



A WALK AFTER DARK

Kirra Pierce

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Article One of The Brethren Accords

To prevent unnecessary deaths among the populations, the seven nations have reached an unprecedented agreement. Henceforth, the changers who are called the clans of the Brother Wolves, the brethren, will be allowed to travel freely across borders and between towns. They will receive annual payment from each of the seven nations as determined by individual agreements with each nation. Upon request, they will be given reasonable short-term accommodations including food, shelter, and comfort during their travels, as needed. Other requests to aide in the fulfillment of their mission will be granted whenever possible.

In return, the brethren will take primary responsibility for hunting and killing the mad changers also known as ravers. Additionally, whenever it is known a man has survived an attack by a raver, the brethren will take custody of the individual until it is known whether that man will remain human, or become a brethren or a raver. If the man changes to a beast and his mind does not break, the brethren will adopt him as a Brother Wolf and teach him to be a member of their community. If, however, the man's mind shatters when he changes to a wolf, the brethren will kill him in a swift and in a merciful manner.

Decoded excerpt from brethren Traveler Raphael's report of raver activity on the border of Birne and Ibsen.

NOTE: A BROTHERN FRIEND CARRIES THIS REPORT. DO NOT HARM HIM. ASK HIM THE NAME OF MARKUS'S BIRD FOR CONFIRMATION. I TRAVEL BY A SECOND ROUTE TO BRING YOU THIS SAME INFORMATION.

Report text:

Weeks of careful observation lead me to conclude that rumors of an organized group of ravers are true. I found the remains of the bodies of missing people from some of the border villages. To a human, they appear to have been killed and eaten by a wild animal, but the scent of changers was in the area. I assumed the deaths were caused by ravers and followed the trail until I reached a maze of scent trails. As had been observed by Duke Cynbarion in a previous encounter with the raver who claimed to be part of this group, the creature had crisscrossed through an area, leaving many false trails to confuse any who follow. This well thought out planning is, of course, not typical of ravers and was the first indication of an organized group. After finally finding a trail leading away from the maze, I continued tracking the raver. Soon, I found evidence of more and more of the creatures. The trails were almost scent only. There was very little evidence of the passing of the creatures that a human would notice, and as Ibsen has broken away from the accords and ejected the brethren from their lands, the ravers probably feel safe from discovery. However, they maintain a high degree of security around their campsite.

I followed the raver's trail to what appears to be their headquarters. They maintain lookouts that they change at irregular intervals and whose locations vary. This may indicate careful planning to confuse any who would spy on them, or it may be simply due to the erratic nature of the ravers. Thankfully, the scent-masking solution that our Cassandra developed continues to work as long I remain in human form.

The ravers enter and leave from a cave. I have not been able to infiltrate past the opening and suspect it leads to a much larger cavern or series of caverns. I have observed thirty ravers come and go from the entrance, but I do not know how many total are inside. Most disturbing, some ravers have come with women. It is obvious the beasts keep them scent-drugged. The women look dazed and rub against the men without thought when they are stopped and checked at the cave opening. If somehow these ravers are holding onto some reason, then it is possible they are keeping the women for breeding stock as well as pleasure. The possibilities are frightening.

I propose that a few small groups of brethren cross the border and capture several of the ravers for questioning. Since we do not know the extent of this problem, it's best we hold off on bringing in any larger numbers, as they would be more easily detected. Additionally, I suspect the Ibsen government of being somehow involved, since they have stepped out of the Brotherhood Accords. They may think the ravers will serve them as an especially terrifying military force, or they may be ignorant of what is happening under the cover of the border war. In any case, we cannot let this continue. If these ravers have a safe base, they will be a threat to all the other nations and the people of Ibsen as well.

Brethren Traveler Raphael

Chapter One

The brethren live in peace with the beasts within them because each accepts the other and its needs one another and their needs. But remember this always: the beast is wild; one way or another, the beast will be fed.

-- The Book of Common Wisdom for All

The night pressed in on him like the claws of an angry beast, like the claws of the beast within him. The need to *change* pulsed in him like an extra heart. His skin was getting hot, and the oil preceding the *change* created a sheen on his skin. He fought it back. He was too near the town. His beast was too hungry. He needed a woman, preferably a companion who would welcome his needs. Taking any woman would be better than the alternative: the carnage a hungry beast could wreak.

His thoughts drifted, his mind as fevered as his body. Still, he ghosted quietly from tree to tree, instinctively maintaining cover until the wind shifted. He stopped in mid step and raised his nose: a woman. He breathed in again. A young woman.

The potential for release cleared his feverish mind. Her footsteps and her voice as she grumbled to herself teased his senses. He stayed in the darker shadow of the tree, not wanting her to run, to trigger his instinct to hunt.

The aching hunger beat with savage intensity at his body. The affirmation of his beliefs crested in his mind again and again while he waited for her to reach him: *I am a Brother Wolf, a brethren, not a raver. I protect the night, and I will not be the cause of fear.*

* * * * *

The moon was bright in the late fall sky with only wispy clouds occasionally playing tag with it, yet its light didn't penetrate through to the path in the woods. The night was not her favorite time to travel, but she wanted to get back home, to the comfort of the cottage. She walked, basket gripped in one hand while the other absently rubbed her neck. *I should not feel this jumpy; this area is very safe. The border war had not touched it, and no ravers or robbers had been reported in ages.*

She moved quietly, but with the speed of familiarity. She was almost home and was bone weary. To stay awake, she muttered to herself, "Bless me, so life's miracles are my business. Sometimes, I'd rather just have a good night's sleep." Her red cape of midwife and healer swirled around her in the night breeze. "And why in all the seven hells do babes choose to come at night? What is wrong with the middle of the day?"

A tall shadow moved onto the path and resolved itself into the shape of a man. Her grumbles stopped, and she froze in alarm.

"Mistress, will you shelter me tonight?"

Her heart jumped into her throat. Her mind barely registered his actual words -- just that she didn't know this voice. All she could see was a very tall, wide-shouldered shadow, a stranger. She turned to run when hands grabbed hold of her arms in an unbreakable grip.

"Peace, lady. I am a brethren, a traveler for clan Marcus. The rains and river flooding delayed me from reaching our camp. I mean you no harm. Look." He let go of one of her arms and pushed up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal a mark glowing in the night, a stylized wolf leg, which confirmed his identity as a traveler.

She swallowed her fear, drew a deep breath, forcing herself to a semblance of calm and thought quickly: *A brethren. All are obliged to aid the Brother Wolf clans.* She hadn't had to deal with any of them before. The Brother Wolves kept the mad ones, the ravers, away from the humans for a price. Part of that price included shelter, food, and reasonable comfort for their members when asked. Other parts of the price were negotiable. The clan members were only guaranteed a chance to "present a request." As far as she knew, their "requests" were filled without comment.

Before the accord between the clan packs and the humans, she could never have walked alone at night, or even so freely during the day, and none that had dealt with them complained. She squared her shoulders and drew another calming breath before offering the formal words, "Traveler, I am the healer, Miranda. I offer you the shelter of my home for the night. Come and be welcome."

"Thank you, Lady. I accept your shelter." His reply was equally formal, but the husky rasp to his soft, deep voice sent a shiver through her. He bent and picked up the basket she didn't realize she had dropped in her panic, quickly putting back the spilled herbs, bandages, and medicines she could barely make out with her only human eyesight.

"We are almost to my home. Please, follow me."

The tall figure stepped aside. She felt his warmth through the air as she passed and caught a whiff of an appealing odor. She stopped and found herself swaying slightly back toward him before she shook herself and moved on.

“So, Traveler, why have you come to this area? Have ravers been seen here? I have not heard of it.”

“I have sighted ravers not far from here. The border war hides their presence. You should not be out alone at night, anyway. Your red healer’s cloak will not guarantee your safety from the hungers of men, and now, with the war and ravers, it will be especially dangerous. You will need to exercise more caution for any night travel. If you must go out for night trips, you should request a guard.”

She tried to bristle at his words -- as though she could plan when she would be called -- but his voice resonated within her like a teasing whisper of lust. She had heard the brethren sometimes exuded an almost hypnotic scent, but they were generally able to control its release. *Does this traveler have no manners? Why does he not wait to see if I am interested in a lover before presuming to entice me his way?* She had seen some of the brethren from a distance. They were beautiful. She had heard of the appetites of the brethren...oh, she was too weary to even let this cross her mind. *Quiet*, she told her body, *I am only going to do my duty to provide this brethren with food, shelter, and a place to sleep. Nothing more.*

He followed her in silence. Even knowing he was there, she barely heard his steps behind her. They were almost to her home. She would sleep soon.

* * * * *

She glided ahead of him with soft, swaying hips. He clenched his fists to keep from grabbing her. She was mumbling about sleep. It was a luxury he couldn’t let her indulge in yet. His sanity and his life would depend on how she reacted to his request. His beast must be fed one way or another, or he would go mad.

A neat one-story cottage came into view. Without conscious consideration, he approved the solid wooden door and the sturdy shutter that covered the front window. A stone path led through a front lawn clear of large plants that might block the view from the window.

Her key turned smoothly in the lock, and the cottage door opened quietly beneath her hand.

They entered a comfortable room with a faint glow coming from a fireplace on the opposite wall. With his enhanced eyesight, he could make out a table littered with papers and books on one side of the room. A closed door waited behind the table. In front of the fire, a backless wide sofa loomed. On the other side of the fire, a curtained alcove partitioned the room, and beyond that, two more doors. Braided rugs softened the smooth wooden floor.

She paused and cleared her throat. "Be welcome and at ease in my home. Would you like some food? I'm going to eat, so you might as well join me if you're hungry."

The husky, feminine tones of her voice sent a shiver down his body. *Now*, his body screamed. *Now*. He licked his dry lips.

"No, but I thirst. Lady, will you give me drink?"

* * * * *

She was just too tired to be polite. "My name is Miranda, remember it." She crouched down and added some wood to the fire, thankful once again for the villagers who ensured she came home to the warmth of a fire after the long work of childbirth. She looked over her shoulder. Finally, she would be able to see what she had brought home.

He was tall. She knew that already. His hair fell in long, dark, curling waves around his bent head. He straightened, shook back his hair, and gave her the first good look at his face. Stunned, she stopped halfway between her crouch and standing. He was unbelievably beautiful. The firelight revealed the lean planes of his face, a richly sensuous mouth, and eyes so dark they appeared black. A simple cape covered his wide shoulders and fell over the top of his knee-high boots. He offered his hand to her, which she took without thought. He pulled her up along his body, his heat radiating through the night chill that had filled her. He cupped her face with a shaky hand and pushed back her thick red-brown hair. Her nose flared as she took in his scent. She studied his face with surprised fascination.

"The full moon is here. Do you understand what that means to me? Will you let me drink from you?"

Her heart raced at his words. She saw something wild in his eyes, the eyes of a starving man just held back from a feast.

"Now." His voice was an urgent rasp that seemed to barely fight its way out of his throat. "I offer myself to you now, this night. Will you take me and give me your passion in return?"

She stood still, within the rigid circle of his arms, surrounded by his warmth and the special beast-aroma-laced scent that reached out to her. In that moment, she forgot to be tired and felt only the ache of need. She was within a whisper of embracing him when he dropped his arms to tug free his cape's tie and pull off the clinging knit shirt. The action revealed a muscled torso that matched his face in beauty.

"I've been away two full moons -- this will be three -- on a pack mission, unable to go to a companion, and now it's too late. If you will not take me...I have a special rope you can bind me with, but you will have to do it quickly. I am on the edge of my control. I dare not *change* this close to the village. My beast is too strong. Too hungry. It would be unsafe for everyone."

Miranda hesitated. To look at him was to want him, yet his urgency frightened her. The faint aroma of his beast scent was building, calling her to surrender to the moment. She felt her body grow wet with longing. *He is a brethren. Surely he would not harm me?*

His long fingers opened his belt and pulled it free, and then he pushed his pants down, pulling his boots off with them. He stepped back free of them and knelt, knees wide. Looking up, he spoke urgently, "A second time I offer myself to you this night. The moon calls me, and I must find release or you must tie me."

His kneeling forced her to look down over the tendons of his neck, the width of his chest, down to the proud length of his cock already jutting firmly from his body.

"Traveler, I..." She was momentarily lost looking at his beauty, unsure of how to continue. Her fingers flexed without thought, itching to scratch along the expanse of golden skin below her.

The words were softly spoken, but must have reached his sensitive ears.

"If you want me, touch me. Otherwise bind me until the change fever passes, and we will see if my sanity holds."

She wanted to touch him. The firelight danced over his skin, and the flames played in his eyes. Those eyes were on her. Her hand lightly touched his head. The hair was like heated silk beneath her fingers. A rough breath escaped his lips at the touch, and his eyes widened, then narrowed.

He gasped, arms still held rigid at his sides, trying to give her a choice. "You release me? May I take you?"

"Yes." She could barely get the word past the desire that was taking over her mind.

The fire within his eyes turned to a blaze. "Put your hands on my shoulders."

She let her hands rest on them and grip the warm skin. With the slow movements of careful control, he wrapped one hand over her calf and raised her leg enough to tug off one low boot, then repeated the procedure with the second. He placed a hand around the outside of each leg and slid his palms up, pulling up her skirt until he reached her undergarment. His hands slid over her stomach to loosen the ties and pull the cloth down to her ankles, where he lifted her feet free one by one while she trembled and clutched his shoulders tighter.

Anticipation wound tightly throughout her. Even these few light touches from him affected her more deeply than the caresses of any of her other lovers.

He opened the simple belt holding up the heavy blue skirt. Belt and skirt fell away leaving her bare beneath the tails of her shirt.

"I thirst, Miranda." He looked from her face to her body.

With a delicate touch, he roamed over the backs of her legs, between her thighs, and pulled her close. He nuzzled his face in her mound.

Heat raced through her body, and that scent, the incredible scent of his beast, filled the air. The wet heat of his tongue parted her sex, blindly seeking, tasting, lapping. Her knees buckled, and she slumped over his body on a moan.

He lowered her to the floor. "I thirst."

His mouth opened wide and fastened over her cunt in a sucking kiss that took all the moisture her body offered him and demanded more and more. His tongue thrust into her vagina stroking and demanding still more, and her body helplessly gave it. She shook and twisted in a torment of delight, her hands first pulling him closer and then seeking to push him away as it became too much.

But he would not stop and growled when her hands tried to push him back. *His beast must be in control of his mind.* Again and again, he forced her body to give up its cream to his greedy lips, until lost to his scent and his intimate kiss, she only shook in a remorseless orgasm that wouldn't let go.

Heat. An intense wave of heat rolled from his body. She felt it from the tongue scorching her to his raspy cheeks burning her thighs. Finally, his mouth pulled away, and his head rose. For a moment, her heart clutched in fear, and the orgasm holding her stopped. The man was gone. She stared into the face of a combination of man and beast.

Oh, gods. His midform -- fur covered most of his body leaving only his face and his genitals bare. He sat up on his knees, held her knees open and gazed hungrily at her, licking the last of her cream from his lips. He looked even larger than before, and oh, so hungry. His scent filled the air even stronger than before.

"Don't be afraid." The deep, gravelly sound rumbled out of his chest, and he leaned over to cover her body and take her mouth in a kiss. With the taste of his mouth, fear left her, and the beast scent took over her mind. She burned now and bucked shamelessly against him. He growled a warning, then pulled his hips back to position himself -- then thrust.

She felt every inch of his cock as he slid into her body. Stretching her wet passage with his solid heat, he filled her and then pushed even deeper, grinding his root against her cunt.

He groaned, the sound of both agony and pleasure. "Gods, I need this. Wrap your legs around me and hold on. Let me feel you hold me, and take me as I take you."

Held tight, he fucked her, and her body shook with the force. She wound tighter and higher until she shattered in orgasm. Her cry filled the air.

"Yes!" He shouted in triumph as he once again ground himself into her body, shooting the liquid heat of his release.

He gripped the back of her neck with one hand and pulled her head up for a kiss still filled with voracious hunger. "Again, Miranda, again." Her dazed brain had just realized the cock within her body was still rigidly engorged, holding her stretched open beneath him. He pulled back a little before pushing back in, setting all the recently satiated nerves singing once more.

Again? She groaned in disbelief even as his gentle strokes had her pulling him close once more. “Oh.” Her voice broke as the sweet joy took her, her body arching into his.

“Yes. Again.” His voice now more like a growl than words. His thrusts gained force. “Again.” Thrust. “Again.” His body moved with brutal rhythm until she was keening her pleasure again, until he roared out his own release, and they collapsed in a tangle by the fire.

* * * * *

He rolled to his side, keeping her close, willing to rest as long as she stayed within his hands. Her eyes shuttered closed, but her hands remained tangled in and tightly gripping the fur of his body.

He smiled, pressing a kiss into her hair. *She slept with the man-beast without fear. Remarkable!* From the surprise in her eyes when the strength of the beast scent hit her, he would wager she had never taken one of his kind before. But she slept with him still in his half beast form, something even most experienced companions would refuse. Rising from the floor, he took her up with him with easy strength. He stepped over to the curtained alcove, which he rightly surmised hid a bed. Stretching out on the soft mattress was a welcome change from the cramped hard places he had napped while spying upon the ravers. He pulled a cover over his new treasure and himself. He would let them both rest awhile, but after almost three months of denial, his beast was far from done with her, and the beast must be fed.

Chapter Two

Three moons earlier

It was a crisp morning with just a slight bite of the coming autumn. The gentle whirl of hummingbirds filled the air. Soon they would be gone south for the winter. Cassandra and her companions, Ty and Cyn, were loading up their carry packs. It seemed they had been at this rock-enclosed campsite for longer than just one night, but then so much had happened in just that one night.

“Shoo,” a gruff voice sounded.

Huh? She turned and had to clap a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. There stood Cyn, his emerald green eyes sparkling with annoyance. Cyn. The ruthless and manipulative Duke was being buzzed by hummingbirds! Apparently, the red in his auburn hair made them think he might have some nectar. *If only they knew.* She bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Ty had no such compunction. “Ha, ha, ha! So your little friends have found you again?”

His laugh. She had never heard such a beautiful, rich, sound. His amber eyes were crinkled with amusement in a face framed by a shining curtain of long ebony hair.

The little birds buzzed Cyn a few more times before he successfully shooed them on. Cyn huffed and glared at Ty with an anger that would make most men quail. “Go on and laugh. Don’t you ever grow tired of that joke?”

“Ummm, why no, I do not. I best explain to our *chosen* so she does not feel we are keeping secrets.” He leaned confidingly close to Cassandra. *Ty’s smile is actually mischievous.* This was a side of him she hadn’t yet seen!

“You see, Cyn’s hair contains the deep red of some flowers, but even worse, when he is happy and relaxed a little of his beast scent escapes his pores. Our scents change somewhat with our moods. His “happy scent” takes on sweet overtones -- a little like honeysuckle. A

human's nose would not pick it up, but those tiny birds and insects notice. Sometimes, when he was younger, a small cloud of butterflies and bees would surround him until he grew annoyed." Ty bent over in helpless peals of laughter again before sputtering out, "It's hard to look intimidating when you're surrounded by butterflies and chased by hummingbirds."

As brethren, both Ty and Cyn carried a beast within them and could fully *change* to a wolf form or a man-beast form with a partially furred body, bluntly clawed hands and feet, and a fanged mouth. She had saved Ty's sanity when he went through his first *change* after being attacked by a raver, a shape shifter whose mind had snapped, unable to handle having an inner beast. Later, he and Cyn had saved her life by giving her their blood, but their shifter blood had done more than save her life; it had created a bond among the three of them.

Cyn narrowed his eyes and stalked over to Ty and Cassandra with all the grace of his inner wolf. He placed one hand under Ty's chin and pulled him up to meet his menacing gaze. "You know, that little remembrance will cost you later, my Bond Brother. I'll enjoy discussing" -- his hand ran down Ty's torso to cup him intimately -- "your selection of memories for our *chosen* later." The laughter disappeared from Ty's face, heat filled his eyes, and a choked moan slipped from his lips.

"Perhaps you would like to share a memory about me to make up for it?" Ty offered, but Cyn didn't relinquish his hold on Ty. Instead, he thoughtfully tilted his head as if in consideration while stroking his chin with one hand and stroking Ty with the other.

"Hmm, that is an excellent idea. I shall think on it. Perhaps you will offer some suggestions while I...extract satisfaction for your impudence, later." With this last comment, he released Ty, who had begun to thrust his hips in time with Cyn's teasing strokes.

"Cassandra, dear, you need to close your mouth. You're gawking." He smirked and went to complete his packing.

Ty watched Cyn glide away with a look that combined suffering and longing. Cassandra felt sympathy as she struggled with the hot, achy feelings just watching them gave her. *Later. Patience now. I'll have them both later.* It was going to be a long day.

She started thinking of the trip ahead. First they would spend time with some of the brethren. Normally, all who survived the *change* joined the brethren clans and learned how to handle this new part of themselves from the older members. Cyn was born with an inner beast and could give Ty all the help he needed. But, as a high-ranking noble, Cyn kept his own inner beast a secret. The population would be alarmed if they thought a brethren had that much power. After spending some time with the brethren, they would return to Cyn's home, the seat of power for his dukedom.

Hmm, I wonder what sort of trade I can set up from Cyn's keep. Just because she was going to be stuck in one place for a while was no reason to let her medicine and medicinal plant trade suffer. The bond the three of them shared was new and would require she stay

close to one of her men for the moment, although Cyn told her the time they could be apart would gradually increase.

Her rambling thoughts stopped when she noticed both Ty and Cyn had completely ceased packing. Their stillness was absolute, then Cyn smiled.

“Darius, Raphael, and Markus are approaching.”

Cassandra relaxed and smiled as well. She knew all three of them. They were brethren and must have come in answer to the message about the attack on Ty and his subsequent *change*. Darius and Markus strode through the rock entrance to the campsite. They were striking men. Sapphire-eyed and pale-skinned Darius with his tapestry of blond and brown waist-length hair would have been just too pretty except for the rough scar that ran down one side of his face and under his jaw. It was extremely unusual for one of the brethren to scar, but he never discussed how he came to have it. Darius scanned the campsite with his customary air of quiet intensity. Despite the masculine beauty of his chiseled features and golden brown hair, people tended to shy away from the olive green eyes that seemed to see too much.

“Let’s see, long raven-wing black hair, honey gold skin, and amber eyes; it must be Cassie!” Darius threw open his arms, and Cassandra ran, launching herself onto him. He caught her with easy strength and held her close before becoming rigid as he buried his nose in her neck. Silently he handed her to Markus who scooped her to his arms and similarly sniffed her neck. Markus looked up to stare at Ty and Cyn with a set jaw while he clasped Cassandra more tightly to his chest.

“Hey, what is the matter with you both? And where is Raphael?” Cassandra tried without success to squirm out of Markus’s arms.

Cassandra noted with concern the low growl coming from Ty’s throat. His muscles were bunched like he was ready to attack, and although silent, Cyn did not look much better.

A laughing voice broke the suddenly tense atmosphere, “Speak of the devils and ...” Raphael dropped to the ground from the top of one of the surrounding tall rocks. “Why are you both looking at Ty and Cyn that way? Hand me my baby sister.”

“You may act like the irritating older brother I never had, but for the last time, I’m not your sister!” Cassandra yelled both in irritation at Raphael’s teasing and relief at his interruption of Darius’s and Markus’s strange behavior. “And, you’ll note, my legs are perfectly fine.” She looked at Marcus’s too-serious face. “Please put me down!”

Markus ignored Cassandra’s order and handed her off to Raphael. He sent a puzzled look toward Darius who just nodded at Cassandra, and then he too buried his face against her neck. When he raised his head, he was no longer laughing.

“What was done to you, my little sister, in such a short time frame? You smell of two wolves. More than that, their scent is not just on you, but it is coming from your pores, as if their blood is in you like a *chosen* mate, but for two, not one.”

He placed her feet on the ground by Darius, who put an arm around her and cuddled her near while Raphael joined Markus in staring at the other men with contained menace.

Ty started to lunge toward the group. “They are trying to take Cassandra!” But Cyn caught his arm.

“They consider her family. Do not attack. Let them talk with her first.” Cyn spoke calming words although his face was cold as stone, and his fingers dug into Ty’s arm with the force of his anger.

Darius swung away, blocking Cassandra’s view of the men with his own body and whispered, “Cassandra, my dear one, did they force this on you? From the time we were lovers, your body will remember my scent. It is possible I could break the bonding to them, although you might finish by being bound to me. I would allow you freedom as Cyn or even Ty never would. I know I never explained why I left so abruptly after we escaped from being snowbound. I was afraid of binding you as they have, but I could not tell you. The secret of the scent addiction is only known to the brethren and their *chosen*. If I told you, I would have had to bind you to me.”

Cassandra laid a hand gently on Darius’s cheek and stroked down his face. “In the first place, you brethren did not keep your secrets as well as you think. My hearing may not be as sharp as yours, but I overheard and observed enough to know about the addiction and why you almost ran from me when you could. That was why I was never angry with you and so remained so ‘amazingly trusting,’ as you put it, of the big, bad leader of the brethren.” Darius turned red to hear his words praising her turned back at him.

“On this trip, I was wounded badly by a raver. They gave me their blood to save my life. Even if that had not happened, I wanted them, and they wanted me. I do not wish to give them up, and Cyn and Ty understand my need for freedom better than you might think. After our bonding grows, Cyn has already spoken of my being able to travel from them on trading journeys. I am pleased with them. There is no need to fight.”

Darius stepped back, although his face was still full of doubts.

Cassandra raised her voice so that all would know she spoke to everyone there, although with their sensitive beast hearing, she knew they had heard everything whispered just a moment before. “Listen well, everyone. I want you all to know that Ty and Cyn gave me the choice before they gave their blood to me to heal my wound. I took them. They did not force me to be their *chosen*; they are mine. So you three” -- she said, glaring at Darius, Raphael, and Markus -- “can stow your outraged attitudes. I wonder if any of you will show so much consideration when you find your mates.” She gave Darius a light squeeze on his arm, a quick hug to Markus, and playful slap on Raphael’s back and then went back across the clearing to where Ty and Cyn stood, visibly barely holding themselves in check

They crushed her between them, rubbing their faces on either side of hers. *They are scent marking me again*, she thought with amusement. *If one of them starts to open his pants, I'm going to have to kill him.*

Ty growled in her ear, "You never said you had been the lover of the leader of the brethren. I will not give you up now, Cassandra."

She grabbed a handful of his hair and of Cyn's and tugged sharply to get their attention. "Now it's your turn to listen. I had a life before I met you, but I chose you. I let myself be bound to you. Darius and I were trapped in a cabin together by a snowstorm and an avalanche. The full-moon night came before we could get out, and yes, we were lovers for a short while, but it is not something either of us sought to continue. We are close, yes, but not frustrated lovers." While the intensity faded from Ty and Cyn's grip, she noted they still carefully kept her between them and did not take their eyes off the other men.

"My companion, why did you not mention how very close you are to the brethren's leader?" Cyn's silky voice slid over her skin. Unlike his normally warm tones when he spoke to her, his voice held a touch of ice. The instinctive fear it generated made her angry.

"I had no way of knowing who would get our message, and initially, I had no reason to discuss all my connections with you!"

"Ah," his voice softened and regained some warmth. "Now all your 'connections' are mine as well. We'll have to make time to discuss this, soon."

A shiver ran down her spine. Cyn was right. What affected one of them affected them all in the *chosen* bond, yet there was steel behind his words indicating a need greater than just a reasonable need to know.

Darius's eyes narrowed. "Your paranoid need to control is beyond belief, Cyn. Take care how you treat Cassandra. If she is unhappy with her decision, we will do whatever is necessary to break her free from you."

"Oh, how noble, Darius --" Cyn was interrupted when Cassandra slapped a hand over his mouth. "Stop before either of you says something unforgivable." She glared at Darius, Markus, and Rafael, who all looked ready to jump her men. "I know this adjustment will take effort on all our parts. I know Cyn is not a trusting or relaxed personality."

Ty snorted.

She rolled her eyes. "And Ty is demanding also."

Cyn's lips quirked into a partial smile.

"But I have *chosen* them, and you know, I will not let them or you or anyone else make my decisions for me."

Markus deep voice intoned, "Cassandra, you know you are well respected among the brethren, and we have respected your need for independence even though you could travel more safely with us. Cyn is different. While he does not intend you harm, it is both his nature and a requirement of his position to be very controlling of everything around him. Ty

does not so openly show it, but his need to possess and control is very like Cyn's. You may need them also, but this will not be an easy pair for you. You may come to me if you need to discuss anything."

No one spoke for a moment as the men exchanged looks of understanding. Markus was a seer. All the brethren had enhanced senses, but he had something more. He could see beyond the appearance, scent, and sound of a person to know their heart. He often could intuit what their future would hold, or at least, where their current path would lead them and if they should go a different way. His acceptance of Cassandra's decision cooled everyone's mounting anger.

The morning campfire still burned brightly. Ty sighed heavily and squeezed Cassandra's shoulder. "Let's sit and talk a bit. We've just heard some new information from the raver that must be investigated." He looked around the small group. "It is of interest to the brethren as well as to the kingdom at large."

Darius stepped closer to the fire, then stopped and smiled at him. "Remember you are now brethren also, Ty. That makes me your leader, doesn't it?"

Cyn stiffened and froze next to Cassandra. *Oh, no, not when they are just beginning to act in a reasonable manner.* "Darius, no teasing."

Cyn spoke quickly. "Yes, my bond brother is still mine, and even closer now, since he is brethren, and we share a *chosen*. Let's not rehash an old conflict."

Darius gave a short, self-deprecating smile. "Sorry, you're right. Sometimes my beast intrudes. What's your news?"

Raphael took Cassandra's arm to hold her back as the others went to sit by the fire to talk. He looked over at Ty and Cyn and then raised his eyebrows in silent question. Is all truly well, little sister?

She nodded and gave him an open smile that said, Yes, I am truly happy with them.

She felt the remaining tension leave his shoulders. He gave her a one-armed hug and went to join the others. Cassandra also joined the little group and sat between Ty and Cyn.

In spare sentences, Ty told them of the raver killed the previous night. "This raver was clearly mad, as they all are, but he claimed there is an organized group of ravers living along the border with Ibsen. The border troubles could have hidden most of their kills. So far as I know, no large group of ravers has ever organized in this fashion."

Cyn nodded grimly. "It would indicate at least some of them are retaining an unusual degree of lucidity. Imagine a group of hungry beasts with the minds of men who have just embraced being killers."

Darius's expression mirrored Cyn's. "It's a possibility we have discussed, but haven't had to deal with." He explained to Cassandra. "While most who turn raver are killers because their minds have snapped, unable to deal with the presence of a beast within them, there are those men who were little more than killers to begin with. The presence of an inner wolf

does not so much confuse them as enhance their killer instincts. They do not truly go mad, just become more of what they already were.” He looked at Ty. “It can also affect those of us who kill as part of our profession in that way. We were very concerned when we heard you were bitten.” Left unsaid was what the three of them had been prepared to do if Ty had lost himself in his beast.

Cassandra felt a shiver run through the arm Ty had pressed against her. She threaded her fingers through his in reassurance and whispered, “It did not happen. It will not happen. You are brethren, not raver.” At her soft words, she felt him relax again.

The others pretended not to notice her quiet aside. Instead, Darius cleared his throat to speak. “As far as investigating this claim of an organized group of ravers, since Isben has broken with the Brethren Accords, we are not welcome there. In any case, if a large group of brethren went into the area, any raver group might simply run and hide until we were gone. We need a spy, someone who can creep up upon a human or *changer* and then be gone before his presence is known. A really sneaky individual.” A wicked smile crossed Darius’s face. “Rafe, I volunteer you.”

Chapter Three

Perfection of communication would solve over half of the problems of the seven nation's good men and women.

-- The Book of Common Wisdom

The main problem being there are so few good men and women.

-- The Common Man or Woman's Response

Present time: At the duke's keep

Cassandra paced the bedroom floor, suddenly stopping with a huff. She looked around. The room was lovely: a sitting area with wide leather chairs and sofa, walls with tall bookshelves and tapestries. There was a desk, a large fireplace with a black fur rug, and of course, a giant, beast-sized four-poster curtained bed covered in the duke's signature colors of red, purple, gold, and black. The colors were the same as the king's, except for the black. She briefly wondered if his majesty was peeved by the Dukedom's use of the royal purple. She smiled. Cyn, one of her *chosen* and the current duke, wouldn't care. Whatever he wanted, he took or arranged to have. He even had a private bathing, and personal-relief chamber with hot water pumped from the belowground chambers of the keep. The whole keep ran smoothly. Anything she asked for was delivered immediately and with a smile. Why, then, was she so restless?

At first when she, Cyn, and Ty had reached the keep, she was so busy satisfying the needs of her *chosen* and learning her way around, the closeness of the place hadn't chafed. As Cyn had promised, she was able to spend more time each day apart from her men. They spent more hours apart and then came together with a fierce hunger. She blushed

remembering the times when Cyn had simply ordered everyone from the passage or hall so he and Ty could take her where they stood. She snorted; they probably only ordered the others out for her sake. They seemed to think fucking anywhere was their right, and to the seven hells with everyone else. No wonder women around the keep looked at them with longing and at her with jealousy.

Even so, the walls had begun to close in. Cyn kept finding reasons for her to stay in the keep. "Please review my remedy room." "Could you help Adeena with the fall trade fair?" "Please review my current trade contracts." Neither he nor Ty wanted her more than a hand span away. And now some royal messengers were passing back and forth between the keep and the royal house. Cyn hadn't spoken to her about them, and she felt confused as to her official status with him. She was accepted and honored as Ty's *chosen* and Cyn's mistress. Well accepted, with a few exceptions. The people of the keep didn't know Cyn was also a beast, and she was his *chosen*. She'd seen the speculation in the eyes of some. They wondered when Cyn would tire of his common trader and look for entertainment elsewhere or, even more importantly, when he would take on a more permanent match. This last bothered her most of all.

"He says he is mine. He gives his body freely while demanding Ty's and mine, but he is the duke, and he must marry." *Why has he not spoken of it? Is it just too painful? Well, painful or not, I'm tired of waiting to hear how we'll handle this. I will not have it continue to hang over me like an anvil on a fraying rope. And, dammit, I'm getting out of here for a while and going for a ride.*

She swiftly pulled her riding boots out of the wardrobe and was pulling them on when a knock sounded on the door. *Hells' demons, if that's yet another bit of busy work Cyn's dreamed up, I'll scream.* "Enter."

Cela, one of the maids who sent her jealous glances when she thought no one was looking, came in accompanied by a man in sturdy work clothes. His deeply tanned face was weathered like a man who spent most of his time outside. She could see dirt stains on his dark green pants and dirt around his nails. Cela tried to hide a look of irritation as she rushed to stay ahead of his quick strides. "My lady, may I present Harrow, one of the duke's huntsmen. He has a request of you." She moved to the side quickly. It was either that or risk being run over as he rushed over to Cassandra.

She almost jumped back in alarm, but his eager face was open and non-threatening so she just put up her hand gesturing him to slow down. "What is it you want, Harrow?"

"My lady, I was hunting a deer and found some fox's blood plants at the point of blossoming. I do not know how to harvest their pollen properly, but heard you deal in medicinal herbs. Can you help me?"

Cassandra was grabbing her cape before he finished speaking. Her heart raced and joined in his excitement. Fox's blood was a common plant that rarely blossomed. They more commonly propagated by new stems popping up from the existing root system as it grew out

and spread. When it did blossom, the flowers only opened for a short time. Their pollen, if it was properly harvested, acted as a universal poison cure. Harvesting was a delicate procedure, and any misstep could spoil it, so supplies were exceedingly rare.

“How far from here?”

“Less than an hour’s ride. If we hurry, we will make it.” She grabbed a slip of paper from the desk, dashed a quick note for Cyn and Ty, and left it on the mantel above the fire. Grabbing the small tool and herb bag she always kept ready, she hurried with Harrow out the door, leaving Cela open-mouthed behind them.

* * * * *

The nerve of that woman to brush by me as if I was a piece of furniture! I cannot believe the duke ignores me now for that graceless clod. Her eyes grew crafty. My lord’s lust is ever simmering. Perhaps if he does not know when she will be back, he will turn to someone else. I will be close by to welcome him if he does. She picked up Cassandra’s note and carefully dropped it into the fire. *Oops, too bad, but sometimes the rooms’ drafts will blow things about.* Smiling smugly, she exited the room. *I must make sure that I come to dust and straighten the duke’s chambers later, just before he comes to dress for dinner.*

* * * * *

“Where *is* she?” Black fury filled his mind. She should be here. He needed to know where she was. She was supposed to be here. She was gone.

Ty breathed in deeply, attempting to calm his beast. It had been hours since she was in their chambers. When the royal messenger had arrived, Cassandra left him and Cyn, saying she had correspondence of her own to work on.

If Cassandra left them, she would sicken and possibly die. He and Cyn would also be in danger of losing their humanity, their sanity.

Why would she go?

He was a newly turned beast and even more at risk than Cyn, who had been born with an inner beast.

How could she just leave?

His tie to her kept him stable, kept him human. He felt this should be telling him something. It should be important, but the only thoughts his mind could hold were that she was gone, and he must get her back.

Damn! Her small travel bag was gone. Did she think to sneak away? He would find her. *Where? Why would she go?* He paced the day away. Panic and despair ate at his soul. His mate, his *chosen*, had rejected him. She’d left. Life was worthless. He had been judged unworthy.

His face twisted in a sneer. She would not leave him like this. He would hunt her down and take her back. He would take her again and again. Drown her in the pleasure of his beast scent. When he was done with her, she would never leave him again.

No, no. He forced his beast back down. *Cassandra would not just leave. Something has happened, but what? It doesn't matter. Getting her back is what matters.*

Ty continued to pace, so distracted he did not notice when the *change* occurred. His torso, arms and legs became furred, his canines elongated to become fangs, and an angry snarl came continuously from his throat.

He threw open the door to the storage closet and went in to grab his travel pack.

He had to get her now! He would never let her out of his sight again.

He was shoving a few random shirts and pants into the pack when there was a brief rap on the door, and a smiling, small redheaded maid entered. Lucinda walked in a few steps, then paled and stopped.

"My lord...perhaps I should come back later." Her words squeaked out as she backed towards the door.

Ty stilled then, his eyes narrowed and fixed on her like a predator spotting weak, vulnerable prey. "Why do you run, Lucinda?" His voice was oily and cruel. He dropped the clothes and quietly advanced on the woman.

She stepped back until she met the wall, her eyes growing larger with each step. "My lord Tyler. You were growling! Please excuse me, my lord. Shall I fetch the duke for you?" Ty's hands captured her arms against the wall, not squeezing, but offering no escape. "Please stop!"

He could hear her heart pounding, smell her fear, practically taste the blood just beneath the thin skin of her neck. Hunger uncoiled within him.

The room's door burst open and slammed against the wall. Through the thick fog of anger, he felt Cyn behind him. His arms reached beneath Ty's, and his hands locked behind his neck, forcing him to release the maid.

"Run!" Cyn ordered the frozen girl. "Find Cassandra and bring her here."

The duke's words released the maid from the terror that held her, and she sped out the door into the corridor, her "Yes, my lord!" following behind her.

Cyn shook Ty. "What, what has caused this, Ty? Your control has been perfect. Why is your beast so angry and out of control?"

Ty slumped in Cyn's arms. The sudden jolt of Ty's full weight caused Cyn to take a steadying step back. "She is gone." Ty's voice was a mournful cry. "Her scent has faded. She is not in the keep. Her travel pack is gone."

* * * * *

Cyn allowed Ty's body, still in man-beast form, to slide to the floor. He then visually searched the room. Cassandra's travel pack was gone from its accustomed place, and his own beast-enhanced senses told him she'd been gone for hours.

"Gone? Gone. She has been restless, but she would not go on a trip without us. She needs us still too often to go alone, and she knows we need her. Something must have called her away and then delayed her." Cyn looked in Ty's maddened eyes. "Hold on, my Bond Brother. I will find out what happened. Cassandra swore to take us. She would not discard us on a whim. Think. You know that."

"Tie me up, Cyn. Your presence pushed back the beast, but we're both angry, confused. I don't know what I will do." As he spoke, his voice grew to more of a growl. Cyn could see lucidity fading from his face.

Cyn was moving before he finished speaking. He opened a chest and snatched the Oryions rope and wound it around Ty. He *changed* one hand to its clawed form, quickly pierced his arm and squeezed a few drops of blood on the rope, then twisted it to animate its special properties. Now, no matter if Ty *changed* to wolf, human, or back to half-beast, the rope would hold him bound. He whispered in Ty's ear, "I'm sorry, my Bond Brother. I will keep you safe from this madness."

He moved Ty to the floor on the far side of the bed from the door. No one coming into the room would be able to see him. He knew Cassandra would never just leave them, but still something was keeping her away. Ruthlessly, Cyn pushed back his own fear and then began his questioning. He called back their room maid, the house steward, until finally a stable boy came with the stable master. He told Cyn Cassandra had left early that afternoon with one of the duke's huntsmen. In a shaky voice, the lad repeated her words, saying something about the blossoming time and that she would follow Harrow anywhere for a chance at it.

"No! She's mine, and I will not let her go." Ty's shout was full of first pain, then rage. The stable master and boy startled in alarm, then stepped back toward the door.

Fear filled Cyn's heart -- fear that his bond brother would disappear into his inner beast. He knew he must act quickly to get Ty back under control before he became unreachable.

"Out! Everyone out and leave us. No one except Cassandra may enter."

Free from watching eyes, Cyn untied Ty's legs and used his own beast's strength to pick him up and throw him facedown over the rail across the end of their bed. Cyn stood between Ty's legs, holding him down with one hand planted in the middle of Ty's back. He *changed* to his half-beast form as well and used his clawed hands to tear open Ty's tightly stretched pants and then his own. In this form, his strength and emotions were magnified: fear for his bond brother and his desire for him were another step away from any human morality or restraint. He allowed his beast scent to roll out his pores and saturate the air. Ty ceased struggling to be free, and his growls turned to hungry groans.

Cyn reached beneath Ty's thighs to lift them so only Ty's face rested on the bed. Ty's writhing abruptly stopped when Cyn licked first one of his balls and then the other. Cyn licked and allowed his fangs to gently slide over the delicate flesh in clear warning. Hungry fire filled Cyn's belly and hips. He needed to assert mastery over his bond brother and to feed the need that never really left him.

His hands shook as he sought the control to call forth only the hot oil that preceded a transformation, but to not *change* to either his full-wolf form or full-man form. He lowered Ty's hips back to the rail and bent once again to run his long tongue over Ty's balls, then back to his anus. He circled and stabbed the tight opening while his ears consumed the musical groans his lover gave just for him.

With Ty's body quivering before him, he stood and positioned his *change* oil-covered cock at the delicate opening to Ty's body. His clawed fingers tightened around Ty's thighs, and he harshly pushed in and began pumping, bringing both cries of distress and then pleasure from Ty's throat. The hot grip of Ty's body drew loud moans of delight from his own throat as he fought to remember the reason for this, not just the pleasure. He reached under Ty's belly to grip his thick cock. Using Ty's pre-cum for lubricant, he stroked him from root to tip in time with his own thrusts in Ty's ass. He felt Ty expand in his fingers, preparing to come. Determinedly, he clamped down on his own desire and tightly gripped the root of Ty's cock to stop him from coming while he continued thrusting in and out and over the spot guaranteed to bring Ty intense pleasure.

"Please!" A painful plea escaped from Ty's lips. *At last*, Cyn thought, *enough of the man has returned from within Ty for him to speak*. Now he must bring it home, reinforce his control and help hold Ty to sanity. His grip on Ty's cock did not lessen. "Please, what?"

"Let me come!"

"Who do you ask, Ty? Who is your lord?"

"You, Cyn. Let me come!"

Cyn burned to give him what he wanted and to find release with him, but there was more at stake than a moment of passion. While Cyn was born part beast and had had a lifetime to learn control, Ty was newly changed and his control was deeply tied to Cassandra. If Cyn could establish control over Ty's beast, it would give him a second anchor. Cyn gritted his teeth and continued. "That was not a request. Ask me and I might let you come."

A roar of fury came from Ty, and he twisted, seeking to free himself, but Cyn's fingers formed an unrelenting ring on Ty's cock while he held his place, thrusting. Finally Ty stilled again. "Cyn, my lord, please let me come."

"Yes." Cyn spoke with relief. He bent to cover Ty's torso with his own and bit into the muscle at the base of Ty's neck while he loosened his hold on Ty's cock. Under his hand, the restrained cum burst from Ty. Cyn finally allowed his own thrusts to speed to completion.

His balls tightened, and lightning ran through his body as he emptied himself into the heat of his bond brother.

A soft moan caught Cyn's attention, and he turned to look toward the door.

Chapter Four

Let your bonds be a source to add to your strength rather than a stress that pulls you apart.

-- The Book of Unions (given to all his majesty's subjects upon payment of the tax to record and officially recognize the blessing)

Both Ty and Cyn were covered with sweat, and the room filled with their beasts' scents. Cassandra panted, leaning back against the closed door. She stood transfixed watching her men, both in their powerful half-beast form. She had returned to the keep to find it in a quiet uproar. She was raced up to the duke's bedchambers with only the words that he and Ty had been searching for her -- that something was wrong with Ty, and she was needed now. She had entered in time to see Cyn force the submission of Ty and watch them coming together. The scene, the raw lust on their faces, ripped open the need within her that they always commanded. A soft moan fell from her lips. Cyn turned his head to focus on her, his eyes widening with surprise, then narrowing.

"Where were you?" Cyn's voice wasn't angry, but full of pain. "Why did you leave without a word?" The sound of his hoarse voice made her startle and jarred her mind out of its lust-induced haze.

Cassandra looked over to the mantel where she had left her note. It was hastily written, but should have told them enough. There was no sign of it there or on the rug before it. "I left you a note. I said I should be back before morning. I was even quicker than I thought. It is barely past dinner hour now. What happened here?"

She struggled to get past the overwhelming heat of desire, but found herself instead pulling off her clothes and crossing the room. She ran her hands over Ty's and Cyn's still-joined bodies, loving the sounds of their rough groans.

“Cassandra.” Ty’s voice made her name a prayer and an affirmation. “I found no note. My beast...we were going crazy thinking you left. I became unstable until Cyn did this.” Ty looked over his shoulder pointedly at Cyn. “You can release me now.”

Cyn smiled, his face full of relief he couldn’t hide. “Oh, I don’t know. I rather like you like this.” But, despite his teasing words he gently pulled his body free of Ty’s and then released Ty from his rope.

They both clasped a very confused Cassandra between them. Feeling the need to comfort, mixed with the aching scent-induced desire, she wrapped an arm around each and squeezed them tightly to her. “Feel me here. I will never leave you.”

Ty’s hand tangled in her hair and pulled her mouth up to his. His licked and nipped at her lips before joining his mouth with hers, his tongue tasting, touching, and caressing every inch of her mouth, communicating without words his need for her.

She felt a blaze of heat behind her and vaguely registered that Cyn must be shifting from his half-beast form to another. She broke the kiss with Ty and looked back. Cyn was, once more, in his human form.

“Shifting forms cleans my body. I would have it clean for I need you too, Cassandra. Do you just return to Ty or to me also?”

She gave him a smile full of passion and the love she hadn’t yet admitted. “Lie on the bed and find out.”

Cyn’s brows rose in surprise at the order. His hands slowly left her and Ty’s bodies as if reluctant to let go, but he obeyed. He eased his lean body back onto the bed beside them, his knees trailing off the side of the bed.

The beast scent was pounding at Cassandra’s mind. She could feel the wetness of her body’s anticipation between her thighs, but she fought to hang on a bit longer, to give both her men what they needed. She pressed a quick hungry kiss to Ty’s chest, then put her hands on his forearms and pushed down. “Release me.” Ty’s struggle to do as she wished was written over his face. Softly she ordered again. “Take back control of yourself, Ty. Release me.” With a swift puffing exhale, he did.

She twisted to run her hand over Cyn through the ruins of his ripped clothes. “Hands behind your head, Cyn.” Stiffly he complied, clearly wanting to grab her instead. She circled his sex with her hands, giving him a warning look when he started to remove his hands from his head. He subsided, and she began to stroke the flesh that filled and hardened for her. “Must I ever remind you that I have *chosen* you both?” Bending, she nipped his exposed nipple, then sucked to soothe it. Heat rose within her. She took a deep breath to hold onto her control, to not just sate her need with the willing body beneath her.

Releasing Cyn, she reached up to touch Ty’s shoulders. He had risen and now stood behind her, waiting. “Ty, take hold of my waist and lift me above our Cyn.” Ty, still in his half-beast form, easily positioned her over Cyn’s ready body. “Now, give me his body.” With perfect strength and control, he slowly lowered her onto Cyn’s cock until they were joined

hip to hip. Cyn's face was a mask of agonized delight, and Ty was breathing harshly in her ear. She slid her hands up Cyn's chest, only pausing slightly to tease the nipples as she passed over them and then up to grasp the wrists of his clasped hands. She leaned further down to kiss him, squeezing her cunt around his cock at the same time. Cyn gasped and pulled his hands free to hold her head and torso tightly against his body before straightening his arms to hold her above him.

"Gods, Cassandra!" He thrust up into her again and groaned.

"Stop." A fever of desire held her mind, and she used all her strength to stay coherent just a little longer.

She could hear Ty's rough breathing behind her, feel his heat, and the soft brush of his fur at her back, but he made no move to touch her. She knew Cyn had taken total control of him to save his sanity, but now, after that near loss, he was unsure of himself. She could give that confidence back to him with her trust. She leaned over Cyn once more so that her ass was exposed to the half-beast behind her.

"Ty, can you partially *change* so that you're covered with the *change* oil?"

A pained groan and waves of heat were her answer, and then she felt his rough hand on her hip and the blunt wet tip of his cock circling, then nudging, her anus.

"Yes, gods, yes. Do it, Ty. Take me. Take us." Then, he was holding her pelvis and pushing in until he was fully seated in her body as well.

Cyn's hands joined Ty's on her hips, and they began to move in concert, so that Ty's thrusts rocked her up and down on Cyn's cock. They had loved like this before, but the intensity of the moment tore a scream from her throat, and she was lost. Only building aching delight, the firm bodies of her lovers, and their hands on her held any place in her mind. Cyn moved his hands to tightly pinch her nipples while Ty's fangs cut into her neck muscles, sending her over the crest. Her orgasm caused her muscles to seize and convulse around her men, while her cries echoed off the chamber walls and down the hallway. The rapture held her prisoner until her men shuddered and came with hot bursts of semen in her body. She collapsed over Cyn's body while Ty briefly draped over them both before carefully pulling free. She felt waves of heat from behind her like he was undergoing a *change*, but didn't have the energy to lift her head from Cyn's sweat-slicked chest to look.

Cyn curled in a sit-up, taking Cassandra with him until she started to slide from his body as he stood. Then, he caught her with one arm under her hips and the other behind her back. He held her head beneath his chin and nuzzled her, more like a cat than the wolf she knew him to be. But still, it was endearing. "Let's get you cleaned up, and you can tell us what happened to cause this misadventure." He carried her into his private bath where Ty, back in his human form, had stepped down into a marble tub filling with steaming water.

"Hand her to me, Cyn." Although composed once more, Ty's face was still shadowed from his earlier ordeal. With playful nip at what she knew to be Cyn's very sensitive nipples,

Cassandra twisted and reached her arms toward Ty, who carefully put arms beneath her knees and behind her back before sinking onto the wall bench in the heated water.

Cyn sat pressed close to Ty and took Cassandra's calves across his lap. The hands of both men restlessly stroked along her body in a confirmation that she was indeed there.

They were all silent for a moment, just content to be safe together. Then Ty squared his shoulders and pinned Cassandra with his gaze. "What happened? You have not left the keep without one of us before. I know we promised that you would have more autonomy as the time you had been our *chosen* grew, but why disappear with no word?" Ty's face grew distressed, but he swallowed and continued. "As the hours passed, my beast began to take over my mind. I have seen how restless you were lately, and the thought that you had decided to leave, that you had rejected our bond, took over. My human side knows that would not be your way, but the beast is not so reasonable. What happened?"

She reached up to press her hands on either side of his face and spoke solemnly. "I have given my word to be your *chosen*. I would not leave you. You must know that. I left a note on the mantel to tell you what I was doing. What could have happened?"

"I don't know, but I will find out." Even knowing it was not directed toward her, the tightly controlled fury in Cyn's voice sent shivers racing down her spine. He continued. "Tell me everything that occurred."

She pulled herself up straight like a queen on her throne and marshaled her thoughts. Quickly she related the meeting with Harrow. "We rode hard and were able to reach the blossoms in time to collect a good quantity of the pollen. We used my scales to measure what we harvested. It was on your lands so you will get the lion's share, Cyn, with the finder's share and half the harvest share to Harrow and another half of the harvest share to me. The pollen is in my pouch now. What I don't understand is what could have happened to my note."

Cyn and Ty had briefly shown surprised appreciation of the fox's blood find, but their faces were back to set, angry lines by the time she finished speaking.

"Cela." Although Cyn spoke, the look he and Ty shared spoke of the same thoughts. "She used to sometimes share our bed and no word came from her when we started searching for you, although I remember seeing her at the door when I sent out the call for you." The three rose from the water to dry. There was someone they needed to speak with.

Cela was nowhere within the keep. Barillus, the head cook, said she saw her speaking with the very frightened Lucinda shortly after the order to find Cassandra had gone out. Barok, one of the duke's personal guards, brought a trembling Lucinda to the duke's chambers. Timidly the small woman looked around the bulk of the gigantic guard and curtsied. "Good evening, Your Grace, Lady Cassandra, my lord Tyler. It is good to see you looking yourself again, sir. Um, are you feeling quite alright now?" She looked as though she would like to bolt, but managed to stand firm, if a little behind Barok.

Ty looked chagrined and remorseful knowing that he had caused this behavior from the usually cheerful maid. "Lucinda, I must apologize for frightening you today. I was very upset that Cassandra was missing, and since you carried some of her scent, I thought you might have been hiding something from me. I meant only to make you reveal what you knew."

The fearful look on Lucinda's face retreated to be replaced with one of relief. "Oh, no, my lord! I would not keep such secrets from you. The scent must have come from carrying Lady Cassandra's laundry down earlier." Then her words rushed out like water spilling past a dam. "Does that mean, I mean, I, we, we all thought that you were turning raver after all! You are all right?"

Ty offered a self-deprecating smile. "Yes, you know that once a brethren, always a Brother Wolf. But, there are some questions that I think you could help us with if you would."

Her relieved smile now stretched from ear to ear. "Of course. How can I help?"

"Cela spoke with you after you left here. What did she say?"

"Gods, it didn't make sense at the time. I said I feared Lord Tyler was turning mad, a raver. She said she only wanted to touch her lord again, that she never thought her being missing would cause this. She must have meant Cassandra's, I mean, Lady Cassandra's absence. She looked very frightened, but then, so was I. She left me saying she was going to look around the gardens for her, and that was it."

Ty rose from his chair, walked over to the maid, and bowed over her hand. "I deeply apologize for having frightened you, Lucinda." He looked up, offering her a contrite and charming smile. "Will you forgive me?"

She blushed prettily, apparently having forgotten her earlier fear. "Oh, of course, my lord."

After Lucinda left, Cyn turned to the guard. "Find Cela and then bring her to me immediately." Barok nodded and left.

Cassandra looked over the fireplace. When the door thumped closed behind Barok, she spoke. "Look here. There is a charred bit of paper about the size of my note. Do you think she deliberately burned it? What did she think that would accomplish? Did she think just because I disappeared for a short time that she could take my place?"

Ty slid his arms around her waist. "It may well have been just that." He nipped her ear and she felt his lips against her neck form a smile. "You know how jealous women give into the stupid impulses of a moment."

Irritated, she turned and pushed at his immovable body. "Jealous impulses indeed!" Then she saw the teasing light in his eye and calmed.

Cyn cleared his throat for their attention. "More importantly, I think Lucinda bought your line that you were only trying to get information from her and in no danger of losing

control completely. Cela may have just been playing what she thought was a harmless trick, but she has exposed a weakness here, nonetheless.” Cassandra motioned with an impatient wave of her hand for Cyn to continue.

“Because Ty became bound to you through the *chosen* bond so soon after he was changed to a Brother Wolf, he has as much control over his inner beast as someone who has been brethren for years. But, that control is tied to you, Cassandra. If you disappeared, his beast might become uncontrollable. What Lucinda feared, that Tyler might become a mad raver, a beast who kills without conscience, very nearly happened.” The concept hung thick in the air as they all considered the implications of Ty becoming mad, a ravenous killer without thought or mind.

“But you were able to bring him back to himself before I got back. Maybe it was for the best. Now you know you don’t have to be completely dependent on me.”

Cyn shook his head. “No, that is where you are wrong, Cassandra. Having been born with my beast, I have better control and was able to help Ty for a while today. But, I’m bound to you also. If I truly thought you had run, I would not, I could not, just accept it. No one would be safe.” His expression turned inward as he spoke, almost as though he were relating a nightmare. Stopping, he shook himself and focused once more on her. “But I trust you. I know your pledge is good.”

Touched and troubled by Cyn’s blunt assessment, she found herself speaking of something that had been on her mind. “Cyn, but you are the duke here. You must eventually marry. There was even gossip of an alliance between you and the younger princess of Birne during my last trading journey before we met. I am guessing you put that off because of Ty’s change to brethren and his *chosen* bond to me, but no one knows that you are brethren born and that I am your *chosen* as well as Ty’s. Will you not be forced to marry at some point? How will we deal with that?”

A wicked smile tugged at Cyn’s lips “Ah, I’m so glad you have brought this subject up.” A wary prickle ran along Cassandra’s spine. When Cyn smiled like that, no one was safe.

Chapter Five

Who knows what lies behind the pleasant face?

-- Old saying

Cyn walked over to the sideboard and poured wine for the three of them. After handing glasses to Ty and Cassandra, he raised his. "To us, to our union."

Puzzled, Cassandra joined him and Ty in the toast and then narrowed her eyes. "What is going on here?"

Ty pulled her close again with one arm and tucked her head under his chin. Cyn stared into his wine. Cassandra's sense of foreboding increased. "Just say it. Is the king pressing you into some political marriage?"

He laughed, amused, but clearly uneasy. Ty's stiff hold on her did nothing to make her feel better.

Finally, Cyn spoke. "You are correct that Ty's change to brethren and his known bond to you have made it easy for me to step away from the proposed Birne alliance. Princess Betiste's family wants closer ties to our country, and even more, access to my personal military force." Cyn's lips twisted into a tight smile. "However, the thought of being so closely tied to one of the brethren as she would be with Ty being my bond brother makes them uneasy. Hah, little do they know how close to a brethren she would be, if she married me." Cyn's smile broadened.

Cassandra merely raised her eyebrows and waited for the other coin to drop.

"The king is pleased to have the marriage not take place since it would give me even more visible power, and my power makes him worry already. However, he did pointedly note that the Lady Melisande, who is visiting here, would make an excellent match for someone.

"Melisande! He wants you to marry her?" She felt a sudden, violent hatred of the woman. Cyn made a placating "wait-a-moment" gesture. Ty rubbed her arms, and she calmed enough to listen.

"Being outside the court gossip, you may not know the history of this, Cassandra. Melisande is actually the current king's half-sister, the old king's bastard reminder of a night of drinking excess. He arranged for her adoption by the childless Lord and Lady Tybolt. Her true heritage is well known at court but not spoken of, since the current king is also fond of her." Cassandra felt cold fingers of dread within her. Cyn always had plans within plans. Surely he had a plan to deal with this? She reached up to touch one of Ty's hands and forced herself to listen.

"If I marry Melisande, the king will have an ear in my household -- which will not do at all. Instead, I had my agents plant the suggestion that if I marry even an illegitimate heir to the throne, it would give me a greater claim on it than my distant relationship to the king already does. The king enjoys openly wielding his power and thus suspects everyone else would want that as well." Cyn smiled mockingly. "He decided he did not like the idea of my being closer to throne in any way after all."

Ahhhh. Cassandra almost smiled at Cyn's machinations, but had an uneasy feeling that this was leading up to something more.

"This has cleared the path to what I really want, and with these recent ideas that I arranged to plant in his mind, it will make the king happy because it will not gain me any visible power."

Cyn put down his glass and clasped Cassandra's shoulders. "Cassandra, I want to marry you."

Her mouth dropped open. She had no noble blood. She was not even from a family of wealth or power! "Cyn, are you joking? If you are, this is in poor taste. At the keep, everyone calls me *Lady* because they know I am yours and Ty's, but the court will not recognize that. No one will accept it!"

"You are wrong. All the royal messengers you have seen traveling back and forth? I have been working for this since you joined with Ty and me. I know you thought that my urgings to learn all the details of my trade agreements, to know how this place is run, that it was only a ploy to keep you busy so you wouldn't miss traveling as a trader. It was much more. I wanted you to see all that you could do here and still have the bargaining that you love. I want you here as my duchess. My beast will accept no other mate but you, now. Think on it."

"And I want this as well, Cassandra." Ty's voice was a seduction in her ear. "You are already acknowledged as my *chosen*. Because he must keep his nature secret, Cyn cannot call you his *chosen* openly, but it is his duty to marry someday. If you will marry him, we can continue to all be together openly, with no continuous parade of potential brides passing through here."

Cyn snorted. "Or worse yet, the contriving young ladies who try to get me alone so they can be 'compromised.' Those who have tried it learned not to play such games with me, but still there are new schemes each year."

Shock ran through Cassandra's body. She knew Cyn would never give her up totally, but she had braced herself to accept the necessity of his marriage. To be a duchess! She could almost feel the shackles of responsibility along with the touch of their hands. Her feelings ran hot and cold throughout her body, and then one thought coalesced out of the tangle. *He has been planning this all along, and he had not told me. Neither of them did!*

Cassandra let the fury take her. It was easier and less frightening than really considering Cyn's proposal. "Damn you both! How could you keep this secret from me? You would marry me so you both can call me mate to the world? I am NOT interested in a political marriage. Do you think you have only to snap your fingers, and I will agree? How dare you!" She was prepared to go on until she saw the sudden pain in Cyn's face as he dropped his hands from her shoulders while Ty's hands tightened and his agonized "*No!*" gasped in her ear.

Anger, seduction, manipulation, threats -- she could handle all of these. But not their pain. She remembered Cyn earlier, on the bed, his deeply ingrained fear that she would never accept his true self, the man born with an inner beast. Her anger crumbled. She thought of Ty's intensely honorable nature and knew he would not have been deliberately unfair to her. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply to calm herself.

"I am sorry I let my temper rule. What were you two thinking to not tell me what you planned?" She placed a hand on the cheek of each of her men, needing to touch, to reconnect.

"This is as much my fault as Cyn's."

Surprised, Cassandra's head snapped back to see Ty's face.

"I challenged Cyn to find a way to make you happy with us. I excel in battle plans. Cyn is much better at other sorts of operations. We both thought this was already such a huge change that we wanted to give you a chance to learn something of the life here, a chance to see where your background and skills would fit, and let you be comfortable before we suggested additional ties. I was afraid too much more at once would send you running. Was I wrong?" He rubbed cheek gently against her cradling palm.

"Seven hells! For someone who claims to not be so good at 'these operations,' you do it very well. As you well know, telling me you fear something may be too much for me makes me want to prove the opposite is true." She reached down to hold his chin and give his head a little shake in frustration. "You have been studying manipulation with Cyn."

"That's not all, Cassandra. Although I thought I could arrange things so his majesty would bless a match between us, I could not be sure. I just got the final word this morning. We have the king's blessing. Will you marry me? Be mine in the eyes of the world."

She thought a look of command rather than trepidation sat much better on Cyn. She found herself wanting to say *yes* to ease the fear of rejection he tried so hard to hide, but she just couldn't see herself as a duchess. "Cyn, Ty, think. I know nothing of court politics and have little patience for the niceties of ladylike behavior. Do you truly see me this way?"

Cyn brightened at this. "Consider for a moment, Cassandra. You deal with the leaders of small and large towns all throughout your trade routes. If there is any courtier more prickly aware of his own self-importance than some of that group, I do not know him. You have experience with a variety of people that most diplomats would envy.

"You can still travel and oversee all the dukedom's trade deals, and as duchess, you will have many more resources to investigate possible medicines than you ever had before.

"But most of all, I hope you want me as well as Ty, just the three of us exclusively. If you reject me, it will be a constant battle to keep away those who want to be joined to the dukedom for money, for power, for prestige -- those who do not care for us as individuals.

"What will you sentence us to, Cassandra? Even if it means a war with another noble or my king, I will have no bride but you." Cyn grabbed her hand and pulled it to his cheek. "Will you have me?"

* * * * *

In another part of the keep, a lady quietly worked at her correspondence. The letters in her note detailing the duke's hospitality were formed with exquisite elegance. The note's contents were full of light bits of gossip that could only amuse the reader. The border around the note was detailed with lovely hand-drawn trailing vines and flowers, as was the custom of the best-trained daughters of the best houses. If there was a surprisingly geometric form to some of the spaces between the leaves and petals, it only showed how very well trained this particular daughter was. That is all that showed unless you were one of the two people who knew the code of those geometric shapes. The true letter contained within the border said much more than the light gossip in the written body:

"Dearest Brother, he has a weakness. His bond brother can be driven mad if their woman goes missing. He will be distracted and vulnerable. He has rejected me, so we cannot take over the dukedom through him. But, my other dear brother will likely push him to offer troops to make up for his rejection of the Birne connection. If we take their woman, his men will stumble, Birne will fall, and we can take over.

"All my love, dearest. Melisande."

She sealed the letter, addressed to her old nanny, Pelia, who lived in the country of Birne, and put it with the rest of the mail. Those who read the outgoing mail from the duke's keep would see nothing to take exception to in the contents. It would be carefully resealed and sent out, but never reach old Pelia. Melisande might be a bastard half-sister to one king,

but she was determined to be remembered as more than that before she died. Her other brother, the one no one knew of, would help make sure of that.

Chapter Six

Who can know the heart of a beast?

-- Common saying when dealing with the brethren

Present time

Miranda's Cottage

Raphael lay quietly, his arms and legs wrapped protectively around Miranda. He shifted to his human form, thinking it would be less alarming for her to wake to it rather than his half-beast. He had managed to sleep for a while, deeply weary after months of resting with one ear cocked for the sound of approaching raver footsteps. His body relaxed on the bed, but inside him, his beast was insistent in its needs: sex, or chase and kill. Only partially appeased by the earlier feast, the beast demanded more, and he would have this need met one way or another.

Raphael's human side gave a quick prayer of thanks to Luna and Lana, the twin goddesses who threw out their nets of stars and guided all hunters of the night. Miranda not only fit his basic need for a woman, but her manner and the books around her cottage spoke of a lively mind. She was brave, beautiful, and *her scent*... He buried his face in her hair once more. It made him think of sex and homecoming and something wild. Her scent was incredible. He sighed against her neck. He knew he must complete his mission, report on the raver activity, but he would return here to her. He had to convince her to see him, the man, not just a creature driven by the harsh needs of the beast's hunger. He refused to consider what this meant to him. He only acknowledged the need.

He let his hands run over her body, enjoying the silken texture of her skin and hair. *Now*. He cupped her mound with one hand and slipped the other under her body to reach

around and gently squeeze a nipple. His beast scent spilled from his body. He eased his throbbing cock between the round globes of her ass. His breath had already switched to a harsh panting. He was still closer to the edge than was safe.

Miranda moved restlessly against him. *She is waking*. His hand was filled with the wet proof her body had heard his call. She made small moaning sounds and twisted in his arms.

Fever clouded his mind. He closed his mouth over the skin of her neck and fought not to bite down. Hunger swelled into one long ache throughout his body. Desperately, he lifted her leg, opening her to him, pulled back his hips just enough to position himself and thrust. He gasped. The relief the wet, hot clasp her body provided was so great it was almost painful, but the hunger drove him on. He couldn't stop thrusting.

A feminine gasp sounded, and her body jerked in his arms. Miranda had awakened. Reflexively he tightened his hold. The beast wouldn't allow his female to escape, but she didn't struggle, she reached up, grabbed his hair, and pulled his lips to her neck. Relief and joy filled the man and beast. She still accepted him!

He moved his hand from her leg back to her mound, delving between the wet folds to stroke her in time with his thrusts, pushing her pelvis back onto his cock at the same time as he pumped forward. He felt her stiffen again, and then she let out a long cry. Her body clenched fiercely around him, demanding what he would freely give. His balls tightened, the need wrapping around his gut until the blazing agony broke free, and he surrendered his release to her, howling with rapture and relief.

* * * * *

Miranda's breath came in short gasps, her body still trembling with aftershocks. She had awakened to the warmth of his touch, to the intoxication of both his scent and the carnal memories of last night. "Traveler, what is your name?"

His chuckle shook his body down to the cock still buried within her. "Raphael, like one of the old god's angels. Miranda, thank you for taking me. I am used to working alone, to being without the resources or comfort of regular companions, but I pushed too far this time. My beast was wild for release...he still hungers."

He moved within her again and then slipped free and quickly rolled her on her back. He covered her body with his own, holding his weight on his knees, resting inside her thighs and on his forearms, bracketing her head. Her momentary shock at the sudden move turned to pleasure and anticipation when she saw the teasing glint the early morning light revealed in his eyes.

He leaned down to trace her lips with the wet, delicate touch of the tip of his tongue and then lightly nip and suck at the tender flesh. "Your guest still hungers, Lady. Will you feed him?"

Smiling against his mouth, she fought to form words and join in the game. “Ah, yes, um, as a good hostess, I would see my guest’s hunger satisfied.”

He moved his head away from her mouth’s reach. “Good.” With that single word he quickly trailed a kiss down her body to settle between her legs. His strong arms pinned her legs wide and he settled his mouth over her mound with a happy hum. He lapped and sucked at that tender flesh with the apparent joy of a gourmand at a feast.

Too long. It had been too long since she had a lover. *Oh!* Sweet delight cut through her body. Never had she a lover like this. *More, take more,* she silently urged.

He swirled his tongue around her clit and then all the way down to the circle of her anus. He teased and stabbed the tight rose, and she yelped in surprised delight. He moved again and slipped two fingers into her vagina, pulsing them against her inner walls while his mouth formed a seal over her clit, and he sucked it fiercely.

She grabbed handfuls of his hair, pulling him closer even while her body arched up. A growl came from his throat at her movement away. She moaned in loss when he moved his wet fingers from her body only to feel a slight burn while he inserted them into her anus. He renewed his sucking on her clitoris. She wound tighter, afraid to surrender to the passion, but the sucking continued with the new sensation of him stroking and stretching her ass.

He raised his head and replaced his mouth with the strong fingers of his other hand stroking and circling her clit. “Miranda.” His voice demanded her attention. She cocked up her neck and focused her dazed eyes on him. “Come for me now,” he ordered and squeezed the slippery nub of her clitoris.

She shattered under the hard waves of pleasure crashing through her and then melted in his hands. His mouth covered her mound again as he resumed lapping the cream of her body while she shook with mindless delight.

He looked up with a wicked smile that, dear Lady, was still hungry. Disbelief must have shown on her face because his smile gentled, if only slightly. “Your body is ready. Can you take just a little bit more? Once more, here.” He gave her a stroke with the fingers still buried in her ass. “My beast, he wants to have you here as well. Will you trust this last bit more to me?” His touch, the honest need in his eyes, seduced her again, and she found herself nodding.

His fingers slipped free of her body and then gently turned her over and pushed a pillow under her hips. He pulled her back up on her knees, ass in the air. A callused hand urged her head down onto the bed again when she pushed up on her hands. His rich voice whispered. “Rest. Just trust yourself to me.” A touch as soft as a mother’s stroked down her back and over her hips.

Lubricant? “Raphael, I, we need, I mean I have some oil that would work if...”

“Shh, there’s no need. My body can take care of this. A partial shift will coat my cock in the *change* oil. Trust me.” She felt a wave of heat coming from him, then a blunt nudging. “Relax. Let me in.” Hot, wet, and oh, so large, he pushed in. For a moment there was pain, then that sensation disappeared under the sweet, forbidden pleasure. She breathed deeply, and just before the lust took her mind, his musky scent saturated the air.

A loud cry of need roared from her throat. She tried to move, to thrust back, but an iron grip on her hips prevented all movement. “Hold still, Miranda. I don’t want to be too rough. Dear gods, the grip of your body is so...” His voice trailed off on a groan, and she felt him move. Small forays at first, that built in depth and force. She signaled her appreciation with soft keens. Orgasm hovered on the edge of awareness, so close. Her body stretched tight in need, reaching for just a bit more.

His hand cupped her and stroked her clitoris in time with his thrusts. Tighter, her nerves stretched until they could hold no more. She screamed and fell into the pleasure while he pumped furiously to join her, and then the liquid heat of his release filled her while his joyous shout filled her ears.

Raphael collapsed. The solid weight of his body draped over her back. He tightened his arms and cuddled her close. Greedy kisses covered her neck and shoulders while she shook with the aftermath. Gently he pulled free of her body and stroked her sides and back again, as if to quiet a skittish animal.

“Beauty, my beauty. Let me care for you. Where are the water and cloths for washing?”

His voice was hypnotic, soft, yet deeply masculine. She felt the vibration of his words down to her well-used core. She found herself answering without thought. “Beyond the second door behind us is a bathing room with all you will need.”

He slipped his strong arms around her and pulled her from the bed. “Eep!”

Raphael smiled at her surprise and walked across the floor with her cradled in his arms like a mere child. “Let me wash you. I would not have you suffer in any way from my attentions.” His grin was full of mischief.

Miranda narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him. Raphael affected a look that was much too innocent. He cocked an eyebrow, and his expression seemed to say, “What? Why look at me that way? Can’t you tell I’ve nothing but virtuous intentions?”

She snorted her disbelief.

He threw his head back and laughed. The cheerful delight in his beautiful voice had her smiling along with him.

He nudged the door to the bathing room open and stepped inside.

Miranda murmured, “You’ll find this a pleasant surprise, I think.” It was large for a cottage’s bathing room, which was to say both of them could, if careful, step around one another without actually touching. There was a porcelain sink with two spigots above it, a toilet like those found in a wealthy home, and a large porcelain tub. Mounted high in the

wall above the tub, a second sink loomed with chains dangling down from more spigots above the ceramic fixture.

He raised his brows in question. She wriggled to be let down. After a brief squeeze, he complied.

"I don't know if you noticed which village you were nearing since you had to change course because of the flooding, but the village I'm serving is Quwe, as in Quwe waters. In addition to the health waters the village bottles and sells, there are a number of natural hot springs in the area. The village has harnessed the waters in pipes that flow to every home, including this healer's cottage away from the rest of the village."

She couldn't keep the pride she felt in this home from swelling in her voice. "One spigot gives the hot water from the springs, and the other, cold water from the river. You can adjust the flows to get the temperature you desire in the wall bowl above the tub, then open the nozzle here at the bottom so that the stream flows down into the tub or rains over your body. I know many of the wealthy have something similar, but, here, the whole village has this luxury. Is that not clever?"

"Yes, quite clever. You are right to be proud of your home and people." He took a washcloth from a shelf on the wall and filled the sink with a mix of waters that he tested and then into which he dipped the cloth. "Here, bend over and put your hands on the wall. Let me wash you." Stunned by the tenderness in his expression, Miranda turned and complied without protest. He carefully washed her most private tissues before likewise washing himself and filling the bathing tub.

Miranda leaned against the wall and smiled. The pale morning light from high narrow windows revealed beauty with every twist of his body while he tested the water and laid towels by the tub. An ache that had nothing to do with soreness began again between her legs. *He has made me insatiable!* Heat filled her cheeks at the thought, and she found herself blurting out words to distract her mind.

"My home and people? No. No, I am just here for a short while. The real healer, Isabella, is at the capital to see her niece graduate from the Healer's Academy. She, the niece that is, will eventually take over for Isabella here. I am completing my own required post-graduate time as a traveling healer, filling in where needed, going to places without a resident healer. It's something all of us do..." her voice trailed off when Raphael stepped into the tub and reached out a hand for her.

His eyes glittered with amusement, but he didn't release his laughter so she took his hand and stepped carefully into the tub of hot water. His look held her captive as they knelt into the water, and then he turned her so her back rested on his chest. He took her bath sponge and gently trailed it over her body.

"So you are not bound to this village?" He brushed his lips across the top of her ear. She felt his tongue glide over the delicate skin behind her jaw. A shiver ran down her body.

"Miranda?" he prompted. His voice held restrained laughter.

That evil tease! She twisted in his arms, and with care, “accidentally” splashed him. *Hah! Take that!* “Oh, sorry. No, I will not be staying. I’ll be leaving here soon.”

His expression changed from one of humor to predatory intentness.

“Um, Raphael...”

He leaned forward, and she edged back. Suddenly, he snapped his arms back around her and twisted them sideways in the tub, pulling her down on top of him. His lips covered hers, and in the next moment she was half under the water, cut off from all sound but his low growl reverberating through the kiss. Slowly, he pulled away and raised her back up to recline sideways on his chest.

“Ah, kitten, if you tease a wolf, you must be prepared for the consequences.” He laughed freely now, sparking her ready temper once more. There was a helpless male nipple right by her fingers.

With a quick squeeze, he was her prisoner. His brows shot up in surprise. She smiled smugly at him. “I’m no kitten, but a healer who knows all the weak spots on any man’s body.” Evilly, she cupped his balls with her other hand, but she only gave his nipple a tweak before releasing him.

“Ah, so the kitten has claws. Something I’ll be sure to remember.” He gave her a quick hug that also trapped her arms, preventing further retaliation. His easy smile faded, and his demeanor grew serious. “I must go soon. I have a report on raver activity that must be given. Which way will you be traveling once Isabella returns? Please say that your journey leads away from this area. They’ve kept their activities secret, but there are many ravers in the tri-border region.”

“Have you seen them here?” Miranda felt a sudden chill. This could mean real danger.

“Although I haven’t seen any evidence of them in this country yet, they are unlikely to respect any boundary when they feel the need to spread further out in their search for prey. They capture young women alive to service their needs. Alone here, you could be an easy target.”

Another shiver ran down Miranda’s spine. She had seen the victims of raver attacks at the academy and had no wish to be one.

“My next stops will be shorter visits in towns without a regular healer or whose healer is growing old. In addition to helping with whatever any particular village needs, my traveling work acts as a sort of audition. The villages will look me over and I them, as I consider where I might wish to settle on a long-term basis. But yes, to your point, the route will take me further from the border. Will you be warning the people here before you leave?”

He rose from the bath pulling Miranda up with him. They stepped from the water, and he plucked a towel up from the floor and began to dry her. She stared hard at him while he quietly towed her off. “Raphael? An answer, please.”

He sighed reluctantly. "No, I will not speak to the villagers, and you must keep silent as well. I should not have spoken of this to you.

"The brethren always feel possessive, protective of a lover. Your courage in helping me when I was so on the edge, so dangerous, has made you even more dear to me in this one night than I can easily say. I spoke more than I have a right to."

Her rigid posture was eloquent as to her feelings. *This is wrong! They must be warned.* She opened her mouth to speak when Raphael continued.

"If the people here begin to behave differently than normal without apparent cause, word would leak out, and it's possible the ravers would relocate before we can get to them. They would be twice as difficult and dangerous to find again, and the damage they could do in the meantime does not bear considering.

"I will travel very quickly with my report and will return with the aide needed to fight the ravers effectively. Promise me you will keep quiet and not endanger my mission. Not when there is no immediate danger here."

Miranda stood stiff while her gut fought her mind. As a healer, she was sworn to protect and promote life. He asked that she hold back information that would protect lives here to possibly save more lives later. "Last night I returned after being away from this cottage for almost a full day. I had just helped bring a new baby into the village. The baby's name is Roslyn. She is a lovely fragile gift. Her mother's name is Izzie, and her father's name is Jovan. They glow with love for their daughter. Remember these people as you travel.

"I will keep your secret, but I will also wait until you come back before I leave this town. Isabella will be happy to have me here while she gets settled back in. If you truly valued our night together and me, remember I will remain here to share whatever danger they face until your brethren come."

Raphael face was set in firm lines. "You strike a hard bargain. I will remember everything. I do not want to leave you here, but I will go because I must." The sternness melted from his face, and a look of embarrassment flashed over his expression. He ducked his head and looked away.

Miranda cocked her head, seeking his gaze once more. *What could cause this confident man to look shy now?*

"Miranda, would you see me again when I return, not just as a member of the brethren, but as something more?"

Warmth blossomed inside her. His passion was amazing, but the careful way he held her in its aftermath and this morning reached past her defenses to touch her deeply.

"Yes. I would like to see you again, for your own sake."

His eyes crinkled with his smile just before he took her lips in a kiss more sweet than any they had shared before. He gathered her close in a careful hug. She felt his considerable strength surround her and felt safe.

“I best be leaving or I’m afraid I will never leave your side or your body.”

She flexed her fingers into his chest muscles at the heat and promise in his words, then pushed back and stepped away. “I’ll dress and quickly make us some breakfast, and then you can be on your way.” She forced her voice to be light, brisk, knowing this was what they needed now.

He followed the unblushing Miranda out to the main room and donned his discarded garments while she pulled loose trousers and tunic from a cupboard behind the bed. Her mind was already racing to think what she could do to keep her promise to him while safeguarding the village when his puzzled voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Uh, Miranda, I hesitate to ask, but I am perplexed. You seemed surprised last night by your reaction to me: to a brethren’s scent, so I’m guessing you have never been with one of us before. Is that correct?”

She turned her face to hide her smile. She could well guess some of the direction of his curiosity, but it was too much fun to make him squirm a bit. She decided not to make the situation easier for him. Composing her face, she turned. “No, I have never had a brethren lover before. Why do you ask?”

Her too innocent expression must have given her away because he growled in frustration and strode over to swing her up in his arms again. “How is it that you were so unafraid of my midform? The half-beast form is terrifying to most. And now, this morning, when most women who aren’t companions and unused to us would shy away, you show no embarrassment.”

At her raised brows, he apparently thought over what he said and quickly added: “Not that I want you to be embarrassed. I’m just perplexed.”

Thoroughly enjoying his confusion, but unable to keep the pretense up any longer, Miranda laughed merrily. “In the first place, when I met you last night I was coming back from aiding with a birth that had taken a full day and most of a night. I was too exhausted to have any sort of normal reactions. It’s just a wonder that even you were able to keep me awake as long as you did.”

She shrugged. “As for the lack of embarrassment, there’s not room for personal modesty in the Healer’s Academy. We used each other’s bodies for study and practice. After a while, students tend to lose any shyness they came with. Also, there’s an unusually free attitude toward taking lovers, and, er, experimenting. All for the sake of being able to help future patients, of course.” She finished with another laugh.

Strangely, Raphael didn’t laugh with her. He scowled instead.

“Why do you frown so? Would you rather I had run screaming from you or tied you and left you to suffer?”

“No.” He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. “I’m sorry, I just find I don’t like the idea of you having other lovers. A natural reaction after pushing myself to the breaking point and having you save me from my beast last night.”

He composed his face into a respectful mien. “There’s no reason for me to be churlish. I apologize again.” Raphael placed Miranda’s feet back on the floor and went back to finish dressing, still shaking his head.

Miranda sighed. A sad pain settled in her chest. Had he felt the same connection that she had for him? Or were his actions just based on seeing her as his savior of last night? That sort of gratitude became a trap against which all the students at the Healer’s Academy were warned. The possibility that only gratitude, not real attraction, caused him to treat her so tenderly made her heart ache with the lingering hurt of rejection. She turned her back on him and composed her face into a professional calm.

After a hasty and mostly silent breakfast by the fire, Raphael stood and held out his hands to Miranda. When she took them, he leaned down to kiss her, but she turned so that his lips met only her cheek. “Miranda, let’s not part with this shadow between us. I must go. I am sorry I allowed a moment of jealousy. Please say you’ll see me when I return.”

Miranda sighed. She squeezed his hands softly. “Perhaps we were both a little overwhelmed this morning. Come see me when you return. We’ll determine then if we meet as friends, or perhaps, more. Farewell and fair journey.”

Raphael hesitated, clearly torn as he took in her still-withdrawn manner. “I know my mind, Miranda. I will see you soon.”

He pulled her in for a hard kiss that briefly emptied her mind of all doubt and confusion, then stepped back with his hands holding her upper arms so tightly she knew she’d find the mark of his fingers in her flesh later. “I will be back for you.” His grabbed up his small travel bag and was out the door before she could form a reply.

Scant moments later she was turning to put away their dishes when the door burst open. A wild-eyed Raphael stood there. “Come with me now! Ravens were here last night.”

Chapter Seven

Can you predict the behavior of a raver?

Next you will tell me which way the wind will blow five days hence.

-- Old joke

Miranda froze. The words echoed through her mind. *Here? No. Not here!* Raphael's hands gripped her arms and shook her.

"Miranda, did you hear me?"

Her head cleared. "Yes...what...how do you know? What did you see? My gods, are they here now?" Her heart raced.

"No. As soon as I went outside, I smelled them and then saw their prints in the soft earth by your house. They're moving across the border faster than I expected. Whether they followed me or just happened on this place, they would have smelled me here. It doesn't matter. You're not safe here alone.

"We should go check the village. You must come with me. I can't leave you here by yourself -- and your skills may be needed there."

Miranda felt the blood run out of her face at his words. Pictures ran through her mind: the new family she had left just last night, the old widower Paulus alone in his cottage, the children playing hide and seek around the town. None of them would expect this. Without a word, she broke free from Raphael and went into a back room. She grabbed new bandages and medicinals from shelves and drawers. She thrust them into the basket she'd carried home the previous night.

The previous night! Oh, gods. Her knees lost their strength, and she slipped to the floor, her knuckles stuffed into her mouth. She had walked the woods alone last night just

like so many other nights. Only by chance did Raphael meet her before the ravers came. An icy chill gripped her as she thought of what could have happened. She had helped care for some who had survived their attacks without changing. Images flashed through her mind of strips of flesh torn from bodies and gaping bloody stumps where limbs had once been. She shuddered and hugged herself tightly.

Raphael had stood silently as she moved about getting supplies. Now he pulled her back to her feet and pressed her to his body. "It's alright. I'm here with you. You're safe." The heat of his body, his now-familiar voice and scent, wrapped around her and gave her strength. She gathered the comfort in and found her own strength waiting there.

"I'm alright," she said, meaning it. "This is the first real crisis I've faced since leaving the academy. I've helped with births, deaths, broken limbs...but nothing like this." She pulled up straight. She would not fail these people or her teachers. "Let's go."

* * * * *

The morning air held a sharp winter bite, and the heavy clouds above hinted the first snow might be soon. They walked quickly to the village. For Miranda, it was too swift and too slow. She feared what they would find, and at the same time, wished she were already there to help. She cast nervous glances through the pines and barren oaks, but the only signs of life were the occasional squirrel or bird. Although she could detect no threat, Raphael's grim face assured her he felt one. They rushed on at a near run.

Rounding a corner in the path, she glimpsed the village through the trees. She heard voices drifting over. The tones were normal, not alarmed or excited. Perhaps nothing had happened?

A sudden tug on her arm pulled her to an abrupt stop. "What?" Irritation and anxiety made her voice sharp.

Raphael leaned in close. "There are no sounds of alarm from the village. You go in alone while I circle 'round it and check for signs of ravers. It's possible they're in the area, but haven't made a move yet. If they are here, I would rather find out how many and where they are quietly. Can you casually chat with people? See if everyone is present, or if any have gone into the woods? Don't leave until I come for you. I'll return to this spot after I've finished looking around. Alright?"

Miranda nodded, took several deep calming breaths, and walked on into the village in a more normal manner.

"Here to check on the newest member of Quwe, Miranda?" Other happy morning greetings followed her through the few streets. Of course, everyone would already know about Izzie giving birth last night. Poor Jovan was probably shooing people away so his wife could get some rest.

She was stopped by young Molly, who was beating her mother's rugs outside their cottage. Only fifteen with glossy, black curls and sparkling eyes, she was the best source of town gossip.

"It's sooo unfair! I'm stuck here helping mother, while Chrissa gets to go look for winterberries with Roland. My Eli is going too. But, me? No! I have to help clean. Could you talk with her, Miranda? Tell her it would be healthy for me to get out and hike in the woods? Miranda, where are you going?"

Alarmed at Molly's news, Miranda dashed on to see Paulus. While Molly had the gossip, the widower acted like a town message board. He would not only know where the little group had gone to look for berries, but also if anyone else was out.

"Why are you so interested in berry picking?" Paulus's already crinkled face grew additional lines as he squinted and leaned forward from the porch chair where he sat like a judge watching all the comings and goings.

"Um, there are some medicinal teas that use the berries. I thought it might be good to pick some and get to know some of the town's young people a little better while I'm at it."

Paulus looked like he bought her explanation, but when she said no more he went on. "They went to the berry grove on the hill, south of the cold-water pond. It was just the three of them, although Chrissa's mother plans on surprising them with some sweet cakes later. If they're doing other than what they claimed, there will be three sorry youthlings tonight and possibly nuptial announcements tomorrow!" He laughed.

Miranda briefly wondered how much the little group thought they were getting away with and how much they were being set up. But the idea of ravers in the area quickly drove away any humorous thoughts.

"Thank you, good Paulus. I better go check on the village's newest member before I consider berry picking myself."

She forced her feet to continue on in the village. She needed to make sure there were no other problems before she met back with Raphael. Izzie, Jovan, and Roslyn were fine, and a quick walk through the streets showed no signs of break-in at any other house. At the Quwe trade building where they packaged health waters in lovely glass vials for the wealthy, and less expensive clay bottles for the common, no workers were missing. The head councilman, who was also the business manager, laughed and told her, "We all drink our water so there is little illness here!"

She walked back toward the trees, exiting the village, hesitant to go too far. Raphael stepped out from behind a tree and beckoned her. Seeing him, she broke into a run.

She blurted out her report. "There's a trio of youthlings berry picking by the cold water pond. I haven't heard of anyone else being out or any trouble in the village. What's your news?"

"There were signs of them scouting the area, but none are here now. Quickly tell me how to get to this pond, and you go back to the village."

"No! If there's injury, I'll be needed, and minutes could mean life or death. Carry my basket and I'll run with you. The pond is due east of here. The berries grow on the hill rising south of the pond."

Raphael met her eyes with a hard look. "I can get there much faster alone."

She nodded, but insisted, "I know the way that may save time, and if I'm needed, it will be faster for me to go with you. Either way is a risk. I'm faster than you think. I can run for miles. Let me come with you."

Taking her basket and stepping aside, Raphael said only, "Lead, then."

She took off at a sprint, but slowed to a steady run as she darted around trees and over rocks. She hadn't lied. Although the academy encouraged exercise, Miranda had been considered strange for her love of running. She often slipped off to the countryside around the capital to dash freely down the country paths. As swift as she was, she heard Raphael barely a step behind her carrying the heavy basket. The pond was in view.

"Almost there!" She threw the words over her shoulder. Raphael grabbed that same shoulder and pulled her to an abrupt stop.

"Here." He thrust the basket back into her hands. "I caught a faint whiff of raver, but I don't smell any of them close. Climb that tree; it'll at least slow them down if they come this way. Wait for me. Call me if you see anything. I'll hear you and come." His tone did not ask, it commanded. He stripped as he spoke and *changed* to wolf form before she could speak. The huge beast reminded her of what might lurk nearby, and Miranda made it halfway up the pine before he faded from view.

* * * * *

How long? How much longer will he be? The bark dug into her hands. She relaxed her grip and concentrated. Forest birds, some squirrels chittering, just the slight movement of the trees in the soft breeze, nothing out of the ordinary, and then a rustling and snapping as something approached. A knot of fear coalesced inside her chest. She turned toward the sound, eyes straining to find the source. A wolf bounded out of the brush and *changed*. It was Raphael!

"Come down quick! A raver was here. He caught scent of me and ran, but had already attacked the younglings. They need your help!" While he spoke, he pulled his clothes on again and then reached to help Miranda down the last bit of the tree.

This time he didn't wait for her to run with him. He simply scooped her and her basket up and dashed into the woods. Even with the extra weight, his speed was breathtaking as he jumped over rocks and dodged branches.

* * * * *

“Chrissa, help me. Eli is still alive. Help me.”

Miranda and Raphael burst into the small clearing between the tall berry bushes. Roland went into a crouch, obviously ready to jump at any attacker and defend his friends, but he relaxed slightly when he saw Miranda.

She spoke as fast as she could to reassure the little group. “Raphael is a brethren. He is here to help us.” Immediately she saw Eli was in the worst shape of the three. He was flat on his back with a gash across his abdomen. His eyes were shut.

“Come help Eli! The thing ripped him bad. I...I can see inside him.” As Roland spoke, he turned to gesture toward the wound, revealing long, bloodstained rips in the shirt over his own back. Chrissa sat dazed, hugging her knees tightly, silent tears running down her face.

Raphael set Miranda on her feet and squatted down on his heels. The move made him appear smaller and less of a potential threat, yet it left him in a position to immediately tackle any incoming menace

Basket in hand, Miranda stepped to Eli’s side and knelt down. He had been lucky with the abdomen wound. It appeared the cut hadn’t ruptured any internal organs. *But why was he unconscious?* Then she saw the blood by his face and gently probed his head with her fingers. She felt the sharp edge of a rock behind him and then a sickening softness on his skull next to it.

“Roland, can you help me roll Eli to his side? He has an injury on the back of his head I want to see better. But we will need to be very gentle and not jostle him. I’m going to ask Raphael to help also.” Miranda spoke gently, trying to project confidence for the shaken younglings. Inside, she held to the icy calm she had learned through hours of work at the academy’s practice halls. There experienced teachers supervised the work students performed for everyone from the poor to the merchant class. Only the very wealthy disdained the academy’s healing halls. Now, however, she would perform on her own.

Roland put careful hands under his friend’s shoulders while Miranda cupped his head and neck and Raphael took his hips. As one, they turned the injured youth to his side, revealing a mess of blood and hair. Miranda cursed under her breath. She really needed clean water to wash his head and abdominal injuries.

“As best I can see now, the skull is broken, but not penetrated. We need to get Eli back to town to treat him and you, too, Roland. I’ll put a temporary bandage on him for now.”

“Chrissa.” There was no reply. “Chrissa! Are you injured? Can you help me with the bandages?”

Chrissa still sat hugging what Miranda now noticed was a ripped skirt around her knees. Looking at Roland and Raphael, she instructed, “Keep holding Eli. I’ll be right back.”

She scooted over to Chrissa and gently stroked her arm. “Chrissa. Chrissa, it’s Miranda, the healer. I’m here to help you. Are you hurt?” A shudder ran through Chrissa’s thin frame, and her eyes focused on Miranda.

“Miranda?”

“Yes, honey, it’s Miranda. I’m here to help you and Roland and Eli. Can you help me? Can you tell me what happened?” Miranda held her breath. Would Chrissa be able to come out of the shock and speak to her or would she retreat within herself again?

“Roland? Eli?” Chrissa’s face held sudden panic. She grabbed Miranda’s hand. “Where’s Roland? I saw the beast jump on him and knock him to the ground. He didn’t get up!”

Miranda leaned to one side. “He’s right here. See. Here he is.”

“I’m alright, Chrissa. I just got knocked out for a little when I hit the ground.” Roland moved aside a thick fall of bangs over his forehead to reveal a large goose egg of a bump. “But Eli is hurt bad. Did you see what attacked us? Are you hurt anywhere?” Roland sounded both concerned and impatient that Chrissa wasn’t doing anything. “Chrissa, you always want to help. This time we really need you. What’s wrong?”

“Eli, hurt?” Chrissa’s voice broke. “The thing, it was a raver. After it jumped off you, it *changed*. It became both man and beast. Eli tried to fight it, but it slashed his stomach and picked him up and threw him down. I picked up a rock to hit him, but he just took it from me and smiled.”

She looked back at Miranda, apparently unable to tell the rest to Roland. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “He took my hands and smiled with his horrible half-beast face, and then I took a breath to scream, but then I just stopped.

“He smelled so good. How could he smell so good? I just kept breathing, and he pulled me to the ground. Part of me wanted to run away, but that smell and my mind was not working. I just stayed there. He ripped my skirt, and then he...he...” She paused, tears pouring from her eyes. She squeezed Miranda’s hand and somehow gathered herself enough to continue. “He ripped my skirt then. He pushed me down and lay on me and...” She drew a shuddering breath. “He, he had just finished when he looked over at the bushes. He jumped up and was gone just before another beast ran through here chasing him, and then I don’t remember what happened until you talked to me.”

Roland moved away from Eli and sat softly next to Chrissa. Wordlessly, he offered his arms to her, agony written across his face. Miranda let out a sigh of thanks when Chrissa slid into her sweetheart’s arms to cling tightly and sob as he rocked her near. Miranda knew that Chrissa had experienced the drugging scent brethren and ravers could exude. On one hand, it had saved her from much worse physical injury. On the other, it caused her body to betray her. The effects on her mind and soul could be awful.

Miranda knew she would have to address that later. Right now she had to bandage Eli, make sure Roland wasn’t worse off than he initially appeared, and then get them back to the village.

Raphael was patiently holding Eli in place. His eyes told her he was ashamed a creature so similar to himself had committed these atrocities and seemed to ask if she hated him now.

She shot him what she hoped was a quick look of reassurance while she wrapped Eli's head in a swathe of linen dressings.

While she finished her emergency care, Raphael used more of her bandages to tie some young branches together to make a traveling bed for Eli. His voice rumbled quietly. "I want you three to carry Eli between you. The raver is probably far away, but I need to keep my hands free to defend us in case he returns."

The group took a collective breath. While Roland and Chrissa took a moment to hold one another and whisper comforts, Raphael pulled Miranda aside.

"This changes everything. I have to assume this raver is connected to those I saw before. If they are starting to raid across the border, this village needs protection now. Even if they were not, I would have to stay to see if one or both of these young men will go through the change to brethren or raver. I also may be able to help Chrissa get through her experience." Miranda opened her mouth to question how he could do this, but he gestured her to hold back her queries for now. "I'll tell you what I'm thinking later. We better get back to the village as fast as we can for Eli's sake. I don't know if the raver will come back -- and if he does, if he will be alone."

Chapter Eight

Blessed Fortuna smiles on the prepared and the daring.

-- The Book of Trader's Proverbs given to all apprentice traders

At the duke's keep

"Will you have me?" "I want to marry you." Cyn's words echoed in her head. He wants to marry me. "My beast will accept no mate but you." No, is it that he wants to marry me, or is it that his beast leaves him no choice? Besides, what do I want?

Surrounded by male flesh, with Ty holding her from behind and Cyn clasping her hands to his chest in front, she couldn't get a clear thought. She pulled away from the two men. "You two have had months to consider this, but it is new to me. I need to think on it."

Cyn's eyes narrowed, his face tightened in evidence of an internal struggle. "Very well. Go. Think, but also think on this."

He jerked her to his body and fiercely pressed his lips against hers. Surprised, her lips parted in an "oh" he quickly took advantage of. Cyn did not merely kiss, he took possession. His tongue stroked hers harshly, and his hands held her tight to his body until she softened, molding to his hardness.

A second heated form pressed her from behind. Her head was pulled away from Cyn's. Her eyes fluttered open long enough to see Ty's burning gaze as he took her lips.

She drowned in sensation as his taste melded with Cyn's, still fresh on her lips. She burned in the flames they so easily provoked in her until Ty pulled back and licked his lips, as though he too was savoring their combined flavors.

“If you marry Cyn, you will still also be my *chosen* in the eyes of the world and I his bond brother. No one will be able to come between any of us.”

With unsteady feet, Cassandra pulled away and left her men and the temptation of their bodies. If she stayed, she knew discussion, any rational thought, would soon be lost in the pleasures of their touch.

She wandered through the maze of halls, and finally, out into the mostly bare herb garden, waiting for its blanket of winter snow. She sat on a stone bench with her arms wrapped about herself, not really noticing the cold. A servant brought a fur-lined cape she acknowledged with a nod, but didn’t otherwise break the stream of her thoughts.

Duchess? If she married Cyn, she would lose a good deal of personal freedom. There would be additional demands on her time -- but couldn’t she delegate the majority of that? Adeena and Cyn’s housemistress handled most of the running of the keep already. Why should that change?

Acting as a trader: my first love. Would I lose that? If she became the duchess, how would she be treated? Hmm, as Duchess she could work at much higher levels than she had previously and with those who had their own power. They would not fear her title. They might even provide an amusing challenge since they would not be expecting much from a common-born such as her. Yes, it could be fun.

If I travel, Cyn will insist on some entourage, guards. Although, that was really no different than what he would insist on now. She snorted. That assumed she could get away without Ty or Cyn or both finding an excuse to come with her. Of course, she quietly acknowledged, it was unlikely she would even want to travel without them.

Where lies the real rub? She sighed, letting herself open up to the deepest truth of the matter. She loved them both. Even their secret campaign to prove how she could fit into the keep and as a duchess endeared them more to her. They cared for her. But did they love her?

Wryly she smiled at the illogic of her feelings. She firmly tied herself to them by the addictive nature of the *chosen* bond, by her own love for them, by their need and affection for her, yet she didn’t want to marry without their love. Ridiculous, but there it was.

Of course, if any other woman thought to marry Cyn, she would meet an unfortunate illness. With Cassandra’s knowledge of herbs, that could be easily arranged.

But no, that’s unfair to Cyn. I will not cower like a young girl afraid of her feelings. She would simply demand to know theirs before revealing her own. But, regardless of what they said, she would accept the proposal. To do otherwise would mean a constant struggle against the plans of other would-be brides and their aristocratic families.

* * * * *

Melisande wasn’t one to wait, so although her letter to her half brother was on its way, she decided to go out for some afternoon air in the duke’s gardens. She dressed swiftly in a

casual, yet elegant, wool dress. The dark blue overlapping panels of the skirt made for easy walking, and the pale blue accents around the fitted bosom and belled oversleeves almost matched her eyes. If she was careful, she could slip out alone and then go to the woods where a few men her brother had carefully selected waited. She had preparations to discuss.

The gate made little noise as she closed it behind herself. She walked through what she expected to be a deserted garden, when she saw a quiet figure wrapped in a cape. Damn the luck, she wanted to escape unnoticed. *But wait, that profile, it's Cassandra! The very object of my current plans, and for once, without another soul hovering in the background. Perhaps this is a sign of favor from the gods.*

Quickly altering her plans, Melisande made her way over to Cassandra with a pleased smile that required no effort to put forth. "Cassandra, what a pleasant surprise! I was just thinking on how to approach you. I know I haven't been too friendly and want to apologize and possibly start anew."

Cassandra's vaguely annoyed expression turned first astounded and then suspicious. Ignoring it, Melisande pressed on. "To show my sincerity, I'm asking you to go for a walk with me and let me tell about the king's court and life in the capital. If I read the signs right, you will be traveling there with Ty and the duke. I don't know if you are aware of my background, but in some ways, I've been an outsider at court myself. While the power of Duke Cynbarion and Ty will provide a certain shield for you against less friendly members of the aristocracy, perhaps I could share some savory bits of knowledge about individuals you will likely meet. I could ease your way. Please say you'll let me make amends. Come walk with me." Melisande finished with an artful smile.

How could Cassandra possibly say no?

If I can just get you away from here to my men, we'll have you before anyone knows you're gone. I will break both Ty and the duke. With the duke out of the way, my dearest brother can take Birne, and I will be a power in our new country. Melisande's smile grew even more charming at the thought.

* * * * *

Damnation of the seven hells. If she had been a minute later, I would have already been gone. Why is this woman choosing this time to be friendly? She might know that Cyn isn't going to offer for her, but surely, she doesn't know yet that he asked me to marry?

Cassandra looked into the pale blue eyes of a woman who had never before pretended to be guileless in any way. She felt sure Melisande would love to rub the presence of a common trader in the noses of those who quietly sneered at her bastard parentage, but dared not openly show it since Melisande was the king's favored half-sister. However, Cassandra just didn't believe this was all Melisande wanted. Perhaps she hoped to obtain something else from Cyn and saw Cassandra as a means to it? It would not do to make an open enemy of the

king's half-sister, and she might find it interesting to match wits with this courtier -- but not at this moment.

Cassandra composed her face to look suitably regretful. "Of course, I would love the opportunity to get to know you better and hear more about the capital. Unfortunately, I have an appointment and was just about to leave the garden. Perhaps we could talk over late-morning tea tomorrow?"

Melisande's face at first grew stiff as Cassandra dared to decline her invitation. However, when Cassandra proposed meeting the following day, her smile took on a brilliant gleam. "That sounds wonderful. Perhaps, we could walk instead? Then neither Cicely's silly gossip nor Adeena's boring plans for the next keep event will interrupt us."

"That would be lovely. Around midmorning bells, then?" Melisande nodded and was on her way. Cassandra gritted her teeth. Adeena provided more stimulating companionship than even the clever Melisande could hope to offer. Although the king's half-sister had one thing right: Cicely's inane gossip would drive anyone crazy.

A real smile appeared on Cassandra's face, now determined to corner her men. *I can't believe they will both be mine and no other's.* Then she groaned. *Good gods above and below. I can't believe I'm agreeing to this: a duchess.*

Chapter Nine

Savor the day; tomorrow is a promise that might never be kept.

-- Book of Common Wisdom

The keep

The duke's personal chambers

"What will we do if she says no?" Ty leaned against the small desk by the fire, arms crossed over a heavily muscled bare chest. Cyn paced before him in an uncharacteristic display of anxiety.

"We make her accept!" Cyn shook his head, then impatiently pushed back the strands of the long, auburn hair falling in his face. "No, not force, but persuade. Damn, I feel like fire ants are crawling all over me. First your control is shaken when she disappears for a few hours, and now my beast is fighting to break free at the thought of rejection. She has already accepted us both in a *chosen's* bond. Why is this giving me so much trouble?"

Ty considered the question. Cyn was always in control. Why did this shake him so? "Possibly it's rooted in your family history. Your human side knows how your great-grandmother rejected the brethren that kidnapped her and forced a *chosen* bond on her. So despite your personal inclinations, you know you can't force her to love or marry you.

"The beast doesn't care. He just wants to have her tied to him and acknowledged as his. Since you must keep the secret of being brethren as well as duke, you cannot openly call her your *chosen*. A marriage would allow both man and beast to claim possession."

“Gods, you’re right. Having her hesitate this way, possibly saying *no*” -- Cyn’s face twisted -- “it feels like a rejection of me, of the bond we share. Ty, you will have to help me. If she says no, and my beast takes over, do whatever it takes to protect her.”

“I will, but you won’t lose yourself to the beast, Cyn. If the answer is no, we will find a way to change her mind. We can alter the role of duchess to suit her.”

Ty grinned. “You know, she’s quite possessive. She will say *yes*, if for no other reason than to keep the other women away from you. Have you not see the way anger lights her eyes when any of the visiting gentle nobles tries to get your notice? I saw her fingering her dagger when even harmless Cicely tried to flirt with you.” Ty smiled at the memory of how close to death poor little Cicely had unknowingly come.

Some of the tension left Cyn’s posture. “Yes, I have noticed. Sometimes I let one of the gentle courtiers talk with me just to see the spark of her passion. I don’t think she has any idea what her unfeigned response means to me.”

“Ty, what if it *is* only passion and caring. What if she doesn’t return our love? Eventually, this place, the restrictions, will chafe. She will want to go away from us, for as long as the bond will allow her. Worse, she is very strong. If she decided freedom was better, she might be able to break the bond, and you know that bastard Darius would be glad to help her.”

Ty’s frown echoed the one on Cyn’s face. “Darius had best keep to brethren matters and leave Cassandra to us.”

He opened his mouth to say more, then stopped. Light footsteps approached the door. Cassandra was returning. He felt an impulse to tell Cyn they would grab her and take her away to the hills with them, and keep her there between their bodies with no one to distract them until she agreed to marriage. His beast rejoiced at the thought. He fought the impulse back with frustration. No, if she said *no*, he would hold her here and demand... He mentally shook his head. He would find a way to win her instead. Whatever it took, he would do it. Unconsciously, both he and Cyn drew to attention, waiting for her to come, waiting to hear her decision.

* * * * *

Cassandra stood outside the heavy door. Sharing blood with the brethren enhanced her body’s ability to heal itself. Her senses were also better than the average human’s, but not on the level of the brethren. She couldn’t tell if her men were still waiting inside or not. She rubbed a sweat-dampened palm against her pants and reached for the door handle.

Inside Ty and Cyn stood stiffly as they watched her enter and shut the door softly behind her. Neither had bothered with a shirt. Their beauty momentarily stopped her thoughts, and she stood silent. Then she relaxed a bit. They looked like men expecting a death sentence. Somehow, their nervousness made her feel better.

“Before I tell you what I’ve decided, I have a question for you both. Aside from this little subterfuge about easing me into life at the keep and the possibility of being duchess, is there anything else you have held back from me? Anything else I should -- no, make that anything else I might possibly *want* -- to know?”

Confusion was her answer. They looked at her and then at each other as if to say, “Did you do something I don’t know about?”

Apparently assured by Ty’s equally blank look, Cyn wrapped his regal bearing about himself. Only his clenched hands gave away his tenseness. “We have been honest as best we know how. If there is something more you need, tell us. We will hold nothing back.”

Ty’s eyes sparked with a dangerous anger. His voice came out a low growl, a guttural warning that combined man and beast. “You know how we want you, how we need you. If our love is not enough for you, then, damn it, tell us what you need. I will make it happen.”

Her mouth dropped open, and her body slumped in relief. “Love? You did not speak of love with marriage. The only time you mentioned love was when I first agreed to stay with you. I thought it was only gratitude.” Her vision wavered, and she realized tears filled her eyes.

Cyn’s arms wrapped around her, supporting her, while she tried to focus on Ty and read his face. Cyn spoke quietly, the breath from his words tickling her ear. “You never spoke of love. I...we didn’t know your feelings. We still don’t. You seemed to like and care for us, but never have you seemed interested in love.”

Ty stepped up, pulling Cassandra and Cyn into his embrace as well. “You spoke to me of your friend who died, who killed himself rather than live as a raver. You spoke of your friends among the brethren. It was clear you value honor, friendship, strength. You spoke of bargaining and travel. I see your joy in adventure and working with clever minds, but never have you spoken of love, of lives freely pledged.” He gently brushed her hair back from her face and cupped her cheek.

“Our love for you is in every touch. It is not just the *chosen* bond that drives us to you. I want to always be in you, to be a part of you. You and Cyn are part of my soul. If I had not thought you cared little for it, or perhaps even only saw it as another way to bind you, I would have spoken of it.” His eyes bored into hers, clearly willing her to believe him.

Cassandra remained still within their arms. Her heart raced with fear and excitement. Was she really hearing this?

Cyn pulled back a little and tugged her to turn and look at him. “I, too, Cassandra. I love your strength. I love your courage. I love how you care for me and Ty without regard to title or riches. But there is something more I cannot define -- something in you that has called me from the first. I only know I will do whatever it takes to keep you. If it is my love, know you have it beyond whatever other comfort or advantage you represent. You will always have it.” He squeezed her shoulders and searched her face.

“Do we sound like fools? Are you asking about love because you want it or because you fear it as yet another bond?” Cyn’s look assessed her. Once again, he amazed her with his insight.

She let her arms go around them for a brief, tight hug. “Once I did look at love as a tie to hold me down. Not now. With you, it strengthens me. When you are holding me, my spirit soars.”

Tears ran freely down Cassandra’s face. “I love you both, and yes, I will marry you, Cyn.”

She leaned in close, and her lips melted into his in a kiss more tender than any she had allowed herself before. She traced the outline of his head with hands that just skimmed over the silk of his hair. When she pulled back, she saw the sparkle of unreleased tears in his eyes.

Ty’s hands were joined with Cyn’s, pressed against her waist. Then Ty pulled a hand free. He tangled it within her long, dark hair and pulled her head back to receive another kiss, this one hard, barely controlled. He feasted at her mouth, tugging her head further back, more within his control.

There was no hiding now. The moment was too raw and unguarded, but she felt safe.

“At last.” The words said in a throaty growl rumbled up from the depths of Ty’s chest.

Her tunic neck pulled taut, then ripped. The blouse pulled halfway down her arms, forcing them to her sides. A hot, wet mouth enclosed her nipple. It sent a shockwave of sensation down through her belly and into her cunt.

Cyn’s hands pressed down her sides. She felt her pants slide away. Ty continued feeding at her mouth. Her arms were immobile, held in place by both his hands and the tightly stretched tunic. Cyn moved away. She moaned at the loss of the contact of his mouth on her breast. Ty raised his head, breaking the kiss, although the fire in his eyes promised much more.

She gave a little startled jerk as her feet were swept up. Suddenly, Cyn held her in his arms, pressed tightly to his chest. His eyes captured hers. His arms and body felt like hot stone. He slowly knelt with her. He had stripped, and his now naked body pressed against hers. Then he looked up at Ty, who was also removing his pants.

Ty joined them, pressing against Cassandra’s other side.

“Hold still,” Cyn commanded them both.

Her head bowed back as she gasped. His seeking fingers had parted her pussy lips and were stroking in a languid tease. Waves of pleasure built in her body. He moved his hand, leaving her moaning once again in longing for more.

“Taste.”

She tilted her head to see Ty open his mouth to accept Cyn’s fingers, wet from stroking her. She swallowed back another moan, watching Ty’s eyes close. His face full of pleasure, he sucked her body’s offering from Cyn’s fingers. He grabbed Cyn’s wrist and traced his tongue

over and between each digit, taking all there was. She traced her tongue over her lips in response.

Ty pressed Cyn's hand down, splayed between her breasts. She felt him give an extra "stay put" push. Ty's hand moved down to first cup her mound in his palm and then slide between the lips and take his own turn, stroking, teasing.

"So beautiful." Ty's hard face grew soft watching Cassandra's helpless undulations beneath his touch. His reaction made her feel beautiful, and the pleasurable ache within her grew more intense.

He stopped. She hung almost at the crest. She could have sobbed her disappointment until she saw him offer his fingers to Cyn.

Cyn sucked off each finger by turn while watching Cassandra's face. Passion simmered on his face. He murmured, "The taste of our bride." Eyes half closed, he licked his lips slowly, evidently savoring the flavor.

She tugged at the torn tunic still holding her arms tight, wanting to touch them, to bring them pleasure and torment as they were doing for her. Ty smiled and ripped the last of the fabric binding her.

She reached up to caress the face of each of her lovers. "Fill me. Seal this promise."

Ty rolled to his back, pulling her with him as he did.

She pushed up to sit on his legs. His hands rubbed up and down over her spread thighs, his expression asking her to take him, to take them both and show that they were hers.

He gave a small gasp, and she could feel and see the tension fill his muscles when she grasped his cock. His breathing stuttered as he moved to the demands of her strokes.

Cyn moaned. Cassandra turned her head to see his eyes fixed on the sight of her fucking Ty with her hand. She reached and took him in her other hand, glorying in the sensation of both men thrusting in her hands.

Their moans. The naked evidence of their need echoed within her. She had to have more. She saw Ty's eyes glaze over. His beast scent filled the air, quickly joined by Cyn's.

The scent stripped away her control. She released Cyn and moved up to her knees, still holding Ty. She held herself just above the end of his cock, briefly rubbing the tip through the folds of her pussy and over her clit before she sank down over his flesh. From the corner of her eye, she saw Cyn rise and move behind her, then his hands were upon her, bending her forward to expose her ass.

She felt a wave of heat behind her. Cyn was partially *changing*. His cock would be coated with the slippery fluid that preceded the *change*. One hand moved down her body, and fingers held open the globes of her buttocks. The blunt, round end of his cock circled, then nudged, and pushed into her body. She couldn't hold back a long moan. Full. It was so good.

“Now.” Her voice was a demand and a plea. “Fuck me now.” She sucked at the flesh of Ty’s chest beneath her, then her head jerked up as he and Cyn began to move within her.

Her cries of pleasure filled the room, echoed by those of her men. At last there was no more teasing. No stopping. The pleasure rose and completely filled her. The waves of orgasm crested again and again until both Ty, then Cyn, each shouted out their completion, filling her with the hot fluids of their release.

Cassandra dropped onto Ty in exhaustion and felt Cyn press a kiss between her shoulders before gently pulling free and taking her in his arms when he rose to his feet.

She looked over her shoulder, gave a half smile, and quirked an eyebrow in questioning. Cyn looked back at her with the confident possessiveness of one who knows what he has. “My love.” His voice was warm with happiness. He bent his head down to hers for a brief kiss. “I’ll wash you, we’ll rest a little, and then I want you both again.”

“You mean *we’ll* wash her.” Ty stood so she was once again between the two of them.

Her smile widened. She really did love the way these men thought.

* * * * *

Cassandra stretched sleepily before snuggling down between her men. Ty and Cyn had decided she wasn’t convinced of their feelings and devoted much of the night to reassuring her. Of course, they also demanded to hear the words from her again and again. She would never tire of seeing the effect of her words on their faces, or their bodies. *Mine. All mine. And tonight we’ll announce it to the keep.* She couldn’t wait to see the expressions on the faces of the other women when they knew she had effectively slammed shut forever the door to Cyn’s and Ty’s bedroom.

One of those faces intruded in her mind. *Oh, yes, I promised to walk with Melisande this morning. It will be interesting to compare how she treats me today and then after the announcement tomorrow. The king’s love and her adopted family make her a power, so I’d best rise and start behaving like the duchess I’ve promised to become.*

* * * * *

In another part of the keep, another woman stretched and smiled for different reasons.

Soon. Soon I’ll have everything I want within my reach.

Melisande sat up in her bed. Her waiting maid handed her a still-steaming damp towel, then her morning cup of tea. Rarely did Melisande allow herself to vary noticeably from popular convention, but despite the popularity of the new beverage, she kept with her preference for tea over the more costly and exotic coffee. She mentally reviewed her plans for the day while she sipped at the fragrant brew.

She gave a small sigh, once again concluding she would have to be “captured” along with Cassandra to prevent any suspicion from falling on her. She gave a small shudder of fear thinking of Ty or Cyn turning their anger or suspicion on her. Being captured meant she would have to leave the comfort of the keep, her books, her favored possessions. But the goal would be worth it.

She remembered how Eric’s eyes glittered with anticipation when she told him yesterday they would finally move forward with their plans. Waiting quietly was hard for them. That he and his friends could manage it the whole time she was at the keep was unusual. Then again, he, Johan, and Farnes were unusual even by raver’s brethren standards. The three had been killers long before they were injured fighting off a raver attack. Not only did all three survive the attack, but they all also became changers who fully embraced the savage killer instincts of their beasts. Additionally, the three were lovers who rarely took an interest in women or anyone outside their trio. Most importantly, for Melisande, they feared and respected her brother. So long as she didn’t trigger their beasts’ instincts, she could travel with them without harm.

Rising from bed, she allowed her maid to dress her and then sat to write a few letters. She wrote to her adoptive family saying she was taking Cassandra under her wing, and she was sure it would eventually prove an asset for the family. The letter confirmed her good intentions while holding enough self interest so anyone looking through her things later would believe she had no knowledge of what was about to happen.

Shortly before midmorning bells, she got her wrap and slipped from her room.

* * * * *

The sky above the herb garden hung leaden, the air full of the promise of snow. Melisande paced to keep warm, but didn’t have long to wait. Just as the tower bells chimed, Cassandra strode into the garden.

If I were really helping her, that mannish walk would be the first thing to go. Melisande allowed no hint of this uncharitable thought to show. Instead, she smiled with gracious warmth like the lady she had been raised to be. “Cassandra, I’m so glad you were able to get away.” She linked arms with Cassandra in a companionable manner and started down the path.

“Now where to begin...”

She prided herself on being truthful when she felt it reasonable, so she kept up a steady chatter of actually useful information regarding members of the court. While she talked, she guided Cassandra out of the keep gardens to the wilder paths leading toward the surrounding woods.

At one point, Cassandra hesitated. “I do not wish to go too far. There are a number of things I need to discuss with Cyn and Ty today.”

No, I won't be denied. I must get her to the cover of the trees! "Oh, I do not mean to go much further. Cicely mentioned she has been practicing a new poem she's written, and I confess, I would just as soon not be the recipient of this gift just yet." Melisande gave a delicate shudder and shared a look of perfect understanding with Cassandra. *What a pity she is both so far beneath me and in my way.* "If we just reach the trees where we will be out of sight, we can finish our chat alone."

* * * * *

Cassandra gave a guarded smile in answer to Melisande's overly friendly manner. *What is this woman's true goal? Is it just so simple as she hoping to use me to gain even more influence at court? Ah, well, I've suffered through many tedious negotiations before determining what's the spark in my neighbor's fire. I can do this as well.*

The pine and bare-branched oak trees moved softly in the slight breeze. Cassandra felt a chill despite the warmth of her cloak.

Melisande limped slightly. "Let's sit on those rocks for a moment before we head back. It feels like a thistle has caught next to my leg."

Melisande grimaced and perched gingerly on the edge of a large, partially buried rock before reaching down to feel around her boot. Cassandra sat on a shorter rock next to her.

"Are there any groups at court particularly hostile to the brethren or..." Cassandra felt a stinging at her neck like the bite of an insect. Puzzled, she raised her hand to rub the irritation, but her hand seemed to waver and dance before her eyes.

She tried to tell Melisande she felt very strange, but the words wouldn't come.

* * * * *

Melisande watched Cassandra fall back into the waiting arms of Johan. Eric and Farnes stood shaking off their cover of leaves.

"The dart worked just as you said it would. The weapon she used to defeat one of us has been turned back against her," gloated Eric.

All four conspirators shared smiles of satisfaction. The story of how Cassandra had used a drugged dart to bring down the raver that attacked her had become well known at the keep. Melisande thought it only fair to use a similar drug to bring down Cassandra.

Melisande cut short her celebration. "We must hurry. I don't know how long a leash Ty will allow before he begins to search for her, especially after his problem with her disappearance yesterday."

* * * * *

While the kidnappers hurried off, riders entered the front gates of the keep. They carried the original letter from Raphael describing the border situation. It would be a while before Ty or Cyn questioned Cassandra's absence.

Chapter Ten

Prepare today that you do not have to spend tomorrow and the next day on repair.

Not all that is broken can be mended.

-- The Book of Common Wisdom

I'm practically finished. I can easily do the rest later, and if I don't stay long, Mother will never notice I was gone. Molly smiled and quietly left her family's garden plot to head for the woods. She gave a big sigh of relief when she reached the cover of the trees without incident. *Hurrah!* She broke into a skip, but stopped when she saw figures coming down the path.

Damn! They are coming back already. What's wrong with them? Am I the only one who knows how to have fun? Wait, that's a stranger in front. Oh, he's handsome, I would go berry picking with him, but where is Eli?

She gasped. Roland, Chrissa, and Miranda were carrying a rough stretcher with a body on it.

"Eli!" She broke into a run.

* * * * *

Miranda watched Molly run towards them. She dreaded the young woman's reaction, but shuddered thinking what might have happened if they had not met her before she wandered into the woods alone. Her arm ached from helping to carry the stretcher, but she didn't want to stop until they were safely within the village. The normally inviting woods felt threatening today. Every hair on her body quivered with tension. She imagined a raver behind every rock, one coming to attack every time the wind rustled the grasses. She needed

to get out of these woods. More importantly, she needed a sheltered spot to care for these injured youthlings. She thankfully noted Raphael grabbing the girl's upper arms to slow her headlong rush.

"What happened?" Molly's eyes swallowed her face when she saw Eli's pale form on the stretcher. "Is...is he..." She looked pleadingly to Miranda. "What happened? Will he be alright?"

"Young one, your friends have all suffered injuries from a raver attack. We need to get them into town so Miranda can treat them. Can you help carry Roland's side of the stretcher?"

Raphael's commanding voice appeared to cut through Molly's panic. After a nod from Miranda, she went to grasp the stretcher by Roland.

Raphael took Miranda's side of the stretcher from her and directed his attention to her. "We are very close to the village. I detect no signs of others nearby, so I can help carry Eli the rest of the way in. Why don't you go ahead?"

Miranda took her basket and dashed into the village. She met Molly's mother, Samantha, who was heading toward the path into the woods with a determined look on her face. *Thank the gods!* Samantha was levelheaded and could help her.

"Samantha, there's been a raver attack. Molly is safe. She and a brethren are near the edge of the woods helping her friends get back. I need you to fetch some of the men to help them. Tell them to bring the youthlings to Paulus's house. I'll be setting up what I need there. Remember, tell them the man with them is a brethren and a friend."

Samantha paled, but hearing that her Molly was safe, rushed off. Miranda ignored the questioning looks from other villagers and ran to Paulus's home. Alone in his house, the widower kept extra medical supplies in his spare bedroom for the village healer to use as needed. Usually, the additional people coming and going from his house just gave him another opportunity to keep up with what was happening in the town. Today it might actually save lives.

"Paulus!" He was still seated on his porch where she had left him earlier. His startled look caused Miranda to pause and force herself to slow down. "Eli, Roland, and Chrissa were attacked by a raver. They are being helped here now. I need to use your room."

Much more spry than his years would suggest, the old man quickly rose and let Miranda inside. In short order, the room's narrow bed was covered in an old sheet. Cleaning and healing medicines and bandages waited on a long slender table.

As they prepared, Miranda explained, "All three were hurt, but Eli seems the worst off physically. He is unconscious. Roland is also injured, but less severely. Chrissa is hurt...differently. Could you put water on your stove so I can make her and Roland a relaxing tea and then go get Chrissa's mother? She should be here."

The crinkled face gathered even more lines at Miranda's words. "I'll be back with her quickly, and her older sister, too, if she's close by."

Paulus was barely gone when Miranda heard the sounds of a crowd approaching. She hurried to open the door. A cluster of twenty or more people moved down the street. Head councilman Rowe's voice boomed from the group. "Move out of the way! Let us get through." The crowd parted at Paulus's porch to reveal Raphael beside the councilman in front of Eli's stretcher. Both sides of the stretcher were tightly lined with men, except where Molly stood clenching Eli's hand in her own. Chrissa and Roland followed, each with an arm protectively thrown around the other's waist. They looked at each other, but did not make eye contact with anyone else.

Barring the door with her body, Miranda raised her hands in a halt motion. "Only the young ones, their parents, the stretcher bearers, and Paulus may enter."

She directed the men to place Eli on the bed and then sent them out.

Paulus arrived with Chrissa's mother in tow. Miranda quietly whispered to the shocked woman what had happened to Chrissa. The young woman now sat between her mother and Roland with a pale face and silent tears coursing down her cheeks.

Soon Roland's mother washed his wounds with an herbal solution while Chrissa helped by holding his hands and giving him somewhere else to focus through the painful process. Miranda knew having the ability to help someone else would also be healing to Chrissa. While they did these tasks and parents prepared the teas Miranda directed, she turned her attention to the delicate task of carefully examining Eli.

The windows of the cottage were open, and all within were silent, listening to Raphael explain what had happened to the crowd, which, a quick glance out the window told her, was growing. Loud gasps from outside the cabin followed the mention of the raver.

Although her steady hands did not reveal the stress she felt, she welcomed Raphael's presence nearby. His clear voice gave comfort. She flexed her fingers and went to work.

"I have just returned from a mission for the brethren studying secret raver activity along the Birne and Isben border. I sent ahead a copy of a report, so even now brethren will be preparing to come to this area. You need to select two of your best riders to go to your lord and report what has happened here to get more aid. Who is lord of this town?"

Councilman Rowe spoke for the town, "This town is included in Cynbarion's holdings. It was part of the dowry of his mother, Eupheme."

Even in the midst of this crisis, Miranda had to smile hearing Raphael mutter, "Is there nothing that bastard isn't into?" In a much louder voice, he continued, "That's fortunate. Cynbarion already has some familiarity with this recent raver problem. He will know how to respond."

"Can your riders leave within the hour? While I chased away the one raver I know of, there may be others, and the night will make any near here bolder. It's best to get started while there are still hours of daylight left."

Miranda kept working inside while she could hear the sounds of planning just outside the window.

Thank you, blessed goddess of healing. She quickly addressed Eli's parents before going to sew up Roland's wounds. "My initial assessment was right. Eli was extremely lucky with the wounds to his abdomen. The skin was cut, but I can find no organs damaged within. I've done what I can to clean and close the wounds. The solution with which I soaked his head bandages will help prevent swelling. You should make a schedule to take turns so someone can sit with him. I'll need to know if there are any changes."

"Miranda, come look at this." Roland's mother stared at his bare back. The ragged tears in the skin Miranda had initially seen were markedly improved. "I just washed his back with the solution you gave me, and these gashes already look better. Is this due to your medicine?"

His mother's voice was filled with forced hope -- hope that Miranda would have to dash. "No, Helene, the solution doesn't have that power."

She turned to Roland. "Do you know what this quick healing means?"

He shared a look of horror with Chrissa, then looked at Miranda and shook his head in denial. But the truth was in his eyes. "I will not be one of those monsters! I would rather you kill me now. Please, can't you fix it? I was just wounded. It's barely happened. Can't you just clean it more?"

Sadly, Miranda shook her head. Roland's head and shoulders slumped at her gesture. *I can't let him give into this despair.* "Roland, you will not be a monster. You will be able to help fight the monsters. You will be like Raphael, the brethren who's helping us now. You will be able to help protect Chrissa, your family, your friends..."

He straightened a little with her words. Helene bit her lip and shared a look of determination with Miranda and Roland's father. They put comforting hands on his shoulders. Roland, however, only had tear-filled eyes for Chrissa.

"You will hate me now."

Chrissa shook her head, becoming visibly stronger as she responded. "No. I will never hate you, Roland. You won't be like that thing. You never could be."

Miranda cleared her throat. "After Raphael finishes outside, I will make sure he comes to see you. He should also be able to help you with this."

She placed a gentle hand on Chrissa's shoulder. "I need to check you. Please come with me."

Chrissa's hand slowly trailed free of Roland's. She looked shaky as she rose to her feet with her mother beside her.

The front door to the cottage opened, and Raphael stepped inside. "How goes it?" His eyes swept over the assembly and settled on Miranda.

She licked her lips and paused briefly to collect her thoughts. "I was just getting ready to examine Chrissa." She gave her a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder. "Eli appears no worse than we thought initially, but he is still unconscious. Roland's wounds, on the other hand, are already visibly healing."

Raphael's eyebrows lifted briefly in acknowledgement. He gave Roland a sympathetic look. "So you and I should talk, eh? Don't worry. Just as when your body changed going from child to man, there was confusion and new feelings, so will there be now. I will let you know what to expect and all the brethren will help you. I've already seen that you are a strong and courageous young man. You will make it through this. Just let me have a quick word with Miranda, and then you and I will talk."

He pulled Miranda to the farthest corner of the cabin to whisper to her. "I expect Chrissa will be fine physically. The raver's scent would have forced her body to prepare for him, and from what Chrissa said, he came within her before I arrived." Raphael looked down, clearly finding what he was saying difficult. "The body fluids of changers have healing properties. Any small injuries he did cause would be repaired. Even emotionally, the fluid will act as a...tonic. She will likely surprise you with how well she is able to recover from this experience on all levels. Since so few women have survived raver attacks in the past, this is not widely known. I tell you so you can use the knowledge to help Chrissa, but must ask you let it go no further. "

Miranda's mouth opened and then closed. "How is it I'm a healer and haven't heard of this? Why do you keep it secret?"

Raphael ran his hands up and down her arms in a soothing manner, but he looked like the one who needed comfort. His brow furrowed as he sought to explain. "Because we carry an inner beast, there is a wildness to all brethren. A need to be free even beyond what man normally prizes. Already, because our scent arouses, there are some who have sought to keep us as little more than toys for their pleasure. This would add yet another reason to try and enslave my kind. Even worse, there might be those who would have their men deliberately attacked to try to turn them to changers and use their body fluids as a commodity to sell. Many would not survive either mentally or physically. We keep our secrets to protect ourselves and others. Do you understand?"

Miranda nodded and gave Raphael's hand a squeeze before going back to examine Chrissa. In spite of what Raphael had revealed, she would still need to do what she could to make sure the girl was uninjured physically and to help her cope emotionally.

* * * * *

Outside Paulus's cottage, the town buzzed with activity. Two riders practically flew on their horses, leaving with missives for Cynbarion and the brethren. Their job was to bring

help. Within the town, weapons and watches were organized. They would be ready if more of the ravers came -- or so they told themselves.

Chapter Eleven

Treat even your competitors with kindness; someday you may need their help.

-- The Trader's Handbook

Head throbbing, Cassandra came slowly to full consciousness. "Ty, Cyn?"

"They are not here."

Cassandra raised heavy eyelids to find Melisande staring back at her. She was sitting next to Cassandra on a thin pallet of blankets. Cassandra tried to push herself up, only to find her hands and feet bound. "Do you feel able to sit? You may feel a bit bruised, but believe me, between the two of us, you have had the better day. While you, slept, I was awake for every jolt and bump of our travel."

"What happened? I remember us sitting and then a sting, and then nothing." The fog in her brain began to fade, and she fought a growing sense of alarm. They were still outside, but it was dark now. A small fire behind Melisande silhouetted her face. There were rustling noises outside of her view. She needed to get her bearings.

"Yes, I would like to sit."

Melisande looked over Cassandra's shoulder. "Help her."

Large male hands grasped her torso and lifted her to a sitting position. Looking around she saw two men, in addition to Melisande. One small, one of average size, both wore clothes with a patchwork of colors that blended with the forest surroundings. Their tanned skin and sun-streaked hair spoke of much time outdoors. They returned her look with curiosity, but did not offer comment. Melisande must be the host of this party.

She looked directly at her.

“Why have you captured me? Your family is already wealthy, and no amount of ransom is worth the trouble you earn with this. They will know I was with you. Ty can follow us on scent alone. You must know that they will hunt you down for this. Even the king won’t be able to protect you.”

Melisande’s lips pulled into a bitter smile. “Money is not the object of this exercise. It’s too bad Cyn decided not to take me as his bride. Then you would have been spared this. You see, what I want is power, respect of those beneath me. You seem one who has always been comfortable with your place, so I doubt you would understand the position of a bastard at court, even a well-cared-for one. The little cuts, the subtle snubs all carefully done so no one could take offense. So I would only look foolish if I complained.”

Melisande’s hands twisted tightly in her skirt material as she spoke. Cassandra was suddenly glad she had never been rude to Melisande.

“You have heard the king is my half brother? Well, he is not the only one I have. My other brother has no royal blood. He has made himself noble by virtue of his actions. He is a true leader, and with him, I will rule a new kingdom. One without the ridiculous pretenses of the present courts.” For a moment Melisande’s eyes filled with the light of a fanatic.

Confusion and fear wrapped around Cassandra’s heart. “That sounds like a noble goal. Why take an ordinary trader like me? I have no standing in court to help or hurt your cause.”

“Don’t play stupid!” Melisande snarled. “As the *chosen* of Ty and Cynbarion’s lover, you would have a certain power anyway, but I saw what happened when you disappeared yesterday. Ty almost lost himself to his beast. Despite bonding with you, he still does not have the stability of a long-time brethren, and Cyn will do anything to protect his bond brother.”

The depth of Melisande’s knowledge of the brethren stunned Cassandra. This was most uncommon! She could not react quickly enough to stop her quick inhale of surprise. Melisande’s eyes narrowed, but she continued.

“I expect the keep is in a complete uproar as we speak. I don’t know if Ty will completely lose his mind now you have disappeared a second time, or if he will be able to hold on to begin the search for you. It doesn’t matter. What is important is that Cyn will drop everything else to help him. He will not be available to organize his troops to aid Birne when the request for aid is officially made. That lack of interference is all we need to win a piece of the border and start our new country.”

Horror at what could very well happen to Ty filled Cassandra’s mind.

“If I’m not a hostage, why am I still alive?”

Melisande reached out to pat Cassandra’s cheek. Cassandra barely stilled her instinctive desire to jerk away. Melisande thoughtfully trailed a finger over the side of Cassandra’s face. “You know what a bond a brethren has with his *chosen*. Ty might very well know if you

were dead. This way he will go wild searching for you, not quietly fade away or kill himself with sorrow. His madness will provide a much better distraction than his death.

"But you don't need to worry about the scent addiction. Soon enough, we'll have you attached to another."

An idea wrapped itself around Cassandra's mind. It couldn't be true and yet... "We? Who are we? Who is your brother, Melisande?"

Melisande sat up straight and proud. She looked at Cassandra with challenge in her eye. "The brother I speak of is Ammon, the leader of the so-called ravers. He is not brethren, but he is not mad. Some who follow him are...unstable, but not all of them. Most importantly, he controls them. We will build a new country with those who have been discarded, those who, like he and I, are not quite considered fit."

"You trust -- Melisande, they are called ravers for a reason. When their beasts take them, they kill with joy. They must only follow your brother because he allows killing."

"No, you are wrong. Ammon is brilliant. He has found a mixture of extracts that quiets the mind. When given to the newly changed, it allows for a merger of man and beast. Not the man ruling the beast as the brethren require, but a union where both are truly accepted."

"You mean the killer in each? Killers who murder and devour the bodies of their victims."

Bleak faced, Melisande pulled away. "All men are killers, Cassandra. Power, kingdoms, birth of any kind involves blood. How do you think any of the noble families gained power? How did our king, my other brother's ancestors, take a throne? It always involves killing. That my allies are ruthless just means we are more likely to succeed."

Her expression softened slightly, and she looked at Cassandra with a degree of pity. "I respected the way you carried yourself in the keep. I even grew to like you. I will make sure you receive the blood of one of Ammon's top lieutenants to break your bond with Ty. You will not be treated as one of the common property women that any may take at their whim."

No! Time seemed to stop for a moment. Cassandra stared in shock. Melisande looked down briefly. Shame flitted over her face before her features once more transformed to the proud mask she normally wore, but she turned to look at the fire as she spoke.

"The appetites of the beast must be fed. They have taken women for their needs. It is another way of controlling those who follow Ammon. The women are kept in a constant state of arousal by the scent of the beasts, ready, needful even, of the men. If you would see lives spared, be glad the beasts are fed this way rather than with the kill. Rarely is a woman actually hurt."

"Hurt! You mean rarely killed perhaps, but to be enslaved in such a way...how can you not call it hurt?"

"I call it only necessary. Someday..."

Abruptly Melisande picked up a bowl that sat by the fire and placed it in Cassandra's bound hands. "Here is some stew. I advise you to eat quickly. We will be leaving again as soon as our third escort returns. For the sake of speed, they will carry us. Do not resist or struggle. These three are among those who are not mad, but they fully embraced their beast's darker side. Do not arouse their beasts. If you do, I will not be able to protect you."

With that, Melisande rose and walked away from the fire and into the shadows beyond the surrounding trees.

Cassandra fought to make her stomach accept the food with the knowledge she would need whatever strength it would give her. She took surreptitious peeks around the camp while she ate and tried to absorb all Melisande told her. The two ravers still in camp showed no interest in her. They stayed well away from the small fire and were little more than man-sized shapes hunched by the base of the surrounding pine trees.

A giant wolf leaped from between two trees. She froze as she stared at the beast. Blood-smeared fur surrounded the muzzle. *This must be their third!* His shape seemed to waver briefly in the firelight, and then a man stood in the beast's place. He was the largest of the three, with shoulder-length hair somewhere between blond and brown. His features might have been handsome if he hadn't looked at her as if trying to decide how she would taste. She pulled back as far as she could while bound and seated. He gave her a quick smirk, apparently pleased with her reaction, and then strode over to a small pile of clothes.

His voice was deep and gravelly, "I see you've eaten. I'm going to untie your legs and let you go behind that rock to relieve yourself before we leave. Once we start, we will not be stopping until we reach our horses." Cassandra jerked slightly. *The ravers are able to keep horses without killing them?*

"Do not look so surprised. Our people can buy brethren-raised horses that will not panic at our scent as well as the next person." He dressed as he spoke. A few steps and he stood at her feet.

She fought not to shrink away from him, to not feel the fear he would be able to smell. Cruel enjoyment contorted his features as he tugged free her ropes. His eyes glittered with suppressed excitement in the firelight. "Oh, and don't try to run. We can all hear your every movement, and you don't want to make us chase you."

* * * * *

At the keep, the day had gone much differently. The riders who had arrived with the midmorning bells were Darius and Marcus.

Guards led them to Cyn's private office, where an extremely pleased-looking Cyn and Ty awaited them.

They paused at the doorway and shared a look of suspicion before looking back at Cyn and Ty.

Darius narrowed his sapphire eyes. “We come bearing serious news from Raphael regarding the raver problem we sent him to investigate. Damn it! Why are you smiling so?”

Now Ty and Cyn shared a look. *Do you want to tell?* it seemed to ask. Ty shrugged attempting to look casual. “You share our news, Cyn. It will be good practice for your announcement later.”

“I don’t know, Ty, perhaps it would not be fair to my loyal people here at the keep to share first with those who do not openly pledge their allegiance to me.”

Marcus stilled and looked at Cyn with the eerie calm he took on when reading someone deeply. Cyn scowled, clearly recognizing the technique, but Marcus only looked back at him with a partially suppressed grin. “Tell, Cyn, or I’ll tell Cassandra how you have treated her brothers.”

Cyn barked out, “You are not her brothers!”

“Will someone please tell me, the acknowledged leader of the brethren, what is going on?”

His good humor apparently restored by Darius’s frustration, Cyn cleared his throat and then gave Darius a smile that began with a wicked edge, but melted into a look of sheer joy. “Cassandra has agreed to marry me.”

Ty ceased all attempts to hold back his own joy and beamed at the group. Marcus immediately stepped up to shake first his, then Cyn’s hands in congratulation.

Darius appeared torn. “Cassandra agreed to tie herself to you, to the restrictions of being a duchess? How did you persuade her?”

Ty sharply exhaled. He should have known Darius would be reluctant to completely let her go. Although he acknowledged Darius and Cassandra were no more than close friends now, he could never completely forget that they had, briefly, been lovers. A part of Ty, both his human and beast side, didn’t trust that this unattached brethren had no designs on Cassandra for himself. When he spoke, the gravelly sound of the beast was in his voice. “We love her. She is *OUR chosen*. She loves us and calls us *HER chosen* in return. What is so difficult to believe?”

“Well, not that there is something wrong with you two, but dealing with court protocol, restrictions on her personal movements...” Darius trailed off, clearly still trying to digest the news.

“She sees *some* advantages to marrying me. As my bride, she cuts off the schemes of all other aristocrats to marry me. I think this thought tipped the balance for me in spite of the problems you mention. She is actually quite possessive.” Cyn grinned and presented a very innocent expression no one who knew him would believe.

This explanation, at last, appeared to satisfy Darius who now also looked pleased. “You are both very lucky men. Just remember that many brethren, Marcus, Raphael, and especially I, consider Cassandra family. If she should ever need us...”

Ty found himself still smiling as he shook his head at Darius's none-too-subtle warning.

Cyn's expression was far more pleased. "We will remember and be happy to make use of the added connection anytime there is a need." He looked amused when Darius frowned at this.

Darius stroked his one scarred cheek in an apparently thoughtless gesture. "You know I was not pledging you any additional--" he tried to begin, but Cyn cut him off.

"Now that we've shared our news, what is yours? What does Raphael say? It can't be good for you to have come riding in so hard."

Teasing aside, the men settled down to business.

Darius brushed his long gold and brown hair. "Raphael says what the raver told you is true. There are at least thirty ravers who have somehow controlled themselves sufficiently to organize into a group. They are operating inside Ibsen under the cover of the current border skirmish with Birne. Their kills are hidden by the deaths from those fights. What is more, they are capturing women, and obviously, scent drugging them for their use. Using the women this way, it may be how they partially control their beasts."

Ty flinched. *Had Cassandra ever seen him in such a way?*

Darius continued. "However, how they came to be organized at all, let alone enough to think through something like that, suggests there is some guiding force behind this, some sort of larger plan."

He leaned forward. "I have Pantheros leading a group toward a meeting spot near the border now. The nearest town in this country is one of your holdings, Quwe. I came to see you myself with this news to ask you to not openly make any move against these ravers yet. If you send in regular troops before we are ready, some might escape. We need to be sure that whoever or whatever has caused this sudden organization among the ravers is stopped here. They are dangerous enough in just their random appearances, but a united force of killers who are bloodthirsty in the truest sense of the word could kill such as we've never seen before."

Ty's insides churned. With his military past, he had been required to kill often. He knew it would have been easy for him to fully embrace the darker longings of his beast and become raver himself. Silently, he thanked his gods again for putting Cassandra in his path when first affected by the bite of a raver. "To force the need upon women in such a way is sickening! I understand strategy very well, Darius, but we must move quickly, not only for the sake of those being killed, but also for the sake of the women who have been taken and those they will try to take. My gods, how many are already affected? Even if we are able to rescue them, how can we undo the addiction?"

Always of few words, Marcus spoke up. "I felt compelled to come with Darius, not just to talk with you both, but the thought that Cassandra might help has tugged at my mind. Can you send someone to fetch her?"

Cyn shook his head. “Not now, she is off walking with the king’s sister, Melisande. She has decided to ‘befriend’ Cassandra. I don’t know what is truly in Melisande’s mind, but that one is clever, and I don’t want to give her any reason to wonder about your appearance here. Let’s plan the other aspects of this for now. I’ll ask Adeena, my personal aide, to watch for Cassandra and discreetly let her know we would like to see her after she returns.”

“Are you hungry?” At the men’s nods, Cyn crossed to the door and looked out to the waiting footmen. “Geoff, my guests and I will lunch here. Go to the kitchen and have food brought up now. Randolph, go fetch Adeena. She is probably in her office.” The men, identically clad in tunics of black with red-and-gold trim, hurried off.

Soon a firm knock sounded on the door.

“Enter.” Although Cyn spoke, all eyes turned toward the heavy door. Adeena entered, eyes sparkling and carrying a leather folder. Unlike Cassandra, she preferred a markedly feminine style of dress when in the keep. She wore a bright green overdress that split at the waist to reveal form-fitting sand-colored pants and a knit top. Her auburn hair was braided like a crown around her head. Her bright green eyes and generous mouth were too similar to Cyn’s own for her to be anything other than a relation.

She entered talking. “Cousin, dearest, you have barely given me time to plan after the news you shared this morning. Surely you aren’t after an update already?” Her chatter stopped as she caught sight of the two new men in the room.

“Ah, I gave *do not disturb* orders and hadn’t heard we have guests.” Her glance and easy smile slid over Marcus and then stopped when she saw Darius, who stared intently at her.

The men all rose. “Adeena, you have heard me speak of them before, but let me introduce Marcus and Darius of the brethren. Brethren, my cousin and personal aide, Adeena.”

Marcus took Adeena’s hand and bowed over it like the best of courtiers. A quiet growl startled the group. Marcus quickly dropped Adeena’s hand and stepped back as Darius advanced.

Ty’s eyebrows shot up in surprise at Darius’s immediate reaction to her. She flushed watching the impossibly handsome creature stalk near her and crowd into her space.

“I have caught the faint echoes of your scent before, in the capital, at the palace, and even here immediately after a group of courtiers left the keep. It called me, but never could I find who owned it. Never did I imagine you were here.” The usually glib Adeena had no reply. She looked around the room, her eyes connecting with Cyn’s in confusion. Darius took her chin and forced her to look back at him. “When this trouble that calls us now is over, you will see me again.” His hand moved slowly, reluctantly from her chin, and he stepped away.

While Cyn and Marcus watched the little scene with speculation, Ty found himself clenching his fists. Adeena may have been related to Cyn, but he had great fondness for the

frighteningly efficient woman who had welcomed him to the keep and teased without fear when he needed it most. He forced himself to relax. Although he and Darius had disagreements, Ty knew the other man to be honorable. Darius clearly recognized Adeena as a possible *chosen* for himself and would pursue her aggressively, but he would not harm her.

Adeena watched Darius move back to his original position, then abruptly turned to look at Cyn. For a moment, panic showed in her face before a mask of concentration took its place. "What do you need of me, Cyn?"

Cyn continued to look speculatively at Adeena a moment before relaxing his body posture a bit. "We need to speak with Cassandra after she returns from her walk with Melisande. I would like her alerted quietly. Could you please take care of this?"

"Of course." Her voice even, only her flushed cheeks and the way she avoided looking at Darius gave away Adeena's flustered state.

As soon as the door shut, Cyn turned to Darius. "Adeena came to me to escape the pressures from her family to marry. She is under my protection. I will not allow anyone to force a tie upon her she does not want."

Darius's muscles clenched, and for a moment, Ty thought he would have to actually act as a bodyguard and defend Cyn from the leader of the brethren. "There will be no force necessary. You saw. She felt it as much as I. She will choose to be mine."

Cyn's mien did not falter through the tense moment. Instead, he continued calmly. "Ah, one thing more you might want to know. Adeena is her family name. Her formal name is Princess Alexandra, and by our laws, until his majesty fathers a child, she is third in line for the throne. It is not only me you will have to deal with if you seek a permanent bond with Adeena." He finished with a wicked smile.

Ty mentally rolled his eyes. Although Cyn loved to provoke, to tease, he usually held himself back because most recipients would be too afraid of *His Grace* to react freely. With Darius, there was no such problem. Ty and Marcus shared a look of understanding before Ty decided to get back to business.

"So, Darius, how many brethren are you sending, and when will they be ready? Quwe is no more than a day's hard ride from here, and you know Cyn will want troops of his own to protect it once the brethren are ready. It might be a good idea for your men to be stationed near the town to better coordinate our efforts." With this, the men began a detailed planning session.

Involved in their work, they didn't notice the passing of time until another knock sounded on the door.

"Ah, that should be Cassandra." As Ty stepped over to the door, his beast suddenly reminded him it had been hours since he had held her. Swinging the door open, however, revealed not Cassandra, but the concerned face of Adeena.

“Cassandra and Melisande are still gone, Ty. I had young Rodney watching to alert me when she returned. He has seen nothing. I looked in your rooms, her study, the library, and the dining hall. Finally, Cicely noticed my wandering about and asked if I was looking for Cassandra or Melisande. She said she had seen them take the west path into the woods from the tower walk. She followed, but didn’t see them. She called down the path, but they didn’t answer. Finally, she left, thinking them either beyond her hearing, or maybe, just wishing to be alone.

“It’s well past midday now. Perhaps you should check.” While she spoke, the others crowded around the door. Darius managed to get closest to the doorframe. Ty watched as he stared resolutely at Adeena, who stepped away, although she never appeared to take her eyes from Ty.

A frisson of alarm ran through Ty’s body. *She is only with Melisande. They are likely neck deep in some discussion of court relationships, or perhaps Cassandra has spotted an interesting plant and is harvesting a sample.* While he told himself these things, he still felt uneasy. *They have been gone too long.*

He refocused on Adeena. “Let’s go look. You three could continue our discussion?” The other men’s expressions mocked this suggestion.

Even Darius tore his eyes from Adeena to address Ty. “Cassandra was dear to us,” he said, gesturing to include Marcus, “long before you met her.”

Cyn, of course, would not be left behind either, so everyone plus two of the duke’s guards headed out to search.

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Cyn and the brethren jerked to attention as they neared the woods. A low growl came from Ty’s throat. The guards tried to put Cyn behind them and looked searchingly for the danger. Cyn would have none of it, pushed them aside, and moved toward the wood along with Ty and Marcus.

Darius grabbed Adeena’s arm. “Stay here.” Then he was off as well.

Ty’s heart raced. The faint scent of strange beasts with the taint of raver lingered in the air. The smell grew stronger once they entered the shelter of the trees.

They quickly followed the women’s trail to where Cassandra and Melisande had sat on the rocks. The strong scent of three ravers showed where they had waited.

Ty released a relieved sigh. “There’s no scent of death or sex in the air. This wasn’t a typical raver action.”

“Here’s where they left.” Cyn studied the ground. “The ravers carried the women.”

Marcus looked around the rocks. “There are no signs of a struggle. I don’t know this Melisande, but it’s a surprise they would get Cassandra so peacefully.”

“What’s this? A dart.” Marcus held it up to his nose. “I smell the traces of some mixture coating it. I’ll wager that one or both of the women were drugged before the ravers took them.”

“And if both weren’t drugged, why not? Was Melisande involved in this? It sounds insane, a noble woman working with ravers, but it’s an amazing coincidence that the ravers were waiting right where the women walked. Walking together was certainly no habit they could have studied or anticipated.” Cyn frowned as his mind raced through the possibilities.

“Actually, Melisande often went for short contemplatives, as she liked to call her walks.” Adeena offered as she rejoined the group.

She gave a short, guilty shrug when Darius scowled at her. “I grew tired of waiting.”

“So Melisande was the target, or possibly she was involved in kidnapping Cassandra.” Ty stared off into the trees. When he turned back to the group, there was death in his eyes. “They have hours head start on us. Whatever their plan and whoever was their target, every moment she’s with them is danger to Cassandra. I’m getting a horse, Cassandra’s medical pack, and leaving.”

“We will leave,” Cyn interposed. “Darius? Marcus?”

“I, too,” Darius spoke. “Marcus, you will need to stay and send out our instructions from this afternoon’s planning.”

Cyn’s look pinned Adeena. “And you will act for me until I return. Marcus can brief you as to what additionally is happening and the men I need sent to deal with it.” Then he turned his gaze to the silent guard accompanying them. “Ty and Darius will suffice as guards for this trip. Marcus will be organizing an important mission for me where you can be of great help. Follow Adeena’s orders in my stead.”

Ty noticed Cyn studying him while they strode back to the keep. “I’m fine. Angry, worried, ready for blood, but sane. She did not go willingly. My beast feels the difference, and my control isn’t in danger. We’re in perfect accord; we want Cassandra back and the ravers dead.”

Chapter Twelve

You can't see tomorrow, but tomorrow will look back on you.

Choose carefully what will be seen.

-- From Proverbs for School Children
(not that they ever paid attention)

Darkness closed all around them. The shadows pressed in like unwelcome visitors. Raphael's beast pulsed within him, restless and edgy. The hunger so recently sated was upon him again. The likelihood of a fight with the ravers brought the need for blood, violence, and sex all to the front of his mind. He knew it showed in his face.

The villagers who hung on every word earlier now hung back. Their nervous glances excited the beast within. With effort, he reviewed their plans. They had sheltered the women -- the ravers' desired prize -- and younglings at the banker's home and the town jail. The dwellings were adjacent to each other, and both had reinforced walls to discourage any thoughts of robbery. Townspeople and the guard, armed with fire, tarred arrows, and swords, lay in wait. Watches and signals were determined. They were as ready as they could be.

Raphael found himself heading back to Paulus's cottage and to Miranda.

She sat on the porch in the chair the old man usually reserved for himself. The sag of her shoulders and the way her head rested limply against the wall told of her weariness. Even so, to him, she looked like beauty and the promise of comfort. Every part of him surged forward to be near her again.

His steps were quiet. She couldn't have heard him come, but she didn't start when the porch boards squeaked under his feet. He sank down between her knees and leaned into her, resting the side of his face against her belly. The perfume of her skin soothed him.

“Raphael.” A smile was in her voice. Her fingers wrapped in his hair to stroke his scalp, and for a moment, he and the beast were at peace. “Eli turned a corner. He woke briefly this afternoon. I think he may make it through.”

Moisture struck the back of his neck. He looked up to see her crying. “I didn’t know if I could do it, if my skill would be adequate. I was so afraid I would fail them, but I didn’t.” Relief was in her face.

Raphael was reminded that even though Miranda had poise and strength, she was still young in her profession. Incredible pride filled him. *Mine*. His beast gloated. *This strong one is mine*.

His gut clenched in a knot of need. *Luna and Lana help me*. The hunger was back with a vengeance.

Miranda gasped. “Your eyes -- they’ve *changed* to the beast!” She took a deep breath. “Oh, your scent... Raphael, you have been a shadow in my mind all day. Even with all this, you were an ache that never quite went away and now...”

“For me, also. I will be going out to patrol around the village. I want to go with the taste of you in my mouth, your scent clinging to my skin and mine to yours.”

“Paulus gave me his room to rest in while the others sit with Eli...”

He stood, pulling her up with him, one arm under her hips holding her snug against him. She wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. The beast howled within his soul when her head dropped to his shoulder. *Mine!* He strode through the cottage, ignoring the looks of those few inside.

The bedroom door bolt tapped into place, closing them in a small room with a dark wood chair in the corner, a standing closet, and a bed with a blue, padded quilt. He ignored everything but the bed as being unimportant. They were alone. Raphael released his control enough to allow his beast scent to fill the air.

Miranda moaned. “Raphael, you make me want. You make me hunger like your beast.”

Yes, she wanted him, too. “I will supply your every need.” His voice was gruff yet tender.

Her face was so beautiful in her naked hunger, her lips parted, her eyes upon him with expectation. He burned to see her fall apart for him. His cock throbbed to fill her, to feel her holding him, milking him in her wet, velvet grip.

Supporting her hips in one hand, he gripped her head with the other and watched her eyes fall shut as her head tilted back. He covered her mouth with his and slid his tongue inside to stroke every surface. The heat of her mouth reminded him of the heat in her body that would hold him later.

Pulling back, a loud growl rumbled up from his chest. Her hands fisted in his hair as he let her legs slide down until she stood. *She doesn’t want to let go at all!*

Her eyes opened. They were dazed and wanting.

Now. Take her now!

He stripped the clothing off her body with hands that trembled from the hunger and backed her to the simple bed. Her legs caught at its edge, and she tumbled onto its surface, with him following. He caged her body with his arms, trying to hold onto his control.

He nibbled her neck, licked over the racing pulse, and then went further down. Each gasp from her drove him wilder, closer to the edge. Her face contorted with need.

His hands went to her thighs, sliding over the satin-smooth skin and pressing them further apart for him. The scent of her sex called to him. He needed her taste in his mouth. He wrapped his arms around her thighs to pull her closer. Her muscles shook beneath the soft skin in his hands. His tongue ran all around her outer lips, over each dip and fold. He lapped the delicious liquid of her arousal and felt her quiver. When he suckled her clit, she spasmed and cried out beneath him and released more of her silky-hot cream. He pressed in closer to drink what he had earned.

Now. He had to give her more. He needed her to take him. *Not just want. Need.* The realization hit him like a sledgehammer. *She must take me!* He could not let her go. *She is my chosen!* He rose above her and paused for just a moment to meet her eyes.

“Now!” she demanded.

Yes! He thrust into her, pushing both their bodies across the bed with the force of it. He couldn’t speak the words yet, but this was a claiming. She was his. Her legs, her arms held him tight, urging him on.

Harder. He needed to fuck her harder, to mark her soul and make her his. *More.* His hips pistoned. The pleasure cut through his soul until she arched beneath him and clamped onto his cock in tight pulls. The ache within him broke free, replaced with ecstasy when she surrendered herself, shaking and clinging to him. With that, he surrendered himself also, his release shooting into the care of her body in rhythmic squirts.

“*Chosen.* Mine.” The words he could no longer hold back escaped his lips. Quickly he covered her mouth with a desperate kiss, afraid she would know his heart and reject him.

“Rest. I must go...” He tried to rise, but was held back by two feminine arms.

“Raphael, I...care for you, too.” The words drifted up to him from the edge of her sleep.

He breathed a small sigh of relief. She didn’t realize what he meant when he called her *chosen*. He held her hand to his cheek, then pressed a kiss into her palm.

He could still try to win her and not make her feel forced. He’d felt the stirrings of this possessive feeling with her before, but thought he had more control over his beast than this. Instead, he found himself bonded to her. As a long-time brethren, he had learned to accept what his beast instincts told him as true, so he didn’t try to deny the feelings of love and possession he felt for this woman. But, Miranda...how would she respond? *Patience.* She had no attachments to another. She would be his.

* * * * *

At first, Cassandra tried to sit stiffly in the arms of the raver, Johan, who carried her through the forest at a steady jog, but eventually, she let her muscles relax against him. He didn't seem to notice one way or the other, and this way made the journey slightly less jarring to her. Now she understood Melisande's earlier comment about the trip having been easier on her so far. When she was out from the drug, she felt none of the jolts she was treated to now. *Do they never tire? It feels like hours since Eric announced it was time to leave their camp spot.* Two of the ravers had scooped her and Melisande up, and they had been running with them ever since.

Gods, my head still aches from that drug, and now this!

Finally, they stopped. Suddenly dropped to her feet, and with her hands tied in front of her, Cassandra stumbled. She was surprised when her escort actually helped steady her.

A light shone through the trees, a cottage! Briefly, she thought about screaming, but if it were more ravers inside, it would only excite them, which could get her killed. If innocents lived there, they wouldn't stand a chance against these killers.

Eric watched her with cold eyes that she could see quite well in the moonlight.

"Very good. You are smart enough to be quiet. Continue your silence. It will go better for you." He turned to Melisande. "Stay here with her while we fetch our horses."

"Eric, I'm still hungry. What say we leave no witnesses?" Farnes licked his lips and sniffed the air.

"No. Ammon said not to kill humans on this trip unless forced. We leave no evidence of ravers."

Farnes pouted, but sighed his acceptance.

The ravers started to the cottage, then Eric turned once more. "Remember, stay quiet. If no one sees you, they will live longer."

Without the women to burden them, they faded quietly, melting into shadows before her eyes. She turned to look at Melisande, who just turned away and rubbed her arms and legs. Cassandra opened her mouth to speak, but forgot her words when a shout of surprise followed by a shrill scream split the night.

Melisande dashed through the trees. Cassandra thought of running away, but knew there was no way she could outpace them or hide from their sense of smell. *Best to stay by Melisande. She has at least some control over the creatures.*

Melisande parted the last tree branches before a small clearing in front of the cottage and stopped so quickly that Cassandra struck her before she could halt.

Eric was holding a fallen body by one arm. Cassandra watched in shock as he shimmered and *changed* to his midform and began tearing bites from the flesh. Johan stood next to him dropping the body of a woman who, mercifully, appeared dead.

A voice rumbled from the midform horror. "They began to question us and ask for more money. They had to die. Leave us to our feast. We will clean the area and get you when we are ready. Now go!"

Melisande caught Cassandra's tied hands and began to edge back toward the cottage when Farnes spoke out. "No. There are children inside. I can smell them." He wiped drool from his chin, his eyes fixed on the door. "You two step back to the trees. I will take care of this one."

"No!" The word seemed to echo in her head, but Cassandra realized it was actually Melisande speaking. "The adults you have already. I will not have you kill children."

Farnes narrowed his eyes and growled. "You do not give these kinds of orders!"

"I am Ammon's mouth and arms. You will obey me as you do him, or *he* will deal with you. We seek to build a nation, not let them justify calling us insane. You may take what you have, but do not touch the children." She sounded confident, regal even, but the hand she clamped down tightly on Cassandra's was icy and trembling.

My gods, can she control them? Cassandra let her eyes dart back and forth, searching for some weapon if Melisande's control of the beasts slipped. In this one thing she could side with Melisande. Any children would be protected, even if she died doing so.

"What if they've seen us, Lady? What if they can identify us? What would that do to our cause?" Farnes's voice was an evil whisper of justification.

"If they are awake, I will deal with them. Even if they could tell a clear tale of what's happened, by the time someone hears it, it will be too late." She marched to the cottage pulling Cassandra along with her.

Cassandra's heart was in her throat. That raver wanted to kill the children! She didn't trust Melisande's ability to protect them, to prevent the raver from returning to the cottage and murdering them after Melisande left. In addition, what if the children lived? Would they be alright until Ty and Cyn got there? She knew Ty and Cyn followed her by now. Would this madness be enough delay for them to catch up?

Once the door closed firmly behind them, Melisande collapsed against it for a moment before straightening. "Never let them see weakness. You will do well to remember that when we reach my brother's camp."

Both Melisande and Cassandra looked around the cottage. It was a single room: a square table, chairs, shelves with crockery, an empty adult bed, a small child's bed, and a crib. "They aren't here." Melisande covered her mouth, a choked, hysterical laugh slipped by her fingers. "I almost got us killed fighting with them over children who aren't even here."

"Thank the gods!" Cassandra muttered.

She turned to Melisande, whispering with a desperate fury. "You see what you have aligned yourself with? They may have some self-control, but they are still the monsters of legend. They would gladly kill and eat any who get in their way, even children. How can

you throw in with them? Help me find a way out of this now, and I will protect you. I will say you were kidnapped with me and helped me escape.”

Melisande shook her head while Cassandra spoke. She looked sick at what had happened, but there was no hope in her words. “No. There are some paths once taken that can’t be stepped off again.” She appeared to resolve something within her and looked more confident. “What we -- Ammon and I -- will build from this will make the ugliness worthwhile.”

The cottage door opened. Eric stepped in and cast a greedy look around the room. Surprisingly little blood spattered his clothes. “Children?”

Melisande answered in a voice that gave no feeling away. “Farnes only smelled the recent traces of them. They were gone before we ever came.”

“*Hmpff*. Well, it appears the greedy fools were smart in one thing. Let’s go.”

* * * * *

Three giant wolves ran tirelessly through the night. Packs were tied to their backs with Oryion rope that clung to their bodies, but stretched and gave with each movement. Her scent was in their noses. Even without it, the clear track of her kidnappers showed the path taken by three men. The deeper press of two sets of footprints showed which men carried the women.

They passed the campsite where the kidnappers had stopped briefly. Again, their noses told them the women still lived. The only traces of blood were those of rabbits the ravers caught. Briefly, wolven eyes searched around the campsite. There were no signs of a struggle to indicate any violence against the women. Then the beasts were off again. Running.

Finally, they reached a cottage. The strong scent of death clung to the air. A pained sound escaped the muzzle of one of the beasts. He shimmered and *changed*. Ty stood, gasping, naked in the moonlight. A second beast changed, and Cyn was beside his bond brother.

He grabbed Ty by the shoulders. “It’s not her! The death, you know that scent is not Cassandra.”

Ty bent an arm to cover one of Cyn’s hands and give it a reassuring squeeze. “I know. Just for a moment, though...I smelled the death and Cassandra’s scent still in the air...for a moment...” He shook his head. There was the sound of a soft step. Both men snapped their heads toward the sound.

Darius walked back out of the trees. He had changed back to human form as well. “The remains of a man and woman are hidden just back there in the undergrowth. I added cover to the bodies with stones for now. There is no trace of Cassandra or Melisande near them.”

All eyes turned toward the cottage. A few steps and Ty lurched inside. Table, chairs, empty beds. Not much in the room, but it all appeared undisturbed. Whatever caused the

violence happened outside. He could smell Cassandra, Melisande, and one of the ravers. They all had been here, along with the couple who had died and...the smell of children? No, that scent was more faint, older. The children would not have been here this night. *Thank the gods.*

Darius's voice came through the window. "They left here on horses. The steeds must have been brethren-raised to allow the ravers near them. However, the kills were fresh. We have almost caught them! If we don't stop, we will have them before dawn."

Cyn nodded. "I know this cottage. The ravers took a path that went through Hothgar's lands, but now we are back on mine. The road they took leads to Quwe and then the border. We must catch them before they cross the border and reach the raver stronghold."

Chapter Thirteen

Friends give one person the strength of many.

-- The Book of Common Wisdom

The giant wolf that was Raphael glided through the woods, alert for any fresh evidence of ravers. He searched the site of the earlier attack, hoping the raver had panicked and left a clear trail for him to follow. No such luck. At first, the beast ran straight away, but then, he obviously regrouped and began crisscrossing his tracks, going back and forth. A maze of scent and tracks covered the whole hillside behind the berry patch. It was the same trick used by the raver that Cyn described. *That makes it certain. This one is part of the new raver brethren.*

Keep unwinding his path step-by-step, or maybe... His beast wanted to keep on the trail. Follow the scent. Run the intruder down. The man within saw another way.

Raphael abruptly turned and began running toward the back of the hill. *If I can find the edges of his maze, I can go around until I find where he finally breaks away, and then I'll get him.*

The raver left his maze at almost the same point as Raphael had. *Yes! I'll get you now.*

Swiftly, he followed the traces of the raver until he reached a small rise above the road to Quwe. *Here.* The scent of a second raver. His tracks came in from the north. *Had he been scouting that area looking for women? Here. They changed.* The footprints of men replaced those of beasts. *They walked to the road? Why would they do that?*

The wind shifted. It brought Raphael new scents. New ravers, women, a very familiar scent. *Cassandra! Ravers have Cassandra!*

Shocked, he stumbled slightly and almost *changed* back to his human form before gathering himself. He raced down the raver's trail. They had met the new group of ravers on the road.

Agitated, he raced back and forth across the meeting area, angry growls coming from his wolf throat as his nose and eyes told him the story. There were three new ravers. They traveled on horses. The new ravers dismounted and spoke with the other two. There were few prints from the women. The scent of Cassandra was strong now. Then he found it: a small, empty sachet bag like Cassandra always carried in case she found an interesting herb. There was no smell of blood on it. Raphael hoped it meant she deliberately dropped it to help those who would follow her.

Damn! How could she have been snatched from a place as well guarded as the keep? Unless they were dead, Cyn and Ty would follow.

Two sets of tracks became heavier. The new group of ravers sent their horses into the woods on the opposite side of the road. *Hmm, the two that were already around Quwe must have warned them the town would be looking for ravers, so they left their horses to go through the woods.*

The original two ravers returned to the woods and headed back down the way the new three had come. They could just be circling around to the west side of the village or they could be going back to stop any who followed the kidnappers.

Fucking seven hells! He wanted to both stay and protect his *chosen* and to go save Cassandra. Although he teasingly called Cassandra sister, his beast had decided she was pack. *Damn it, Miranda should be safe.* She was in the heart of the protected village, and the first two ravers were probably after whoever might follow the kidnappers. *Cyn and Ty can certainly take care of themselves.* His beast gave a small whimper of fear in case he was wrong and followed the tracks of those holding Cassandra and the other woman.

* * * * *

A scant ten minutes before.

Cassandra alternated between sleep and checking the woods for signs of Cyn and Ty. The horse startled. Jostled, she sat up straight.

"Be still, woman." The raver jerked her against him, then released her waist. "Hold here and don't try to move." He put her hands over the saddle pommel and slid to the ground, still holding the reins.

Two naked forms melted out from the shadows. *More of them! Gods save me and damn them to the seven hells.* Hands tied, the raver in control of the reins, and Melisande watching her warily from the other horse, Cassandra concluded it was not the time to attempt an escape. She tried to look cowed and non-threatening while listening to every word they spoke.

"What are you doing here?" Eric sounded angry. Very angry.

"We were assigned to steal more women, but the Birne villagers are guarding theirs too carefully of late. We decided to take some from here instead and leave some pieces of a Birne uniform to make it look like they did this. It will help slow those here in Andera from joining the fight." The raver attempted to look arrogant, but she saw nervousness in his face.

"Idiot! They will never believe Birne would sanction a strike against their best ally. This will only give them an excuse to join in the fighting sooner." Eric spat out the words in the gravelly voice that indicated *change* in form was coming. His hands fisted at his sides and muscles in his arms bunched. His two fellows slid down from their horses to join him, glaring at the newcomers. Cassandra's breath caught in her throat, the air suddenly too thick to breathe.

The raver braggart attempted to snarl in defiance, but then dropped his head submissively along with his partner. At the gesture, Eric's arms relaxed from their ready-to-attack position. "Lucky for you, Ammon's sister has a better plan." He inclined his head to gesture to Melisande. For the first time, the newcomers looked at the women with Eric, and their eyes widened. Eric snorted in disgust. "Your senses should have told you who was with me already. You do not pay attention to your surroundings as a true brethren should. You are pitiful. Perhaps I should kill you both for disobeying the master and general stupidity." The newcomers hunched down in a wary posture and shuffled back a step.

"No, we are sworn to Ammon. We want to prove ourselves worthy -- true brethren."

"Tell us what to do!"

They practically stumbled over one another in their anxiety to appease the stronger beast.

Eric sneered, obviously pleased with their pleading. Cassandra felt her chest loosen as the threat of an imminent attack faded. She drew a grateful breath into her lungs, trying to keep it as quiet as possible. She had no wish to bring attention to herself with these creatures.

"Very well. Listen carefully. We have taken the *chosen* of Cynbarion's right-hand man, the brethren Tyler. Melisande saw him nearly go mad when she was just missing. This will completely unhinge his reason. We hope Tyler will kill or severely injure the duke in his madness. In any case, Cynbarion will be too occupied with that to cause us trouble in the border war. However, he may have sent some of his men to find her. You two follow our tracks back and kill any who follow us. Hide the bodies well so no one can find them easily, then return to our camp. DO NOT attack any villagers or take any women. We don't want to leave an easy trail for them. Can you do that -- just that -- exactly as I told you?"

"Yes."

"Yes." Both nodded their heads as they stepped further back from the dangerous trio of other ravers.

"See that you do," Eric snarled back at them.

The two newcomers quickly faded away. Cassandra's heart raced. They would find Cyn and Ty! Her men would be following her, not just sending a few troops to search. She knew Ty and Cyn were fierce fighters, but they wouldn't expect a reverse attack. She mentally bargained with the gods. *Please keep them safe! I will do anything.* Nothing could happen to them. She couldn't withstand the anguish if it did.

Rough hands gripped her waist. Eric pulled her to the ground. Looking at Melisande, he spoke in a still angry voice. "Thanks to those fools, Quwe will be on alert. We can't chance riding through or by there. We'll leave the horses here and walk through the forest around the village."

She inclined her head in agreement. "Our eyes are not as yours, nor, of course, is our strength. You may carry Cassandra and me to make this as speedy as possible."

He tuned to Cassandra. "You'll be easier to move if you're awake, but if I hear a single sound -- even a squeak -- I'll drug you, and when you awake, I'll make you sorry. We need only keep you alive. So far, you are safe by Melisande's orders. But if you interfere, you will be punished. Understand?"

She gave a brief nod. While the ravers stripped their gear from the horses and chased them into the trees, Melisande sidled up close to her. "You have done well. Continue being wise and you will be unharmed. These three are very stable, but they enjoy giving pain. Don't give them an excuse."

* * * * *

Muscles stretched and strides lengthened. The scents and trail markings were becoming fresher. Then they stopped. First Cyn, quickly followed by Darius. Ty halted not far ahead to look back in wolvern puzzlement at his brethren when he caught it too, a faint new odor in the air.

Ravers. Not those that had taken Cassandra, but new ones. Two scents. A low growl of warning vibrated from deep within his throat.

The giant wolf forms of Darius and Cyn moved to the side of the road. Ty followed. They continued on after the trail of the horses carrying Cassandra and Melisande at an only slightly slower pace, frequently looking to their sides at boulders and low tree branches, at any place that could hide an enemy.

The scents of the new ravers and Cassandra became stronger with each stride. Ty wanted to run full out. To retrieve his mate. He panted not from the chase, but from the effort to control the beast body and mind. Success, not speed, was the key. He also forced himself to let Cyn take the lead. Since he had actually been born with the beast in him, he would be the most adept at spotting signs of the others, but he constantly had to pull himself back.

A slight hitch in Cyn's step alerted Ty. He, Darius, and Cyn all froze. The hair on their necks rose, and the lips of their muzzles lifted showing fangs -- but they did not growl or make any sound. They slipped free of their travel packs, sunk low to the ground by the trees and bushes, and waited, eyes on the road.

Shortly, the two wolves loped into view. The ravers. Ty made minute adjustments to his muscles. His claws dug into the soft upper layer of earth. *Come just a little closer. Just a little...*

They burst from the trees in smooth leaps. Cyn latched onto the back of one raver while Darius took the other. Ty sank his teeth into the hind leg of the one Cyn had. He relished the taste of hot blood flooding his mouth, wanting them to fight, to give him an excuse to tear into their bodies.

The raver under his teeth yipped and struggled briefly. But with Cyn at his throat and Ty's fangs in his leg, he dropped to the ground in surrender.

While Cyn kept his hold, Ty rushed to help Darius with the other still-struggling raver. He, too, was quickly overwhelmed.

Fighting through the red haze in his mind, Ty stepped back, *changed* to human form and dashed over to their travel packs. He pulled out Cyn's Oryion rope and quickly tied the hind legs of both ravers. He threw the other end of the rope over a sturdy nearby tree branch.

"Let them go!" he shouted.

Cyn and Darius released the beasts they held and *changed* to their human forms as well.

Ty pulled the rope to haul the ravers up into the air while Cyn bit down on his wrist, making a small wound. He spilled a few drops of his blood on the rope and gave it a twist to trigger it.

The ravers rapidly *changed* as well: first to their half-beast, then human, beast, and finally back to human forms again.

Darius stared at the angry, confused faces of the ravers as they hung upside down from the tree branch.

"I am Darius, leader of the brethren." He seemed to grow larger, his power spread out around him like the buzz of bees in the air.

Ty blinked in surprise. He had never seen a shifter display power in this way. He was glad the powerful brethren was on their side.

Darius's voice interrupted his thoughts. "What are you doing in my territory?"

The ravers paled, and the rope swung as they twisted fruitlessly trying to free themselves. Seeing they couldn't escape, they began babbling.

"We weren't after you!"

“No brethren or any villagers. We are acting as soldiers. We’re looking to kill, uh, fight -- I mean stop troops following our fellows -- not interfere with brethren business.”

“Yes. You can let us go. We mean no harm to you and will leave Andera soon.”

The ravers completely focused on Darius. They jerked in surprise when a fierce growl escaped Ty’s throat.

Cyn remained hidden in the darkest shadows of the tree, but Ty heard a similar sound of anger from him.

“Look at me!” The ravers flinched and looked back to Darius. “Who is it you are protecting?”

“Our brethren from Isben. One has taken a *chosen* here. He is helping her escape the lord who tried to force her to stay.”

That foul liar! Ty’s mind flooded with images of his teeth ripping their bodies open. He struggled to hold back his beast. It was important to get all the information they could from these creatures.

Darius appeared still angry, but not as enraged. “We caught the scent of two women and three shifters. Who is on MY territory besides the *chosen* and the one who claims her?”

“Just two helpers and another woman who wanted to taste what a *changer* could provide. Just them and us. We do not mean to invade your territory.”

For a raver, he lied smoothly. More evidence of their relative sanity.

Darius briefly stepped closer and sniffed one of the ravers. “You lie. There is the faint, but recent odor of another woman on you.”

“No! No! We, I only stopped to, uh, please one woman in Quwe before we met back up with the, uh, lovers.”

At the thought of another touching Cassandra, Ty’s muscles trembled with an overwhelming desire to attack. His nose told him no trace of sex stained the trail so far, but he knew it was only a matter of time.

“I think they have nothing more to give us, Darius. Let’s finish and go get MY *chosen* back.” He dropped the rope and *changed* back to his beast form before closing in on the ravers.

* * * * *

Raphael observed the trio of ravers and the two women they carried. The kidnappers traveled a narrow woods path. He hid behind the cover of the large rocks on the hillside above it. Cassandra and the other woman appeared unharmed. He wanted to get her back now and return to Miranda, but the three ravers took great care to move silently, constantly scanning their surroundings for anything representing danger.

Ty and Cyn will be following. If I can at least slow them down... Raphael crept away with the stealth learned through years of experience escaping tricky situations. Once he topped the hill, he began to move with more speed. Raphael decided to use the ravers' tricks against them. He would get ahead of the group below and prepare a few surprises.

* * * * *

Farnes had the lead, walking in his half-beast form, claws ready to defend against any attack. Cassandra heard him smack his lips and mutter how delicious the flesh of the horse seller and his wife had been. She knew stress and frequent *changes* in form increased the hunger and tried not to shudder thinking of how the ravers might appease it.

Farnes's head snapped to attention. He looked around, sniffing the air. He gestured for the others to stop, and his fellows nodded back to him. He pointed to the direction the scent came from. Johan put Melisande down and went to join Farnes.

Eric kept hold of Cassandra. She felt his muscles tense, prepare to move. He scanned the surrounding trees, looking for possible attacks. She heard a loud crash and a howl of pain, then nothing.

Melisande pulled a sheathed dagger from her sleeve. Her eyes darted around nervously. She held the sheath in one hand and the dagger's handle in the other.

"Watch her," Eric growled to Melisande as he sat Cassandra on the ground. She gave a jerky nod and moved to crouch at Cassandra's back. Eric shed his clothes and *changed* before racing into the woods after his partners.

As soon as he left, Cassandra whispered, "They have come for me. Help me get away, and I'll let you escape. You know being the king's sister will not protect you from Cyn." She heard the whisper of steel, then felt the cold edge of the knife against her throat. She froze. *Had she gone too far?*

"Stand. I'll not stay here waiting like a staked-out goat. We'll at least get to some cover." The knife eased away from Cassandra's throat. She awkwardly tried to rise to her feet with her hands still tied behind her. Melisande put a hand to her elbow and assisted her.

The possibility of freedom was so close Cassandra could taste it!

"Damn Luna's net!" A rustle of skirts and Melisande stood before her. "Damn you, Cassandra." Her voice was low and angry, but she twisted her neck, looking around with another frightened glance.

She could see Melisande's fear and uncertainty. She decided to push her a little more. She spoke in urgent voice. "Run now. Cyn's men will have orders to get me back and kill or take any who are holding me. Whatever damage you hoped to cause with Ty by abducting me has already been done. Leave me. Get away. They won't come after you, a woman. Run!" *Please, just leave. Don't decide to kill me. Just go.*

Melisande visibly wavered. She looked at the knife in her hand and at Cassandra. The possibility of killing Cassandra obviously crossed her mind before her features firmed in decision. "Have your freedom, then. I'm away."

Cassandra released the breath she didn't realize she held. Weak with relief, she almost collapsed.

Melisande turned to leave when Cassandra heard the sound of animals crashing through brush. Two wolverine figures raced from the woods. The second overtook the first and they tumbled in a snarling knot.

Both women backed away from the mass of flashing teeth and claws. They moved so quickly it was almost impossible to tell where one left off and the other began, but Cassandra thought that the large black wolf resembled her brother Raphael and that the other was Eric.

Where are the other two ravers? Is it Raphael? Is he alone?

Absorbed in watching the fight, Cassandra didn't notice Melisande move until it was too late.

She grabbed Cassandra's hair with one hand and held the knife to her throat with the other. "Stop! Stop, or I'll kill her!" Her clear shout filled the space around them. The black wolf jumped away from the brown one and fell into a crouched position, his hackles still raised. Both wolves were bloody and panting from their battle.

"*Change!* I know you can understand me. *Change* and tell me what is happening." Melisande slightly pressed the edge of the blade to Cassandra's throat, drawing a line of blood. Immediately it was obvious she'd made a mistake. Eric sniffed and licked his wolverine lips in interest. He stared intently at the line of red and began gathering his muscles, preparing to attack.

Raphael *changed* to his midform and grabbed the distracted beast by the fur at his nape and hindquarters before he could attack. He swung the creature and threw Eric against a tree with terrible force. Eric dropped to the ground, dead or unconscious. Cassandra couldn't tell.

Her heart almost fell through her stomach when three more beasts burst into the clearing. One jumped toward Cassandra and Melisande and *changed* to human form in mid leap. It was Cyn! He grabbed Melisande's arm away from Cassandra before the noblewoman could react.

"How dare you threaten her!" He twisted her wrist and forced Melisande to drop the knife, then shoved her to the side, where a now-transformed Darius caught hold of her.

Ty also shifted back to human. He and Cyn ignored Melisande to run their hands over Cassandra.

"Are you alright?"

"Have they harmed you in any way?"

"I'm well. I'm well. Thank the gods you made it to me now. They planned to take me back to the raver camp."

“Uh, hum, and “Thank you, Raphael, for killing two of the ravers and stopping the third,” Raphael mocked. Cassandra snorted a relieved laugh.

“Yes, Raphael, thank you. Were you not with Ty, Cyn, and Darius?”

“No, I was on my way back with information when I was stopped by a raver attack outside of Quwe. I tracked the one who did that and his partner when I happened upon the signs of your passing. I left the trail of the others to go after you. I laid a trap that crushed one of the ravers who had you and trapped a second long enough for me to kill him. The third was stalking me when I caught sight of him and chased him here.”

Raphael’s brow creased, and the prankster looked unusually serious. “What of the other two ravers? The ones I followed initially? They appeared headed back down the kidnappers’ trail, but if they veered back toward town, we must go now.”

Cyn put out a placating hand. “Don’t worry about those two. They met with us. They are dead.”

“And what of this one?” Darius gave a slack-jawed Melisande a little shake. “She was clearly with them. Although, how a noblewoman could come to be involved with this sort, I don’t know.”

“Cyn...Cynbarion, you’re a *changer*, a brethren! How? When did this happen?” Melisande had found her tongue, but her eyes remained wide in shock.

Ty’s eyes narrowed, and a look of cruelty such as Cassandra had never thought to see on him crossed his face. “Ah, that’s right, Cyn. You have given away your secret and to an enemy. What should we do now with her? She threw in with ravers and put Cassandra in danger. Perhaps she should share the penalty all ravers face.”

Melisande’s shocked face grew even paler as all the men’s eyes turned to her speculatively. Having seen the beasts in action, she would know that a quick death would be a mercy compared to what they could do. For a moment, Cassandra let her suffer before she spoke.

“No. Do not kill her. It is true Melisande worked with them, but the reason I am unharmed is because of her. In her way, she tried to protect me, at least up until the last. She works with them because she has a second half brother. His name is Ammon, and he is the leader of these newly organized ravers. She claims he controls them and has created a mixture that helps even the ravers control their beast. I don’t know how much he loves his sister, but she may be useful to us in a number of ways.”

While she spoke, Darius looked back to where Eric lay. “He’s gone! I will go after him. You three stay with the women.” Within seconds, he *changed* and was off.

“Damn it to the seven hells! They were taking me to some river crossing to reach their camp. Eric will probably be on his way there to alert Ammon.”

"And we don't know if he realized who or what Cyn was before he left." Deadly anger infused Ty's voice. Melisande tried to step back further only to find herself now in Raphael's grasp.

"Don't think you're going anywhere," he purred in her ear and then looked at Cyn. "If we don't kill her, then what shall we do with her instead?"

"Gag her for now and bring her with us. You said ravers staged an attack in Quwe?"

"Yes, three youthlings out picking berries. I spent the previous night sheltered by the village healer." Cassandra noted with interest that Raphael actually blushed upon mentioning the healer. "When I was leaving, I got the smell of a raver. She went to check with me, and I got to the young ones in time to chase away the raver before he killed the two males. They both suffered injuries in the attack, one seriously. He had raped the girl. I think he meant to bring her with him to join the women at his camp."

"Did you receive my report? Do you know what the ravers are doing?"

"Yes, yes, I know. How are the youthlings now?"

"One of the young men is becoming a shifter. He will need brethren help. The other is badly injured, but it looks as though he might heal. The young woman...I don't know. She seems to be doing well so far... The healer there is young, just visiting the town, but she is very skilled." Although concerned for the young ones, Cassandra again noted how Raphael's face and voice softened at the mention of this healer.

"Alright, this is what we will do." Even still naked from his *change*, Cyn radiated the command he had exercised his whole life. "We shall return to Quwe to check on the status of the village and the injured. I also want your healer to look at Cassandra to make sure she isn't harmed."

Cassandra looked at him with irritation.

"We have brethren and some of my regular troops coming to meet up here already, based on your first report. I will make Quwe my base and take out this raver who dared threaten Cassandra."

"Good." Ty spoke in approval even as Melisande cried out.

"No!" Melisande sobbed, "It wasn't Ammon's idea. I saw how Ty reacted when he thought Cassandra disappeared. I had the idea of distracting Cyn by taking her. Leave him!"

"Your idea?" Cyn looked to Cassandra for confirmation.

"Yes, she confessed it to me earlier." Hearing a warning growl from Ty, she added, "But I still don't want her killed."

"It doesn't matter whether it was his plan or not. He's still a threat to us, and we must deal with him." Cyn's voice sounded as cold as she had ever heard it. "Gag her and let's be on our way. Darius will find us when he returns."

Ty and Cyn slipped on clothes from their travel packs while Raphael took some of Darius's.

Finally, Ty sighed placing an arm back around Cassandra and rubbed his chin over the top of her head. "I am so glad you are safe, but what are we going to do with those other women? The ones the ravers have at their camp."

"Yes," Raphael added, his expression turned inward in clearly remembered horror. "They are innocent, but are addicted to the beast scent. They will suffer terribly if we just try to take them back to their homes."

Cassandra looked thoughtful. "I have an idea. Perhaps your healer could help me, Raphael."

Chapter Fourteen

Be always ready. You never know who will come to call.

-- Advice for Every Wife
(a book much popular with
husbands and mothers-in-law)

“Who goes there?” The voice shook a little. Cassandra saw the tips of bows ready to shoot and was doubly glad they approached the town by the road instead of coming through the woods.

“It’s your duke and his company. Stand down!” Cyn’s voice rang out as they came more clearly into the light of the watch fires the townspeople had set around the perimeter.

They rode in on the recaptured horses that the ravers had abandoned earlier. Darius still had not returned, so Raphael rode with them, holding their prisoner, Melisande. Cyn rode alone, making an impressive picture of authority while Cassandra was able to relax gratefully against Ty’s warm chest on the third horse.

The still night air carried back excited whispers.

“It is the duke!”

“He’s already come to aid us!”

“Can you believe it?”

Quickly Cyn cut through the eager crowd. “Be still. I had just received a report of raver activity at the border when my lady was kidnapped. I came here with only my bond brother, Tyler, and the brethren leader, Darius, to rescue her.

“I do have more troops coming to fight this raver problem. They should arrive by tomorrow afternoon. In the meantime, you have the honor of being the first of my people to

greet your future duchess, who is also my bond brother's *chosen*: Cassandra O'lewiala." Cyn dismounted and reached up to help Cassandra down from her and Ty's horse with a grand flourish.

Momentarily surprised by the announcement, Cassandra still managed a gracious smile at the congratulations coming from the group of townspeople who had been awake, taking their turns at guard duty. *We never discussed my family name... How? Oh, but of course, he is Cynbarion. He would know.*

Cyn continued, "Raphael has informed me of what happened here and your precautions. Continue as you were, but note: although we have already killed four ravers tonight, there was one who escaped us. Another member of our party, Darius, the leader of the brethren, is currently chasing him. Take care you do not become overanxious and shoot Darius if he returns tonight."

Cyn turned to the man who wore the badge of head councilman. "Rowe, what is the most suitable place for us to rest?"

"My home would be honored, Your Grace." The head councilman bowed a flourish of his own, showing that even this small town was not lacking in finesse. He looked at the gagged woman with Raphael, obviously curious, but hesitant to question the duke.

Cyn caught his glance. "She aided the ravers and is our prisoner. She'll remain with us until we decide her fate. No one is to offer her harm or aid unless I decree it." He looked around the group who all nodded or offered an "Of course, Your Grace."

"Fine, then..."

"Where is the healer, and do you know if she is awake or not?" *Not the most diplomatic approach, but Cyn will have me in bed if I do not take control now.*

Ty slipped an arm around Cassandra's shoulders and squeezed gently. "I will go with you to see her, before we *all* get some rest."

He's getting as bad as Cyn!

"And so will I," added Cyn.

"Then I might as well go, too, as I know the cottage out of which she is working." Raphael headed down the street, speaking a little more brightly than the others did and tugging their prisoner's arm along with him.

Cassandra raised her eyebrows in interest. *He really is eager to see this healer again.*

Raphael led them quickly to a small, neat cottage. The windows glowed with a gentle light indicating someone inside was still awake.

"Take her." He practically shoved Melisande into a startled Cyn's grasp before opening the door.

"Miranda," he called softly as he stepped inside. "Miranda, are you still awake?"

A young woman stepped through another doorway into the cottage's main room. She had a finger placed to her lips in a shushing motion. Her long blue skirt swirled around her legs as she spun back, quietly closing the door behind her. Rich reddish-brown hair was drawn back in a messy chignon, and when she turned back to face them, Cassandra saw the shadows of weariness under the brandy brown eyes set in a delicate oval of a face.

"Shush, Eli is sleeping in there. I was on the way to bed myself. Eli's sister is sleeping on a cot next to him. If he stirs, she'll fetch me." She shook her head as if attempting to clear away the tiredness.

"Raphael, I didn't expect to see you again tonight. Am I needed?" The weariness faded from her face as she looked past Raphael's shoulders to the new faces framed in the doorway behind him.

He crossed the room, took her hands, and stroked them while he spoke. "This lady is Cassandra, a very old friend of mine and a trader in medicinal herbs. She wants to talk with you about what the ravers have done to the women they captured. Her companions are Ty -- her *chosen* -- and Duke Cynbarion, who is now her betrothed. The other woman was aiding the ravers, and is our prisoner."

Seeing Miranda's eyes widen reflexively at the news, Cassandra hastily extended her hand, hoping to put her at ease.

* * * * *

Miranda's tired mind jolted back to full alertness. After a quick mental sigh of relief that none appeared injured, the words "Duke Cynbarion" jumped out at her. This was the famous duke? He, the brethren Ty, and the woman -- Raphael's friend -- carried themselves as if they were used to commanding the respect of those around them. The other woman, the prisoner, too, wore fine clothes and stood with the rigorously straight posture she'd observed among the nobles in the capital. All this flashed through her mind in a heartbeat's time. Then Cassandra offered her hand.

"Hello. As Raphael said, I am Cassandra. I am sorry to trouble you so late in the night, but I was hoping to find if you have some equipment I need. I have an idea that might help those women held by the ravers. It is important that I begin work on it as soon as possible. If what I need is not here, I'll make a list and send for it at first light."

Cassandra's easy smile and direct manner allowed Miranda to focus on the matter at hand rather than concerns with protocol. "Please, let's sit."

Miranda and Cassandra took adjoining chairs. Raphael stood behind Miranda with one hand resting on her shoulder. She noted that Ty had taken a mirror position behind Cassandra, with Cynbarion seated next to her. The prisoner was pushed into a chair placed across the room from the others, where she could be watched, but not overhear their conversation.

“Here in town I keep only a few basic pieces of equipment: a mortar and pestle, a few flasks -- although there are glass containers aplenty where the town bottles its waters -- and a small fire holder and stand. But the healer’s cottage a short distance from here has a fully equipped medicinal preparation room. What is it you need, and how do you think those women might be aided?”

Cassandra nodded approvingly at Miranda’s to-the-point response. “Raphael says he has explained the scent addiction the ravers are using to control the women they kidnapped?”

Miranda hesitated, reluctant to admit to the knowledge after Raphael had explained how carefully the brethren guarded that bit of knowledge, but Cassandra was clearly aware that she knew. “Yes.” She decided to not elaborate until she could determine exactly what Raphael had said.

“And you are familiar with the herb called fox’s blood?”

Excitement sparked in Miranda. She began to see where Cassandra was going. “Yes, but it is so rare...”

“Recently we were lucky enough to harvest an unusual amount. The raw pollen is in my travel bag, which Cyn was thoughtful enough to bring.”

Miranda bit her lip to keep from interrupting. She burned with curiosity to find out how Cassandra and the duke came to be in Quwe already. The message about the raver attack couldn’t have reached the keep already.

The questions must have shown in her face because Cassandra interjected, “How we came to be here tonight is another story. Since fox’s blood acts as a cure for all poisons, I suspect it may also counteract the effects of the, ah, perfume that both ravers and brethren can exude.”

Gasps, from Ty and Cynbarion drew her attention, but the men focused on Cassandra. Ty knelt and looked Cassandra in the eyes.

“How long have you considered this?” The words sounded stiff, as though it was difficult to ask.

Cassandra placed a hand on his cheek and reached for Cynbarion with her other hand. She gave them both a look so filled with tender love that Miranda felt she should turn away.

“This does not affect my decision. Whether fox’s blood can break the addiction or not, it will not change my feelings or my decision.” Ty’s shoulder’s dropped slightly, and he turned his face to press his lips to her hand. Cynbarion held the hand Cassandra offered him between his own, then brought it to his lips also. Cassandra blushed slightly and pulled back her hands, putting on a back-to-business face.

“If no new threat appears, we should go to the healer’s cottage tomorrow and process the raw pollen to a proper medicinal solution. How are you with laboratory work?”

“I am excellent.”

At Cassandra's raised brow, she added. "I won honors for my skill at the Healer's Academy and was invited to join the formulary there. But I wished to see more of the country, so I declined. I am currently serving my traveling apprenticeship before choosing a final town in which to practice."

"Ah, then we are fortunate your travels brought you here. After we prepare the solution, we can test its effectiveness on me. I first became bound to Ty when he saved my life by giving me his blood after a raver attack. Instead of a more gradual binding, the blood tie is instantaneous and quite strong. In the months since then, our tie has grown even stronger."

At her words, Miranda saw both Cynbarion and Ty's lips press tightly together. She could understand the brethren's concern, but why was the duke upset? Whether or not Cassandra was bound to Ty would not affect her engagement to the duke, would it? Mentally shrugging the question off as none of her business, she focused on the test Cassandra proposed instead.

"Your *chosen* bond was created by a blood tie? If the solution works for you, will it work the same for those who have been addicted in a different manner?"

"What do you suggest?"

"How long does it take to form the bond normally?" Once again, Cassandra raised an elegant eyebrow in question. Miranda blushed, hating it that she did so. "Raphael and I have been together several times between last night and earlier today." She looked at him, unsure of how he would take what she suggested. "If we bonded, we could then test the solution on me..." Her voice trailed off as Raphael's shock-frozen face came alive with a burning possessiveness.

Cassandra tried to speak. "Miranda, I don't think that's a --"

Raphael interrupted looking only at Miranda. "I had already asked to see you when this was over. Can you guess why?"

Miranda looked down, afraid to answer. He took a deep breath. "I want you for my *chosen*. I know, that is, I remember, fully human men and women do not decide so quickly, but my beast knows -- I know."

She realized she was gaping and closed her mouth. He looked away a moment. She saw his profile furrowed in concentration. When he looked back, his face had firmed in resolution. "If we do this and your solution doesn't work, I will be happy." He knelt beside her and took her hands. "It will be...very difficult to even let you try. Once you are mine, no part of me will want to let you go. I know this is important, but I don't want to frighten you with my beast's reaction. Don't ask me to feel that tie, to know you are mine and then just let you go."

"What was done to those women sickens me. I think I can let you try, if you promise that if the potion works, you'll let me re-form the bond." Raphael actually trembled. "I'm sorry. I couldn't feel that and then just let you go."

Tenderness and passion ripped through Miranda's body. *Love? Was this love she felt already for this too beautiful man? Maybe.* She was afraid to commit more than her body to him. *What if I am wrong?* She thought of the women degraded, enslaved by a twisted form of the very bond she deliberately courted. *Do I really trust Raphael enough to risk him having that sort of control over me? Yes.*

With that acceptance, she felt a freedom she had never allowed herself before. Surprised, she realized that love was there also, and she found herself nodding to Raphael's enquiring gaze. "Yes, if the solution doesn't work, I could live with the consequences, and if it does work, I will still be here for you."

She felt her cheeks blazing now under his searching look. He put one hand behind her head to draw her close, then pressed a kiss that, although tender, melted her down to her core with its heat.

A polite cough reminded her they were not alone, and she pushed against his chest. His arms stayed firm about her, but he did lift his face away, whispering, "Later," before rising and stepping back.

She dared to look for the others' reactions. Ty and Cynbarion were pleased, but obviously trying to suppress their response. She guessed they didn't want to do anything to anger Cassandra. *That woman has power.* Cassandra herself, on the other hand, looked at them with slightly misty eyes, although she also attempted a smirk.

"Well, I never thought I would live so long... Raphael is dear to me, irritant though he is. Congratulations," Cassandra finished, with a genuine smile, before clearing her throat to continue.

"I believe the bonds, or rather I mean the bond, I formed with Ty is the same as those formed in the normal manner, but testing the solution on more than one subject would be best."

She ignored the "But, Cassandra ..." that both Ty and Cynbarion tried to interject and continued.

"So if you do bond, we can both test whether or not our cure will work."

Cynbarion placed a hand on Cassandra's arm and leaned in closer to her. "To the point Raphael referenced earlier, will he and Miranda, or you and Ty, be able to re-form the *chosen* bond if this solution works? Does fox's blood just cure the immediate...poisoning?" His mouth pinched on this word, as if he swallowed something very bitter. "Or does it form an immunity to the substance altogether?"

Cassandra paused and thought a moment. "As far as I know, no one has ever deliberately poisoned themselves to test. But, you know, that doesn't really matter to us. I will stay with you and Ty, and Miranda has promised to stay with Raphael. Regardless of the outcome, no brethren in this room will be deprived of his *chosen*. Understood?"

"Yes." Cynbarion placed a soft kiss on Cassandra's cheek. "Thank you."

Miranda turned away, feeling she watched something too intimate for observers. She found Raphael studying her.

He spoke softly, just for her. "To answer your other question, if both parties are willing, that seems to speed the bonding process. It can be done tonight. If you, if we, are going to form a *chosen* bond, I would have the privacy of your cottage. The brethren's leader is pursuing the one escaped raver. He will not be back to trouble your town tonight. Can you leave your charges here for the remainder of the night?"

"Chrissa's body, and even her mind, seem to be healing as you said she would. It is remarkable. She is at her home with her family and should be alright for the night. Roland's wounds have healed, although he is quite shaken emotionally by the coming changes, he will need you and your fellow brethren to help with those, not me. Eli, however, is still very fragile. I will need to check on him again later and be here in case something changes in the meanwhile...we can only afford the privacy of Paulus's room tonight."

"Then, my dedicated healer, that is where we shall go."

She turned back to the others who now stood by the door. Ty had a firm hold on the prisoner who shot daggered looks at all of them. "I will see you all again in the morning. Cassandra, Ty, Your Grace." She tried to maintain her dignity as she said good night to each of them. Instead, she felt her face burn and knew she was turning a fiery shade of red. The gently amused looks she received did not help.

The casual relationships she had enjoyed never affected her this way, but now she felt naked before these near strangers who quietly murmured good nights and then were gone.

Her heart beat so loudly Raphael must hear it.

He turned her, held her at arm's length, and searched her face. "Miranda, you do not have to do this. I would not force a bond on you, nor have you choose one because of any healer's oath."

"No! No, it's not that. I'm just nervous." He didn't look convinced, and she sought the words to explain. "Before, when you said humans didn't know their hearts so quickly, it is usually true, but not always. After I offered to form a bond with you to test whether fox's blood would dissolve it or not, I realized I did so only because I trust you to not abuse such a bond -- and that trust came from love." She looked down, then shyly peeked back up at him to gauge his reaction.

"I guess sometimes even we full humans are still able to touch our inner beast," she joked.

The concern melted from Raphael's face, and when he smiled, it was like the blinding brightness of the sun.

"Mine!" He shouted before she shushed him, indicating Eli's closed door. He picked her up and whirled her around, before pulling her in for a joyous kiss that promised everything.

He carried her to the room they had shared earlier and swiftly shut the door behind them. Curtains only covered the lower portion of the window, so the moon provided a gentle light. He let her legs go to wrap both his arms tightly around her chest. She reached behind his head to pull him down for a kiss. The scent of his beast filled the air, and she felt her conscious mind slipping away as hunger began to roar a demand through her body.

Pulling back she gasped, "No, not yet, Raphael. Hold back the scent for now. I want to take you without it. I want you to know I want you, just you, without anything extra to call me."

She felt a fine tremor run through Raphael all the way down his torso. "Thank you." His eyes filled with tears he did not shed. "This first time, as you wish, but I must release the beast scent later to ensure the bond will form."

She inclined her head, then pushed up on the balls of her feet while pulling him down for another kiss that began tenderly. But soon their tongues were battling in a game to see who would drive the other mad first. It was a game they were both winning.

His hands ran down her spine pressing her tightly to his body. She tilted her hips to fit closer to the hard flesh at his hips.

He groaned and pulled back enough to reach between them and loosen the ties of her bodice, tearing it away. "Miranda." He paused, and she raised her arms for him to pull off her blouse. It was gone in a second. Her skirt and undergarment quickly followed.

Anticipation ran through her as she watched the hunger battle for control in his face. His hands roughly pressed into her flesh while he rubbed them up and down over her hips before pulling back abruptly.

He pulled off his shirt, then toed off his boots, and removed his pants. Although his movements were jerky, he never looked away from her face -- never tried to hide the hunger in his.

If she thought her heart would burst with nervousness earlier, now she was sure this tender hunger would consume the remains.

"The bed. Lie down." She forced the words out. He slid past her to stretch out the length of the bed, hands fisting in the comforter, chest expanding and contracting with deep breaths. His eyes remained pinned on her, waiting for what she would do.

She licked her lips, wanting him so much and wanting him to feel to his bones that it was him that she wanted, not just what his beast scent could do. She crawled onto the bed and between his loosely spread legs. Holding him in place with just her eyes meeting his, she laid her hands over his fists. "Keep them here." She felt his hands flex even tighter, then slowly looked down his body past the glistening of sweat on his chest, past his belly to the nest of hair surrounding his cock, then up its seeking length. He groaned and thrust up slightly when she licked her lips again, looking at the full, plum tip.

"Please," he groaned, as if in pain.

She leaned over, placing one hand over his heart and the other around his cock, then took him in her mouth, sucking and licking along the length. She felt his heart leap and pound. He twisted his head, groaning loudly. Fire roared through her body. Salty, bitter drops escaped into her mouth. She wanted more. She wanted him to fall apart in her hands, under her lips. She sucked him in even deeper.

“Ahh! No!” he cried, then grabbed her and pulled her up, quickly dragging her along his body until his cock was poised at the opening of her vagina. “No, I want to be fucking you when I come. I want to be holding you.”

His eyes were an inferno and made her passion rise higher. She needed him in her more than she needed her next breath.

“Yes.” She slid down onto his cock, his arms wrapped tightly about her. He pushed up just enough to meet the downward arc of her head for a rough kiss. His lips surrounded hers, and his tongue captured her mouth while his hips bucked upward, pounding into her flesh.

The passion burned her from the inside out with its white fire. She could no longer contain it. A cry broke from her lips, and her body shook with the release, squeezing again and again his flesh within her. Then he shouted against her lips, filling her with his cum. The hot liquid pushed her even further. She started to lose consciousness, but his mouth pressed into hers, demanded she stay with him while he pressed up into her through the last spasm of his orgasm.

His arms loosened, and they collapsed together on the bed. For long moments the only sound in the room was the twin sounds of their panting.

She lay listening to the heart under her cheek, one of his hands lightly rubbing over her back. She felt unbelievably connected to him. Her pulse sped. She didn’t know if she could stand to even try the fox’s blood solution! Just the thought of separating from him overwhelmed her.

Startled, she pushed up to see him in the moonlight. “Raphael?!”

“It’s done, Miranda.” He gripped her hips, still joined with his.

“You are mine now. My *chosen*, as I am yours. Even with my controlling the scent, it --whatever it is that makes the scent -- is in my body fluids, especially the liquid that carries my seed. We have been together so much in this short time...you already carried a great deal of my essence. I felt the bond slip into place between us as I came.

“I have never felt such joy, or now, so complete. Are...are you pleased?”

Part of her wanted to just rub against him and soak up even his basic male scent, to taste his skin and be part of him. That feeling of need was frightening and made another part of her want to run. However, the hesitancy in his voice, the way his hands still gripped her as though she might run screaming from him, awakened Miranda’s empathy and gave her courage.

She looked him steadily in the eye. "I told you before, I had made up my mind. You are my *chosen*." She glanced down to gather her thoughts and then looked back, willing him to understand her confusion. "The intensity -- the sudden feeling of being part of you, of needing you -- it took me by surprise."

He ran his hands up her body to frame her head and leaned in for a short kiss that spoke more of love and gratitude than raw passion. "I didn't know it would happen just now rather than later, but I'm so glad you wanted me. Your acceptance of me, your willingness to bond must have brought it into place faster than I expected. I know you opened yourself to this because the healer in you needed to help..."

She covered his lips with her fingers. "No, once you asked me to stay as *chosen* no matter what the fox's blood solution does, I realized that I only proposed the 'temporary' bond because I trusted you, because I love you and wanted you bound to me."

His lips tenderly caressed the fingers she had placed there. "I love you as well and will never give you cause to regret this. When this emergency has passed, we will find a way to blend our lives."

"Ah, yes. I remember you are a traveler for the brethren, and here am I, who always wanted to travel. See how we are fitting already?" Returning his grin with one of her own, she snuggled tiredly into his chest.

"Sleep, my precious one," he whispered. "Your body will demand mine again soon, and many others will demand your time tomorrow. So rest."

Miranda was asleep before he finished speaking.

Chapter Fifteen

Never get between a brethren and his chosen.

-- Common Sense

“Hello, the town!”

The two watchmen closest jerked to attention. He stood slowly from behind some bushes, careful not to make any sudden moves to startle the town guards. “Halt! Who goes there?”

“It’s Darius, leader of the brethren. Didn’t Duke Cynbarion tell you to expect me?”

“How do we know you are who you say?”

Did they really think a raver would politely stand and announce himself?

Darius shook his head in tired disgust. He knew they were frightened and not in a familiar situation, but really!

“I’m walking in. I’m alone, unarmed, and naked since the Duke and company took my clothes with them after I *changed* to pursue the raver.”

He stepped out from the bushes and walked into the village. Neither his long hair trailing behind him nor the smattering of chest hair did anything to cover the generous expanse of flesh displayed in the early morning light.

Women walking in the street stopped and gaped. A few remembered to cover their children’s eyes. Men moved much quicker to cover the eyes of their wives and daughters.

One man, whose wife was apparently not present, laughed at the sight before he ran into his house to grab a blanket.

Offering the wrap to Darius, he said. "I'm Jovan. If you are who you say, please understand, we've just had a terrible fright, and everyone is on edge. This is usually a much friendlier town."

With impatient weariness, Darius thrust his right arm out. "Look here." A wolf's head tattoo and crown were on the inner forearm.

"Yes," Jovan spoke loudly. "He bears the mark of brethren and leader."

Darius was aware of arrows still pointed at him by nervous townsmen. "If you still doubt, fetch your duke, Cynbarion, or Tyler, or Cassandra. Any of them will vouch for me."

Showing excellent timing, the three exited a close-by house just after he spoke.

"Darius, what an interesting choice of garment. Do you plan to lead the brethren in a new fashion direction now?" Cyn was all genial smiles.

Darius ground his teeth at the barb. Cyn, at least, had managed a few hours of sleep while Darius had had none. He opened his mouth to tell his grace what he thought of his ill-timed humor when Cassandra stepped in front of her men.

"Stop it, Cyn! Can't you see he's exhausted? Come inside, Darius, tell what's happened and get some rest."

Still scowling at Cyn, Darius did as Cassandra directed. He dropped into the largest chair in the comfortable peach-and tan-colored parlor. He yawned and stretched his legs out before him.

"Could you please bring him some breakfast -- he'll want a large one -- and some tea? Also please have someone fetch some large men's clothing for him," Cassandra directed an older woman who kept glancing at Darius as if hoping the blanket would drop. He felt soothed by Cassandra's care and even more pleased to see it irritated Cyn.

Tyler plopped on the small peach-colored sofa. "Well, what news?"

Darius grunted. "The raver is quick. I must give him that. I'd almost reached him at the river when he ran into a cave. Inside I found the entrance to a tunnel that seemed to go under the river. I could smell many ravers and heard him call to others to watch for me. Since I didn't know what was ahead or how many, I left. I pried loose a boulder from above the entrance to seal it for now and ran back, only to find my clothing gone."

Tyler smiled a little, but it was obvious his mind was on the problem. "So he got away. Now they'll know that we know all about them, and that we have Melisande. That last might make this Ammon more cautious at least, but we really don't know how much time we have. You closed that entrance, but there may be others. Although, I would guess, none closer to the village or he would have gone there instead."

Cyn eased onto the sofa by Ty while Cassandra took the remaining free chair beside it. "What are you thinking?" he asked Ty.

"Well, Ammon will want to act quickly while he thinks he has a strong advantage. He'll know we would go here. But, will he think us to leave immediately and retreat to the

keep for reinforcements, or would he think that we'll stay here expecting to be safe, for a while, anyway? He will not know we already have your troops and Darius's brethren coming. From what Raphael said, his camp is a couple of hours across the border.

"My guess is that he will try to cross the river today with as strong a force as he can quickly muster, then send scouts to determine our location. If our own people arrive in time, we set watches for them while holding our main force in the woods south of here, where they'll not be observed. After their scouts leave, we can pull in our forces and prepare an ambush. Of course, if we're lucky enough to spot them at their river crossing point, we can take them there."

"Very nice," observed Darius. "Pantheros should be here with the brethren this morning, well ahead of any threat from Ammon."

"And if I know Adeena" -- Darius's head snapped up at Cyn's mention of his aide -- "my own troops will not be far behind. But it could run into the afternoon, so I'll send a couple of the villagers to meet them on the road and direct them away from the town."

"We wouldn't want to spoil the surprise."

The food arrived, carried in by far more women than necessary. "Careful!" Cyn glared at one young woman when she tripped, sloshing hot tea on his lap while staring at Darius.

Cassandra gave an inelegant snort in an obvious effort to choke back a laugh while Cyn brusquely thanked the women and ordered them out.

Raphael came through the door carrying the clothes that he had borrowed from Darius the previous night. "Here, I heard you were missing these, O Grand Leader."

"Thank you for returning them." Darius sniffed the garments. "I see you have kept them close to you while I was gone."

Raphael beamed unrepentantly. "Miranda, my *chosen*" -- naked pride and warmth suffused his voice -- "is checking her patient and then will be ready to go to the healer's cottage with you, Cassandra."

Cassandra sped to him with a ready hug. "Then you have bonded! Congratulations, Raphael."

"Thank you. The feeling is beyond what I ever hoped." For a moment, Raphael looked down, his tanned cheeks reddened slightly.

Surprised at the news and to see Raphael looking the least bit humble or embarrassed, Darius sat up straighter and demanded, "What's going on! You have taken a *chosen* in the middle of all this? And why do you need to go to the healer's cottage? No one appears injured?"

Quickly Cassandra filled Darius in on her plan to try fox's blood to break the scent addiction of the *chosen* bond. Raphael, Cyn, and Ty all scowled their displeasure, but none disputed the need to help the women the ravers had taken.

After a quick argument, Raphael and Cyn won the right to accompany Cassandra and Miranda.

Cyn casually offered, "If you two want to go fetch Miranda, I'll give the town guard and Rowe some direction for the day and then join you." Raphael headed eagerly for the door. Cassandra's eyes narrowed in suspicion, but she went without comment.

After they left, Darius pulled on his clothes. "And what of our prisoner? I wager she can tell us much of the ravers' resources."

"Yes, I think she probably knows very exactly her brother's forces and assets down to the last man. She has shown great feeling for him, so the trick will be to get her to speak." Ty spoke in measured, careful tones. "I wanted Raphael gone before we discussed it. You know of his softness toward women."

Ty was known for some of the same weakness so Darius was surprised to hear him speak so coolly. He looked at Cyn who stared steadily back. They had something particular in mind.

"You have obviously discussed this. What do you suggest?"

Ty took a short breath before answering. "She can't be trusted to tell the truth. She might even lie if we used force, but if we..." He drew his lips back in disgust.

"A woman thoroughly drugged by our beast's scent will not have the presence of mind to lie," Cyn cut in, his voice like ice. While Ty might have a little sympathy for the woman, Cyn clearly had none. "I want you two to use that to force the truth from her. If his numbers are greater than we suspect, what she knows could save our lives and those of everyone in this village."

Grimly, Darius nodded his agreement. Many times he had been forced to kill ravers or inflict pain to control a new brethren struggling with his beast. None of it felt as distasteful as this.

"I will order everyone else out of the house." Cyn left without another word. Darius looked at Ty.

"She's upstairs." He turned to go, then stopped. "You realize she has seen Cyn *change*? None but we can speak with her, and she can never be allowed to go free. I will do whatever it takes to protect Cyn and the dukedom."

"I will not kill this woman, Ty."

"I will not ask you to."

Darius followed Ty to the stairs, watching the stiff posture of the brethren whose *chosen* and bond brother had both been threatened by this woman. If he wanted her life, could Darius really stop him?

Chapter Sixteen

The way through two evil choices is to always be led by love.

-- The Revered One

Melisande stared at the ceiling. Tied to the bed rails and still gagged, she had little choice. Cassandra had come in early with Ty and Cyn at her back. She allowed Melisande to relieve herself and have a small breakfast, but would answer no questions. As soon as Melisande finished eating, the gag was replaced, and Melisande was tied to the bed.

Seven levels of hell! She had some knockout potion-tipped pins and a stiletto hidden the support wiring of her garments. All she needed was a minute of unsupervised freedom, and she would have the means to escape. But to have tried anything under the watchful eyes of all three of them would only be suicide, and she meant to live and prosper still.

The hall floor creaked, and then the door opened. Ty, and the brethren leader, Darius, entered.

They both looked exceedingly grim. A shiver of fear ran through Melisande's body. She was the king's sister. Surely even Cynbarion would not order her killed?

They took up stations on either side of the narrow bed. After a brief, shared look, Darius reached down and untied her gag. He sat on the edge of the bed and offered her a drink of water, which she accepted gratefully. Although Cassandra had been careful that the strip of cloth they used to gag her was not too tight, her mouth had grown very dry.

When are they going to speak? They must have come for information about Ammon. I will tell them he has few ravers at his command just now and that they are waiting for a group to return before they have sufficient strength to attack. I'll let them think they have a week or more of safety.

They do make me nervous, and my scent will show that, but I must make myself more afraid, so they believe me. The one not mated to Cassandra is more likely to show pity.

She looked at Darius, willed tears to fill her eyes and made her voice soft and frightened. "What...what do you want? Please don't hurt me!" She thought his eyes narrowed in disbelief, but he didn't speak. He gently pushed back some of her hair that had come loose from the braids wrapped around her head.

Melisande began to feel warm, slightly uncomfortable. She found herself tugging her ropes, trying to get closer to the brethren leader. He smelled...enticing.

Smell? Scent! A bolt of awareness shot through her body. "What are you doing! Why are you... Please stop! Don't do this to me!"

Genuine terror filled Melisande. Were they going to treat her as those women her brother's ravers had captured -- to hide her away and make her a sex slave for the brethren?

The air grew rich with the scent.

She fought to hold on. This couldn't be happening to *her*. But it was. She focused on the brethren holding her head, Darius. They were affected by this, too. Maybe she could turn it on him. "Release me. Take me." Her voice was husky with hunger. She wanted to promise more, but Darius's tanned skin, visible above the loose laces of his shirt, was too distracting. She licked her lips, wanting a taste.

"I need something from you, Melisande." His deep voice sent vibrations through her body, down to what her maid called her cunt.

Vaguely, she heard Ty walk out. Alone -- with Darius. She felt her resistance falling away. She twisted to her side to rub against him.

"Free me and I will give you everything." *If only I could touch him!*

"I need you to talk to me. Tell me about your brother. Why should we let him live? Is he truly strong enough to control ravers?" Darius leaned down. "Really" -- his lips brushed her ear -- "he cannot have more than a few followers, can he?" Need throbbed through her body to the flesh between her tightly clenched legs.

* * * * *

Darius walked through the bedroom door, the still-writhing woman visible behind him. He ran his hands through his hair.

Ty sighed. "I had to leave. Even though I knew we would do nothing more than use the scent on her, it felt too much like betrayal of my *chosen* bond."

"It was...difficult...on many levels. Despite what I know of her, she is very attractive, and I am not yet bonded. She is...more resistant to the scent than any woman I have ever met...I had to push myself to near the edge to break her."

"But you got the information."

"Yes, as you no doubt heard, he keeps about forty ravers with him and has another..."

Ty jerked stiff like a man struck, a stunned look on his face.

Darius stopped abruptly. "Ty, what is it?"

"The *chosen* bond. It is gone. I do not feel Cassandra's presence anymore. She's gone!" His eyes grew wild, his skin shone with a film of the *change* oil, then his shape shimmered, and the midform of man-beast was there instead.

"You!" roared the creature, looking past Darius toward Melisande. "This is your doing!"

He roared his fury. Muscles bunched to leap. Deadly clawed hands were poised to rip apart flesh, when he was knocked to the floor. Darius was on the half beast's chest, his knees holding down the beast's arms, and his fists were in its hair.

"No, Ty, no! Cassandra is fine! Think! It's the fox's blood. It worked, but she is fine. She's alive and won't leave you. Remember her plan!"

The beast stopped struggling. Lips drawn back in a snarl relaxed. The gravelly voice rumbled out. "Gods, what I almost... Let me up, Darius. I must go to her. Now!"

Darius jumped up. He had no desire to get between the powerful brethren and his *chosen*. Ty dashed down the stairs. When Darius looked out the hall window, he saw Ty's wolf form already racing down the street past startled villagers and a small group of horsemen.

It was Pantheros and a couple of his brethren forces. At a gesture from Pantheros, one of the riders peeled off to follow the racing wolf form. The other two stopped in front of the house.

A moment later, he heard steps approaching.

"Good morning, O Glorious Leader." The tall, dark-haired brethren gave a brief laugh at Darius's irritated frown. *He really had to do something about Raphael's influence.*

While women often sighed over Darius, they only stared at Pantheros when they thought he would not notice. Pale skin coupled with ink-dark hair and a sensuous mouth made him striking to look upon, yet his face held an expression that hinted he would just as soon hurt as give pleasure. Most stayed out of his path. He wore the dark green shirt loosely laced at the neck, the even darker brown leather pants, and knee-high boots that, together, often served as the brethren's uniform.

He stopped directly in front of Darius. His eyes clouded momentarily while looking curiously toward Melisande. Then he composed himself. "We saw the villagers Cynbarion sent out, and I've already positioned" -- he inhaled deeply -- "ah, already positioned the brethren to intercept any incoming ravers. Aison is in charge."

He shifted uncomfortably looking over Darius's shoulder to the softly moaning woman on the bed. "We are using the scent-covering mixture Cassandra developed..."

His whole body leaned toward the open door. "Gods, Darius, what is happening here?" He stared at Melisande. "Is that the prisoner? She smells...so good, so...needful."

Abruptly he turned back to Darius. "What are you doing to her? We don't treat women this way!"

Darius felt his cheeks flush in unaccustomed shame, but he held Pantheros's stare. "She is the half sister of Ammon, the leader of the ravers. She is also an aristocrat and used her position to help him. She even conceived the idea of kidnapping Cassandra and helped in the actual deed." Darius paused. Pantheros flinched slightly at the mention of Cassandra's kidnapping, but didn't otherwise react.

"I used the scent only to get information about her brother's forces. I did not take advantage of the arousal... It was the only way to get information we could trust without harming her."

"Instead you left her aching."

"She is our enemy!"

"She is mine!" Pantheros stopped. His dark eyes widened, and his mouth dropped.

Darius grabbed Pantheros's shoulders. "Lana and Luna! Her? She calls you? Pantheros, she is deceitful as a snake -- unworthy to be your *chosen*. Perhaps it's just the level of her arousal that calls to you?"

"No, that is not all." For a moment Pantheros looked confused, as if he might back away from the recklessly quick statement, then the confusion melted away. His mouth firmed into a straight line. "You owe me, Darius. I want her."

Darius sighed. *Damn. I, and in fact, all the brethren do owe Pantheros, although I am the only one who knows it.* "Her name is Melisande. She has two half brothers, Ammon and the king. She has already betrayed the king for Ammon. You cannot forget that, nor trust her. She also saw Cyn *change* during Cassandra's rescue. We cannot allow her to speak with anyone not of the brethren. Do you want this burden?"

Pantheros didn't budge. "She is mine. I can't turn away." Then he offered Darius a half smile. "Easy has never been my choice."

Darius sighed heavily. "Very well, then. I know the call of your *chosen* is difficult to deny."

Pantheros raised his brows in question. Darius just shook his head, declining to answer. "Another time."

"Since Cyn is most directly affected by what she saw, perhaps he will have a suggestion as to what you can do with her until, if ever, you find her trustworthy."

While they talked, Darius watched the way Pantheros's eyes kept flitting over to the woman whose moans were gradually fading. Finally, the sounds stopped, although a quick glance of his own showed she still twisted restlessly in her bonds.

"If you are done with me for now?" Pantheros looked at the figure on the bed with hunger.

"Yes. You may go to her, for a short time, but I expect you to be with us later. Do not forget, she must be tied and gagged against speech when you leave."

Pantheros looked strained, but nodded.

Darius heard the bedroom door shut as he hurried down the stairs.

* * * * *

Ty raced to the healer's cottage, following the combined scents of Cassandra and Cyn. Closing in, he heard Cyn's voice.

"Miranda, stand back! Raphael is not himself."

Ty *changed* and tore open the door. Inside, Cyn knelt, holding a shaking Raphael. Cassandra stood behind Cyn, her hands resting lightly on his shoulders. Miranda froze in midstep when the cottage door slammed against the outer wall, but Ty ignored her to advance on Cassandra. His beast drove him to touch her, to reclaim his *chosen*.

Cassandra's eyes widened, watching Ty's purposeful advance. "Ty, how much of you is there?" The knuckles of her hand gripping Cyn turned white. "I am here for you. I do not run."

He paused, struggled to force words through the fire that filled him. "Need you."

She raised a hand, calling him to her side. In a heartbeat, he held her in one arm, the other on Cyn's shoulder. When he was connected to them, the fog eased back from his mind.

Miranda remained where she stood, although she swayed on her feet as if pulled by an invisible force toward Raphael. Her voice wavered. "Cassandra's cure for the scent addiction works, but look at the result."

"For the ravers, this will not matter. They are not in a *chosen* bond with the women." Cyn ground the words out. Ty could feel a cold sweat coating Cyn's body. *He is holding onto his control by the skin of his teeth.* "The only result will be the women freed of the scent -- freed from their slavery."

Miranda nodded her understanding. "I'm coming to him, Cyn. Even without the bond, I...I love him. He needs me as Ty needed Cassandra's touch."

She took a step closer to her lover when Raphael gave a jerk and jumped to his feet, pulling free from Cyn's hold. Ty's muscles bunched, as did Cyn's beneath his fingers, but Raphael only swooped Miranda up in his arms and buried his face against her neck.

"Gods, it was as if you cut my heart out." His voice came out muffled by her hair. "Miranda." He made her name into a plea. A plea Ty well understood.

"Through that door, to the bedroom," she muttered. Raphael disappeared behind the door with Miranda still in his arms.

Cyn turned on his knees to bury his face against Cassandra's womb while Ty pressed the back of his head with one hand and put his other arm around Cassandra. She leaned back

against him, soothing him with her presence and her acceptance of him. He needed to reform the bond, to feel that link with her once again. He spotted a bed through the pulled-back curtains of an alcove by the fireplace and tugged Cyn's hair to get him to rise.

Cyn's voice took on the gravelly sound of his beast. "Cassandra, now?" He took Ty's hands in his and rubbed them over her breasts and down her torso.

Ty felt a catch in his throat at the sensation. He held his breath, waiting for her answer. *Don't. Don't make us wait.* He pressed small, fierce kisses along the side of her neck, shaking with the effort to hold back until she answered.

"Yes, gods, yes. I felt the loss as well. Bring me back to you, to you both." Ty grabbed her hair to tilt back her head. He took her mouth, wanting to take her words into him. There was the rustle of clothing. He pulled back, pleased with the dazed look on her face. *Yes!* This is what he needed, to see her as hungry as he was. He felt Cyn tugging her away, and a growl rumbled up from his chest. He saw Cyn, now naked, before him. The pressure building in his chest eased. He let Cyn pull Cassandra to the bed and noticed he had removed Cassandra's pants while the kiss distracted Ty.

The sight of his two lovers tumbling to the bed brought an overwhelming feeling of possessiveness. He rushed to join them.

Cassandra's beautifully rounded bottom was just visible beneath the hem of her shirt. He wanted to see it all. He sat on the bed behind her prone body and pulled her shirt over her head forcing Cassandra and Cyn's kiss to break off.

They looked up at him with heat. Remembering the first time all three of them were together, Ty pulled Cassandra back up and between his legs. First, he settled her head against his shoulder and brushed his hands along the inside of her legs, savoring the texture of her skin while pulling and spreading her thighs over his own.

"Hands here." He put her hands on her thighs, forcing her to participate in the display of her body. Then he ran his hands over her slim figure before Cyn's watching eyes. Her breathing deepened with his touch.

He palmed her breasts, circling and squeezing the nipples so they stood out like an offering for Cyn, whose own breathing grew deeper with each movement of Ty's hands. Ty's own hunger burned brighter with each touch. He pressed his hard cock against the hollow of Cassandra's back. Cyn watched them, one hand supporting his head and the other squeezing and stroking his own rigid length.

Next, Ty slid one hand lower over her body to cup her mound. Cassandra bucked against him. Her breath stuttered. Her body was hot in his hands, but he wasn't ready for her to come, not yet. He stretched his legs apart, spreading hers further also, drawing attention to her open cunt. Ty rubbed two fingers along her wet inner lips, circling and teasing the clit without allowing her release.

Cyn licked his lips in a gesture of longing. He pulled up onto his hands and knees. Ty knew he was about to break.

“Cyn, a little taste only.” Cyn’s arms bent as he dipped down. Ty held open Cassandra’s pussy lips and felt the brush of Cyn’s hot tongue lapping against her. Cyn’s face pressed in closer, his tongue reaching inside. Ty massaged her clit and felt her jerk in his arms, moaning loudly with her first release.

Cyn slurped up the liquid soaking Ty’s hand. He could wait no more.

“Now!”

He pulled Cassandra up to her knees. At first Cyn wouldn’t give up his place at her cunt, his mouth following her up, then he quickly rose, Cassandra grabbing onto his shoulders. Cyn’s hands were at Cassandra’s waist, and he lifted her until Ty could see the length of Cyn’s cock between Cassandra’s legs. Then Cyn pushed her down. Cassandra gasped, and her body arched.

There was a flash of heat from Cyn and a moan from Cassandra. Cyn’s half-man, half-beast shape looked at him from over Cassandra’s shoulder. Ty knew the larger cock of this form would stretch Cassandra tightly, and he hungered to join them.

Careful to control his strength, he pushed Cassandra and Cyn back so her ass was exposed to him. He went through a partial transformation that left him coated in the *change* oil. He rose to his knees behind her and rubbed the tip of his cock around her anus, then pushed in. She pushed back against him, easing the way. Her body held him tightly. The pleasure shot through his body. After a few careful thrusts, the grip of her body, and the feeling of Cyn just a thin membrane away, was too much. Ty let the *change* take him as well. He went to his midform, loving the sounds of her moans of pleasure.

His eyes met Cyn’s, and both let their scent flow into the air. Cyn’s lust-inducing aroma drove him mad with need, as he knew his would affect Cyn, as he knew both were affecting Cassandra. He fought for the concentration to actively force more of the scent from his body, to drench his *chosen* with it. It was as if they swam in a river of lust.

“Pleasure her. Make her ours again.”

He didn’t know if the words came from himself or Cyn. They began to thrust in counterpoint to each other, each stroke taking them deeper into the feeling, to where they would gladly drown.

Cassandra twisted and moaned inarticulate cries between them. She reached one arm over her shoulder to pull Ty down to her mouth. Her body gripped down on him, and she shouted her release, her face a mask of ecstasy.

He reached the moment of crisis, every muscle in his legs and hips clenching, seeking to bury himself further in her. Fierce joy shot through his body as he pumped himself into her.

An animal roar came from Cyn, and Ty felt him too pumping his release into Cassandra.

As one, they each leaned down to one of her shoulders and bit her, marking her as their own.

At that moment, Ty felt something snap into place. The *chosen* bond returned, and more, he could feel Cassandra's orgasm with his own and Cyn's as well, and he knew they felt his. For an endless moment, rapture held the three of them in a single grip, then they fell back into themselves.

They leaned together in a panting tangle. Random bolts of pleasure still sung through Ty's body for a long minute after, and then finally, he pulled free. While Cyn helped Cassandra free of his cock. Ty rose on shaky feet to find a bath area and some water to wash Cassandra. He smelled soap, water, lavender, and other welcoming aromas coming through a partially open door. He quickly *changed* to full wolf and back to clean his own body, then found water and cloths for his *chosen*.

She lay panting softly, held in the bend of Cyn's once again human arm. She offered him a tender smile, although her first words were businesslike. "The solution worked. The fox's blood dissolved the bond, so we can help those women, but I am so glad it easily re-formed. I cherish you both and the tie between us."

Ty bent, loving how she left her limbs slack in his grip, open and trusting to whatever he would do. He washed her delicate flesh, and unable to resist, placed a few gentle kisses on her soft pussy. Even after washing her, his wolveren senses could smell the combined scents of Cassandra, Cyn, and him. It smelled like home, and her soft cries at his touch were his welcome.

Cyn stroked his hair, drawing his attention back to the moment. His brow furrowed as he looked from Ty to Cassandra. "Did you both feel...more? It seemed as though I were actually feeling being inside you." Cyn had the grace to smile wryly at the unintended pun while Cassandra's smirk mocked his humor. "I mean it was as though I shared your emotions and the actual sensations of each of you. You perceived it, too, yes?"

Ty felt like pleading ignorance to tease Cyn a while longer, but Cassandra apparently felt more mercy. "Yes, I felt it, too. It was wonderful, almost worth the short time we lost the bond to have it re-form so tightly. Now, I only feel my own skin, my own sensations again. Is it the same for you?" Her look took in both Ty and Cyn.

Ty placed a fond kiss against her belly before sliding up to recline, leaning on one arm, while the other joined with Cyn's on Cassandra. "Yes, it was the same for me also. It'll be interesting to see if it was only this once or if we'll share that more in the future."

"Or even to see if it only occurs during intimate moments." Miranda was stepping out of the now-opened bedroom door with a very happy Raphael behind her. She was wrapped only in a sheet, and from what Ty could see, Raphael wore nothing.

Quickly he pulled their sheet up over Cassandra, who batted it back from her face with irritation. "I need to breathe, you know! And a naked brethren is nothing I haven't seen before."

“You don’t need to see any males but your *chosen* naked again, and he doesn’t need to see you!” Cassandra just rolled her eyes at Ty’s pronouncement, while Cyn ignored the byplay altogether to address the young healer.

“So you and Raphael experienced the same sharing of feeling and sensation?”

Her eyes sparkled, and she spoke with unbound enthusiasm. “Yes! So this is something new? I can’t wait to study it and...” Her voice trailed off as she watched Cyn’s expression turn to a frown.

“You can’t tell anyone of this.”

“But why not? Who knows what we would learn.”

“What would happen if someone like Ammon learned about this? How many women would he use to form a bond, break it, and re-form to try to repeat the results. The unscrupulous, like him, would be tempted to try to work it for their own pleasure, or if the sharing could be extended to sharing thoughts, they could even use it to gain spies. You may study it in secret with Raphael or even question us” --he gestured to Ty and Cassandra -- “but no one else must hear even a word about it. Understood?”

Miranda bit her lip, clearly frustrated, but Ty saw the understanding pass over her face and a reluctant acceptance of Cyn’s authority.

Still shielded by her body, Raphael wrapped his arms around her. She relaxed back against his body. “At least we know the fox’s blood solution works. We can help those women the ravers took.”

“Yes,” Cyn agreed. “We will do that, and you will be of great help to them afterward as well. They will need someone to help them understand what has happened. It is also important that those women and their countrymen understand clearly that these were the actions of ravers. Although they call themselves the ‘true brethren,’ they are not. If this is not made clear, then Ibsen may decide to attack, and we would have the war Ammon plotted after all.”

Ty judged that Cyn had finished and gave into his own wishes. “Raphael, get dressed! We have much to do today.”

Chapter Seventeen

The end is never such. It is a new beginning.

-- A common farewell among the Chema mountain people

Raphael crept through the undergrowth. He avoided dry twigs and rustling leaves with the ease of long practice. There was no sign of the ravers yet, but stealth when hunting was both habit for the man and instinct for his beast. He wore his midform of man-beast and bothered with neither shirt nor shoes. Instead, he wore dark woolen pants, easily shed if he took wolf form. He also had a bow and a quiver of arrows, each tipped with Cassandra's potion that knocked out changers.

Logically, he knew it would be better to take out as many of the enemy as possible without endangering themselves, but his wolf wanted blood. He knew the urge was the same for the others. They called themselves brethren and held tightly to their sanity. However, the lure to go wild was always there, much more so for the unmated. It was rare for them to face more than one or two ravers at a time. The anticipation of being able to fight full out, with the intention of killing all of their foes, was an almost palpable force among the Brother Wolves.

He passed brethren in wolf form and others high in trees. They waited for some sight of the ravers. Either they would use polished metal to signal one another, or if they thought the ravers might see their signals, they could chance using special bird whistles to alert the brethren on the ground to attack. They would ignore the bite of the cold air and stay in place all day, all night, and longer without moving, if needed. Raphael suspected the wait would be much shorter.

Just a short time ago, the brethren found a second entrance to the tunnel Darius had blocked. Raphael was going to wait with the lookouts posted there. He wanted to see the ravers when they came out.

Although that was where they expected ravers, the brethren did not mass there. They spread out in small groups at lookout points in the woods, along the river and further back. At a signal from one, they would gather to surround and attack the ravers -- hopefully before they knew they had been seen.

A signal flashed over Raphael's head. The ravers were already here! He sped toward the river, other brethren already in wolf form joining him. Even running, they moved in near silence.

He reached the steep rock wall a short distance downstream from the tunnel opening. Ravers spilled out from a narrow opening between two boulders along the river wall and then carefully scrambled down the jagged rocks to reach the riverbank. The place they stood would have been under water just a few days ago in the worst of the flooding. Now the icy waters had retreated sufficiently to allow a long, narrow gathering spot.

He heard someone creeping close and tensed, ready to strike. "Raphael." The word barely loud enough for even his changer's hearing. He relaxed, recognizing the voice.

Ty joined him. He wore the same dark brown pants as Raphael, but carried a coiled rope with a multipronged hook and wore a sword in its sheath across his back. Although curious, Raphael decided to hold his questions in favor of silence. They carefully peered through the small spaces between the large rocks scattered at the lip of the river chasm. Fifteen, twenty, thirty, and last of all, a tall man with a wild mane of dark blond hair. He gestured to the crowd, which followed him to a difficult climb out of the river canyon.

They are staying in human form. Why? The midform has claws and greater strength. He must have ordered them to stay in human form to better control them! In a bare whisper, Raphael shared his thoughts with Ty.

He looked behind him and saw a pale, golden-haired brethren gliding over to him and Ty. The ravers had begun whispering among themselves, creating a quiet buzz that would hide the brethren's own whispers. Raphael signaled the young brethren to quietly give his report.

"Darius said to tell you almost half of us are here. As soon as the ravers reach the top, we will attack with the brethren here, and you" -- he looked at Ty -- "can go to your position." A brief nod and he was backing away.

Raphael stared at Ty. "What position?"

"I will use this" -- Ty gestured to the rope with a multipronged hook on the end -- "to help me reach the bottom of the chasm swiftly. Once there, I'll go to the tunnel, kill any guarding the entrance and kill any who try to retreat through it."

"Alone?"

“Yes, even including the effect of your drug-tipped arrows, we are outnumbered. The first priority is to make sure none of them gets through to the village. We can spare no more to go with me.”

Raphael frowned, then whispered back fiercely, “As soon as I’ve shot these arrows, I’ll join you. Cassandra will have my head if anything happens to you. And where is Cyn, anyway? I would have thought he would be trying to outmaneuver Darius to direct the fight.”

Ty grinned. “We got him to move his base of operations to the healer’s cottage. He can still direct the town and keep track of the battle while guarding the women. Pantheros is also there with our prisoner, Melisande.”

“What shall we do about her? I can’t see killing her, but we can’t let her go free or even speak, and then there’s her other brother, the king.”

Surprisingly, Ty did not look concerned. His smile merely widened. “Pantheros has taken a great interest in her. You may trust she will be taken care of in a way that will protect the brethren, but will not require that we take her life.”

“Pantheros? But, he had sworn to never --”

“I know. His beast has other ideas. He won’t make it easy for her.”

Raphael felt almost sorry for Melisande. Her life was about to change a good deal.

The last raver reached the top of the cliff wall. Raphael shifted his position slightly and pulled the first arrow from the quiver. Immediately Ty set the hook and began practically flying down the ravine. At the same time, a sharp whistle cut through the air and arrows flew, many regular ones and Raphael’s, which were tipped with the last of Cassandra’s knockout mixture.

Those struck with the drug-tipped arrows wobbled and quickly fell. A few hit with the regular arrows died. Most screamed in pain and fury. They pulled out the arrows and began shifting to heal and fight. The odds were better, but his Brother Wolves were still outnumbered.

Brethren poured from behind trees and rocks to meet the attack with bloodthirsty abandon. The ravers had no time to think, but fought like the cornered beasts they were.

Raphael saw a few go over the edge and begin the climb to the ravine floor and the tunnel. He grabbed Ty’s rope and descended almost as quickly as Ty himself.

He arrived at the tunnel just in time to see the gleam of Ty’s sword as he beheaded one raver, the body of another already on the tunnel floor.

“There are some climbing down!”

A third figure ran away.

“Can you get him?”

Raphael set out after him, while *changing* to his wolf form and sliding free of his clothes. He was off before Ty finished turning to face the tunnel entrance.

Although the wolf form was much faster, the raver hadn't stopped to *change*. That marked him as a younger shifter whose *change* would take place more slowly. A wolfish grin lit Raphael's muzzle, and he ran even faster to catch the young killer.

The raver came into view. The scent of fear rolled off his body. Raphael's animal side responded with hunger. The desire to kill sharpened.

He leapt onto the raver's back, feeling the skin tear beneath his claws. He snapped his jaws close over the killer's throat.

A scream gurgled from the raver's mouth as he went down. Blood gushed into Raphael's mouth; he exulted in his triumph.

With frantic hands, the raver tried to get a grip on Raphael and pull him away, but Raphael had completely torn through the artery. The raver's body emptied its blood before he could tear Raphael away. There would be no *changing* of forms to heal this one.

Fighting the beast's hunger, Raphael forced himself away from his kill. There was always this moment of danger. During the chase, man and beast were one. After the fight, the beast did not want to cede control back to the man. He wanted to feast, to relish the victory as any wild predator would.

The stress of the last few months -- spying alone on the ravers, never really resting as he watched them -- had worn Raphael's reserves thin. The added stress of losing the bond with his *chosen*, if only briefly, made it worse. He felt the pull toward the body like a physical thing. Miranda. His desperate mind latched onto the thought of his *chosen*. She would not want this.

Heat and then the *change*. He was in human form once again. The wolf still paced in his soul, but was unwilling to do anything that would cause his mate to reject him.

There were no lights in the tunnel, but Raphael saw a faint light in the distance. The other entrance. He ran toward it. Would Ammon have more men stationed to guard that exit as well, or did he trust that none but his own would reach the other side?

Cautiously Raphael exited after first testing the air for any sound or scent that might indicate waiting guards. There were so many scents from the ravers that had just passed through. He couldn't be sure, but there were no sounds or sights to tell him others waited. He exited in a quick diving roll and looked around, ready to defend himself. There was no one there.

He did a quick study of the ground. Two sets of footprints showed guards had run away! They must have heard the attack on their fellow raver and fled. At least they were running together. Raphael guessed they would make for their base camp. There was no telling what they might do to the women in their panic. He *changed* back to wolf form and

raced after them. Like the raver he caught in the tunnel, they stayed in human form. He would catch them before they could reach the base camp.

He tempered his speed to watch for any signs of a trap. Once they got past their first moments of panic, they might realize they had not heard a large group coming back through the tunnels and decide to try to kill him before he could stop them.

He paused. Ahead the path narrowed and wound up a hill. High rock walls on either side provided the perfect opportunity for an ambush. He cocked his head. How to proceed? His muzzle pulled back in what could have been a silent growl or a wolfish smile.

He veered off the trail, climbing onto the surrounding rocks. A raver with a stone the size of a large melon in his hand watched the path below.

The raver turned, his eyes widening when he saw Raphael. He quickly glanced down to his weapon and threw it with a grunt of effort.

Raphael leapt, feeling the stone brush by his fur. He landed on the raver, his claws slashing the creature's abdomen while his jaws closed over the throat. The satisfying gush of hot blood told him he reached his target.

Sharp pain tore through his side. The jerk of his head ripped the raver's throat out. The second raver! He tore the knife free from Raphael's side, and pulled his arm back, prepared to strike again. Raphael jumped free of the first raver's body, away from the downswing of the knife, then he leapt back to the second raver, *changing* to his midform as he did. The force of his body striking the raver, along with his greater mass, threw the raver to the rock. Raphael quickly used his claws to finish him off.

He stopped for a moment, panting from the expended energy. The *change* from wolf to his half beast healed the knife wound. But *changing* so quickly and healing cost energy, and he was not fully recovered from his earlier mission. Reaching within himself, he pulled upright and started back toward the tunnel at a quick pace. He hated leaving the captive women behind a second time, but he knew the ravers' numbers at the base were still too many for him alone.

He focused his mind. He might be needed at the battle, so he sped back toward the tunnel.

* * * * *

Raphael saw Ty's tense form outlined in the light coming from the entrance. He was half crouched with a two-handed grip on his sword in a ready position. The floor around him was a bloody mess of body parts. While Raphael had been gone he'd been busy and was still primed for battle.

"Ty! It's Raphael." After all this, he did not want to be killed by accident.

Ty spun around, sword still ready. His shoulders relaxed, and he lowered the sword.

"Did you get him?"

"Them. There were two more at the other entrance, and yes, I did." His sensitive ears picked up a small scuffling sound of a step on the loose dirt around the canyon wall.

Once again in a ready position, Ty turned back toward the entrance.

"It's Borak. I've come to take your place." A large figure blocked much of the incoming light.

Ty did not budge. Raphael realized that Ty did not know all the brethren in Darius's command. "It's alright, Ty. Borak is with us."

The sword was lowered, and Borak stepped closer.

"Sorry," Ty grunted. "You smelled of brethren, not raver, but..."

"I understand." Borak waved off Ty's comment.

Raphael bit back a grin. Borak was not known for his conversation. His dark hair fell in wild tangles about his shoulders, and he rarely smiled. "The battle is over above. We won. Darius said for me to take your place here in case those that escaped try to go back this way. We have brethren pursuing them, but Ammon and some others got away.

"You both may go to your *chosen* to watch them. Darius is on his way to meet up with Marcus and the duke's party to let them know what's happened." The brethren stepped aside so Ty and Raphael could move by.

His *chosen*! Miranda would be well protected at the healer's cottage with Cyn and Pantheros, yet he burned to be with her, to guard her himself.

Ty appeared like-minded as they sped up the still-dangling rope to the top. "I'll meet you there." Raphael shed his clothes again and *changed* to wolf form.

"Wait!" Ty pulled off the sword harness and made a quick adjustment to it. In moments, he had stripped, *changed*, and slid the harness so it fit over his wolf form. Then they both ran toward the cottage.

The forest was full of the scents of changers. Many brethren and some ravers had crossed the same paths he and Ty now raced over. The scent of the ravers spurred him on to greater speed.

They reached the cottage, where the scent of raver was strong in the air.

Eric, the raver, stood outside. He had Cassandra and Miranda! The raver's fists bunched in the material of each woman's shirt behind her head. He shoved them along. Their hands were tied, but they looked unharmed. They twisted in his grip, but their strength was no match for that of the raver. The bodies of Cyn, Pantheros, and two other brethren were tossed to the side of the yard.

Raphael heard a low growl issuing from Ty's muzzle and nipped the brethren to silence him. Although Ty was an experienced warrior, he was a new brethren. His control over his beast was not complete. He knew Ty would be going crazy with bloodlust after seeing both his bond brother and his *chosen* in danger. His desperation to attack could be their undoing.

Raphael felt the same, but had the control of years as a brethren. He jerked his head back, indicating for Ty to follow him.

A short distance away, he *changed* to his half-beast form. He collapsed against a tree, trying to gather his strength once more, while Ty slipped free of the sword harness and *changed* as well.

Ty visibly shook with the need to go to his *chosen*. But he maintained the discipline to look to Raphael, who pushed himself away from the tree. "There may be others. Ammon will likely want his sister back, and they have somehow taken out Cyn and our other brethren. We must make our attack count. There is a small window in the back of the bedroom. I could crawl through."

Ty nodded in agreement. His training and previous experience obviously coming into play. "I will draw their attention by tossing a few small stones in the bushes on the opposite side of the glade and hide nearby with my sword ready..."

* * * * *

Cassandra tugged uselessly at the bonds on her hands. Eric gloated in her ear. "We lost many today, but your brethren will lose everything. You see the brethren down there? We will kill them before we go, and your duke will not even wake up. Without the extra strength of the brethren, the drug will kill him."

He leaned in closer to whisper in her ear. "I'm going to make you mine to make up for those your men killed. You may hate me, but your body will serve me willingly -- after a while."

Then he yanked Miranda close. "You're pretty. I bet you would taste sweet. If you're smart, you'll cause me no trouble while I decide whether to keep you or..." Eric parted his lips in a parody of a smile. It became even broader when Miranda shuddered.

The cottage door opened behind them. Ammon stepped through with Melisande by his side. His movements were abrupt, angry. However, he looked pleased he had recovered his sister. He turned toward Eric. Cassandra did not think he caught Melisande looking at the still form of Pantheros.

She tore her eyes from Ammon. The way he commanded her gaze was amazing. For all that she knew he had done, he still pulled her attention. There was something magnetic, about him. She guessed it was this power as much as anything that allowed him to control the ravers.

Melisande turned her head back toward Cassandra with an attempt at her normal proud bearing, but Cassandra could see she was shaken. Her eyes were wide, and there was a slight trembling in her hands.

Ammon spoke with a cold voice. "The women will make good hostages. Finish off the brethren and let's go."

Cassandra's heart raced. *How can I stop this?* She braced to throw herself into a fight, praying that Cyn would wake in time to help.

"No, just leave them. They will be more demoralized by their failure, and that will help us," Melisande replied, stunning Cassandra with her response. *Could she feel something for Pantheros already?*

Ammon hesitated and then seemed to accept his sister's decision, nodding agreement to Eric. "Then come." He bent as if to lift Melisande over his shoulder, when he froze and gestured to Eric toward a dense growth of trees and bushes just beyond the open space in front of the cottage.

In a blur of motion, Ammon dashed to the trees.

A roar sounded in Cassandra's ears. Raphael tore open the cottage door and burst out, attacking Eric with clawed hands. Her own hands and Miranda's tore free of Eric's as Raphael's body struck him, tumbling them both to the ground in a struggling heap.

Miranda threw her body over Melisande, stopping her from aiding the ravers. Cassandra started to run to Cyn, then dashed into the cottage instead. She grabbed a knife from the worktable and held it between her knees to slit the leather tie holding her wrists together. Then she snatched the small vial of knockout mixture she and Miranda had prepared while the fox's blood distillate cooled, and ran back out the door.

Eric had *changed* to his half-beast form. He and Raphael twisted, grappling in the dirt, each seeking an opening. Meanwhile, Miranda struggled with Melisande.

Cassandra moved around the two men, hoping for a chance to help Raphael. For a moment, she caught his eye and held up the flask in her hand. An instant later he seemed to slip, giving Eric the advantage. He pinned Raphael to the ground. Eric's head reared back, baring his fangs. Cassandra smashed the vial over his forehead.

Broken bits of glass and solution embedded in his skin. He froze while solution ran over his face to his mouth. He made a gagging noise and then fell over. Raphael scrambled backward, away from the still raver and the remains of the knockout solution. He rose, wobbly, to his feet, then fell to his knees.

Cassandra rushed to help Miranda. Melisande had a stiletto in her hand. Miranda, her own hands still tied, struggled to keep the knife from her. Cassandra grabbed the wrist of Melisande's knife-bearing hand and threw her weight onto the arm. She felt a snap under her, and Melisande screamed in pain. Melisande's arm had broken over the stone-lined edge of the path to the healer's cottage.

The stiletto dropped from Melisande's hand, and she rolled over cuddling the injured arm and crying.

Miranda went to the struggling Raphael, while Cassandra looked warily to the trees, then ran to check on Cyn, who began to stir along with the other brethren.

“Who is with you, Raphael?” Cyn’s voice was groggy. He clutched Cassandra as he slowly stood.

“Ty was with me.”

There was a rustle of bushes, and Ty stepped out with his sword. Both he and Raphael were naked from their shifts to wolf and back. Cassandra shared a quick glance with Miranda who gave her a small smile and headshake.

“Ammon escaped. As soon as he saw me with a sword, he ran the opposite way. I chased briefly, but thought you might need me here.”

Pantheros awakened and rose on unsteady feet. He went directly to Melisande, who let him hold her without struggle, her face still contorted in pain. Miranda sped into the cottage and came out with scissors, and a basket of medical supplies. She knelt by the pair and started snipping back Melisande’s sleeve. Cassandra admired the woman’s adherence to her vow to heal. She would have let Melisande -- the deceiver -- suffer longer.

Then she frowned. “Where did her stiletto come from?”

Miranda answered as she continued cutting Melisande’s sleeve. “She pulled it from her clothes as we fought.”

Pantheros put one hand under Melisande’s chin and turned her face to his. “Is there more?” His deep voice rumbled out, surprisingly gentle.

Melisande looked at him as though hypnotized. “No more knives.” He raised a brow in question. “There are four pins tipped with knockout solution hidden in my support garments. I’ll not use them now.”

He looked to Cyn. “I’ll remove them when Miranda is done.”

Raphael crouched beside Miranda to watch, obviously not willing to simply trust the safety of his *chosen* to anyone else. But, otherwise, the group turned away from them.

Cassandra’s attention went to Eric. How long would the raver be unconscious? Ty moved to her side and gathered her close. “Do not worry about him. His breathing and heart have stopped.”

She had killed him! “The solution, he swallowed some in addition to what the broken glass put in his body. I’ve never given anyone more than a tiny amount before...”

Ty cuddled her closer. Cyn joined him in holding Cassandra, the warmth of his touch in direct contrast to coldness of his words. “We’d have had to kill him anyway. It’s just too bad we didn’t get to question him first. At least we can still question Melisande as to what Ammon’s next steps might be.”

Cassandra was once again reminded that Cyn always looked beyond the moment to plan his own next steps. Yet the way he held her with shaking hands also reminded her of the tender lover only she and Ty would see.

Ty spoke again. “We won at the river tunnel also. As soon as our men from the keep are here, the brethren forces can go to Ammon’s old base camp. There will only be a small

number of ravers left there. If we move quickly, we can lure them out and kill them before they further harm any of the women. As for Ammon, we know he will back sooner or later, as long as we hold Melisande.”

* * * * *

We’ve won! The brotherhood, the brethren of ravers is smashed. At least for now. Cyn’s lips pressed in a tight smile. Ammon had gotten away. He still had his formula, his mixture for controlling ravers. Until the leader of the bastardized ravers was dead, there was still danger. *But now I know about you. My eyes are everywhere, you bastard. You will not run free long.*

Melisande was also trouble. She knew his secret, but had not told her brother.

Ammon might deduce it on his own, since Cyn had very obviously survived Cassandra’s potion, lethal to ordinary men, but acted only to temporarily knockout changers. Then again, Cyn had only been hit in the arm with the drugged dart. Ammon might think Cyn merely lucky, that he had not received a full dose.

In any case, questioning Melisande had proved useless. She knew no more than he about where her brother would go next. He was getting her out of the way for now. Pantheros was taking her to Cyn’s mountain allies, the Chema. They were extremely good at keeping secrets. They had secrets of their own.

Adeena arrived less than one bell’s time after the brethren finished off the invading ravers. Cyn genuinely smiled at the way she constantly kept some of his men with her, frustrating Darius’s attempts to get her alone. Instead, she worked with Marcus, organizing clean-up operations and preparations to aid the women the brethren freed from the remnants of the ravers. Now Darius and Ty were gone with the brethren to do just that. Additionally, Cyn also had a more personal task Adeena planned for him.

In the next room, he heard Cassandra exclaim “Wedding plans? After all that has happened, I just want to sleep for a week. I certainly don’t want to think about anything as complex as a formal wedding.” *Ah, Adeena was taking a moment to discuss that personal task with Cassandra now.*

“That’s all right,” came the much too cheerful voice of Adeena. “I’ve already started the plans. I’ll just take care of everything.”

He heard Cassandra groan and mutter, “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

* * * * *

In the healer’s bedroom, Miranda delved into Raphael’s travel bag and pulled out a long, slender, silvery rope. Cyn had generously shared with her how to use it when she expressed distress over Raphael’s exhausted state and her feeling he should stay in bed resting for a couple of days. Raphael had scoffed at the idea that he needed rest now, saying he

would sleep for an hour only and then join the brethren in their attack on the raver base camp. She knew better.

Once he shut his eyes, she carefully pricked him with a sliver of the broken vial of knockout potion. She would have him tied up and waiting, um, resting, before it wore off.

He woke surprisingly fast. She barely completed her last knot and triggered the Oryion rope.

“Miranda,” he began with a lazy grin, only to have his eyes widen in surprise when he tried to move and found himself bound. “What do you think you are doing? I must go!”

He tried for a wicked grin, but looked a little panicked. “I’ll let you tie me up later, or maybe I’ll tie you. This is no time for this!”

“Oh, but you’re wrong, Raphael. I saw the way you struggled in the fight with that raver. And you told me how you have lived these past few months. So, healer’s orders: you are going to get some rest. You might as well get used to it and settle in now. No activities, out of bed anyway, for the next two days. Now I must go help with final medicinal preparations for the women we will receive, so you rest for now. I will be back later. Don’t worry, I intend to take very good care of you.”

Miranda gave him an angelic smile and left. Raphael might resist resting when he thought he should go to the fight, but there was one part of him that, she noticed, liked where he was just fine.

She continued smiling to herself. Oh, yes, she would take excellent care of him.

 THE END 

Kirra Pierce

Bio? Kirra is spy/secret agent who disarms nuclear bombs in her spare time. Uh, wait, what was that, Loowis? The real world me? But that's sooo boring. Oh, all right.

I am actually a mom who used to haunt the halls of corporate research and write excruciatingly boring technical reports, but who can now be found at PTO meetings, chaperoning school outings, helping with homework assignments -- you get the idea. My homemaking seems to bounce between June Cleaver aspirations and Peg Bundy deliverables. A neat home is lovely, but wouldn't you rather be reading? I obviously would.

I've always loved fantasy and while my body may be in this world my mind is usually someplace much more interesting. I don't care for tepid *anything* in fiction. Hot heroes, savvy heroines, and an edge of danger are all things I look for in a book and what I hope to deliver to you.