

“I am.” Anleeh gave the laces a few more quick tugs and then tied it off securely.

Coming around to look at her once more, Siara watched him take in her lushly offered breasts. His beast flickered behind his eyes, causing her own sleeping beast to stretch awake.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I will attack you,” she warned.

“We do not have time.”

“My beast does not care.”

“As long as she is awake.” Anleeh grabbed the skirt and slipped it around her hips, fastening it on the right side with a bone pin.

The sewn furs of the bottom part of her garment hung longer over her left hip. The fabric held closed on the right hip with only the single bone pin. Each time she moved the fabric parted offering a view of the entire length of her right leg and hip.

“If I move wrong ... or there is a breeze...”

“You will just have to be very careful.”

“Wasn’t there a fourth fur?”

“We don’t need it.”

Between the sections of the garment, Siara’s soft white belly curved, lush and womanly, the tight dip of her waist begging for a man’s hands to settle there.

“I am practically naked.”

“I know. It is glorious.”

“Why do you still get to wear pants?”

“Enough stalling, we need to leave.” Anleeh knelt and laced her boots, making sure they were properly fastened, and wrapped the leg warmer skins over her bare calves and thighs. When he finally swirled the cloak over her shoulders Siara could almost pretend that she was wearing real clothes.

“You look like a fantasy from my youth.”

“I do?”

“Yes. As a young man, when I did not dream of battle, I dreamed of a lush woman, clad in nothing but fur, her body mostly bare, breasts and sex ready for my enjoyment.”

“Don’t most men wish for that?”

“Yes, but very few live to see their fantasy made flesh.” Anleeh pulled her against his, bending her back over his arm as he kissed her.

Breaking the kiss, he pressed his lips against her forehead one last time before taking her by the hand and leading her out to the horses.

Anleeh placed a fur pad over her saddle to protect her bare sex as she rode. Boosting her up, he made sure she was situated, running through his now familiar list of last minute riding instructions.

“Keep your heels down, fingers loose. We’ll be heading down some steep trails, lean back, put your weight in the stirrups not the reins.”

“I will, I remember.”

“I know you do.” Anleeh cupped her bare knee, “This is the last time we will have to speak like this, with complete freedom.”

“I’m ready.”

“I hope that you’re right. I hope that I can protect us both.”

“Anleeh, if something were to happen to you...”

“Don’t run. They will hunt you if you do. Do your best to submit, survive.

Eventually the other Zinahs will come for you.”

His answer was what she had expected, but the swirls of fear in her belly solidified into a hard knot. Unable to speak past the fear, she nodded. He hesitated, as if he wanted to do, or say, something else, but in the end he turned away, checking each of the horses before mounting his own.

## Chapter Nine

The beat of war drums heralded their arrival.

Anleeh rode ahead, his chin high, eyes forward, acknowledging no one.

Thump, thump-thump, thump, thump-thump.

The drums were a tool of intimidation, used to frighten those who approached the walled village. Despite this knowledge, Anleeh's heart beat sped up, battle anticipation like quicksilver in his veins.

Deep in his belly, the beast rolled, awakened by the danger of their situation. It was not fear he felt, but anticipation. There were few things he enjoyed so much as a good fight. Today was a good day to die, and had Siara's presence not dictated a need for survival, it might have been worth fighting to the death.

They followed a muddy track through the outskirts of the village, heading towards a wooden wall made of sturdy tree trunks sharpened to points, so large that it encompassed a section of the forest beyond. Only one roof peaked over it, thin plumes of smoke rising from it. This was the Great Hall, his Uncle's Hall.

There was a clearing in front of the gates. Stripped bare of trees and grass, that desolate plot of land had seen more blood spilled than anywhere else in the village. He could feel the eyes of the people on them, but they had yet to see any living person besides the guards, who stood silent and watching at the gate as the drums boomed over them.

Anleeh reined in at the edge of the clearing, dismounting, sword in hand. He stood for a moment, fighting the urge to look back at Siara, reassure her, warn her.

The gates were flung open, a straight path between the gates and the Hall offering a clear vision of the long, tall building. The doors opened; a blond man stepped out, his shoulders thick with muscle, giving him more weight than Anleeh, though they were of a height. The solider wore only deer hide leggings and boots, and a collection of claws and teeth dangling from a cord around his neck. He swaggered down the path from the Hall to the gates.

Anleeh moved forward, his steps quickening, the other man's pace increasing as he reached the wall and passed through the gates. By the time they reached the center of the clearing, each was running. The blond man let out a loud war cry, swinging the battle axe he held in a vicious arch, aimed at Anleeh's neck.

Anleeh ducked beneath the blade, driving his own sword forward, opening up a vicious deep wound along the inside of the man's knee. The man's leg folded beneath him as he roared. Spinning out of reach, Anleeh moved to the man's back, catching the handle of the battle axe as he tried an awkward rear swing. Jerking the axe away from him, Anleeh set his blade to the man's neck, opening a shallow cut.

When Anleeh stepped away, the blond man rose and limped away, defeated.

From within the Hall a second man came, this one holding a sword, the lines around his eyes marking him as an older solider, and clearly a cunning and clever one if he had survived to this age.

Anleeh corrected his grip on the battle axe, a blade in each hand, waiting calmly in the center of the circle. His beast rolled behind his eyes but remained contained.

They circled for several moments before the other man moved in with a swing at Anleeh's left side, but whirled at the last moment, turning so that the sword whistled through the air at Anleeh's right. A quick underhanded swing of the axe deflected the blow.

Rather than pull away, Anleeh stepped close, trapping the crossed sword and axe between their bodies. Hooking his foot behind the other man's, he yanked, placing his sword tip against his opponent's throat when he landed hard on the ground. The sharp tip of his blade nicked the throat of the man on the ground and Anleeh stepped back.

His breathing was coming faster, the dark madness of battle whispered through his veins, but Anleeh fought to contain it, to contain his beast. He would not fall to the madness, would not become what he had been.

As the second man left the clearing, Anleeh looked at the Hall. Though there were no windows in the structure he knew he was being watched, knew they judged him, spoke about him, behind those massive doors.

This time two men emerged.

Clearly they had judged him to be a threat, but whether this pair was sent to kill him or to test his skills was undetermined.

The men separated, coming at him from opposite sides. Anleeh took out the man on his right with a backwards kick to the groin, his upper body bending forward to duck under the stab at his heart from the second man.

The man on his left opened a shallow slice in Anleeh's arm, the blow landing before Anleeh had a chance to raise his sword. Jerking his attention to the man in front of him, Anleeh lashed out with his sword, the vicious fast blows driving the man back. Just as he learned the rhythm of Anleeh's strokes and began to counter them successfully, Anleeh stabbed the sword into the ground and tossed the battle axe in the air. Turning inside the man's sword, Anleeh knocked him back a pace, snatched the handle of the falling battle axe, and with great precision swung it in a horizontal arc, opening a cut along the man's collar bone.

Using the same momentum, Anleeh turned to face the first man who had risen to his feet. Whirling the axe around him, passing it hand to hand, using it as a distraction, Anleeh drove the man toward his grounded sword.

When Anleeh was within lunging distance of his blade, he once more threw the axe skyward. His opponent's gaze followed it, and he started to backpedal, trying to get out of the heavy axe's landing path. Anleeh snatched up his sword, sprinting around behind the distracted soldier, wrapping his arm around the other man's neck, holding him still as the axe dug its tip into the ground only an inch from the man's foot. Taking his time Anleeh marked this man's neck as he had the others.

He stepped back once more, yanking the axe from the ground.

As he turned to face the Hall he caught sight of Siara, seated atop her horse, the hood concealing her face. As he looked at her, despite the fact that he could not see her clearly, Anleeh felt her beast brush against his. It was she, her beast, her desire for him when he was like this, savage and wild, that stripped away the last of his control.

Turning to the Hall he lifted his arms, the sword in one fist, the axe in the other, threw back his head and roared.

Twenty men streamed out of the Hall, forming a loose circle around him, and, with his vision gone red with battle madness, he fought.

In ones and twos they came at him, each retreating before he could land the killing blow. It was no longer a show of strength, but a true battle, for Anleeh's beast wanted blood. On and on he fought, the dual blades whirling in the dying light, the blows they had landed, the blood that flowed from his flesh, unnoticed and unfelt.

When two men pulled a third out of the way, denying Anleeh the kill, he snarled in frustration. Feeling a presence at his back, Anleeh lifted his sword to shoulder height and turned, the blade moving with the force and skill to sever the man's head.

Anleeh's gaze met that of the man he was about to kill, and, for the first time, his heart stuttered. With lightning fast reflexes, Anleeh checked the blow, the blade skittering to a halt, resting along the man's shoulder.

"Finish it, Anleeh Sedrickson. Today is a good day to die."

"It is a good day to die," Anleeh panted, his beast falling quiet under the gaze of this man, "Sedrick Erickson, but Mother would never forgive me."

"She would not."

Anleeh pulled the blade back, driving the tip into the dirt, and then stretched out his hand.

"Welcome back," the old warrior grasped Anleeh's wrist, "son."

Anleeh grinned, his heart welling with emotion. He was still panting from the battle, but the madness had retreated, his beast withdrawing when faced with an alpha.

"Thanks to you, Father."

Around them the panting men, even those who held wounds Anleeh had inflicted, cheered.

"Come into the Hall, son, your uncle has much to say to you."

"I have much to say to Uncle, and to you."

Anleeh turned, heading for the horses. "Leave that, Anleeh; we will tend to the horses."

"There is a prize too precious to be left, atop that horse."

"She is of value to you?"

"Great value."

Sedrick looked to the horses, and most of the men followed suit.

Seated atop her horse, perfectly motionless, Siara sat tall, the smooth curve of her legs and the way the cloak lay over her breasts marking her as female, but the hood keeping her identity a mystery.

Anleeh handed the weapons to his father and pushed through the ring of soldiers, heading for Siara.

Aware that they were being watched, Anleeh didn't touch her, though he wanted to reach out and stroke her skin.

"Are you ready?"

"You—you're bleeding." Her voice wavered, thick with tears. Anleeh peered up into the hood and was stunned to see tears coursing down her cheeks.

"Siara, lover, it's okay."

"You're bleeding. They, they tried to kill you."

"I'm fine."

"You were beautiful, the way you fight, the way you are, but there were so many of them, and they-they..."

"Shhh. I know, but I need you to be strong. We must go inside now."



Her head bent and Anleeh heard her take several deep breaths.

"I'm ready." Siara stood in her stirrups and swung one leg over. Anleeh grasped her waist and helped her down.

"Walk beside me, keep your chin up, don't look at anyone."

"That older man, who is he?"

"My father."

With Siara at his side they made their way back to Anleeh's father. Sedrick motioned for a few men to take care of the horses and then turned his attention to Siara. He gave her a quick once over, taking in her attire, and then nodded at Anleeh. His father's preliminary approval was a good sign.

"Come, your uncle is anxious to see you. There is much to tell."

"There is." Anleeh and Siara followed Sedrick to the doors of the Hall.

The Hall had not changed, but it was the smell that made him realize he was home. The dusky smell of burning fir and oak, the rich scent of meat and the tang of mead seeped into his nostrils. A thousand memories, each more vivid than the last, swam to the surface. For a moment he was overwhelmed, but fingertips brushed against the back of his hand, grounding him. Anleeh glanced at Siara but she stared straight ahead; perhaps he had imagined the fleeting touch.

The Hall was a single large building, divided into smaller spaces, but the majority of the building was one great room. It was both the central meeting room of his uncle's people and the social heart of the Clan. Dominating the center of the hall was a large round fire pit, lined with stones etched with runes and symbols. The fire was never allowed to die, even in the heat of summer, and when the witches were called in to work their magic, it was into the heat of the Hall Fire that they cast their potions. On the far side of the fire, opposite the doors, was his uncle's throne. It was a powerful and richly decorated symbol, though it would have been laughable compared to the throne of the King and Queen in the Palace. Situated on a dais, the actual chair of the throne was not visible, for every inch had been draped with white wolf furs. The white wolf was rare, and to kill one dangerous, for it could only be done with purity of heart. The white wolf was protected by the Gods.

The high roof of the Hall was supported by thick circular pillars, which ran in two rows down the edges of the Hall. Between the left row of pillars and the wall were aisles of tables and benches, used to feed those soldiers who had been honored with the right to eat in the Hall. On the opposite side were fur draped benches and floor mats for lounging and other, more adult, activities.

"Anleeh Sedrickson!"

A massive man rose from the throne, his hair either white or the pale, pale blond of his people, none knew for sure. The lines on his face marked him as an old man but his body was still fit, his shoulders unbowed.

"Uncle." Anleeh moved toward the throne, skirting the Hall Fire.

Jahl, leader of the Clan, blood of his blood, stepped down from the throne. Anleeh stopped before him, allowing himself to be inspected, but showing no sign of weakness. The soldiers Anleeh had fought filed into the Hall, intently watching the reunion between the leader and the man who had once been the most prized fighter in their Clan.

"You have been gone a long time."

"I have."

“When you left you said you would return.”

“I have.”

Jahlr grunted in acknowledgement of that truth, but then added, “The witches tell me you will not stay.”

*Damn it to the North Wind.* Anleeh had not wanted to start the conversation this way.

“Much change has occurred in the Great City.” Anleeh said, non-committal.

“Throlock is dead.”

“Yes.”

“Was it a good death?”

“Nay, he died alone in his room, throat slit by an assassin.”

“Then he will never feast in the warrior’s hall. It is just.” There were grunts of agreement from around the Hall.

“The King’s death, and the rise of the new King and Queen, has brought many changes. I am a part of these changes. That is why, once I have spoken with you, I will return to the Great City.”

“The concerns of the City have never been ours. You would place them before your Clan?”

*Tread carefully.* “I left to learn to fight in the ways of the Temple army, increase my skills until I would be a warrior unequalled.”

“You fight well.” It was a massive understatement and again rude noises of agreement echoed from the audience.

“Thank you, Uncle. When I arrived in the Great City I was chosen to be both warrior and guard, to be Zinah, one of the Queen’s chosen few.”

“We heard rumors that a man of Den had been chosen, but then we heard this man was pretty, a lover of fashion and fine fabrics, a thinker, not a fighter. No man of Den would be such.”

With a single sentence his Uncle reduced all that he had worked for and become to something pitiful and low. Anleeh fought the swell of embarrassment and anger. The people of Den would never understand who he’d become.

“I thought it was beneath a chief of Den to listen to the tales of serving girls.”

His Uncle grunted. “Your skill cannot be denied. You will teach us what you learned.”

“Yes.” Fighting knowledge was his greatest bargaining chip.

“And then you will leave.”

“Yes.”

“And what of the woman?”

Without turning to look at her, Anleeh spoke to Siara. “Remove your cloak.”

He knew she had obeyed when low muttering ran through the assembled men. In his mind he called up the image of her, curved pale flesh, wrapped, bound, and barely concealed by the dark furs.

“She is mine,” he announced, powerful words, spoken in a clear strong voice.

The air in Hall changed. Those who’d decided they wanted her either backed down or began plotting to take her from him.

“She is Siara, a woman of great worth and importance in the Great City, a scholar and scribe. Though she is not of Den, I have called and felt her beast, and she is wild.”

“You called her beast?” His Uncle questioned sharply, the old man’s gaze returning

to Siara.

“And her beast called mine.”

“Yet she is not of Den.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

“You are mistaken, Anleeh. If you called her beast then she is of Den, no matter where she was born.” This was truth. The beast within was a thing of Den, and none other would ever know it.

“How much does she mean to you?” The question came from one of the hovering men. Anleeh turned to look for the speaker, but he was lost in the crowd.

“She is mine,” he reiterated, letting venom drip into his voice.

Out of the corner of his eye Anleeh could see her, standing tall and proud, chin up, hair spilling around her, eyes dark and mysterious. Her coloring among the fair-haired people of Den only added to her appeal.

From the back of the crowd a young man strutted forward. He was bare-chested and his lack of scars marked him as young, and his swagger as cocky.

The young soldier slid his hands around Siara’s bare waist, jerking her back against his body.

Anleeh’s beast snarled to life, but before he could move, Siara spun, raking her fingers across the man’s face, and when he yelped and reeled back, she slammed her fist into his groin, snarling in satisfaction when he dropped at her feet.

Anleeh’s beast settled, satisfied that Siara’s had handled the situation.

“Siara,” he barked.

With a last snarl at the withering man on the ground, Siara swept her glance over the others and then made her way to Anleeh. Though he wanted to scoop her up, cradle her face and ask if she was okay, he kept his expression stern.

He held out one arm and, like a falcon come to her master’s call, Siara went to him, allowing Anleeh to wrap his arm around her waist and pull her to his side.

Jahlr watched all, his clever eyes taking in every nuance. “She is indeed a prize; you will need to guard her well. Many would like to pit themselves against your skill again, and the possibility of possessing your woman only sweetens the desire for battle.”

“The Gods blessed me with her, and I will do all I can to protect her, but I want her to move with safety among the Clan. I told you she is a scribe, a woman of great learning, and she will chronicle Den, immortalize its glory within the hallowed walls of the Temple Library.”

“We do not need to curry favor with the Temple. Never before have we opened our doors to study.”

“Den is a place and people of great strength; the world should know of it.”

His uncle wavered, the traditional dismissal of the opinion of the outside world warring with pride.

“Very well. The woman will be allowed to move among us, but none will be forced to speak with her, and she *will* abide by our laws.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

“Are you weary from your journey?”

“Not so weary that I could not lift a tankard.”

“Ha! Good to see that you remember what is important. Sedrick!”

“Yes, brother?”

“Your son has returned. Invite the Clan. Tonight we feast.”

Men cheered, the Hall doors were thrown open, and though Anleeh grinned to match the expression of his Clan mates, his concentration was on the woman he held close, and the way she trembled.

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't breathe.

Of course she could breathe, air moved in and out of her lungs, but Siara felt that she was suffocating. She'd never been so frightened before.

It had taken everything she was to sit calmly atop the horse and watch them try to kill him. As he'd spoken with the man he called Uncle she'd been forced to stand, naked and exposed, as the very men who'd tried to kill her lover fondled her with their eyes.

Then hands had grabbed her, and for an instant she'd been sure it was a trap, they would kill Anleeh and rape her as she watched his life blood drain into the stones. In her fear and anger—*how dare he touch her*—Siara's beast had risen, taking control long enough to effectively deal with the intruder.

She'd wanted to run to Anleeh, hide behind him, but she was mindful of the fact that she was in a situation she knew almost nothing about.

In truth, Siara was terribly worried about the repercussions of her behavior. Anleeh said they liked their women submissive, and her actions had been decidedly not. Did she have a right to defend herself?

Thoughts and worries tumbled in her mind, and try as she might, she was unable to find her calm center. The beast, which paced back and forth, restless and alert for a second attack, kept her from retreating behind the calm mask that was her shield.

The doors of the Hall were thrown open and people poured in.

Blonde people.

A second survey of the room revealed that almost every head was topped with pale blond hair. The pale skin and hair was like the moonlight compared to the sun-kissed golden blond and tan people of the Great City.

The women's hair hung long and wild to their waists covering their...

Siara made a little noise of shock when she saw how the other women were garbed. All wore furs, and only fur, but the garments were beautiful. From red fox and silver wolf fur, shoulders draped with fluffy mink tails and even breasts elegantly cupped by bear claws, the women looked like the forest come to life. Many had bellies exposed, but the fine tailoring of the furs they wore said it was a choice, not a necessity.

Siara, embarrassed about her garments, changed from thinking that she was wearing practically nothing, to the recognition that she was the most poorly dressed woman in the room.

*Ah well*, at least being poorly dressed was something she was used to.

Anleeh's arm slipped away from her waist, and Siara looked up. His face had settled into an expression she'd never seen before, his eyes haunted.

Moving slowly through the crowd, which parted to let her pass, was a tall woman, notable for her dark hair. The last of the people parted and Siara got a good look at her. Slender, with long lean lines of muscle clearly defined on her bare arms, the woman wore white and grey furs, sewn into a knee length tunic. The skirt of the tunic was darted with triangles of darker gray fur, and her boots were lined with the same. Her wrists were

heavy with bracelets of bead and bone.

Anleeh stepped away from Siara.

"You have returned." Her voice was low and musical, with an accent Siara could not place.

"Yes."

"Did your journey bring you joy?" The woman flicked her gaze to Siara.

"Yes, my time in the Great City brought me much joy."

"Then do not regret it; you owe me nothing."

Anleeh's head bowed, his shoulders heaved, and he threw himself at the woman's feet, wrapping his arms around her thighs and pressing his face against her belly.

Siara was the only one close enough to hear him whisper, "Mama."

\* \* \* \*

Siara lay in their small sleeping alcove, still wearing every bit of clothing save her boots.

"Siara?" Anleeh whispered. "Are you here?" They'd been separated when a few of the warriors took Anleeh away to see to the cleaning of his wounds.

"Yes."

Anleeh pushed back the curtain and looked down at her. "You know better than to wear your clothes to bed. Come here."

Siara wiggled her way out. They had been given one of the sleeping nooks in the Hall, an alcove with storage closets both above and beneath it. The actual sleeping space was just tall enough that Siara could sit up.

Anleeh held aside the curtain as Siara hopped off the bunk.

"Strip."

"Anleeh," she hissed, "people might..."

"Obey me."

*Why was he being so harsh?* Turning her head away Siara bent to remove the leg wraps and then pulled the bone pin free. Hands clenched at her sides she turned her back to Anleeh so he could undo the lacings. As he tugged Siara did her best to pretend that her ass and sex were not exposed to anyone who might wander through the Hall at this late hour.

When the top dropped to the floor, and Siara was completely naked, she turned to Anleeh, refusing to look up. His hand on her jaw, grip too tight to be comfortable, forced her to meet his eyes.

"I see both fear and anger in your eyes; hold onto your anger," he warned.

"Having problems with a disobedient woman?" A voice, hard and mocking, intruded into their moment. A shadow moved on her right side, and Siara wondered how long the speaker had been watching.

Anleeh turned, blocking Siara. "No. It has been a hard day for her, nothing more."

"My woman said she saw her get into bed in her furs."

"My woman is not used to the cold. That shouldn't be a problem now that I am here to warm her."

The man who'd spoken was Anleeh's height with shoulder length kinky blonde hair. Siara pressed herself against Anleeh's back and cursed herself. She'd thought she was unobserved when she slipped into the bed.

Curling her fingers into his tunic Siara paid close attention to the conversation, hoping she would find a way to correct some of the damage she'd done.

"It has been a long time, Anleeh."

"It has, Leik."

"Things have changed; the power has changed."

"Watch your words. People could think that you are implying my uncle is not in full power."

"Do not make threats against me, Outsider. You are no longer of Den. Whatever fighting skill you gained is that of the weak humans of the Great City. Your beast has gone soft; you cannot even control your woman."

"My woman is no concern of yours."

"A good hard fuck from a real man would settle her beast; let me know when you're ready to let a real man have her."

Siara leaned around Anleeh in time to see the man turning to walk away.

Anleeh needed to prove he had control over her, and Siara was determined to give him the opportunity to see it done. Siara stepped around him, stroking his arm as she did so, hoping her touch conveyed all that she wanted it to.

Siara ran to the man, bare feet silent on the floor. Reaching up she knotted her hands in his hair and jerked him back. The man yelled in surprise and whirled, his hand coming up to knock her away, but Siara let her beast run free, let it take control, and the beast's reflexes were faster than Siara's own.

Ducking, Siara brought her knee up, slamming it into the man's groin. The blow was just as effective as it had been this morning, and when the man dropped to the ground, Siara, heedless of her nakedness, straddled his chest.

"Never," she growled softly, "insult my man."

Anleeh, with studied slowness, walked up beside the pair.

"Siara," he said mildly.

Tossing her head Siara looked at him, "Yes?"

"I thought I told you that you may not attack people." He'd never given that order, but Siara played along.

"He deserved it. He insulted you."

"He will not be the first or the last." Anleeh's eyes flicked to the side, and that is when Siara became aware of the people who had gathered to watch. "But you disobeyed an order."

"And I will do it again if he, if anyone, insults you." She hoped that was the right response, defiant, yet acknowledging his order.

"Then you will take your punishment."

Siara licked her lower lip, slowly rising, kneeling the man beneath her a second time as she did. Leaving the man to curl on his side, hands now cupping his abused member, Siara stood before Anleeh, a subtle shake of her head sending long tangles of hair down to cover her breasts.

"You know what to do."

Siara turned to the wall, placing her hands against it and walking her legs backwards. Unlike the first spanking, Anleeh's hands on her outer thighs urged Siara to keep her legs closed, offering a small amount of protection from the watching eyes.

Anleeh stepped to the side and then brought his hand down in a vicious spank on her

presented buttocks. Siara jerked, the noise was so loud that she expected there to be searing pain. A second spank was administered with the same scarily loud 'slap,' but the pain was mild by comparison. Whatever Anleeh was doing sounded much worse than it felt.

Siara knew they had an audience; she could feel their gazes on her exposed flesh. She sucked in her stomach to make it smaller and hoped her rear end didn't look impossibly large as Anleeh spanked her.

It was her fault that they'd had to stage this discipline session, so Siara forced herself to ignore the witnesses, and instead let herself sink into the spanking.

After all the emotional upheaval of the day, the spanking had a strange effect. It felt as if Anleeh were beating the emotions from her body, leaching out the residual fear, frustration, embarrassment and worry. In its place came a strange calm, and arousal.

Siara began pushing her hips into the blows, her sex filling with moisture. Her beast rolled through her, displeased by the spanking, wanting Anleeh to take her hard and fast and long, enough of this pain-laced foreplay.

When one particularly hard blow jiggled her sex, Siara snarled in pleasure, the strange purring-yowl echoing from low in her throat.

Distantly she heard voices rising, as if discussing the sound, but Siara had to concentrate on maintaining her position. Her beast had grown bold after being allowed to attack two men today, and whispered seductively, assuring Siara that she could take Anleeh, knock him down and hold him there long enough for Siara to sink down onto his cock.

The vision, the desire, was so strong that the denial of it made her light-headed.

The rhythm paused, no more blows fell. She would rather be spanked than enter this void of sensation.

Siara snarled, making her displeasure at the cessation known.

"Get in the bunk, woman."

*Thank the Goddess.* Siara pushed off from the wall and then rolled into the bunk, watching from the hidden dark as Anleeh stripped, baring himself before the onlookers. Anleeh climbed in, pulling the drape shut behind him.

"I need to be inside you. Now." Anleeh jerked her legs apart, crawling up between them, and slid his cock inside of her. With her legs hooked over his back, his chest resting on hers, he thrust into her, fucking her again and again, his thighs slamming against her abused ass.

Siara held him tight, pushing away all thought and emotion, living only for the feel of his cock tunneling into her, the pleasure of his body pinning hers down. When her orgasm came Anleeh fucked her harder and faster before pulling out to spill his seed onto her belly.

## Chapter Ten

“Siara?”

“Hmmm?”

“It is an hour before dawn. Now is the only time we will find any privacy.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I know you are sleepy, lover, but I need to know that you are okay.” Anleeh’s voice held something painful, almost desperate. Siara opened her eyes, realized she could not see him in the dark of their little bunk and lifted her hand to cup his face.

“I am fine.”

“The spanking...”

“I knew what would happen. I did it on purpose.”

“I thought so, and it was the perfect thing to do, but I was unsure. I am stunned you were able to so accurately defuse the situation.”

“You have been teaching me about Den since the moment we left; I would have been a fool to not understand what was happening, and what was needed to remedy it.”

“I forget how very clever you are,” a smile slipped into his voice, “as I am so distracted by the lushness of your body.”

“A body many have now seen naked.”

“Don’t sound so forlorn, my lover. You are beautiful.”

“I wonder why you are the only one who ever thought so.” *And why you never thought so until we began this journey.*

“I will be greatly envied for having such a lush woman; you saw how they reacted to you yesterday.”

“I think they were reacting to the idea of taking something of yours.”

“That is just an extra bit of pleasure for them; you are a prize, especially after last night.”

“What I did was truly right?”

“Yes. It showed that you knew the rules but chose to break them, marking you as a woman of great spirit. You took on a warrior and then accepted your punishment with grace and pleasure. The only way you could be more desirable would be if you were blonde.”

“I have never seen a people who look so alike.”

“I told you that outsiders are rare.”

“But your hair is dark.”

Anleeh shifted away from her. “Yes.”

“As is the hair of that woman ... your mother.”

There was a long pause before Anleeh answered again. “Yes.”

“Are you the only ones with different colored hair?”

“Nay, there is one other. The woman I saw trained, the one I spoke of, has dark hair also.”

“Is your mother...”

“I will be with my father and uncle all day; you will have to make your own way.”

So there would be no talk of his mother; it was not really Siara’s business after all. It



was good that he reminded her that she was, despite their charade, nothing more than his comrade.

“I was hoping you would be able to walk with me, let me learn the compound.”

“I will not have time for a few days; you will have to be on your own.”

Siara’s heartbeat sped up. This is not how she’d imagined this would go. “Anleeh, I am not so good at speaking to people, especially those I don’t know.” *Please, I need your help.*

“Perhaps the old Siara was not, but you have changed, as have I. We are not the people who rode out of the Great City: you are both bolder and softer, and I am retuning to what I was.”

“Anleeh, why do you say it that way? What is wrong with who you were?”

He sighed. “I do not know how to explain.”

“Try.”

“Enough of this. I suggest that you head to the public cooking fires if you wish to meet the other women.”

Feeling terribly alone despite Anleeh lying so close that the heat of his body warmed her, Siara lapsed into silence. Neither one of them spoke again until, with a murmured, “Be safe” Anleeh slid from the bunk, leaving Siara to curl up on her side, homesick for the first time since she’d left.

\* \* \* \*

“I want you to teach the Clan the fighting styles you used yesterday.”

Anleeh jerked his attention back to his uncle. He needed to pay more careful attention to the conversation. He’d been distracted all morning. The conversation with Siara had left a sour taste in his mouth.

“I will teach them, but it will come with a price.”

“You were sent here to make us pay homage to the Great City.”

“Not to pay homage. To form an alliance.”

“Den is its own nation. We need no one.”

“The King and Queen will not rule as Throlock did; they want peace and unity among all the lands between the seas.”

“Then they will leave Den be; we need nothing from them.”

“But yet you ask me to teach you of their fighting methods.”

“Bah! Enough of this, we will speak of other things. Bring out more mead!”

Anleeh leaned back in his chair. He’d gotten further in this conversation than he’d thought; it would take time to sway Jahrl. While a fur bedecked serving girl refilled his tankard, Anleeh wondered how Siara was doing.

\* \* \* \*

Siara pressed her back to a tree, shoulders and head slumping in defeat.

She’d been wandering for hours, walking the paths between the many structures which made up the village. She’d walked until she hit the spiked-topped wooden wall, then turned and walked the other way, until again she’d hit the wall. It was an hour walk from one side to the other.

More people that she could count had stopped in their daily activities, women pulling

water from a well, men balanced atop roofs, sheaves of thatch on their backs, to watch her walk by. Siara wanted, needed, to stop and talk, but the very thought of going up to these people and starting a conversation was so unnerving that she couldn't do it.

As the Royal Historian and Scribe, she was an utter failure. When she'd imagined the journey, Siara had pictured herself seated at a long table in a place of honor, Anleeh (who during the journey had discovered he was madly in love with her) seated at her right, assisting her. One by one the people would come to her, speak with her, allowing her to take all their stories and weave them into a pattern that would explain Den and its people. Then, again with Anleeh by her side, Siara would walk among them, observing their daily lives and rituals.

Siara had walked among them, but with none of the grace and confidence she had imagined. The confident woman who'd run the Temple College, renowned for her observant manner and calm, stern face was gone, lost to the nervous young woman who leaned against a tree, hiding from the people she'd been sent to study.

"Lost?"

Siara yelped and turned; standing behind her was a young woman, her face smooth and surrounded by glossy waves of white hair. Her eyes were startlingly blue against the cream of her skin.

"I'm sorry. You startled me, but thank you, no, I am not lost."

"My name is Anga."

"Hello Anga. My name is..."

"Siara, I know, I saw you yesterday, in the Hall."

She'd seen the spanking? Goddess bless it—

"Uhhhhhhhh."

"It was really, really beastly the way you felled that warrior."

Oh Goddess.

"And then, the way Anleeh-Ori protected you, that was *beastly*!"

Thank the Goddess, she was talking about the first encounter, not the second. The girl, who had at first appeared serene, was now bobbing on her toes, hair bouncing around her head.

"Beastly?"

"Yes!"

"Is that ... an expression?"

"What do you mean?"

"How, and when, do you use the word beastly?"

"Oh, I forgot that you barely even speak our language!" Siara bit back the need to point out that Den and The Great City both spoke the same root language. Instead she smiled, encouraging the girl. "Beastly is what you say when, when, um, something is very good, but also maybe a little bit scary, but you get tingly all over."

Anga demonstrated by shivering and Siara laughed, charmed by her effervescent manner.

"So beastly is an exclamation. It is not used to refer to when a person's beast, er, rises."

"Oh, oh! I want you to tell me all about your beast. My sister's beast came—she just married—but she likes to tease me and just smiles. She never answers my questions."

"Your beast isn't always with you?"

“You don’t even know about your beast but you can call her? That is *beastly*!”

“I would like to learn more.”

“You have to! Come, meet my friends, we’re supposed to be harvesting honey, but mostly we just talk.” The girl grabbed Siara’s hand and started dragging her through the village. “The way it happens is that something has to happen. Then once something happens, there’s your beast!”

Siara, tripping along behind Anga who had both a surprisingly strong grip and long stride, struggled to respond. “What happens?”

“Different things. The beast is sleeping, so something has to happen to wake it up. Mostly what happens is...” Anga paused to giggle.

“Is it, perhaps, something that involves a man and a woman?”

Anga’s incessant giggle was infectious, and Siara smiled. Though she had only lost her own long-held virginity a few days ago, Siara felt quite worldly by comparison.

“In here.” Anga dragged her through the low doorway of a long squat hut. The dim interior smelled both musky and sweet. The floor was covered with thatched mats. Seated on the mats, a bevy of girls were clustered into groups around large pots.

They were harvesting honey. One group scraped the honey from the comb, another stirred a large pot of sticky gold liquid suspended over the fire, and the last group poured honey through a heavy strainer.

In the dim light, pale bare arms and breasts gleamed.

Siara jerked her eyes to the ceiling, hoping the darkness hid her blush. She’d seen her share of female breasts in the College, but they’d been brief glimpses, at quick flash as a girl changed gowns, nothing more.

“This is Siara, the girl Anleeh-Ori brought home!”

The girls all squealed in delight, several jumping up. Siara realized she couldn’t just stare at the wall and so reluctantly dropped her eyes to face level.

“Hello...”

Two girls disappeared behind her. Nimble fingers loosened her top before Siara had time to protest. As the fur dropped, Siara brought her hands up to cover her breasts; unfortunately this gave the girls better access to whisk off the bottom fur.

A plain piece of tan linen was wrapped over her hips, knotted at one side.

The girls stepped back, beaming.

Siara, hands still covering her breasts, could only gape at them.

“Oh! Maybe I should have explained, but we don’t wear our furs in the honey tent. It’s much easier to get it off of skin than out of the fur.”

“Indeed. That is very practical.”

Anga grabbed one of her wrists, jerking her hand from her breast and dragging her to sit in the center of the room. Aware that it would be ludicrous to continue to hold her breast as she was, Siara dropped her remaining hand, painfully aware of how her large, soft breasts looked when compared to the firm, high-mounted breasts of the younger women.

Seated cross legged beside Anga, she let the other girl’s scattered manner drive the conversation, however circuitous the route may be.

“She didn’t even know how the beast comes, yet she has one, and she cannot speak our language!”

“Well, I understand it well enough, just some of your vocabulary and colloquialisms

are new to me.”

“Ohhh, she doesn’t speak our language. What funny words!”

“Nay,” Siara smiled, and with the confidence of a longtime teacher, “those are words used in the common language that we both speak. What I mean is that here in Den you have words we do not use in the Great City, and you use them in a different way.”

“Tell us about the City,” they pleaded.

Slowly, worried her home sickness would return, Siara began to speak. She described the shape of the valley with its hills rolling down to shelter the expanse of the City, with the Temple nestled into the hills on one end, the Palace at the other, each protected by high stone walls.

The paved streets and night lamps earned gasps of pleasure, as did the description of the fine fabrics and jewels that could be traded.

Smiling at the eager faces around her, Siara spoke of the Temple and the College.

“So girls like us would live in the Temple? And you would teach them?”

“There were many teachers, and I was one before I became Head Mistress.”

“But ... what did you do?”

“The College was responsible for many things. It is from the ranks of the girls in the College that the acolytes of the Priestess are chosen. We were also accountable for the maintenance of the library, for the safeguarding of our history. That is why I have come here. There are only few records about Den in the library; there should be more, and though I have only been here a short while I know it to be a land rich in beauty, with exceptionally beautiful girls.”

They all giggled appreciatively, though one worried voice asked, “Jahrl-Ori says Den’s strength is in its secrets.”

*Tread carefully.* “Jahrl has accepted me and is aware of my purpose here.”

“Enough of that,” said a bright eyed girl, with breasts that had not yet grown, “I want to know about Anleeh-Ori.”

“Anleeh-*Ori*?” she asked, raising her brows in question.

“Ori means, of the royal house, like um...”

“Prince,” another supplied.

Siara smiled. “Prince Anleeh. It is fitting.” Remembering his Uncle’s seeming disdain for Anleeh’s position and status, Siara looked around at the rapt faces surrounded by glossy locks. She had no doubt that every word she spoke would be spread throughout the village.

“Do you know the story of the Dark War, of how an evil man slaughtered the Queen and Princess?”

They all nodded.

“What happened next?”

“The younger daughter went to the Temple, where her mother had been Priestess...”

“—and the sons of the five most noble houses went with her.”

“Yes. And what title were they given?”

“Zinah.”

“You are very clever, and correct. The Zinahs are the most powerful, clever, and,” Siara leaned low as if she were whispering a secret, “handsome men in all of the Great City.

“Every time a new Priestess rose, they searched out the perfect men, those who were

strong enough to help the Priestess rule the Great City and to fight the evil King.”

“King Throlock. He’s dead now.”

“Yes he is, but he would not be if it weren’t for Anleeh.”

“He was one of the Zinahs.”

“Indeed, and by far the most handsome of them.”

The girls giggled and pretended to swoon.

“Anleeh served as the Minister of Justice, now Lord Justice, making sure that each person in the City had the same rights as all the others.” This statement was met with blank stares so Siara moved on.

“His great bravery in battle was often the talk of the city. He saved the life of the Prima Zinah, who is now King, more times than anyone could count. And, with every step he took, women swooned at his feet.”

“But he didn’t notice them,” one young thing piped in.

“Nay, he did not,” another added.

“Because he loves you,” a third concluded. They smiled at one another, pleased with their clever deduction.

Siara paused, mouth open. Considering the lies they’d told to explain her presence, to protect her, it made sense that the girls would conclude that Anleeh loved her. To them it must appear that’d he returned home with the woman he loved, his soon-to-be wife at his side.

Feeling the sweet thrills of pleasure the silly talk had caused washing away on a tide of reality, Siara could do nothing but force a smile and dutifully repeat, “Yes, because he loves me.”

\* \* \* \*

Anleeh entered the Hall and every girl under the age of seventeen burst into shrieks and giggles, then fled. Like the tide parting around a rock, they flowed around him on their way out the door. When the Hall emptied he could see several men, older warriors who had earned their right to rest by the fire after dinner, seated at one of the long tables. Curled on a cushion by the fire, Siara, wildly gorgeous with her tumbling hair, barely concealed curves, and fire lit skin, was industriously writing in one of her notebooks. Charmed by the contrast of her fuckable pose and her studious activities, Anleeh almost forgot his annoyance with her. Almost.

He slid onto the cushion behind her. She did not react, her quill continuing to scratch across the page. His hand came around and pressed against her belly, fingers spreading wide to cover as much flesh as he could, using firm pressure to slide her back against his chest.

“Tell me, lover, why is it that those girls ran from me just now?”

“I’m sure I have no idea.”

“Hmmm, yet I thought I’d overheard a conversation where one cub was telling another some very interesting things about me, and that she’d learned them from you.”

“Indeed. Well, after I wandered through the camp by myself for several hours, unsure how or who to approach without causing offense, stranded in a foreign place with no one to...”

*Uh oh.* “Siara, I’m sorr-”

“Please let me finish. As I stood against a tree, I finally understood how horribly

misplaced the King and Queen's trust in me was. I am so woefully unqualified and unable to do this job..."

"Ahh lover, please tell me you do not believe that."

"A young girl approached me. She was very kind and took me to the honey processing building, where I met her companions and we talked for several hours. To be surrounded by young girls felt like being back at the College, felt like being home."

Her voice broke on the last word, a great suppressed sob heaving her shoulders. Anleeh closed his eyes, regret for his treatment of her washing through him, obliterating his annoyance. He was not the injured party here. Ignoring the stares of the men, hoping they did not realize she was crying, Anleeh scooped Siara up and carried her outside. The sleeping alcove was neither big enough nor private enough for this conversation.

He carried her out of the Hall and into the woods, the hour late enough that he encountered no one.

"You left me alone," she accused softly.

"Yes."

"All day, then into the night. I ate by myself for I knew no one, no one talked to me."

"I know, lover."

"I cannot do this."

"You can."

"Nay! I cannot, I do not know how to talk to people I do not know."

"You never had a problem doing so when you were Headmistress."

"It was different. I was someone, someone important. They respected me, knew me. Here I am nothing, a dark haired freak."

"You are not a freak, and you can do this. You were fearless when we first walked into the Hall, and then you played disobedient to help me gain reputation. How were you able to do all those things if you are so unqualified?"

Siara was quiet for several moments; her body relaxed even though he continued to carry her, which he knew still made her uncomfortable.

"I was only able to do those things because you were with me."

The comment was so whisper-soft that the breeze almost snatched it away.

Anleeh let her slide to the ground, catching her face in his hands to hold it still. The emotions he could read in her features broke his heart. Here was the cool eyed Headmistress, competent and calm, masking the quivering innocent he'd relieved of her virginity. So complex—both confident and unsure of her own worth, fearless and fragile.

Anleeh slipped to his knees before her, knowing she wouldn't understand the significance of the gesture. Wrapping his arms around her thighs, he rested his cheek against her belly.

"I have treated you poorly and for that I am sorry. I never wanted to hurt you; that is why I pushed you away. In the beginning I knew that coming to Den would be hard for anyone they sent, never mind a woman, and one of such character. I dreaded your training, even as I longed for your body. What if I changed you? Broke you? And then, with each kiss, each bright word and act of bravery, you became dearer to me and the idea of hurting you became more abhorrent.

"I trained you, and it changed you. There are parts of you now exposed which you kept safely hidden in the Temple, and that is my doing."

"Nay, it is mine, for I was ready to be changed."

Anleeh looked up. "Truth?"

"Truth," she confirmed with a calm smile.

"That does not excuse how I treated you." He wanted her to hate him, wanted her to be mad, anything but filled with the homesick self-doubt she'd displayed in the Hall. He needed her to be strong and confident. He depended on her strength. His own ability to function with a lifetime's worth of memories and worries pressing down was reliant on her. Had she not been with him, had she not been the creature of strength and integrity that she was, he would already have failed.

Anleeh pressed his cheek to her bare belly, smelling hearth-fire smoke, honey and Siara herself. Her fingers traced through hair, combing it back from his face, her firm touch on his scalp comforting.

"If you so feared hurting me," she said, "why were you so cruel to me this morning?"

"I did not mean to be. There are things I do not want to talk about. I'm not ready, and I don't know if I ever will be, so I pushed you away."

"Anleeh, I must confess that I do not understand your fear regarding discussing this land. I have found nothing among the people to warrant that."

"There are still things in Den you do not understand."

"I know. That is why I asked for your help." Exasperation crept into her voice and Anleeh knew he was doing a poor job of explaining.

"I'm sorry. You want answers and explanations, but Den keeps its own secrets. There are things I don't know if I will ever be able to tell you." He was talking about his mother, and when he tilted his head to look at her, Anleeh had to wonder if she didn't know that was what he referred to. "Siara, I hope you were careful today. The people can be barbaric."

"I would not say barbaric. While what they did to you yesterday, the way they made you fight, was awful, it was nothing barbaric, it was a ritual. The man who challenged you last night was far better behaved than some of the soldiers newly come to the Temple."

She didn't understand, and, perversely, he was glad of it. "You have not seen what we are capable of."

"Then tell me."

He pressed his face into her stomach and did not reply. Siara stroked his head and whispered, "I am not so innocent as you would make me, Anleeh."

Silence stretched between them before he kissed her belly and looked up once more.

"Things will be different from now on. Tomorrow I will take you around, introduce you. There will still be times, like tonight, when I must go with the men."

"I want you to tell me what you do with the men, or take me with you."

"You cannot come with me. I spent the evening naked in the sweat house."

"Excuse me?"

Anleeh laughed. "There's my Siara." Hands still on her hips, he rose. "I will tell you what I can, and I will do my best to make others accept you, but it will take time. My own acceptance is tentative."

"There I think you are wrong. Your battle yesterday and the public punishment you administered to me, these are both things that confer status, correct?"

"As always you are correct, lover."

“And of course, you are their *Ori*.”

“It seems you did more than spread lies with the girls, you learned a few things too,” he teased.

“My translation is not exact, but I believe by calling you Anleeh-Ori,” she grinned, “I am calling you Prince Anleeh.”

The ownership of, and responsibility to the people conveyed in the title—one he once considered no more than his due—made him uncomfortable. Siara reached up and rubbed the frown line between his drawn-down brows.

“The title is not the same,” he countered.

“Yes, your highness.”

“Enough woman.”

“Whatever your majesty demands.”

“Do you want another spanking?”

“If it would please your royal majesty.” Siara, struggling to keep a straight face, danced away, dodging behind trees as Anleeh playfully chased her.

“When I catch you...”

“If you catch me.”

“*When* I catch you, I will punish you until you tell me exactly what you told those girls. Half the village will have heard the tales by now.”

“Only half? I’d rather hoped the whole village would have heard.”

“You know, it is not far to the nearest wall; I can have you bent and spread before me in seconds, ready to take a spanking.”

Siara stopped and Anleeh caught her arm, spinning her and pushing her back against a tree. The black centers of her eyes were huge, her arousal having spiked hard and fast.

“Hands above your head.” He pinned them there when she obeyed. A quick tug freed her breasts and Anleeh flicked a nipple. “The idea arouses you, doesn’t it?” He pinched the other nipple, using it to lift her breast. “I went easy on you last time; this time I would not.”

Siara moaned and pressed her hips against his. Anleeh started working the lacings of his leggings.

Siara watched him, the stillness of her body telling him that she waited for his cock to be freed with as much anticipation as he did. When he released himself, his body springing forth, already dripping for want of her flesh, Siara spread her legs and then lifted one, wrapping it over his hip and around to the small of his back, heel digging in. Anleeh pulled the bone pin free and the fur dropped, allowing him to view the warm sex ready for him.

“Now,” she commanded, and he obeyed, surging forward, his cock sliding in, one hand digging into her hip to lift her for a better angle. He lifted her other leg, helping to wrap it around his waist as he fucked her against the tree, her face pulled tight in a grimace of pleasure as his cock surged and retreated, again and again. There was no quarter, no mercy. There trapped between his body and the tree, she would both have and give pleasure.

Siara grabbed her breasts, mercilessly working the nipples with tight pinches and rolling twists. The extra sensation was what she needed. Crying out in satisfaction she came, as wild as the forest itself.

Anleeh jerked away from the tree, Siara held against his chest. Dropping to his knees



he pulled free of her body and then repositioned Siara on her knees. Holding open her ass cheeks he surged back into her sex, the angle much different, causing Siara to yelp and moan at the new sensations. Jackknifing his body into hers Anleeh almost didn't pull out, wrenching himself out of her at the last moment to spill his seed against her ass and thigh.

Muscles quaking with exhaustion yet strangely rejuvenated, Anleeh sat down, content to simply rest. Siara turned around, still on hands and knees, her breasts hanging full and lush beneath her. Anleeh opened his arms and Siara came, crawling into his lap, curling up as he gently tucked her flush breasts back into the top. When her head dropped to his chest, it felt as though everything would be all right.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm sorry."

"You're forgiven."

"Tomorrow will be different."

"Thank you."

"Goodnight, lover."

## Chapter Eleven

“If we may return to the subject of vocabulary for a moment...”

This was met with a chorus of groans.

“If you tell us more about The Great City.”

“More about Anleeh-Ori!”

They giggled, the sound echoing like small bells in clearing. The day was unseasonably warm, and Siara had taken advantage of it to bring the girls out to the small clearing in the forest.

Out of all the people she’d met with, from old warriors and wise women to farmers who lived in the land beyond the wall, Siara liked these girls best. It was the same group of young women that had taken her in, treated her so kindly that first day. Anga sat at Siara’s right. Open in the girl’s lap was one of Siara’s notebooks, and even as the other’s giggled, Anga thumbed slowly through the pages, her lips moving when she came to a word she knew.

The other girls relaxed in various poses, languidly braiding flowers and ribbons into each other’s hair. Siara had gone through the bags the Queen sent, finding them stuffed with items from the Great City. Anleeh called her gifting ‘bribery’ but in a teasing manner. The gifts she’d been able to pass out to those she visited with had eased her way, from the crystals she gave to the witches to the ribbons the girls now toyed with.

“I have told you more than enough stories, you little gossips.” They giggled again, a few protesting and batting their eyes in mock innocence. It had become something of a game to them, to see how fast they could spread Siara’s colorful tales.

“Now, back to vocabulary, what do you call babies?”

“Baby.” Several answered.

“Very well, what would your mother call babies?”

“Babies.”

“And you grandmothers?”

This made them pause. Finally one answered, “Buba.”

“Why?”

“It is the old language.”

Siara dipped her quill and made careful notes. Though the language they spoke was the same, the word usage differed, especially among the older generation.

“Thank you, girls. Now, what would your father call babies?”

“Cubs.”

This confirmed her second theory. Men, especially the warriors, used animal terms for almost everything. Women were not pursued, they were hunted and chased. Quiet, gentle women were ‘does’ while wild ones were called ‘vilkat’ the name for a female forest cat.

“And your grandfathers?”

“Buba.”

Siara bent over her book, noting each word, writing a description and then dictating the terms of usage.

Over the past weeks she had filled three journals with her studies. With each person

she talked to, each story she was told, Siara fell a little bit more in love with these people. Many were fierce, seemingly unkind, but with Anleeh by her side, she'd broken through that, learning to mimic their culture so that nothing she did or said made anyone uncomfortable.

Anleeh had stuck by his promise, spending every moment he could with her, visiting those she wished to speak with, easing her way, even intimidating a few into speaking with her.

*Anleeh.* The girls had started to chatter among themselves, and Siara let her mind wander.

She was worried, and she didn't know why.

The past few nights she'd been woken by the roar of a beast, one only she could hear. It echoed in her ears even when she woke. With each dream she had, she became surer that her beast was trying to warn her that something was wrong with Anleeh, but Siara did not know what it was.

When they were alone, he was a mix of the man she'd known in the Great City, laughing and quick witted, and the man he was to the people of Den, a fierce and proud warrior, now a master trainer among their warrior class.

He seemed fine, if perhaps torn by trying to be solicitous of her when they were alone. But Siara felt her beast's unrest.

How clearly she remembered his dire threats, the cloaked warnings he tried to give her regarding Den and what he had been. She'd grown to feel that many of his fears were unfounded, the people of Den were reclusive and hardworking, but showed no characteristics that justified his predictions of disaster. Siara decided that the nightmare that woke her, and her beast's unrest, were a product of his warnings to her, rather than any real threat in Den.

Shaking off her unease Siara looked up, the girls quieting as they realized she waited for their attention.

"Next question."

\* \* \* \*

Anleeh lifted one of the newly made staffs and whirled it. It whistled thorough the air as he whipped in around his body, passing it from one hand to another behind his back. He thought of Rohaj, the dark skinned man who'd become his brother.

Rohaj had taught them all to become masters of the staff, for it was the weapon of Rohaj's homeland. Anleeh had clocked himself in the head more than a few times while learning.

"Watch my hands. It looks like I am moving more than I am because of the way the staff moves. There is power in that; your enemies will be distracted, afraid, if they see you wield the staff well." Anleeh flipped it into both hands and lunged forward, thrusting the eight foot staff before him. "You come out of the pattern swiftly, use the length to your advantage as you do, stab hard for the belly, wind your opponent."

Anleeh stepped and turned, stabbing the other end of the staff straight down. "A single blow to the skull once they are down will end them."

Around him the warriors grunted with satisfaction, some of the younger ones looking a bit ill.

"Pick up your staffs. Begin by simply holding it. Turn it between your hands; learn

the weight and heft of it. Hold it in the middle with one hand, then two. Do the same at different points along the length.”

They each took a staff and then found a spot on the hard packed dirt of the training field.

The more experienced warriors did as he’d instructed, getting a feel for the weapon. Anleeh kept an eye on the younger warriors, remembering why he’d been glad the training of the Temple army was never his duty.

Two of the youngest were already trying to twirl the staffs.

*Crack.* One boy knocked himself out cold. An older warrior, the boy’s father by the resigned expression on his face, moved forward to take care of him.

The other boy, still young enough to be entirely stupid, did not learn from his friend’s mistake. He actually got a rhythm going, twisting his wrist to get the staff to spin. He lunged forward. The momentum changed the angle of his arm, and therefore his swing. The staff came up between his outspread legs and smashed his balls.

Anleeh winced as, whimpering, the young man fell to the ground.

“You were never so rash,” a gravelly voice noted. Anleeh turned to his father, who’d come up beside him.

“Nay, I was not.”

“When you were younger than they, you were a better warrior.”

“I was perhaps more focused.” *I was an animal.*

“Walk with me.”

Nodding to those left on the field, Anleeh set down the staff in his hand and began walking with his father.

“Has Uncle agreed to speak with me again?”

“There is time yet for that.”

It had been nearly a week since Anleeh last spoke with Jahrl about the treaty he’d come here to negotiate. After days of being stonewalled by both his Uncle and his Father, Anleeh had decided to begin training the men, as a sign of good faith.

“Father...”

“I am aware, son, and you do much to strengthen our warriors.” There was something in his voice that gave Anleeh pause, and prompted him to ask a question that had been swirling in his mind.

“Father, the warriors ... they seem...”

“Soft.”

“Yes.”

“They are. When you left and did not return, you took the warrior heart of our people with you.”

“Nay, the beast, the warrior heart, lives in each.”

“But none have the beast as you do.”

Thank the Goddess for that.

“Or did. I have yet to see your beast unleashed.” There was reproach, a hint of derision, in his voice.

“The day we arrived...”

“On that day a good man, a strong man, one skilled and powerful, fought, but it was not the warrior heart of Den.”

Anleeh could not deny it, but he could not bring himself to tell his father how hard

he'd worked to burn away that part of himself. Under the gentle kisses and fiery lashes of the Priestess, now Queen, Anleeh had changed. In the presence of his brothers, the Zinahs, he'd learned skills that made him more powerful than he'd ever been in Den, but it was controlled power.

In Den, in the eyes of his Father and his Uncle, nothing but that warrior heart would ever be truly fearsome.

"I have learned to fight. I do not call the beast to battle; it is not necessary."

"It is the way of our people. You were born with a strong beast, and he will not be denied."

\* \* \* \*

The beast is referred to as both a part of a person and separate from the person. The common understanding is that the beast is in each individual from birth, but must be awakened. There are various events and emotions in life that will cause this awakening. The youngest example I was able to find was of a 4 year old boy who became lost in the woods for several days. When they found him he acted like an animal, manifesting a beast which had been called by his fear and need. It was not until the boy was placed with his mother that he was calmed, and those who witnessed said she had to call her own beast to quiet him.

The beast can be 'called,' willingly drawn up, or the beast can simply come forth, drawn into control of the mind by circumstances.

There are no physical changes to mark the coming of the beast, only changes in behavior. A person who is inhabited by their beast reacts as an animal would, quickly and often with violence.

*Relations between men and women are the most common place for beasts to come into play in everyday life.*

Siara absently worried the edge of her furs with ink-stained fingers as she re-read her writing. She felt she'd captured the basics of what she learned, explaining them in the simplest manner. The issue of her beast, and why she had one when she was not from Den, was still a mystery.

"What do you write, heart of my son?"

Siara looked up. Standing before her, magnificently draped in white furs, was Anleeh's mother. *At last.* Siara had been longing to speak to the woman; it was the one interview Anleeh had been hesitant to help her obtain. The dark haired woman was different from the rest of these people, and the difference went deeper than hair color.

Siara carefully closed her book and dipped her head in a bow.

"Walk with me, heart of my son."

Siara rolled to her feet, a movement that she'd perfected in order to rise without exposing herself. Not wanting to delay this meeting, she left her notebook, quill, and ink on the straw strewn floor next to her cushion.

Anleeh's mother started towards the back of the Hall. Siara fell in step slightly behind and to her right.

They circled to the back of the throne and then through a low door. Siara's heartbeat tripped up as they moved into the dark space. What little light might have filtered in from the great hall was blocked by the throne and their bodies. As they moved deeper into the dark Siara kept her eyes trained on the furs the other woman wore, the creamy white

seeming to glow in the black.

The glow of white disappeared, leaving her alone in the black. Siara blinked, but it did not help. The other woman was gone.

“Enter here.”

A flame grew in the dark, a lone taper casting just enough light to show that Anleeh’s mother had moved through an archway in the left wall of the hallway, the pale orange glow illuminating the haunting beauty of her face.

Siara stepped through the low arch, stopping just inside.

The air in the room was heavy, close and dense with a smell that tickled Siara’s memory, though definition eluded her.

“You have questions for me, heart of my son.”

“Why do you call me that?”

“It is the truth. You are his heart.”

Siara knew she should hold her tongue, maintain the lie, but this was his mother.

“Nay,” Siara took a breath, “there is something you should know...”

“I know all. My son’s heart holds no secrets from me. It is between you and he that secrets exist.”

She stepped back, moving to a triptych atop which sat a shallow bowl of oil, three wicks set into the edges.

One by one she lit them, the room brightening, and, as it did, Siara’s lips parted in wonder. Every inch of the room was covered in carvings and paintings. Long columns of runes, like those Siara had seen etched into the cabin doors, created borders for primitive paintings, brushed onto the walls in the colors of earth: brown, ochre and green.

“How long have you loved him?”

Distracted by the walls, Siara spoke the truth. “Since the moment I saw him.”

There was a beat of silence and then a small sound of pain escaped Siara.

“You have never told him?”

“Nay.”

“Why?”

*Because I knew he would never love me.* “He belonged to the Priestess, and once he was freed, I knew he would never look to me as a companion.”

“His heart does belong to you.”

“Nay.”

“Tell me of the first time you saw him.”

Siara stepped a few feet further into the room, keeping her back to the other woman, pretending to look at the paintings. She spoke, even as her mind screamed to hush, to keep quiet, to protect her heart.

“I was newly appointed to be Headmistress of the College. They brought me before the Priestess to receive a final blessing. He was there. It was the first time I had seen him, though we heard that the Priestess had found the third of her Zinahs among the beginning soldiers.

“He stood behind her, and behind the Prima. And he was beautiful.”

Siara carefully set her fingers against a long stroke of green, the heavy air pressing down on her, the familiar yet unknown smell tickling her nose, the words tumbling from her as she remembered that day.

“Siara, come forward to receive your final blessing.” The golden Priestess’ bell-

bright voice rang gently in the powerful beauty of her chambers.

Siara, careful in her stiff ceremonial shoes of white leather, came forward, resisting the urge to cover her arms which were bared by her simple dress, the heavily embroidered gold belt cinching her waist so that breasts and hips swelled above and below.

From an early age she had been sheltered in the College, dormed with other young women, her only real contact with men the occasional word with the male servants of the Temple. She felt exposed, vulnerable, and terribly insecure dressed as she was, in garments that she knew were not flattering, facing the three most virile and powerful men in the kingdom.

She had seen the Prima and second in command, Rohaj, before, and had done her best to avoid both. The vigorous air of command around the Prima intimidated her, and the dark skin and silent menace of Rohaj frightened her. But today a third man stood behind the Prima. Anleeh, they called him, a young soldier, a fierce fighter, plucked from the ranks of the Temple army to serve the Priestess. No one had seen him for two months, but a few days ago he'd emerged from the private quarters, dressed in the finest garments the artisans of the Great City had to offer.

He wore a long green tunic, the sleeves and chest embroidered with vines, the color causing his eyes to glow like green flame in the pale oval of his face. A jewel-handled sword hung at his hip and a dagger poked out of the top of the smooth embossed leather of his boot. Even through the fabric of the close-cut leggings he wore, Siara could see the muscle definition in his thighs when he moved, the slit sides of the tunic parting to offer glimpses of something Siara had never found desirable before.

When she reached the Priestess, tall, slim and golden in a gown of midnight blue, Siara folded her legs, preparing to kneel. A hand, sturdy and strong, cupped her elbow, easing her to the ground. As Siara's knees touched down, she looked up. Beside her, Anleeh was bent, one hand still cupping her elbow. His eyes met hers, and that was all.

"There was something in his eyes, something so deep I could not name it, and still cannot, but I loved him then. It was in the way of young girls, lulled by his beauty and the unexpected show of chivalry. I told myself it would pass, as I grew older, I would not love him so. The girls I taught fell in and out of love as easily as the wind blew, and so I told myself it would be with me, but it was not. He is kind and bright, he laughs when other do, his power and bravery in battle were often spoken of, and so I love him still."

"You asked for this duty to be with him."

"Asked for ... how did you know?"

"I told you that my son's heart hold no secrets from me."

Siara pressed her whole hand flat to the painting. "Yes, I studied this place, your people, because I wanted to know him. When the old King was defeated, I knew things would change, I knew that there were places they would need to send ambassadors, and that Den—and therefore Anleeh—would be one of the first."

Her hand turned into a fist. "It was not just for him that I did it; do not think me so weak."

"I do not."

"I spent my life in the Temple, longing to be the explorers in the tomes I read. I know I am not the best for this duty. I do not have his easy manner with speaking to people, but I will learn. I have learned already."

“You have found your life’s work.”

“Yes.”

“And when you return to the Great City...”

“I will have a path.”

“And Anleeh?”

“Will not want me anymore.” Siara’s eyelids slid closed, pushing the tears to roll down her cheeks.

“I have called you the heart of my son, for that is what you are, but I know that only his words will make you believe it. You have learned to value yourself as a scholar, but not as a woman.”

Throat tight Siara merely shook her head.

“You humans are all alike.”

The comment drew Siara from her misery. Tears drying, Siara turned. “We humans? You speak as though you were not one.”

“I am not.”

“That ... that is not possible.”

“Did the tomes you read not speak of people who were more, monsters and demons?”

“Merely legends.”

“Nay, and until you learn that, you will never see the world for all it really is.”

Anleeh’s mother reached out, and touched a fingertip to one of the columns of runes. Light flowed through the wood, rushing to fill each line, moving around the room as fast as water in a rushing river. Startled by the brightness Siara brought a hand up, shielding her eyes against the moon-white light that now filled the room.

“Do you know my name?” she asked, and Siara tentatively lowered her arm.

“Nay, Lady, they always call you Serdick’s wife, or Anleeh’s mother.”

“Did that not make you wonder?”

“It did, it was on my list of questions to ask you,” Siara admitted.

The dark haired woman laughed and the sound caused the light to rise and fall, pulsing with her pleasure. “They do not speak my name for to do so might let the Gods know where I am. Names are power in Den.”

“Gods?”

“You worship only the Goddess in the Great City, but know this, heart of my son, there is more to those who rule the stars than a single Goddess.”

“The Queen speaks with her; the ways of the Goddess and her wishes are well known.” Siara defended.

“I heard, long before I came to the earth, of the blessed Priestess and she is a good and obedient servant, but the Temple does not know all.”

Siara wanted to dismiss the older woman’s words, but she could not. It should have been easy to consider Anleeh’s mother unenlightened and provincial, but she spoke with such surety and authority. Heart racing, Siara struggled to form a thought or question complete enough to utter aloud.

“What—who?”

“You are pale, sit.”

Siara nodded in agreement and sank to the ground with less grace than she might have hoped.



Anleeh's mother moved to a painting of the night sky, touched her fingers to it, and the painting began to move. The twin moons trekked across a blue pigment sky as stars circled.

"There is a way to all things, heart of my son. Long ago there were more men, more races than you could name, created by the Gods. They were not all meant to survive, and so all did not. Humans, with their depth of intelligence and breadth of spirit, rose. The Gods retreated, for there is more to do in the sky than look down upon the earth.

"Humanity grew, hurt itself, and found great joy, but this is not a story of humanity, it is a story of a people, created much as humanity was, but favored of the God, not the Goddess."

She moved to a second panel of images and brought them to life with a brush of her fingers. Now stick figures, men with triangular torsos and single lines for legs and arms, ran through a forest of simple trees. At their feet, beasts—lion, wolf and deer—ran. Siara expected it to be a scene of the hunt, but there were no weapons. The animals ran with the men, not from them.

"The God's race of men were not nurtured as the Goddess's humans were, so they began to fade, but were too stubborn to die. The humans came and these fierce people took some of the humans for their own, men and women alike, breeding with them, as they drove the other humans away.

"Humanity gave them the gifts of the Goddess, softness, creativity, the ability to nurture, and they began to flourish again, but never lost their wildness.

"Time passed, and the God's people broke into pieces. They warred among themselves, for they each had a grain of the God's battle lust in them."

She lit a third panel, the rich colors bright inside the border of light-filled carvings. The stick figures here went to battle; hand to hand they fought as animals looked on from the trees.

"The God's people became the people of Den, His name in a language so old none save the Gods know it." Anleeh's mother paused, watching the fighting men, but Siara was watching her.

"Are you ... a God?"

"No, and yes." With a long sweep of her hand, Anleeh's mother quieted the paintings and Siara bit back a protest; she desperately wanted to see what the other paintings showed.

"The people of Den, their fierce nature, has faded through time, and the God did not want to let his people fade away. Every fifty years he sends one messenger, one token, filled with the Battle Lust of his own soul. This messenger is crafted by the Goddess and given enough human traits that she will fit in with what the God's people have become. The God's token is sent to earth and for a single day must remain. If none capture her, then she can return. If she is caught she must remain, and by doing so bring back the God's power to his people."

Siara's heartbeat picked up speed as she fit the pieces together. "You are the God's messenger."

"Yes."

"Sedrick caught you."

"Yes."

"And Anleeh..."

“Is God-touched.”

Siara bent her knees, wrapping her arms around them and pressing her forehead to them. Her body hummed with excitement or fear, she did not know which, but she tingled from tip to toe. Everything was different now. She did not doubt the woman’s words, and could never go back to not knowing. She was ashamed that she’d considered herself a great scholar, a learned woman, and yet had not known even the most basic truths of their world. Conflicting desires to run from the room and to stay and demand answers warred in her, until her fingers shook and arms twitched from it.

“This is much for you to learn, heart of my son.”

“Do they all know what you are?” Siara finally asked.

“They know, but many do not believe. The messengers became a thing of legend. It was said that if a man came across a woman bathing, and saw an animal pelt or feathers nearby, she was an *alsmun*, a creature that, once kidnapped, would be the perfect wife.”

“Sedrick kidnapped you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you are prisoner here.” The horrific injustice struck Siara and her tears started again.

“Yes and no. The legend was true that an *alsmun* has an animal’s pelt, and for as long as Sedrick holds mine, I will remain here.”

“Does he know—does he know what you truly are?”

“Yes.”

“And yet he still keeps you?” Sara’s chest burned. “We must find your skin!”

“I did find it once; I could have left.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I had a baby, a bright eyed boy of four summers, and what is in me of the Goddess would not let me leave my child.”

“You stayed for Anleeh.” Siara reasoned, tears continuing to course down her cheeks.

“Yes.”

Siara had been plucked from the bosom of her family at an early age. Her family had lived in a village much plagued by the old King, and times were hard, every hand needed to labor in the fields. Women had children not for love but for need.

The Zinahs, those before Anleeh’s time, had come through their village and noticed her, a dirty peasant girl, scratching symbols in the dirt to represent sounds. Upon hearing this tale the previous Priestess had sent the Zinahs back to collect Siara and bring her to the Temple. Siara’s father saw it as a waste that they had fed her for five years, only to lose her to the Temple as she was becoming a good worker. The Zinahs had paid her father gold coin in exchange for her, and this sale, the proof of her father’s lack of love, was Siara’s deepest shame.

For all of her adult life, Siara had wondered if her mother had let the Zinah’s take her out of love and the hope that Siara would have a better life, or out of relief at having one less mouth to feed and greed for the coins they’d offered for Siara. She’d never returned home, never been willing to face the answer. If her mother was loving, Siara knew she would have collapsed under the grief of having lost a lifetime with a caring parent. If she was forgotten, a child more remembered for the price she’d fetched, Siara was not sure she would ever recover.

And here was a woman who had chosen to stay with her kidnapper, turning away from a life with the Gods, to be with her child.

"Anleeh is grown, can we, can I help you..."

"Do not weep for me, child. Sedrick loves me, and I him. My longing for freedom is a product of what I am and will never fade, but does not have to be obeyed."

"Anleeh knows what he is? That he is 'God touched'?"

"He does. The God is strong in him; that is why he is such a fierce fighter, and why he fears his beast."

"He does not fear his beast," Siara protested.

"He does, but he hides it well. I have heard your tales of the Zinah Anleeh. I know that he learned to suppress his beast, to fight without it, and what a great relief this was to him."

"Please, I want to understand, why does he fear his beast?"

"His beast is strong, strong enough to kill many in battle, and from the time he was young his father and uncle have encouraged him, fed his beast, knowing that, because he was my son, it would be dominant. Soon he was more beast than man. Only the presence of my beast, or that of his father and uncle, those he recognized as Alpha to him, could calm him and call him back to himself."

A knot of dread formed in Siara's belly. "What happened?"

"You are wise to know this story does not end well. Anleeh went into battle against a battalion of King Throlock's men. They were terribly outnumbered and many died. The more of his friends that died, the more terrible his beast grew. He slaughtered without regard for the wounds that were inflicted on him. The God's battle lust, his beast, rode him. Sedrick was injured and Jahrl took him away. Without the presence of Alpha beasts, Anleeh lost control. He killed a hundred men that day, and when there were none left standing, he finished those who lay dying. When their blood ran red, he found their horses and slaughtered them, for all he could see was prey."

Siara was unaware of the fresh tears that slipped from her eyes until the older woman reached over and brushed them away.

"You weep for him."

"The man he is now—would never do that; he is kind and clever, always laughing, just. He believes in the law."

"Yes, the man he is now. After word of Anleeh's deed reached King Throlock, he sent five hundred men. The warriors of Den went to meet them, traveling beyond Den's borders to protect the land. When they arrived, there was a force already there, the Temple army, sent to protect Den. Anleeh saw them fight, saw the control and power of their skill, so much more effective than brute force. Three weeks later he left for the Temple, pledging to return trained in the ways of the Temple army."

"He regretted what had happened."

"His heart was hurt by it, but he was heralded as a hero. They call that day 'the slaughter of horses' and still talk about it. He had nightmares, and for almost a month afterwards had to be watched at all times because his beast was so close to the surface he was dangerous." Anleeh's mother smiled, but it was sad. "To the people of Den he was the greatest warrior, an unparalleled compliment among these people, but he'd lost their trust. He defended his homeland to the point of near madness, and when he returned no one would get within ten paces of him. He left to learn control, though he told his father

and uncle it was to acquire the knowledge of the Temple army.”

“But he did not want to return here.”

His mother looked away, and black hair slithered forward over her shoulder. “I know.”

“I am sorry.” Siara whispered

“Why do you say that to me? You’ve done me no harm.”

“He is why you stayed on earth, and then he left you alone here.”

“But he found peace in the Great City, he found a part of himself, the part you know, that would have been forever locked away under the Battle Lust had he stayed here. I can only imagine what a balm that was to his human heart.”

Siara could no longer sit. Springing to her feet, she began pacing around the room, too restless to even stop and look at the paintings.

“You have told me much.”

“Much of what I’ve spoken of is secret, and I will ask you to never speak of it, though you may chronicle it in your little book.”

“Why? Why did you tell me?”

“I trust you, diligent scholar, to write my words, make the truth of them known, so that the truth of Den will be known.”

“You want the rest of the world to know?”

“Nay. I want those who have the desire to understand, those who seek out the books, to be able to find the truth.”

Siara turned, a chill calm settling over her. “This is a great burden you give me.”

“I hope you will take it, for I have grown weary of carrying it alone.”

Siara’s empathy for the other woman rose once more and she moved forward, wanting to offer comfort. They embraced, but Siara took as much comfort as she gave.

“Have you no name I could call you?”

“Call me Raven, for it was black feathers, like those of a raven, Sedrick gathered to capture me.”

“Thank you, Raven.”

“I will give you a new name, for you are the heart of my son, but now you are a part of my heart too, Daughter.”

\* \* \* \*

The Hall was wild with noise. The men shouted each other down, hearty laughs booming against the walls, girls shrieked their high laughter as they chased or were chased by their men.

Anleeh, tired from a day spent training, grimaced at the noise level and then searched the room for Siara. He’d tried to be sure he always made it back to the Hall in time to dine with her, but this miserable day had kept him away from her through all of dinner.

He finally spotted her, sitting in a prime spot on a mound of fur close to the hearth fire. She was still, a pool of calm in the sea of noise. Her gaze was on the fire, and even from this distance he could tell she was distracted. She sat straight, her posture thrusting her breasts forward. Around her couples lounged, wandering hands eliciting shrieks and moans.

The only people left in the Hall were those with lovers, or searching for one.

He settled on the furs beside her, relaxing on one elbow and stretching out his legs.

Siara did not look up. Curling an arm around her bare belly he pulled her down, forcing her to lie back against him.

“You are distracted tonight, lover.”

“My mind is so full of things I barely have space to remember breathing.” Her voice was distant, its intense hush in contrast to the riotous frivolity of the others in the Hall. Her gaze was still on the fire, her body stiff against his. Anleeh stroked her hair back, studying her face.

They lay together in silence for a few moments, Siara still lost in the flames, Anleeh slowly relaxing after the difficult day. Just being with her was calming. She was a part of him in a way he’d never expected, a balm to his wounded soul.

“What did you learn today?” he whispered.

Siara blinked, tearing her attention from the fire to look over her shoulder at him. “I do not want to speak of it yet.”

He tugged a lock of hair forward, and then casually danced the end over the mounds of her breasts. “Then we will not speak of it.”

Siara turned and tucked her head into his shoulder, curling against him. The embrace was closer than normal. Anleeh brushed his hand over the top of her head, smoothing her hair, a frown of worry wrinkling his brow. Whatever she learned had left her seeking comfort. He would wake her in the early hours of dawn, when they could talk freely, and ask her again.

His musings were broken by a loud cry, the sound quieting all those lounging in the Hall.

Anleeh leaned up, so he could see over the flames, and then slowly smiled.

“I think you will want to see this, lover.”

An arm at her back, Anleeh helped her sit up. Siara leaned in to him as she peered around the fire, and Anleeh knew by her gasp the precise moment she realized what she was watching.

“Are they...?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

The warrior had his woman seated on the end of a table. She rested back on her elbows, hair spilling in all its white gold glory over the wood. The warrior knelt at the end of the table, his woman’s legs over his shoulders, his face buried between her thighs.

She cried out again, hair thrashing about, body straining almost as if she tried to get away, but was anchored in place by his white-fingered grip on her hips. She still wore her dark brown furs, and her small breasts heaved within the confines of the halter-style top.

Her lover rose, leaning over her on the table, forcing her to lie back. Everyone in the Hall watched as he leaned his face close to hers. They were still for a moment, her panting breath loud in the quiet Hall, and then he growled.

She responded with a fierce snarl. Her arms came around his shoulders, fingers scratching at his leather covered back, body pressing up against his. The warrior slipped a fist beneath her back, keeping her body arched, and he bent and bit at the exposed tops of her breasts.

Siara moved against him and Anleeh tilted his head to peek, to make sure she was not frightened or embarrassed. It was quite the opposite: her eyes were huge and dark with arousal, and, as the warrior ripped the fur from his lover’s breast with his teeth, she

sucked her lower lip into her mouth.

Anleeh slid one hand to her thigh, brushing it lightly, and Siara's legs parted, hips tilting to coax his hand to her sex.

The warrior unlaced his leggings, and when he thrust into his lover, she snarled again, the beast riding her, each thrust eliciting animal sounds of satisfaction.

Anleeh slid his hand to the inside of Siara's thigh.

Higher and louder the woman's cries grew, undercut by the warrior's low continuous growl as he buried his head in his woman's neck and thrust harder and faster.

She screamed as she climaxed, and his low throat growl as he took the final thrusts set the hair of the watchers standing on end.

The warrior lifted his woman, cock still buried in her, and staggered to a mound of furs near where Siara and Anleeh lay. Around the Hall people turned to their lovers, urgency in their touches, arousal spiked by the display.

Anleeh bent to Siara's ear, prepared to ask if she'd enjoyed the display, when another spoke.

"The title of wildest beast goes to your woman, Henrick."

"There is none like my Lorna," the warrior murmured sleepily, a satisfied smile on his face.

"You think that display claimed you the title of possessing the wildest vilkat?"

Anleeh made sure his question was loud enough to be heard by the whole Hall. Siara stiffened against him.

The warrior, Henrick, turned his head where it lay on his lover's exposed breasts. "I do."

"I say you are wrong. I say my woman's beast is the fiercest." Siara's fingernails dug into his wrist and he felt her stiffen against him.

"She is not even of Den." Henrick countered.

"Did you not hear what she did to Leik?" Anleeh asked, stroking Siara's thigh.

Henrick's eyes darted to the movement of Anleeh's hand before he answered.

"Aye, but it is merely talk, gossip about the stranger." He emphasized the last word.

Ignoring that petty insult, Anleeh replied. "My woman's beast is fierce."

"Prove it," Henrick snarled, sitting up and pulling his woman against him.

Anleeh smiled. Wrapping his arm around Siara's waist, he raised them both to their feet. He could imagine her doubt and unease, but beneath it, he could feel her beast stretching to get out, wanting to be displayed before these people, to prove herself the most fierce.

Anleeh turned Siara, and for a brief moment allowed their eyes to meet, acknowledging her fear and worry, but demanding her submission. Siara's eyelids lowered.

"Wrists." Siara held her arms out and Anleeh grabbed her wrists, forcing them behind her and bracing them at the small of her back with one hand, then bending her backward, knowing how vulnerable she would feel.

He bent his head to her neck and breathed against her skin. Holding her there, body bent by his will, he did nothing but breathe. Calling his beast, he loosened the chain that held it, allowing it to climb up inside his chest, expanding into his skin, into the air he exhaled. He feared his beast, but this experience would bind her tighter to him.

Siara shuddered, turning her head to the side and panting. His bare arm against her

naked back allowed his beast to roll and scratch along her skin. His beast snarled with satisfaction when hers stretched fully awake.

Anleeh continued breathing against her neck, aware of the silent watchers. Within Siara, her beast grew more and more agitated, wanting to respond to the call of Anleeh's beast, but held still by Siara's obedience, her body kept immobile in his grip.

Taking a deep breath Anleeh tilted his head, letting his breath wash over her parted lips.

With a snarl, a deep true snarl of the beast, Siara ripped her hands from Anleeh's grip, arms going around his back, fingers clawing into his tunic and ripping it, parting it at the seams.

With his chest and back bared Siara raked her nails over him, marking him before she fisted a hand in his hair, her teeth moving in to mark his shoulder. Anleeh pushed her away, forcing her to turn as he pulled a knife from his boot. As she thrashed, he slid a hand beneath the laces of her top, pulling them away from her body before he slit them with the knife. Throwing the knife to the side Anleeh jerked her back against his chest, holding her there.

Siara's head tipped back against his shoulder and her hands came up, cupping her breasts, rolling the nipples. When he continued to simply hold her, Siara snarled, grabbed his hands and forced them to her breasts, demanding that he pleasure her. Grabbing the full mounds and squeezing hard, he released the bone pin, allowing her bottom garment to fall to the floor, sliding his hand over the pelt of hair protecting her sex.

She undulated in his hold, her snarls turning to low growls and mewls.

Anleeh released her, holding his hands away from his body so all would know that what she did was of her own will, the will of her beast. Siara turned and dropped to her knees. Her fingers curled into the waistband over his hips. Siara set her lips to the soft flesh below his belly button, her breath hot against his skin. Her tongue traced a single long path up his flat, hard stomach, venturing as far north as it could. Anleeh leaned his head back, curling hands in her dark tresses, knowing what an exotic pair they made, her dark hair an arousing contrast against the pale flesh of his belly.

She nipped at his belly button and then fucked the indent with her tongue. Her hands began to rub his cock through his leggings and Anleeh loosened his control enough to let a snarl slip out. Her fingers picked apart the lacings and opened the placard, freeing his cock, immediately cupping it with warm, greedy hands.

With more skill than that first night, Siara took him into her mouth, sucking him down. Anleeh dimly heard the sounds of envy that echoed from the men as her dark head bobbed up and down the hard length of his shaft.

Wrapping a fist more securely in her hair, Anleeh coaxed her head away, and she released his cock with a loud pop. Her fingers crawled up his chest as she started to rise, her lips pressing fervent open-mouthed kisses to his chest, stopping to suck each of his nipples, then licking the line of his throat before pressing her lips against the underside of his jaw.

Her behavior was coaxing, her beast acknowledging his dominance, persuading him to have her, fuck her, pleasure her.

Siara rested her parted lips on his cheek and breathed, letting him taste her wild submission. She blended her beast with her obedience; her passion with control, and that pushed him over the edge.

With a roar, Anleeh grabbed her, one arm around her thighs the other around her back, lifting her and then bearing her down onto the furs. Siara snarled in triumph, making a mockery of her submission, as Anleeh forced her legs wide.

He caged her, hands beside her head, looming over her, making sure she could see and feel the breadth of his body above hers. She could not get away, and he would do with her as he pleased. Her eyelids lowered and raised as she lifted her hips. Anleeh reached down pressing his hand to her belly, holding her still to receive his cock. When he thrust into her, her body tight, the angle ensuring that she felt every inch, Siara screamed, her hands coming up, nails raking over his arms.

Anleeh pressed his face down, feeling her breasts jiggle against his chest as his thrusts rocked her body. Again and again he thrust into her, burying himself deep and then retreating only to fill the void once more.

She was close, he could feel it, knew from the way her beast purred to his.

As her orgasm peaked, she lifted herself, sinking her teeth into his shoulder, marking him, claiming him, even as he fucked her. Now each thrust raked her teeth against his shoulder, and the small animal pain sent him over the edge. Wrapping a hand over her neck, Anleeh forced her head down and to the side, biting the soft skin where shoulder met neck. She screamed, the sound both animal and human, and his beast roared with pleasure. Anleeh no longer knew if the sound was only in his mind or if his beast's roar of pleasure echoed through the hall.

He thrust a final time, for the first time spilled his seed deep into her body, collapsing against her as the Hall watched in envious silence.



## Chapter Twelve

“How is it decided who works the farms?” Siara, elbow deep in sticky bread dough, puffed out the question as she ineptly kneaded the massive pasty mound of dough.

“Those who are farmers work the farms.”

A piece of hair fell into Siara’s face. Gritting her teeth she ignored the irritating tickle, concentrating on her kneading as she formulated the correct questions. The women who worked in the kitchen were unlike any of the other women. Unmarried, and as far as Siara could tell, unmated, they lived together in a cabin along with the women who oversaw many of the functional production elements of the Clan.

In her writings Siara had started referring to them as Mistresses. Mistress of the Kitchen, of the Ale House, Honey House, Tanning House, and so on. There were male servants that worked in all these places, and warriors who used the tanning house, but the day-to-day maintenance fell to this special class of women.

Anleeh helped her secure an interview with several of them, taking her to the tanning and ale houses, walking beside her as the women explained, in short, hard sentences, how the products were created and who had use of the facilities.

Siara had been less than satisfied with those episodes and, on Anleeh’s advice, volunteered to assist in the kitchen of the Hall.

Pull, twist, smack. Pull, twist, smack. The regular beats of her kneading were matched by the rhythmic thunk of the cook’s knife into the pieces of venison she was chopping for stew.

“How does one become a farmer?” Perhaps if she started with the basics...

The blade’s thunking paused, then started again. “One is born a farmer, and dies a farmer.”

“But what if one does not want to be a farmer?”

“That is what you were born to.”

“Is the life you were born into the life you must always lead?”

“Change is hard in Den.”

Siara sighed in satisfaction; this was the longest conversation exchange they’d had all day. “You speak as if from experience.”

“Yes,” The reply was short and hard, but without anger, so Siara continued.

“What were you born as?”

“A warrior’s daughter.”

“Are all warriors’ daughters born to work in the kitchen?”

“No, they are born to be the wives of warriors.”

“Then why are you here?”

Before the cook could answer a rich male voice flooded the kitchen. “It smells wonderful in here, and look, I see something quite tasty I would like to eat.”

Anleeh’s hands slid over Siara’s hips, making it quite clear it was not the bread she kneaded he would like to devour. She wore a borrowed set of furs over her breasts, and at the brush of his hand, her nipples peaked into the soft fur.

Teeth grazed her neck below her ear and nipped at the edge of her jaw.

“Are you ready to leave, lover?” he whispered.

Siara nodded softly and withdrew her hands from the ball of dough. Holding them away from her sides, she dunked them in the tub of wash water. Anleeh's hands plunged in beside hers, his strong fingers efficiently rubbing the sticky dough from her skin.

There was intimacy, unexpected and sweet, in having their hands hidden in the dark cool water together. He felt it too, for his fingers began to move slower, rubbing for the pleasure of touching her, his fingers sliding between hers, dancing up the inside of her wrists to play along the crease of her elbow.

Once she was clean, Anleeh helped her dry her arms, working a soft cloth carefully over her skin, his gaze lowered, focused on his task, freeing her to examine his face. As he separated her fingers to dry between each, she pondered the jut of his cheekbones and the simple line of his jaw. He'd been losing weight since they got here and it showed in his face. What golden color the sunlit Great City had put in his face was leeched away by this cool world, and his brows and eyelashes stood out in stark relief.

Could his mother be right? Did he love her?

Siara had spent so long wanting him from the shadows that the possibility was almost overwhelming. At first it had been safe to long for him, for as one of the Zinahs he was untouchable. But now that his mother had mentioned it, Siara could not help but hope for a life with him beyond this mission.

"There are things we must speak on," he murmured, rubbing the drying cloth over her palm.

"Yes." She had yet to tell him of the meeting with his mother.

"About last night..."

Siara's cheeks reddened as a hot flush rolled down her body, her nipples and sex coming alive. She lowered her gaze from his face to watch him caress her now dry hands.

"I did not plan that, nor did I intend to ever display you that way," he said.

"I am fine."

"Are you truly?" He tilted her chin up.

"I am."

"When I first raised you to your feet, I could feel the reluctance in your body, yet you obeyed."

"Is that not what you taught me to do?"

His mouth kicked up in a half smile, but there was no humor or joy in it. "Your training, of course." He started to pull away.

"Nay, Anleeh, listen to me." Siara curled her hands over his wrists, holding him in place. "The training taught me to trust you, to trust that I would find pleasure in your touch, and be protected by it." She turned so they were face-to-face. "Would I have chosen to go naked before the Hall? No, but I did, because you taught me not to fear it, to sink into your control and protection."

Anleeh leaned his forehead against hers. "I meant to comfort you for any hurt last night might have caused, not ask you to comfort me."

"I like comforting you," Siara whispered, her words puffing against his cheeks.

"May I confess something?"

"Of course."

"I, well, I was—hmmm I seem to be having trouble admitting this."

"You were aroused by it. The same as you were aroused by being spanked when others watched."

“I was. Knowing that I was so vulnerable, being watched, but protected by you from everyone but you. I liked knowing that we might make them jealous.” *Knowing that you were mine, and I proved it before one and all, staking my claim to you.*

“You were gorgeous, powerful, so sexual and sensual...” His cream words slid over her, describing a woman that only existed in his arms.

“Well, um, indeed.”

He laughed, hugging her to his chest.

Siara smiled and laid her cheek against his shoulder. She looked up just in time to see the cook staring at them, her previously impassive face creased with deep mourning and sadness.

\* \* \* \*

“Anleeh-Ori?” the young soldier stopped before them, twitching slightly with nerves. He was a huge, muscle-bound brute of a boy, and his face seemed painfully young atop all that bulk.

“Yes, Leriv?”

“I wished to speak with you, about, about...” His eyes strayed to Siara.

“Training?” Anleeh hazarded.

“Training.”

There was a long pause. Siara was sublimely unaware of the young man’s regard as she carefully turned the pages of one of her little books, quill in hand to make corrections. Anleeh lounged beside her, a tankard of Den’s sweet honey-fermented ale in one hand. They’d retired to a pad of furs after the evening meal, the atmosphere much quieter and more relaxed than the high frivolity and sexuality of last night.

Siara was gorgeous in her new furs.

It had taken him longer than he would have liked to catch enough snow rabbits to complete the ensemble. Unlike her first garment, which had been a single layer of fur, meaning that the tanned underside was outside, Anleeh had caught enough rabbits that this garment was soft fur inside and out.

His mother had helped him plan and sew it. Rather than two pieces, this was one, a short dress that fell to mid thigh. The inner curves of her breasts were exposed by the deeply cut neckline. A multitude of carved bone runes, precious beads, and a few small white feathers, dangled from the V of the neckline. The top left her shoulders and back bare, fastening in a single strap behind her neck.

Beaded straps with dangling feathers and bits of bone were wrapped around her right bicep and wrist, her left arm temptingly bare. The anklets he’s promised her on their journey were wrapped around her delicate ankles.

More of the rune carvings, feathers and bone were attached to the back of the neck strap, left to dangle against her bare back, flirting with the dip of her spine.

In the past hour, Anleeh had discovered a previously unknown fetish for shoulder blades.

Siara shifted, the decorative and protective bits on her garment clicked together softly, and the boy made a small noise.

Poor thing. He was too young to have been in the Hall last night, so would not have seen their display, only heard of it. The facts themselves were fantastic enough, never mind whatever embellishments had been added as the tale was passed along.

“Speak your question or go.”

“I, uh, thank you for training us, Anleeh-*Ori*.” He stumbled away before Anleeh could respond.

“Who should I speak with to learn more about the class system?” Siara asked as the boy retreated.

“Den doesn’t have a class system.”

Siara whipped her head around to look at him, hair shimmering beautifully against the white furs. He wondered if she’d figured out that wearing all white fur was a mark reserved for the ruling family.

“There most certainly is. At first I thought it was just normal social stratification, but I have learned that almost no one lives a life different than the one they were born to, and people are trained their whole life to serve that function.

“Boys who were born into warrior rank families play games that require strength and mental acuity, those who are born to be farmers play games that emphasize cooperation. They are being groomed.”

“You are correct,” he admitted with some surprise.

“You just said that Den doesn’t have a class system.” She arched her brows and Anleeh glowered at her. Bad enough that she was right, no need to rub it in.

“I do not think it is as intensive as you may believe, but I will admit that your arguments and points are valid.”

“Of course they are valid, though it is clear from your attitude that none here, except maybe your mother, has enough perspective about their own society to offer useful insight.”

“My mother?”

There was a hard edge to Anleeh’s voice and Siara focused on the quill she held, turning it between her fingers. “Yes. I spoke with your mother.”

“When?”

“A few days ago.”

“What did you speak of?”

“Many things.”

“Where did you have this conversation?”

“In a rather interesting room...”

“The *orarista*.”

“The what?”

“The *orarista* is a room of remembering, a place where history is stored, and then the room is hidden away, so that no one will become complacent by dwelling too long on past glory.”

“Hidden away? It is in that corridor behind your Uncle’s throne.”

“There is no corridor behind the throne.”

Siara handed Anleeh her book and quill, and darted across the Hall to investigate. Anleeh sipped his ale, not realizing until his fingers hurt that he was clenching the tankard so hard that his fingers were white against it. He was angry. Angry with his mother for speaking with Siara, and with Siara for doing the same, though why he was angry, the true root of that anger was something he was not ready to examine.

Siara returned, utterly irresistible with her cloud of dark tousled waves spilling over her lush body so enticingly packaged in her furs, her progress watched by both men and

women.

She sank down beside him, face blank. "There was a room there."

"My mother called the *orarista*."

"Wait." Siara snatched her book and quill back, quickly flipping open to a blank page. "First, please spell it."

Anleeh felt the anger wash away. If his mother had spoken of things best kept undisclosed, Siara would have peppered him with questions; clearly she was still ignorant of his secrets.

Relaxed once more, Anleeh spelled the word for her and spent the next hour answering her questions about how (an incantation of course) and when (whenever the caller was in true need) the *orarista* was called. When her questions pushed the bounds of his knowledge, Anleeh laughed and begged her to leave off with her inquisition.

"This is an inefficient amount of information."

"I have told you all I know."

"I will have to speak with your mother, perhaps she will know more."

"Perhaps."

"What do you think about..."

*Bang!* The doors of the Hall were thrown open, the heavy wooden panels pushed with such force that they crashed against the walls.

Wind whipped through the doorway, bringing the flavor of night to the warmth of the Hall.

From the darkness a figure emerged, a warrior, his massive shoulders heaped with furs, so that at first he appeared to be a monster, something too large to be human. He stepped into the light, boots thudding against the wood of the floor.

Anleeh sat up quickly, setting aside his ale and reaching over to close Siara's book, forcing her to put it down. Without question she capped her inkpot, tucking it away into a small bag with her journal, and scooting close to Anleeh's side. Around the Hall others did the same, putting down whatever they were doing, preparing themselves for whatever ominous things the dramatic entrance heralded.

Anleeh recognized the warrior, an older man, calm and seasoned in battle, a good fighter. His face was blank, but his eyes burned. The man continued into the Hall, staring straight ahead, stopping when he reached the Hearth Fire. It was then Anleeh noticed the rope clutched in one hand.

The warrior turned towards the open door and began pulling, his biceps flexing as he towed on the rope.

A ragged bundle appeared, thumping over the threshold. Bit by bit the warrior pulled the bundle into the Hall, and Anleeh knew that all save Siara understood what was inside.

Finally Siara would know why he had warned her so stridently, trained her so harshly.

\* \* \* \*

Siara pressed her side against Anleeh's back, her heart thumping hard inside her chest. His quick, quiet insistence that she put down what she was doing, that she pay attention, had set her on alert.

As the warrior pulled the bundle closer to the fire Siara could see that it was a large sack, filled with something angular, not smooth, as a bag of grain would have been.

The warrior reached down and sliced off the top of the bag, stepping away from it once it was opened. Movement behind her had Siara turning. Jahrl moved forward to take his place on the throne.

She turned back in time to see the bag slowly move, undulating.

A head appeared in the opening, followed by shoulders. The figure rose, its feet still in the sack. Wild tangles of hair covered the naked body. It was a woman.

Siara sucked in a hard breath. That warrior had placed this poor woman in a sack and dragged her across the ground, no telling how far. Siara twitched forward and Anleeh placed his arm across her waist, holding her still. He was right, she needed to watch, to learn how justice was delivered in Den.

“Jahrl-Ori,” the warrior barked. “I bring charges of disgrace upon this woman.”

“Do you wish to give reasons?” Jahrl asked.

“I would, that all will know her shame. She touched another man.”

There was a rustling in the Hall and Siara watched as women pressed closer to their men. Most of the women’s faces had gone impassive, though many of the men wore looks of disgust. Those few women who had an expression showed pity and fear.

Siara’s breathing sped up, her belly knotting with anxiety.

“Raise your chin, woman, let us see your disgrace.”

The woman raised her head and Siara jerked in surprise. It was Anga’s older sister, the one newly married.

Her long white blond hair hung in her face, and the warrior moved forward, pulling a knife from his boot.

“Anleeh,” Siara whispered fearfully.

“Quiet,” he breathed.

The warrior gathered his wife’s hair in his fist, rough fingers pulling it away from her face, and then, with little ceremony, sliced it off.

Her hip length locks now shorn to neck, there was no protection for her nakedness. The warrior threw the hair onto the hearth fire where it crackled as it burned, sending up a rank smell.

“I will have my save-face,” the warrior yelled. Jahrl nodded.

Several warriors rose, pulling a large box from beneath the platform the throne sat on.

The box was opened and several long lengths of rope pulled from it, as well as a heavy leather flogger. The woman whimpered—the first sound she’d made—and tried to run.

She darted for the open doors of the Hall, but was easily caught. Her husband grabbed her, turned her, and then backhanded her to the ground.

Siara could take it no more. She pushed to her feet, prepared to go to the girl’s aid. Anleeh rose beside her, and Siara expected that he too would assist in putting an end to this abuse.

When Anleeh wrapped an arm around her waist and clamped a hand over her mouth, using the hold to pull her back into the shadows, Siara was so surprised that she didn’t fight him.

The other men moved forward, helping the woman’s husband to corral her, lacing cuffs onto her wrists and ankles. Throwing the ropes attached to the wrist cuffs over a high beam the warriors dragged on it, jerking the woman forward until she was directly

below the beam, then stretching her onto her toes.

Other warriors came forward and took the ropes attached to her ankles and jerked them apart, spreading her legs until her big toes barely brushed the ground, forcing her body's weight onto her arms.

The woman's head bent forward between her painfully stretched arms; she was whimpering, a soft, continuous cry. Tears prickled in Siara's own eyes, and as the husband hefted the flogger, Siara struggled in Anleeh's hold.

Anleeh would not make her stand and watch this. He would stop it. Together, they would stop it.

The husband raised the flogger and brought it forward in a brutal blow against the woman's back. She screamed.

No. No, this is wrong, this is horrible, this is brutal and I will not watch it happen. I will stop it, I will save her.

Siara began to fight Anleeh's hold in truth. His arm around her middle, binding her arms against her sides, tightened. Siara dug her heel into his toes, but Anleeh jerked his foot away.

He leaned back against the wall, keeping her body tight to his, and forced her legs between his, holding them immobile within the heavily muscled bracket of his own limbs.

It was then Siara realized that Anleeh would not stop this, that he would force her to watch as this woman was beaten.

A second blow landed, the woman screamed again.

"You deserve this, you are dirt, not fit to wear furs." The man's voice dripped with venom, and Siara wondered how he could so abuse his wife, a woman he must have cared for if he had married her.

Again the lash fell, the screams heartbreaking, the silence of the watchers horrific. None moved to help her, and the men who held the ropes pulled them tighter when she struggled.

The warrior moved forward, grabbing his wife's jaw and forcing her head up.

"You are lucky that Jahrl-Ori grants you mercy, for I would take pleasure in slitting your throat for what you've done."

Bile rose into Siara's mouth. This was mercy?

He stepped back and raised the flogger once more, striking the woman's breasts.

Siara jerked in Anleeh's hold, tears slipping from her eyes, sobs jerking her chest, as hard red welts, accented by thin cuts, bloomed across the woman's breasts.

Siara wanted to close her eyes, to turn away, but felt that she should not, could not. She felt that if she watched, she, who alone seemed to understand how horrific and wrong this was, it would alleviate some of the poor woman's suffering.

The woman stopped screaming as another blow landed against the front of her body, marking the skin of her belly. She hung lifeless in the ropes as thin trails of blood coursed down her body, crossing the horizontal cuts and welts. If her body were not dead in truth then Siara could only assume that her soul was dying.

Soon no unmarked patch of skin remained. Each leg had been beaten, the popping sound as the straps of the flogger wrapped around her thin legs gruesome.

The warrior stepped back and Siara sagged against Anleeh, hopeful that the litany of prayers she had whispered to the Goddess had helped ease the woman's suffering.

The warrior still held the flogger, continuing to swing it. His swings changed, from horizontal movements to underhanded vertical upswings.

The men holding the ropes attached to the woman's ankles pulled them further apart.

No.

Siara started struggling once more in Anleeh's hold. She would not, *would not*, watch this, she would stop them. Anleeh's fingers bit into her flesh and Siara wanted to weep with frustration at her inferior strength. She could not fight him.

But her beast could.

Siara closed her eyes and reached for her beast. Before she'd always called her beast with lust, pleasures of the flesh, but in her anger and fear the beast flourished. Focusing on that anger, she tried to call the beast up, tried to raise her through the thick fog of horror, an all too human emotion that coated Siara like black tar. The beast stirred fitfully and, pressed against him as she was, Siara knew the precise moment that Anleeh felt her beast stir, for his own woke, rising to help its mate.

Anleeh jerked her off her feet and Siara used the opportunity to kick at him. Holding her, one hand still securely over her mouth, Anleeh made his way to the back of the Hall, away from the beating, and into the kitchen.

Siara, still struggling, paused momentarily when they entered the kitchen and saw the Cook. The older woman was curled in a corner, rag pressed against her mouth to muffle sobs.

It seemed that Siara was not alone in her grief for the woman they were beating, but while Siara felt both grief and anger, this woman's face was marked by grief ... and fear.

Anleeh shouldered his way through the kitchen door, slamming Siara on her feet and releasing her.

"Anleeh! We must..."

Anleeh leaned back inside the kitchen door and emerged with a rag. Pulling it taught between his fists, Anleeh stepped behind her and forced it into her mouth, between her teeth. He had the knot tied even as she brought her hands up to pull the rag free. Anleeh grabbed her wrists, shackling them in his fist, and began towing her through the woods.

Siara was so shocked by his actions that she offered no resistance. Deeper into the forest they went, Siara shivering in the arctic night air, her bare back and shoulder's shaking with cold.

Anleeh's face was hidden from her, and the deeper they went into the woods, the more Siara's anger was melted away by fear. True fear.

She had staked her life on the belief that Anleeh would protect her, at the cost of his own death if it came to that, but she would have sworn before the Goddess that Anleeh, a man of justice, the Lord Justice, would have laid down his life rescuing that woman.

Was she wrong about him? Or was this the man of Den that he'd warned her about? Had her dismissal of his warnings cost her everything?

Anleeh stopped. Releasing her hands, he kept his back to her. Siara stumbled away, driven by fear to put distance between them, however futile fighting him had proven to be. She jerked at the knot of the gag, but her fingers were too cold to work with dexterity, so she tugged at it until she was able to pull it down. The white cloth dangled around her neck like a collar. Mouth free for the first time since he'd seized her, Siara worked to calm her hiccupping breaths. There were so many words to say, so many questions and accusations.



"Who are you?" Her voice shook.

"You know the answer to that, Siara."

"Nay. The man I know is the Zinah Anleeh, Lord Justice, a man known for his quick wit and sense of honor. A fierce and loyal fighter, who worked to protect all that the Temple and Goddess stand for."

"Do not blame me if that idyllic vision is who you thought I am."

"That is truth! Who, what, stands before me now is the lie."

Finally he turned. "What you see before you is a man, a man of Den who is much more lenient for having gone to the Great City."

"You let them *torture* her!"

"Those are the ways of Den."

"I do not care! It was horrible what they are doing to her, what they made her suffer. How could you let them do that?"

"I warned you from the beginning." This truth only made her angrier.

"You did not warn me that torture was a public sport. That was barbaric, the most dreadful thing I've ever seen."

"You lie to yourself. How many times did you see the Priestess use humiliation as a punishment?"

"Humiliation, yes, but that was not humiliation, that was something different, something horrible." Siara's voice rose with each word, peaking only to fall again so that the last word slipped into the night as a whisper.

"She disgraced him, disgraced his honor, and she is his to do with as he pleases."

"Nay! She should be protected, by laws and justice."

"The laws are tradition. My uncle changed those traditions already. In the past he would have had the right to slit her throat and wear her blood."

"No, no..."

"That is the way of Den."

"It is wrong. Anleeh, you are a man of justice."

"I became a man of justice; I was not born it."

"It matters not. You should have stopped them, or if you were not brave enough, let me stop it."

"You could not have stopped them."

"I would have. I could have."

"Now you lie to yourself."

"Anleeh, please, please tell me that I was not so wrong about you, tell me that you would save her." *Tell me I am not wrong to love you.*

Anleeh took a step towards her, pausing, fists curling, when Siara took a shaky step back.

"Would I? Would I save that woman?" The frighteningly impassive mask he wore cracked, his eyes dark with a pain she could not name, "Would I cut her down and offer her a chance to speak on her crimes, to mandate a punishment that was not so horrible? Yes. But I could not, cannot."

Siara hung her head, folding her arms against her belly, her icy skin prickled with gooseflesh.

"This is the harshness of Den you warned me of."

"Yes."

"I did not believe it, still cannot. I know these people. They are good and kind people. What is happening in the Hall is monstrous."

"Yes."

Her shoulders sagged with relief; it was a small piece in recreating their alliance. "I will never forgive you for stopping me, for I will never forgive myself for being unable to help her."

"Blame me, not yourself." Anleeh stepped forward, cupping her shoulders in hands that were painfully warm. "Know this. Had you interfered, the next to be bound would be you, and I would have been forced to do the same to you."

"Would you have?" Siara tipped her head up, but stared at his cheek, unable to meet his eyes. "Would you whip me till my flesh ran red with blood? Would you beat flesh that you had caressed, that had caressed you?"

"It is the way of Den." His voice was so cold, so hard.

"Why are you trying to scare me? I have never, until tonight, doubted that I was safe in your arms."

"Did I not punish you physically as I trained you?"

"It was not the same. I may be a novice but I know that. Do not compare what you do to me with *that*."

"Your training was better than I thought," he conceded, "though clearly it was not good."

That comment cut unexpectedly deep. He could not know how she had treasured every moment of that training, for it meant he had focused on her, acknowledged her in a way that he never would have otherwise. Siara barely remembered the stiff young woman who'd sat beside him the Palace, demanding information and creating lists.

"Was my training so hard for you to administer?" she asked, turning her head away. Her heart was growing as numb as her skin. If he were going to tell her he hated her, that she disgusted him, now would be the time, for she would not feel it as keenly.

"Do not misunderstand me. I doubt your training because you disobeyed me, forced me to restrain you physically, drawing attention to your disobedience by your continued fighting."

"You could not expect me to watch that..."

"I did, and do, expect that you will do whatever I say."

His voice darkened and the fingers around her shoulders bit deep. Siara jerked her eyes to his. "You are angry with me."

"Damn it to the North Wind, yes, I am angry with you!" His voice exploded around her, and his dark control melted under the heat of her anger. Siara's tension began to fade, his anger was far better than his icy calm.

He shook her slightly. "Do you have any idea what you risked? What consequences your actions will have? You promised me that you would obey!"

"I have been nothing but obedient!"

"No! You have obeyed when it was convenient for you or when it brought you pleasure."

"You are wrong! Do you think I wanted to be spanked before others, that I wanted to be fucked on the floor of the Hall..."

"Do not deny you enjoyed it."

"—displayed like a trick pet? Nay. I wanted none of those things."

"Then you've lied to me."

"Anleeh, *listen*. I wanted none of those things, but I enjoyed them, and would do them again," she looked into his eyes, willing him to believe her, "for you."

"Enough Siara, you have made it very clear that what you wanted from this mission was a chance to be a great historian, like those whose books you worshiped in the library."

"How little you know me." He made her desire for a life of adventure sound cheap and vain.

Anleeh laughed, but it was a terrible mocking sound. "I know you so little?" One hand slid from her shoulder to ass, cupping it possessively. "I know you well enough."

"Please don't cheapen this." Emotions rolled through her like snakes, slithering, sliding. Anger, then sorrow, fear and passion fought for dominance, none holding the position long enough to allow her to focus and center. Her chest and throat were tight with suppressed tears, cheeks hot with anger while a single blink would be enough to send tear falling from her eyes.

"What's between us is passion of the flesh, arousal of the beast, nothing more."

"Why do you speak to me so? Are you now of Den? Is the man I love gone?" In her anguish Siara did not guard her words, and the admission slipped out.

"Love, what is this talk of love?" Anleeh's hand slid from her ass, his fingers splaying over her shoulder blades.

Siara, despite the suddenly soft tone of his voice, closed her eyes. So many years of longing, of want, had taken their toll, and the upheaval of the night finished what little barriers remained. She was exhausted, unable to carry the heavy burden of her secret any longer. Releasing the tears that had pooled along her lashes, Siara, refused to look at him.

"Anleeh ... you must know I have always loved you. I loved you when you were forbidden to me by your status as a Zinah. I asked for this task because I craved a new life of adventure, but also to be close to you."

"Siara..."

She did not want to hear what would surely be a polite dismissal, comforting words. "Your smile and bright teasing words were like the Goddess's sunlight to me. I thought of you when I touched myself at night, and hated that you knew me as no more than the strict Headmistress of the College."

"Why have you not told me before?"

"I was afraid. Afraid you would pity or avoid me, afraid that if you knew you already held my heart, you would no longer touch me. Now I am stripped bare before you. All my protection, the walls I built inside, are gone. They have been crumbling, falling, and I do not know if I could put them back up even if I wanted to."

"Siara." He wrapped her in his arms, hugging her dangerously cold body to his.

"My heart hurts," she whispered.

Anleeh fumbled with the runes that clinked against her back, lifting one. He muttered softly, and Siara was aware of a strong press of tingling heat at her back, before full darkness fell and she knew no more.

\* \* \* \*

"You should not love me." Anleeh lifted an unconscious Siara into his arms. Worry creased his brow as he felt how cold she was. "My secrets could kill you."

Anleeh made his way back to the Hall, praying to Den's God that the punishment was done. When he gently kicked the door the Cook answered. She nodded jerkily and Anleeh moved through the kitchen, carrying Siara through the dark and still Hall.

He sank down before the Hearth Fire, wanting to warm her before taking her to bed.

A slim figure appeared in the darkness on the opposite side of the Hall.

"Mother," Anleeh whispered, not looking up from Siara.

"Son."

His mother came to kneel beside him.

"I changed her, Mother."

"You were changed."

"It is not the same. I chose to go to the Great City."

"And she chose this, chose you."

Anleeh looked up, "You know?"

"That she loves you? I do."

"What do I do?"

"You leave her, or you love her with all the fire in your soul."

"She still does not understand. She understands better now, but she would hate me if she saw the battle madness."

"Nay. She has strength you underestimate."

"I respect her strength greatly."

"Then do not change your ways now."

Anleeh lifted one hand and stroked Siara's face. "I want to love her."

"I think you already do."

"I cannot love her until she knows me, really knows me." He brushed a finger over her lower lip, "I will not love her."

"Do you think she will run from you if your beast were to rise?"

"I do not know. Justice, thought and reason are like air to her."

"They have come to be for you also."

"Because they were something different than what I was. Learning to understand—and then dispense—justice, was like being reborn."

"You will not be happy until you unite the pieces of who you are."

"They cannot be united. Reason must rule the beast or the beast will consume reason."

"You can be both. I am."

Anleeh looked at his mother, surprised to hear her speak so openly about a secret that only they two truly understood.

Anleeh's mother looked away first, reaching down to stroke Siara's hair. The Hearth Fire cracked. Outside the Hall wind whistled, rising up to stir the stillness of night.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Do not be."

"I left you."

"You followed your heart, first in a quest to be a warrior, then in a quest to be something more that your father or uncle wanted you to be."

"When I left I promised you I would return."

"That promise is forgotten. My heart is glad you found peace and fulfillment."

"I am the only one who understands you, who knows you, and I abandoned you

here.”

Holding the woman he was afraid to love, he looked at the only woman he could say, without reservation, that he did love.

“Come with me,” he asked fervently.

“Where?”

“To the Great City. Return with me. There are things there, such beauty, different from here, buildings so tall they seem to scrape the sky, and in the Temple you feel the Goddess, like a balm in your heart.”

“The Goddess only? Are you so changed that you have forgotten the God?”

“No. I remember our ways, but I have seen the Goddess light the face of the Priestess, have felt the power swell within my skin.”

“Put your woman to bed and then tell me.”

Anleeh lifted Siara, tucking her into their sleeping alcove, before returning to kneel before his mother.

Letting the reserve, the hardness that was Den, melt away he spoke of the Great City in the manner he had learned while living there. His eyes danced as he described the Temple, the Palace, the city sheltered in the circle of mountains.

With words and hands he painted his life, the years he lived there, in the air of the Hall. The quiet and attentive face of his mother urged him on and on, words spilling faster. He wanted her to understand, wanted the vision to be so clear, that, though she said she held no blame towards him, she would understand why it had changed him, how the change from this savage land to the refined world of the Temple had seduced him.

She smiled and nodded, her pleasure that of a mother faced with an enthusiastic child.

Anleeh took her hands in his. “The fabrics, the skill of the weavers with cloth and the artisans with leather, would astound you.”

She laughed when he sheepishly admitted that he was known for his sense of style and refined manner of dress. His wry smile acknowledging that it was a reaction to the redundant pants-and-tunic dress of Den, combined with the sense of style his mother was known for, that had prompted him to cultivate a manner of dress.

“It pleases me to see you so happy.”

“Mother, please, come with me.”

“You know I cannot.”

“I will find them.”

“You are your father’s blood, you cannot.”

“That is myth; we will not know until I have tried.”

“Your father would see it as a betrayal, you know this.”

“It is your right to fight for freedom!”

“It is, but I am bound here...”

“By me.”

“Yes, by my child, whom I love.”

“Then let me look for them. It is only myth that tells us my blood will prevent me from freeing you.”

“How easily you dismiss legend. You should know better. I am the stuff of legend, as are you.”

Anleeh bowed his head, turning his face into her palm when his mother cupped his

cheek.

She began to murmur in the old language. Anleeh did not understand the words, no one did. But the magic that bound them, the magic of their people, that flowed so strong in his veins, a blood gift from her, whispered the meaning.

I love you, my child, your happiness is mine, your joy my own. Neither time nor distance will ever make you any less my child. I lived without regrets from the moment I first held you in my arms. My body still knows you, for you were a part of me once. I wish I could have made life easier on you. I am sorry that what I am, what I gave to you, has been such a burden.

I love you, my child, my baby.

Anleeh slipped from his knees to lie beside his mother. He buried his face against her side, arms around her waist, and for the first time felt like he had come home.

\* \* \* \*

She woke screaming.

In her dream Anleeh stood over her, a whip in hand as he stripped the flesh from her body with cruel blows, his words, mocking her confession of love, stripping her soul.

“Siara, wake, you are safe.”

“Anleeh.” Enough of the dream remained that she stiffened as he pulled her close. She had to force herself to relax. “I dreamed.”

“Of what?”

“That you beat me,” she confessed.

“Lover, I am sorry that such things haunt your nightmares.” Regret tinted his words.

Siara curled herself into him. “There was more,” she whispered against his neck.

“Tell me.”

“In my dream ... I was with child.”

Anleeh didn’t speak, but as she slipped back into sleep, Siara knew he lay awake.

\* \* \* \*

Siara woke the next morning to find Anleeh gone. Sliding from their bunk she rearranged her furs, which had twisted around her body as she slept. Shoving one of the armbands into position around her bicep, Siara worried.

Last night seemed as a terrible dream, the torture of that woman, Anleeh’s refusal to stop it, his dragging her, gagged, into the woods, and finally, her confession.

Her soul felt bruised this morning, her head heavy from the unshed tears, heart burned by so many things. Today she would find the woman, make sure she was being taken care of, do what she could to make it right.

There had to be a way to change this awful practice, this travesty of justice. Perhaps she would work on Anleeh until he agreed to make it part of the treaty.

Anleeh.

Siara grimaced as she remembered her confession. For so long she’d kept her secret, it seemed unreal that she’d finally professed her love.

Perhaps his absence was his discreet way of telling her that he did not return her feelings. She’d expected no less. It was clear that he held her in some regard, perhaps even affection, after all they had shared. It was this regard and camaraderie that his

mother no doubt mistook for love.

She could not deny the closeness that had developed between them, but she did not want a partner, she wanted a man who would love her beyond all things, and whom she could love until her soul burned with it.

It was a foolish dream, the product of too many stories in the old texts of the library. She read tales of men and women whose love for one another had defeated armies, started wars, and changed the course of nations. Perhaps it was the idea that love was an adventure that attracted her, or perhaps the belief that love was powerful enough that the fabric of the world quaked before it, which drew her in, but Siara wanted it.

If Anleeh did not, could not, love her like that, then she would find another. When they returned to the Great City he would take up duties as Lord Justice, she would finalize her journals and then take off on another adventure. There was a whole world to see; Den was just the first stop.

Her resolve firm, bruised heart comforted by the assurance that it would not suffer loving Anleeh forever, Siara laced on her boots and headed out of the Hall.

“Anga! Anga!” Siara saw the young woman wandering slowly down a path with a water pail, the listless way she swung it indicating it was empty.

Siara walked quickly up to the young girl, taking her elbow and leading her off the path into a stand of trees.

“I’m glad I found you, I wanted to talk to you.”

“Alright.”

Siara wrapped one arm around the girl in a hug. The uncharacteristically taciturn answer was indication that Anga, and most likely the rest of her family, was suffering today.

“How are you?”

“Well.”

“Anga, how is your sister?”

The girl kept her eyes on the ground. “Ella is fine.”

“Ella? Isn’t that your younger sister?”

“Yes.”

“Anga, I mean your older sister, how is your older sister?”

“I don’t have an older sister.” Anga looked up and there was something cold and unyielding in her eyes.

Anga held Siara’s shocked gaze for a moment before slowly walking away.

It was in the second to last place she could think of to look that Siara found Anga’s sister. The Tanning house was the one furthest from the Hall. Siara, puffing slightly from the long trek, made her way into the dark, fragrant building. Stretched between massive racks, hundreds of furs were curing; the skin sides coated with the thick paste Anleeh had taught Siara to use.

When she entered, the Mistress of the Tanning House, a heavyset woman wearing a simple leather dress, came forward.

“What can I assist you with?” Each word dripped with reluctance, the woman’s tone urging Siara to leave.

“Is she here?”

“Who?”

“Do not play with me. I have already spent a lifetime arguing with women in each of

the other huts. You know of whom I speak. I want only to see her, to speak with her, to make sure she is okay.”

“If she were here, there is nothing you could do for her.”

“Let me see her.” Siara put all of her authority, her power and force of will, into the order.

The woman looked away and then jerked her fingers towards the back of the building, the movement small, highlighting the woman’s reluctance.

Siara nodded her thanks and weaved her way through the skins to the back of the building and through a low doorway. There were small living quarters there. A little fireplace set into one wall, a cot against the other and a single stool. Simple leather dresses, matching the one the woman wore hung from pegs in the wall.

Curled on the cot, covered by a simple cloth blanket, the first of its kind Siara had seen in Den, was Anga’s sister. Heaving a relieved breath, Siara moved forward, kneeling by the woman’s head.

“Are you awake?” Siara whispered.

“Leave me be.” The voice was reedy thin, hoarse after a night spent screaming in misery.

“I am sorry for what you suffered last night.”

“Leave me.”

“I want to talk to you.”

“Just leave me be.”

Siara let silence fall, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. If the situation were different, if it were Siara who had been so brutally tortured by the man she loved, what words would comfort her?

“What he did to you was wrong.”

Slowly the woman’s head lifted, revealing a face swollen with bruises, left eye completely closed. Siara kept her face calm, experience from years of being a counselor to all who lived in the Temple helping her to hide her reaction.

“What he did is allowed,” the beaten woman replied.

“In Den, but I tell you now that what they did to you was wrong.”

“I betrayed him, betrayed his honor by letting another man touch what was his.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I did.” The woman’s voice was raspy and low, almost gone from her screams. Her swollen lips barely moved and the woman raised the corner of the sheet to wipe at the spit that slipped from one side of her mouth. “I believed that a woman who betrayed her man deserved to die.”

“Punishment is necessary for those who violate laws, including that of marriage, but that was more than punishment, that was torture.”

“I did not mean to,” she murmured, voice distant. She turned her gaze to Siara’s and what little expression her battered face could form seemed to beg Siara for understanding. “He touched me and I could not help myself, my beast rose, I felt passion, far more than what my husband gave me.”

“It was a mistake, a foolish one.” Siara admitted.

“I only did it once, but he knew, my husband knew.”

“How?”

“I do not know, but he knew. I think he could feel it, knew my beast lay quieter than



normal for she was well satisfied.” She blotted at her lips again.

“You must name the man who tempted you; it is not right that you take this punishment alone.”

“My husband knows who it is who touched me.”

Siara was shocked. “He does?”

“Yes. I told him.”

“Why was he not called forward to accept punishment also?”

“A man is not punished for mating a willing woman.”

Siara sucked in a breath in anger. “That is wrong.”

“It is the nature of a man’s beast to want a mate, to lull a woman and take her as his own. Women must learn to fight any desires another man raises.”

Siara struggled to force her anger under control. It was horrible and frustrating that this culture both glorified women whose beast was strong, yet demanded that they control the urges of that beast in a way the men did not have to.

“You will not return to your husband, will you?”

“He is my husband no longer; the woman I was is gone.”

“Your family...”

“I have no family.”

After Anga’s reaction, Siara was not surprised.

“I would like to help you.”

“What is done is done.”

“I want to let you know that, if you want, you can come to the Great City, to the Temple, seek peace and solace there.”

“Leave Den? I could not do that.”

“Then let me do something for you.”

“There is nothing I need; I will have a new life, a good life, serving my people.”

Siara swallowed a protest, reminding herself that she could not force the woman to change her life, as much as Siara might not understand it.

“I want to write down your story. No one but I will ever see it, it will be hidden away in the Library.”

“No one would see it?”

“Only I.”

“Anleeh-*Ori*?”

“He will not know.”

“Surely there are more important things you must write than the story of an evil woman.”

“You are not evil, and to me there is no more important thing to write than your story.” Siara tugged on the pouch she wore across her chest, opening the flap to pull out an empty journal, her ink pot and a new quill.

One swollen hand, wrist marked by deep bruises from the cuffs, stretched out the stroke the journal where it lay on Siara’s knee. The movement was heartbreakingly reminiscent of the way Anga touched Siara’s journals.

“I will live forever, in this little journal.”

“Yes.”

“Where do we start?”

“What is your name?”

“Allana.”

Siara turned to the first page and carefully wrote *Allana's Story*.

\* \* \* \*

“There is no reason for us to join with the Palace.”

“There is every reason. The future power of the Land Between the Seas lies in unity.”

“Den is strong without them. We will not use our army to protect those weaker than us.”

Anleeh ground his back teeth together. The arrogance of his father and uncle regarding the power of Den's warriors was expected but aggravating. He wanted to explain how horrifically the warriors of Den would be decimated if they went up against the Temple army, but knew that warrior pride would never concede the point. He could describe the diverse weapons and advanced techniques of the Temple army, recount the battles they had won, but it would not make a difference.

“You have seen me fight; you know that there are things to be learned from the Great City, things that will only make Den stronger.”

“There is no need. You are here now; you will teach us.”

Anleeh let the comment go unchallenged. They all three knew that Anleeh would not stay, but it seemed his father was not ready to admit it.

“I have taught the warriors much of what I know, but if a treaty were agreed upon, you could demand that selected warriors of Den be trained in the Great City, by the General of the Army.”

Anleeh leaned in, his voice hushed, drawing their interest. “Imagine a man whose skin is black, like that of a summer wolf. His skin is pulled tight over flesh and bone, so you can see the veins pumping blood to muscles knotted like ropes.”

He could see that both men were intrigued. Mentally apologizing to Rohaj, Anleeh continued his tale. Had the dark warrior been here, he would have slit Anleeh's throat to stop him.

“His head is smooth and there is no hair anywhere on him. He wears furs, as we do, but his are from animals unlike those we have ever seen. The beasts were massive, like a bear, but gold and orange, some ringed with stripes, others with spots. It is from this man, the new General of the Temple army, that you could learn.

“Wealth would flow into Den, for there are no carvers in the Great City whose skill is even close to that of the Den. The scraps from the floor of the wood room would fetch a price enough to buy ten weapons.”

Anleeh stopped when Jahrl leaned back. He waited. They sat silent, unmoving, at a table to one side of the Hall. Around them men and women moved about their daily tasks.

“What does the Palace want?”

Anleeh smiled and began outlining the King and Queen's requirements.

\* \* \* \*

Siara, wrapped in a long fur cloak, sat in the middle of a clearing, not far from the Hall. The noise of people did not reach her here; there was only the sky, studded with a thousand diamond point stars, and the cold air of night. She'd flung back the hood to

look up at the stars and her hair hung down, blowing in the night wind.

A figure emerged from the trees across the clearing, shoulders heaped with furs, heavy cloak shadowing his long frame.

The sight of him raised many things in her. Desire, longing and love warred with trepidation, fear and embarrassment. When Anleeh reached her he held out a hand. Despite all that had passed between them, Siara did not hesitate to reach up, sliding her fingers along his palm. He pulled her to his feet, and in the same movement, cupped her cheeks and kissed her.

Siara slid her hands under his cloak, easing them along the trim line of his waist as his tongue teased her lips open, slipping between her teeth. Siara sighed as he broke away. She could kiss him forever.

"I finalized the treaty with my Uncle," his whispered, mouth only inches from hers, hands still cupping her face.

"Our mission is complete; we can begin preparations to return home."

"You feel you have learned everything?"

"Not everything, but enough."

"I know that what happened last night was wrong, but do not let it change..."

"Do not worry for me; I understand it, even though I cannot accept it."

"Change has happened. There is a time when she would have died for her crime."

"So I have learned."

"I am sorry ... for the way I treated you, that I could not be the man you expected me to be."

Siara's heart lurched when she realized how her berating must have made him feel. "Forgive me that I would accuse you of such things, when I know you are a good and honorable man. I know now that it was as hard for you to watch as it was for I." She reached up and brushed the hair from his brow, "How hard it must have been for you to change from who you were to who you are now."

"It was, and I will never regret it." He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. "I am haunted by the knowledge that if I had stayed, if it had been you who was discovered in another man's arms, I would have seen nothing wrong with beating you."

Siara shivered, for that moment terribly aware of the breadth of his shoulders, his greater height and the power in his hands where they still cupped her face. Then his fingers stroked her cheekbones, his hand so tender that her love, not dimmed in the least by the events of the past days, rose up in her.

"I could never crave another's touch," she admitted, dragging in a breath tinted with the smell and taste of him.

Anleeh slid his hands down her body, palms covering her neck, pressing down over her breasts, to her waist. Holding her there he slowly, with all the dignity of a man performing a ritual, lowered himself to his knees before her, head bowed.

Remembering Raven's words, Siara asked, "What does it mean for you to kneel before me?"

"It means that I value you above all others, that I would die for you." His words were thick with conviction, pulled from him by emotions he would not speak. Those unvoiced emotions watered the hope Siara had worked to keep dormant.

Siara slid her hands into his hair, cool silk around her fingers, cupping his head and pulling until he rested his cheek against her belly. Anleeh's arms wrapped around her

waist, pressing her to him in a grip that was almost painful.

“I love you,” she whispered.

He did not respond, but as she stood beneath the stars, with all that he was, the confident warrior, the smiling laughing Lord, the vulnerable conflicted man, laid bare at her feet, Siara’s heart knew a joy it had never felt before.

## Chapter Thirteen

Anleeh woke a moment before the battle cry echoed through the Hall. As the last note of the war cry died and the drums started, Anleeh slid from their bunk, slipping into his leggings, his mind going blank, entering the calm white light the Priestess and his fellow Zinahs had taught him to find before battle.

"What is it?" Siara whispered from the darkness, voice thick with sleep. It had only been a few hours since they'd crawled into bed. Her sleep soft voice caused an unexpected tightness in his throat. Anleeh reached into the dark and her fingers slid through his, her lips brushing the back of his hand.

"Battle cry."

"What has happened?"

"I know not."

"You must fight?"

"Yes." Anleeh turned, pulling his shirt out of the cupboard and shrugging it on. Naked, Siara knelt, helping him into his boots and lacing them. Around them the Hall came to life. Men dressed quickly and silently, women shrugged into their furs, running for the kitchens or moving to fetch weapons.

Siara lifted a pelt, holding it in place against his leg but Anleeh shook his head.

"I will not wear those."

"You will be cold."

"There is only fire in a battle in Den."

She rose, shivering in the night chill, and Anleeh took a moment to wrap a fur lined cloak, ankle length, over her shoulders.

"Siara, you must listen to me. I know you have found friends among these people, but if I do not return, the battle for you will be fierce."

"Don't speak that way, you will return..."

"Listen. I must know you will obey me. Seek protection with my father and uncle, but understand that, especially after what we did in the Hall, they will not want to let so powerful a woman go. They will let you ease your grief, and then mate you to the strongest warrior."

"Anleeh please..."

"This is truth. I do not speak to frighten you, merely warn you."

Siara looked at him, in the dim light of the Hearth Fire, as around them men prepared for war. She did not weep or plead with him; she handed him his sword.

"Go to battle, and return to me."

She was magnificent. Hair tousled, draped in the white fur, holding his sword, the orange and red light of the fire danced over her skin, she seemed Goddess-like. Fierce and protective, brave and vulnerable.

Anleeh accepted his sword, shrugging the strap over his head so it lay diagonally across his chest.

"Pray for me."

"I will."

"Then I will return."

“I will wait for you,” she said, and they both knew she meant forever. Anleeh kissed her, and left.

\* \* \* \*

They did not return for many days. The first day Siara was able to keep herself busy, ignore the gnawing ache of worry in her stomach. By the third day fear lay over her like a shroud; she was unable to eat for the knots that had formed in her belly.

“You must eat,” the women scolded each other, but none did. They cooked, great sides of venison and precious beef, preparing for their men to return, but none spoke of it.

At night the Hall rustled with the sound of those who could not sleep. Feet padded over the floor as the women roamed the Hall, bodies aching for the touch of the men who had left to defend them. Those who had homes of their own came to the Hall, slept in great piles of rounded limbs and blond hair near the fire, taking comfort in another’s presence.

On the fourth day the drums sounded once more.

Children, sent to keep watch to distract them from waiting, as they too had grown fretful and worried, came screaming down the paths, yelling that they could hear the war horns the men carried.

One of the women dropped her bucket of water and ran, hair streaming behind her, to the drum tower near the wall. Siara, her own empty water bucket dangling from her fingers, watched as the woman flew up the steps, grabbed the heavy mallet, and began beating the drum.

Four times she beat the drum, letting the reverberations of the last blow fall into silence. Mothers quieted chirping children as everyone strained to listen. Then, faintly, a horn sounded. Everyone exploded into action, some running inside to help Cook prepare food, others scooping up the smallest children and herding them away, but the vast majority of the women ran for the walls, hoisting ladders into position and climbing high enough to see over the wood spike top.

Siara didn’t know what to do. It seemed more practical to go and help prepare the Hall. But even as she analyzed the most logical course of action, she headed for the wall, hoisting a ladder into place and climbing. Once her head and shoulders were clear, Siara wrapped her hands around two of the spike-shaped tops of the wall beams, holding herself in place.

Every other minute the drum would sound. The echoing war horn grew closer and closer. They were coming from the north, circling around the wall to reach the gates.

A hush fell as they finally came in to sight, each woman looking for the one they loved. Cries of joy rose in the cool air as fathers, husbands and sons were spotted. The men were silent, continuing their relentless march home. The gates were thrown open as the men marched in, and Siara scrambled down her ladder. She didn’t see Anleeh.

At the rear of the party, men carried stretchers and Siara headed for them. Her mind was curiously blank, as if the possibility of Anleeh injured or dead was something so horrific and remote that she could not even visualize it. One of the women caught her arm, pointing away from the stretchers, towards the center of the mass of marching men.

Siara changed course, quickstepping alongside the warriors, but she still did not see him. A sea of wide shoulders, hung with weapons of every style, blocked her view of the men in the middle. Jahrl moved to the front of the pack. He stepped forward, to the Hall

doors, but he did not open them. Instead he stood before them and turned. When he raised his hands, the men stopped and the women fell silent. Warriors and women alike looked at him expectantly, waiting for their leader to speak.

"Many days ago, a warrior returned to us." Siara looked around, and found several people looking back at her. He was speaking of Anleeh; Siara's search for her lover doubled in its frantic intensity.

"He was returned to us a man of great skill, of great learning, more than any of the rest of us may claim." A few of the warriors nodded.

Where was Anleeh?

"But that is not what makes a warrior of Den!" The men roared in agreement.

"Today my brother's son returned to us in truth. Release him!"

The warriors began to move away, pushing the women back, forming a large circle in front of the Hall doors. Siara stumbled backwards as a warrior pushed her hard. When the circle was formed, five men stood in the center. Four of the men held ropes in one hand, spears in the other. The spears were pointed at the fifth man, and the ropes led to nooses wrapped around his neck, waist, bound wrists and one ankle. His features were hidden by a rough hood, pulled tight to his features by the rope around his neck.

"Anleeh," Siara whispered, "What have they done to you?"

"It is for protection that they bind him." Raven slipped a hand around Siara's waist as she spoke. "The God's battle madness came upon him."

"Look what they've done to him; they treat him like a prisoner." Rage at those who abused her lover, *her mate*, warred with a deep and terrible fear.

"There is no other way, the God's rage cannot be trusted. When it comes upon him, Anleeh does not know friend from foe."

She could not leave him like this. Siara had a brief but terrible vision of Anleeh, bound as Allana had been, beaten as she was forced to watch. She could not bear it. There must be a way to help him.

"I ... I was told that a child's beast will respond to that of its mother. He loves you—help him. Help him!"

Raven stroked Siara's arm, but Siara could feel her fingers tremble. Raven was as frightened as Siara was, and that terrified her.

"I too am of the God. If he had a normal mother, one fully human, he would perhaps have a chance, but to see me, to feel my magic will make it worse."

"What about Sedrick? Can't he help him?" Siara ripped her gaze away from Anleeh and his circle of guards in time to see Raven's lips tighten. "Sedrick does not want to calm him, does he?"

"The battle madness is greatly revered among the warriors."

"Than why do they treat him like a—a..."

"Animal? Because now he is closer to animal than human. His beast is in control, thirsty for blood, angry to be trapped in the human skin, but retaining the creativity of a human, which makes him deadly."

"Did they make him march all the way home like this?"

"Yes, hooding is a way to keep him calm, and bound is the only way to control him."

They fell quiet, the hushed, hurried words melting into the tense silence as Jahrl raised his voice.

"Release him!"

The warriors dropped the ropes and the slip knots gave way, sliding from his wrists and waist. Anleeh, who had been ominously still, jerked into action. He ripped the rope from around his neck, jerking his hood off with it, and lunged at the closest warrior. The man extended his spear and Siara cried out as, for a shining crystal moment of horror, it looked like the man would run Anleeh through. But Anleeh jerked to the side, ripped the spear out of the other man's hands, spun around and knocked his opponent's legs out from under him. The movement was so fast that the end of the spear blurred as it whistled through the air. Anleeh brought the shaft of the spear against the man's legs with such force that a meaty 'clunk' was audible to all.

Siara expected him to back away, as he had on that first day when he'd been forced to prove himself, but instead Anleeh planted one foot in the man's belly to hold him still, twirled the spear in his fist and then raised it, point directly over the man's heart, for a killing blow.

"Anleeh, no!" Siara called out, but the sound was covered by the battle cry of the other warriors. Two came forward, jabbing at Anleeh while keeping themselves out of range, distracting him, as the third pulled their fallen comrade out of danger.

A roar of pain echoed through the village when Anleeh threw his spear, embedding it into the thigh of one of the two remaining men. The warrior collapsed to the ground, hands wrapped around the spear, trying to relieve the pressure of the weight. Anleeh stalked forward, every muscle and tendon moving with grace beyond that of what humans could do.

The remaining guard ran up behind Anleeh, fisting his hands in Anleeh's tunic and digging in his feet. Anleeh reached back, grabbed the other man by the neck and flung him away. He then ripped off his shirt, bare chest steaming with heat in the cool air.

When he reached the man on the ground, Anleeh sank slowly, knees folding as he brought his body down. The other man, clearly panicked, raised his hands, batting and pushing at Anleeh. With animal calculation and human brutality, Anleeh grabbed one of the man's forearms, one hand at the wrist, the other at the elbow. Anleeh's biceps bulged and the muscles in his back flexed as he snapped the bones. The man screamed, and screamed again, as Anleeh dropped the now misshapen limb. Siara felt bile rise in her throat, her vision going dark and knees weakening. The muted snap, like a heavy branch breaking, echoed sickeningly in her mind. Beside her, Raven laced both arms around Siara, keeping her on her feet.

"Anleeh," she whispered, "stop."

The man beneath Anleeh now lay still, whether with shock or dead Siara did not know.

Anleeh placed his hand against the man's leg, on either side of the protruding spear. She breathed a sigh of relief when he took no further action against the man. Instead he rose, hands coated in blood. Anleeh turned away from the man he'd felled and wiped bloodstained hands against his bare chest, leaving streaked handprints of crimson. It was primitive and barbaric, monstrous.

Siara did not know she'd spoken aloud until Raven whispered, "This is a part of him, the part of himself he fears, the part he has kept hidden from you."

Anleeh lifted his hands, tilted palm to the sky, threw his head back, and roared.

The sound was beautiful in ferocity, filling the silence, subduing it, replacing it with vibrating notes that held rage, triumph, and a need for power.



As quickly and unexpectedly as summer lighting, Siara's beast rose, responding to Anleeh, more real, more powerful, than it had ever been before.

Previously Siara's beast had been like a catalyst, freeing her to act on emotions and power that were always in her. This time Siara could feel the beast, like a real physical thing, clawing inside her. Siara opened her mouth but air would not come as her beast wrapped claw-tipped paws around her throat. She tried to raise her hands, to tear the claws away, but she could not move.

Her panic and fear warred with the beast's rage and hunger. The beast wanted, *wanted, wanted*, to be with her mate. Saliva pooled on Siara's tongue as her beast longed to lick the blood from his salt-sweat chest, and then, with the sweet copper taste still coating the tongue, bite him, bite her mate to mark his flesh, and let him mark her.

Anleeh roared again and Siara's paralysis broke. She grabbed at her neck, drawing in great woops of air. Around her the warriors echoed Anleeh's cry, raising their voices in howls.

"Raven, h—help me, my beast, I cannot control her."

"She is called by his. You must go to him."

"I cannot; he has gone mad."

"Yes he has." Raven's voice dripped with sorrow, and when Siara looked at the older woman, there were tears running down her pale cheeks.

Siara turned back to Anleeh and forced herself to put aside her initial reaction, and instead understand what was happening. This was Anleeh's greatest fear, this horrific loss of control and of self. She'd tasted it, when her beast rose, preventing her from moving, filling her with repulsive desires. What must it be like for him, one so controlled, to have lost control, to have fallen to his greatest fear, the nightmare that plagued his dreams?

As the howls of the warriors faded to silence, Jahrl stepped forward.

"Anleeh, son of Sedrick, child of Den, welcome home." Siara was astounded that Jahrl walked right up to Anleeh when he was so clearly dangerous.

"He should move away," Siara whispered to Raven.

"Jahrl is the alpha, the beast in Anleeh knows it," she answered.

Jahrl threw back one side of his cloak and raised a long scepter that had been hidden beneath.

"You would not take this honor many years ago, for you said you wanted to be the greatest warrior, to be stronger and faster than any, and would not accept the honor until that time. You left to learn these things, and when you returned you proved them.

"But the man who returned to us was a lie!"

The warriors shouted their agreement, and Siara bared her teeth in a small growl of her own. How dare they say that the man he was, the man he'd become in the Great City, was not a true warrior? Anleeh's head turned toward her, as if he'd felt the small surge of anger, the growl, but Jahrl drew his attention.

"Today you proved yourself. Not a single life was lost among us, and their casualties were great. No man who left that battlefield will forget the way Anleeh tore through them, making a mockery of flesh and bone."

Jahrl raised the wooden scepter he held, the bear claws attached to the end gleaming dully, and then, in a savage blow, raked it across Anleeh's upper body, opening four jagged wounds diagonally across his chest. Siara's beast screamed in terror. *They were hurting him, abusing her mate, her lover, her beloved.* She would stop them, protect him

when he could not protect himself.

Siara broke away from Raven and pushed through the circle of men, running for Anleeh as his knees slowly folded beneath him. She expected to feel her beast rise in anger, but she remained dormant. Siara skidded to her knees before him, reaching out and then pulling her hands back before she touched him. Blood poured from the furrows in his chest.

“Get back, woman,” Jahrl snarled.

“Nay.” She did not look at Jahrl for fear her anger would overpower her. Siara needed to be calm. She turned her attention to Anleeh, the rest of the world melting away as she focused on him. His suffering pressed down on her like a yoke across her shoulders.

“Anleeh,” she whispered, keeping her voice level and calm.

“Go.” The order was low, guttural, forced between his teeth. She caught a glimpse of his eyes, the ring of green thin around the enlarged black center.

“Anleeh, let me help you.”

“Go. No control. Leave me.”

“I will not leave you.” Tears welled in Siara’s eyes. “I will help you. I know you do not want this, that you fear it...”

“You are wrong in that.” Anleeh lifted his head and his voice had cleared, velvet smooth, no longer rough, but touched with a low note it had never contained before. “I was wrong to fear it, for it is a part of me.” He ran a finger through the crimson liquid that slid down his chest and placed it in his mouth, sucking away the blood.

“Anleeh, please, you must control it, control this...”

His head bowed, arms and shoulders twitching, the muscles rolling and knotting in unnatural ways, as if his skin could no longer contain him. He pulled his finger from his mouth and gagged slightly.

“Lover,” he pleaded softly, voice gone gravely once more, “please run, leave this place, leave me here.”

Heart breaking, terrified and confused, Siara knew that leaving him was the last thing she would ever do. “Never.”

Anleeh lunged for her. Siara raised her arms, instinct driving her to protect her face and neck. He toppled her to the ground, ripping her furs off, exposing her bare breasts to the sky and his hungry eyes.

He leaned low, and when he found access to her neck and face blocked by her arms he started to growl. Every hair on her arms, back, and neck stood on end, the reaction of prey to the growl of a predator.

“Heart of my son,” Raven’s voice tickled her ears, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. “The beast must rise; the beast must be set free.”

She nodded, though she did not understand, and lowered her arms. It took every scrap of will, of bravery, and of love for Anleeh, to expose her neck to him, even as he continued to snarl. His lips pulled back in a parody of a smile, his eyes so wild, so wide, that none of the beautiful green iris showed.

She lowered her arms and her eyes, submitting to him, acknowledging his dominance. He descended on her, hands curled into claws, grabbing at her arms and hips, squeezing, bruising. He bit her shoulder, just where the smooth skin curved up into neck, bit until it bled, until her blood mingled with his own in his mouth.

She wanted to scream in pain, but her beast held her still, quiet, submissive, beneath

him. Her stomach rolled as his chest, slippery with blood, slid against her bare breasts. The smell of blood, sweat and earth was strong around them, overwhelming. Each breath was a struggle against his bruising hands and the weight of his chest.

The longer he held her down with teeth and hands, the more violently he twitched. His massive shoulder, blocking her view of the sky, was trembling. As she watched, the trembling changed.

Things moved beneath his skin, rising and falling to push against the confines of his flesh.

Anleeh pulled back, lips stained with her blood, her chest now smeared with his. He scrambled away, movements jerky, harsh. He curled onto his knees, hands covering his head. A low keening filled the air, and the noise was so pitiful and horrifying that Siara almost took the opportunity to scramble away, to flee.

She didn't realize she was crying until a soft breeze, at odds with their terror, cooled the wet track of tears on her cheeks.

"Anleeh," she whispered, voice hoarse from the suppressed tears. He was coming apart, like a rug unweaving, and she didn't know how to stop it, how to help him.

This was magic, old magic, the magic of the people of Den, that moved under his skin so that it appeared claws raked from within, pushing up the flesh in low hillocks. Siara remembered her own feeling of a few moments ago, that her beast was a real thing growing inside her, choking her.

A strange calm settled over Siara, like a shield, one that would protect her from whatever happened.

She crawled to Anleeh, her beast rising up and urging her to keep her head down, move slowly, keep her movements small, show him she knew he was the stronger and acknowledge his dominance.

Anleeh was still balled on his knees, bloody hands clenched in his dark locks, motionless but for the undulations under the skin of his back. His arms were streaked bloody to the elbows.

He jerked as she grew closer, a growl slipping out among the keening. She hesitated, and for the first time looked up, looked at the circle of watchers. She scanned them, looking for help, for acknowledgment. As her gaze moved over them each person met her eyes, but it was with the same blank stare that she'd seen when the woman was tortured.

When she looked over her shoulder Siara saw Jahrl and Sedrick. Raven stood behind them, their outstretched arms blocking her way.

It didn't matter. Siara needed no help, needed no guidance.

Carefully, gently, she reached out, placing her hands on Anleeh's back, against the pulsing flesh. He convulsed at her touch but his inhuman cries fell quiet. They watched, Anleeh's mother, father and uncle, and waited for Siara to act. Waited and watched.

Siara let her eyelids droop, gaze unfocused, until the grey mist of her mind, the mist in which she'd glimpsed his beast before, was visible, overlaying the physical reality of the world.

She looked at Anleeh and shuddered, the horror of what she saw so great that she had to force herself not to look away.

In the grey mist Anleeh was not a man, but a teaming twisting mass of beast, legs tipped with razor claws and talon, tails whipping in fury, back and shoulders rising and falling, the vertebrae clearly defined through thin skin or covered by thick layers of fur.

Siara tried to separate what she saw into different animals. The massive forelimb of a bear, the ruffed shoulders and back of a lean winter wolf, and the long white tail of a leopard, were the things she could identify. Anleeh was like a God's melting pot, the viscous liquid from which pure life, in definable form, was distilled.

"Have you always been like this?" she asked, voice echoing oddly between the grey mist world and her own, "Trapped, without form? Without definition?"

Into the grey mist a beast crept, her body low, movements slow, tentative. Siara's beast approached Anleeh's, circling him, sniffing gently.

In that moment the solution became clear, and it was not magic, but Siara's beloved logic applied to something extraordinary.

*Anleeh has no control, because his beast has no form.*

Siara slid her hands up and down Anleeh's back, quieting the beasts within. "How you have tortured him, how hard he must have worked to deny you."

In the mist Siara's beast continued to circle, looking for her mate, her posture nervous, worried. "I need to see," Siara whispered, and the mist cleared.

A trill of pleasure skipped down Siara's spine, as for the first time, she saw her own beast. A black leopard, her fur hinted with spots, long and lean of body, tail twitching, circled the still unidentifiable mass that was Anleeh.

Siara closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the mist was gone. Anleeh had fallen into her arms, his head resting against her shoulder, hands digging into her hips, holding her when he had nothing sane left to hold onto.

"I love you," she told him and then, with every ounce of will and conviction she had, let her beast rise through her, consuming her. The she-leopard roared to life, streaming through Siara's body, possessing her fully, claw tipped limbs stretched within the confines of Siara's arms, pressing forward until they reached Anleeh, until Siara's beast, still a creature of mist and magic, unseen but powerful under her human skin, touched Anleeh.

Anleeh's body jack-knifed away from her. His hunched back bowed, his chest stretched and fresh blood began to seep from his wounds. His eyes, wide and green once more, were sightless, staring at an unseen place between earth and sky.

His fists opened, fingers curled in claws, and he ripped at his chest, digging his fingers into his wounds, tearing at his skin. He threw his head back, neck straining, as a red light began to pulse around his body, growing denser until Anleeh was only a pale outline in the center of the murky blood-light.

He bellowed and the sound mutated into a yowl.

Siara slowly pushed away as her beast fell quiet, heels digging into the earth as she backed away from whatever was in that red light.

The light began to suck inward, folding and rolling inside itself, falling to the earth where it coalesced, disappearing into the form that lay on the ground.

Slowly it rose: a snow-white leopard.

The beast straightened, lifting and setting down each massive paw in turn. He was huge, a head taller than Siara as she knelt. The leopard leaned back, stretching from hips to forepaws, claws flexing into the earth, digging furrows as they retracted.

He pulled out of the stretch and moved to Siara, slinking with a cat's grace.

Siara forced herself to be still, but turned her head away in fear, breath coming in short, hard pants between trembling lips. She had been so sure of her actions, but now

she'd truly created a monster, and if it chose to turn on her, on any of them, there would be no salvation.

She felt the beast's breathe first, a puff of hot air against her cheek. Then thin whiskers brushed her cheek a moment before his head butted lightly against her. Siara whimpered and drew her head down. The leopard butted her again, harder. Siara's beast bounced to the surface once more, twitching with happiness, cooling Siara's fear and helping her understand the body language of the leopard.

She slipped her arms around the beast's neck as she turned to face him.

The leopard's face was twice as large as hers, the massive muzzle covered in soft, short white fur, eyes, outlined in darker fur, large and beautiful, tilted in the face, the inner corners flowing down into the straight lines of the muzzle. The irises were green.

"You are beautiful like this, Anleeh." The leopard opened its mouth, exposing bright ivory teeth. Siara squeaked in alarm. "Anleeh, please don't eat me."

He closed his mouth, head tilting to the side, and then nudged her again, rubbing his cheek to hers. Siara buried her hands in the beast's neck, feeling the thick fur and skin, digging her fingers in as she began to shake with relief.

This was Anleeh, calm and seemingly aware, able to understand her, no longer possessed by the battle madness, no longer tortured from within. She'd helped him bring the beast out.

He was free, but lost to her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, for both of us. All I wanted was to stop your suffering, stop your pain. I didn't understand that I would lose you forever. I hope someday that you will forgive me. I will try; I will scour the library for a spell, a way to turn you back. I will ask the Queen; sacrifice whatever is needed, to find a way to make you human again." The promises tumbled from her lips. Horror at what she'd done pulsed through her.

Anleeh pulled out of her arms. His jaws opened and closed, as if he were trying to speak, but could not. He reached out a paw, placing it against her thigh, and pushed, leaning against her, before pulling it away.

"Anleeh, I don't understand."

He jerked his head to one side, and then repeated the motion. With a leap he bounded away, moving to his family. Father and Uncle parted, and Raven, laughing and crying, dropped to her knees, embracing Anleeh without hesitation or reserve, speaking into one of his small rounded ears.

Anleeh jerked his head in a nod, then turned away, looking back at Siara once more, before he took off running, headed for the woods.

Raven lifted her arms to the sky, and a shimmering white light surrounded her. The light condensed into a tight ball and then exploded in a shower of sparks, Raven's white furs dropping to the ground. A raven, obsidian feathers glittering in the sun, streaked into the sky.

Around her, the people of Den were still. Siara did not stay to see what happened. She took off running, chasing after Anleeh.

She ran until the forest closed around her, ran without direction, but also without fear. When she finally stumbled into the clearing she'd met Anleeh in the other night, she stopped, one hand holding the stitch in her side as she scanned the ground for him. A yowl startled a scream out of her.

"Anleeh? Is that you? Make that scary noise again if it is."

The yowl came again, broken slightly, as if he were laughing. Siara headed for the noise, scanning the forest floor.

“Anleeh?”

An odd huffing noise came from above her. Siara looked up and there, lounging on a branch, was Anleeh. His tail lowered, twitching against her cheek and then flipping her hair, playing with her.

She caught his tail, holding it still. “You seem ... happy?”

His tail flexed in her grip.

“Indeed. This is somewhat vexing. Two tail taps means yes, one means no, did you understand that?” She released his tail, and he tapped twice to say yes he was happy and then twice again to say he understood.

“I cannot believe I am having a conversation with a leopard.” The tip of his tail stroked down her cheek, and it reminded her of the way he would stroke her face. Her sorrow of a few moments ago came flooding back.

“I’m—I’m so sorry. I didn’t know, but I will find a way to change you back, I swear it.”

He thumped his tail once against her shoulder.

“No? Oh, well then, of course, I can understand that you would prefer to be a leopard.” Her words fell hard and fast as embarrassment tinted her cheeks. *I am a fool for letting myself hope you loved me.* “I will—I will tell the King and Queen...” *I dreamed you loved me and wanted to spend the rest of your days with me,* “—something. I should go.”

She turned away as his tail thumped her, hiding her sorrow, not wanting to burden his new freedom with her grief.

Anleeh leapt from the branch and landed before her, lips pulled up, teeth bared. He herded her backwards, radiating menace, until her back hit a tree.

“Anleeh please ... you are frightening me. Please, just let me go.”

A black bird fluttered down to rest on Anleeh’s back. Siara blinked, and instead of a bird, Raven, fully human, stood beside Anleeh.

“Why do you weep, Daughter?”

Siara’s mouth opened and closed several times, her thoughts whirling, reactions, emotions, conclusions, all jumping to the front of her brain.

“I—I thought that I’d turned him into a leopard.”

Raven laughed, “You have.”

“I mean ... forever, but you ... changed back.”

“Yes, and so will he.”

One minute Siara was standing against the tree, the next she was sitting down, relief having weakened her knees.

“He can change back?”

“Yes, but he needs your help.”

“What do I do?”

“Put your hands on him, now imagine as a human.”

Siara dug her fingers into Anleeh’s fur, petting him as he rested his massive head against her shoulder, and pulled up her memories of him, the laughing debonair Lord, the firm teacher, the careful lover. She remembered his taste and the weight of his body on hers, the feel of him inside her, the safety of his arms, and the thrill of knowing him.

Light pressed in on her closed lids, and then it was flesh, not fur, she held.

“Siara,” he whispered, “open your eyes, lover.”

“I am afraid.”

“Do not be.”

She did as he ordered, and the man she loved, dark hair tousled, beautiful green eyes calm, looked back at her. He smiled, tentatively, and Siara let out a watery laugh—how she loved his smile. His tentative smile grew confident and he pulled her into his arms, hugging her.

They held each other for several moments, letting their souls take comfort in one another’s touch.

Anleeh drew back first, and cupped her face, looking into her eyes.

“Siara, I love you.”

Siara smiled, “I know.”

## Chapter Fourteen

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“That you could turn into an animal.”

“I didn’t know. I knew what my mother is, but I thought that her blood is what made my beast so strong, so uncontrollable. I did not know that my beast could manifest, that want of that is what made him so hard to control.”

Siara repositioned her cheek against Anleeh’s shoulder and he turned and kissed her forehead. They were lying together on a mound of furs in a deserted cabin outside the walls. They’d come here, running through the trees, holding hands, driven by a need to touch and be touched, to confirm that they were alive, that they had survived.

The first coupling had taken place against the wall of the cabin, Siara clinging to Anleeh, wrapped tight to him as he slammed into her, his cock huge inside her, filling every inch so completely that the first few thrusts danced with pain, beautiful because he, and his burning need for her, caused it.

With their lips sealed together, he’d taken her, used her for his pleasure, quick to come after so many days apart. Then he’d laid her down beside him, stroking her gently, fingers inside her sex as he rubbed her clit, kissing her slowly. He overwhelmed her with his touch, from his hands in her sex to his lips on hers, chests pressed together, hand at her neck, cradling her head.

She came that way, moaning against his lips, her cries escalating into screams of pleasure as his fingers forced her to climax again, and then once more, his thumb carefully brushing her pulsing, sensitive clit.

Siara ran her hands over his chest, careful of the pink, newly healed scars. Anleeh would wear the mark of the bear claws forever, though they were greatly healed after his change to leopard and back.

“Why did your uncle do this?”

Anleeh laughed, “It is called the Bear’s Mark, and it is the highest honor a warrior can achieve. It is given to warn others, for a warrior who wears the Bear’s Mark always goes bare-chested into battle, and to withstand the pain of it, and the healing of it, is a sign of honor for the warrior. It marks him as an animal.”

Siara put on a mock frown. “I rather think that your turning into a leopard would have taken care of that.”

“I think you are right, my love.”

“Tell me again.”

Anleeh knew what she was asking for and rolled her onto her back. “I love you.” He kissed her lips. “I love you,” now her breasts; “I love you.” He nipped at her belly button and then kissed her again, “I love you, and you saved me.”

“No, it is you who saved me, set me free.”

“It was always in you to be free; I merely showed you the sky. You flew on your own.”

“That is beautiful.”

“Not nearly as lovely as you.” Anleeh laid his head against her beasts, face turned to



the fire. "I will never forget the way you looked, so brave as you lowered your arms, letting me hurt you." He started to rise but Siara fisted her hand in his hair. He was no doubt planning to examine the bite on her shoulder. They'd washed the wound at the same time they'd washed the blood from her breasts. Anleeh had fretted and said they'd find a salve to help it heal, make sure it didn't scar, but Siara wanted the scar, wanted to always remember that moment when he'd had nothing to hold on to but her.

They lay quietly by the fire, each with their own thoughts. Siara wondered if he, like she, was thinking about what his mother had told them, about the magic of what had happened.

Raven had long suspected that Anleeh's beast could manifest. Try as she might she had never been able to draw his beast forth, and it had been clear since he was small that he did not have the power to call the beast himself.

The older he grew the less the beast within could stand the confinement of the human skin. It was only the denial of the beast, controlled through strict discipline and training, and the absence of the beasts of the other people of Den, that had allowed him to live in the Great City, the beast dormant within.

As he'd suspected and feared, his return to Den had awoken the beast, and when Anleeh had finally used the beast in true battle, there had been no way to cage it once more, making him a slave to the God's battle madness.

Raven had hoped that a woman, a mate, would quiet the beast, but Siara herself was so strong that she had called the beast to physical form, rather than coax it to return to hibernation.

"I can hear you thinking," Anleeh whispered, voice thick with weariness. "There will be time, the rest of our lives, to dissect all that has happened, to write volumes about Anleeh, the beast man of Den."

Siara chuckled softly and yawned, his drowsiness infecting her. Hands curled in his hair, she slept.

\* \* \* \*

A tickling at his nose woke Anleeh.

When he opened his eyes he saw Siara leaning over him, a lock of her silky brown hair held between her fingers, dangling at his nose where she'd used it to tease him awake.

"You're awake," she said brightly.

"Because you woke me up."

"Never mind, now you're awake." Siara sat up and tugged him up beside her. Anleeh yawned and stretched, wincing as the stretch pulled at his new scars.

"Your mother stopped to check on us and brought you some food; she said you'd be hungry."

"Food? You should have woken me sooner." Anleeh grabbed the sack she indicated and dug though until he found some roasted venison, wrapped in leaves. Pulling the meat out, he began wolfing it down, filling the hole in his belly.

Siara'd seen him turn into a leopard; most likely she would not stop loving if she saw him eat like a pig.

She loved him.

From the first night she'd told him, Anleeh had been filled with a peace he'd never

known, and had never let himself identify. Yesterday he'd faced his worst fear, losing himself to his beast, until he was so beyond reason that he would attack anything, anyone.

His chewing slowed, the food turning ashy in his mouth as he remembered the way he'd fallen on her, hands causing bruises that were now blooming along her arms, hips, and thighs. He remembered the taste of blood, his and hers, against his tongue, and the way her flesh felt beneath his teeth, the pliancy of her skin and muscled begging him to bite harder.

Her own beast, speaking to his, rolling through him, calming him, had been all that protected her, and even after what he'd done to her she'd helped him, cradled him as the madness of his people's God roared through him, splintering his mind. She'd come to him, like the cold wind of winter through the hell of his mind. She'd freed him, taken his shapeless beast and called it to form, called it to life, freed the beast, calming him.

For the first time in his life, his beast was not a constant worry.

"Anleeh?" Siara's worried voiced pulled him from the memory of blood and death.

"Anleeh, are you alright?"

"Yes, I was just ... remembering the battle."

"Do you want to speak of it?"

"Not today."

"Alright." Worry creased a line down her brow and Anleeh smiled, trying to calm her.

"I am truly fine, lover. Let me finish eating and then I will pleasure you properly, reassure you of my good health."

"I want to try something first."

"Oh?" Anleeh mock-leered at her, but Siara merely stared at him, reminding him of the poorly dressed, serious, young woman she'd been in the Great City. He sighed even as he smiled, loving her all the more, and continued to tear off strips of meat and eat them.

"I was telling your mother about what I could see in the mist..."

"What mist?"

"—and how there appeared to be several different animals rolling around inside you."

"What?"

"And it is my belief that you became a leopard because my beast is a leopard and so that is what it was easiest for me to call."

"I—you..."

"Please do stop interrupting me, Anleeh. You mother said there was something I could try, a test for my theory." She smiled in pleasure at the logic and order of having a hypothesis. She lifted a knotted bundle of cords, the end of each one dangling with a small figure. Siara sorted through the pendants until she found the one she wanted.

"Siara, what test..."

Holding the pendant in her left hand, she touched his leg with her right.

Light exploded around Anleeh as his flesh melted away, bones cracking and reforming, what was human being pulled deep into the new skin he now wore.

Anleeh blinked at the piece of meat he had just been eating. It now lay abandoned on the dirt floor. On either side of it rested two paws. Anleeh swished his tail, feeling the longer stands of fur brush against his back legs.

He threw back his head and howled.

“Apparently you can become more than one animal.” Siara was slightly wide-eyed with alarm she was trying hard to cover. Anleeh trotted over to her and licked her forearm. She tasted like salt and sex, like his mate. He pushed his long snout against her neck and sniffed; she definitely smelled like mate.

Siara placed her hand in his fur, and a moment later he was human once more. He pushed her over, spreading her legs and settling between them.

“Do you have any idea how good you smell to me?”

“Really? What do I smell like?”

“Like my mate. You smell of sex and safety, of future and life.”

“Is that what I smelled like when you were a leopard?”

“No, then you smelled different, beautiful, sexy, but different.”

“Really?” Anleeh leaned in to kiss her but Siara shoved him off. “That is really interesting. I wonder if it is linked to the animal you are or if your feelings have settled since yesterday.”

“Woman, I just confessed my love for you and all you can think about is examining this to death?”

“How can you think of sex when we are in the middle of making history? You are the stuff of legend. How can you not be excited and want to know more? You just turned into a wolf, and you were a leopard yesterday.”

Her bright eyed enthusiasm bordered on frightening, but he loved her for it.

“Frankly, my love, I am more excited to know that I will no longer have to fight with my beast, that for the first time I am free of the worry that one day I will fall to the rage and kill someone I love.”

Siara leaned in to kiss him, her eyes loving and soft, but just before her lips brushed his, she slapped his chest.

“Look at your chest.”

Anleeh looked down to see that his scars were completely healed. No longer pink he now had four jagged, parallel white lines running from his left shoulder to the right side of his waist.

“I thought that it was all the magic we generated that caused them to heal, but what if the act of transforming heals you?”

That was an interesting thought. Anleeh sat up and grabbed the food bag, search around in the bottom.

“What are you looking for?”

“A knife.”

“Why?”

Anleeh pulled out a small blade. “I am simply creating an experiment for your hypothesis.” Anleeh slid the blade down his shin, choosing a spot that, though it hurt, would heal quickly if they were wrong.

“Anleeh!”

“Quickly, lover.”

Siara, flustered, fumbled with the charms, “I uh, don’t really know what this one is. I wanted to try it later, but maybe...” she scooted over to him, wrapping her arm around his waist.

The light consumed him once more, the same discomforting feeling of his flesh

peeling away and then being drawn inside, covering the popping of his bones. He was blind as he changed, his body not his own.

This change took longer, and this time it was filled with sounds, crashing and scrapping. He felt something hit his back as the light retreated. When his vision returned, Anleeh was confused. He was no longer inside the cabin, for the bright morning sun hurt his new eyes. The colors here were bright, not the muted grays of the wolf or the precise vision of the leopard. He lifted his head, which appeared to be resting on the ground. His head kept rising, up and up, his neck long and fluid.

"Anleeh," Siara's voice was muffled. "Don't move."

Worried but trusting her order, he slowly turned his head, keeping the rest of his body still, his new neck flexible enough that he was able to look at his own back.

Siara, seated astride him, pushed a piece of the cabin roof off herself and sat up.

"You broke the cabin."

Anleeh looked around; she was correct, he'd turned into something so big that he'd broken through the cabin walls. One corner and the stone chimney were all that was left.

Siara slid down and Anleeh got an uninterrupted look at himself. He had the long thin body of a reptile, but a thousand times larger. Planting his feet he lifted his body up, his four limbs, each as flexible as a human arm, easily supporting him.

His tail, long and fluid, swept across the now defunct cabin's floor, curling around Siara's ankles and snaking up until she was wrapped by his tail from feet to waist. Against her pale flesh his dark green skin was menacing, glinting with gold highlights in the sun.

"Let go," Siara demanded, and he released her. She rushed to his side and began tugging on something. It felt like she was pulling on his shoulder blade. Siara pulled something out from his side, a thin membrane that glittered pure gold in the sunlight.

"You have wings!"

As soon as he saw the wings, Anleeh knew what he'd become.

He snapped open his other wing and pushed off hard with all his limbs, two powerful strokes lifting him into the sky. He pulled himself into a tight circle and then landed once more. Placing his tail in front of Siara to keep her out of the way he bent his head low and shot out a stream of fire, toasting what was left of the cabin walls.

"And you ... breathe fire." Siara sat down hard.

*I'm a fire serpent*, he thought, delighted to the marrow of his new bones. The fire serpent was a creature of legend in Den, a terror and friend of the people.

"What's a fire serpent?" Siara asked.

*You can hear me?*

"Yes ... well no, I cannot hear you, not with my ears."

*I have the power to speak to your mind in this form.*

"Is that normal?"

*I don't know, fire serpents are supposed to be a legend, myth, not real.*

"Everything that has happened in these past two days seems to be the stuff of myth."

*You appear overwhelmed, lover.*

"I do feel a bit overwhelmed."

*Ride with me.*

Siara tilted her head back, looking at the blue above. "Into the sky?"

*Yes. Are you afraid?*

“Do you still love me?”

*Always, forever, as the man, the wolf, the leopard and the fire serpent, I love you.*

“Then I will never be afraid again.”

She ran to his side, placing her foot on his bent foreleg and swung onto his back, just in front of his wings.

“Show me the sky.”

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Lila moved to Southern California where she obtained her degree in anthropology and currently resides in Hollywood, which provides an endless supply of exciting evenings and writing ideas. Having spent extensive time in France, Egypt and Turkey Lila speaks five languages, none of them (including English) fluently.

She has neither husband nor cats but there are some piranhas living in a fish tank behind her couch.

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