



Wild Within

A Bonded fantasy

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Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Deanna Pryce

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Dedication

To Lisa
Mine

Chapter 1: Dark

She was going to kick his ass. Rylan had been gone from her bed for three nights. He had *never* been gone from her bed all night before. Not once. Not since her foggiest memories of his constant warm presence at her back. He'd been there even before they'd been found by Scuffle, when they'd been existing only for food and sleep like true wildlings.

Now it was day four of no Rylan. She'd ranged from worry, to anger, to confusion, and back to anger. It was time he explained what in the Six Elements he thought he was doing. Today was the day they'd planned a major snatch. They'd gone over every detail a hundred times. He'd problem solved everything that could go wrong. She'd been ready a week early. But then he'd disappeared. She hadn't thought about the snatch since.

She started the morning the same way she had every day since he'd gone, by checking on him through their magepath. She didn't have strong magecraft. However, she and Rylan shared a rare magepath that linked them. Each knew when something was wrong with the other, and could pass emotions along it as a kind of secret conversation. Kneeling in the middle of their bed, she brought down her heart rate, and her mists rolled up. Everyone had an image they held when they worked the magescape. Everyone it seemed, but her. She had fog. And a blue ribbon that undulated off forever that led to Rylan. She knelt on the ribbon, summoned her will, and pushed her anger at his absence at him, demanding. *Rhythm, heat, pleasure, striving*. Oh Joy. He was fucking. Again. Like he'd been every morning when she checked.

She opened her eyes, blinking as her mental mists faded like an after-image. Their rooms were bare, but clean. Plaster and wood and torn scraps of fabric made up the walls. A few rainy day pieces of loot that could be traded for water, if needed, hung as decoration. It was a good shak at the top of the building, with an open rooftop impossible to scale. They'd held this together for a few years. She thought with fury about how she was approached last night as she'd come in the main entrance four stories below by the ambitious, flat-eyed man living on three.

"Need a partner, pet? Seeing as how traps need resetting so damn often and Rylan seems to have left. I'd be better as help than an enemy, sweet. Think on it. I'll keep you good."

She'd wanted to spring at him. It had been a long time since someone called her a bedpet to her face. But she didn't know if Rylan would be home to back her up if she took damage. She didn't know if this creeper knew something she didn't. The magepath told her he was alive, and unharmed. But not where the blazing ash he was and why he wasn't back.

Today, she would hunt. All she got from the Clan sisters yesterday were shifted eyes, and the men left the room when she walked in. She'd never cared about the skinlickers he fucked before. They couldn't touch her confidence in KarRylan. That was what people called them they'd been together so long. What was going on?

She set off to find out. The Dark was divided into wedges labeled by the AlphaZeta. The alleys and hodgepodge of buildings that surrounded Fourth City were like moldy cheese encircling a delicious fresh loaf of bread. Only a magic-laced wall, an impossibly

smooth eight shaks high, separated the City dwellers from those outside the walls. There were four gates in, and these closely guarded against anything not a City citizen. "Wildlings" is what the City folk called them, as they spit at them. The wildlings of the Dark lived forever in the shadows, outside law, but with no true freedom.

Some dared to travel the True Wild to one of the Kingdom's other Seven Cities, but it was just some other ramshackle fringe to be gained, the only change perhaps in climate. The way through the True Wild was dangerous beyond belief, filled with wild creatures, magic creatures, wild men, and Beasts. None who went into the Wild thinking to escape City or Dark ever returned to tell tales. No one, no matter how skilled with magic, blade, or cunning. Thus the walls. And when people would not or could not live within the walls, they built a tangled trash barricade around their little shak world. The forbidden, guarded roads and secure City gates kept out the danger for cityfolk. Wildlings had to make do by staying close, fighting for survival and status around the City edges.

KarRa watched Pru from the shadows of a deep doorway that had a torn awning. Eventually there was enough of a lull in the busy intersection she could be sure there'd be a moment for conversation. She freed her warclub from her waist and flowed smoothly straight for Pru. She let her fighting face drop down, the mask that she wore whenever she knew she was going to be involved with pain. Pru saw her coming too late to run for her bolt hole at the edge of the street. She moved so the trash barrel was between them. Green sparks were still spitting up from the last deposit.

"Keep away bitchling!" Pru's voice was a screech that had nothing to do with the lines on her face, and everything to do with hard living.

"I've no desire to get closer, Pru. Tell me who Rylan's taken up with and I'll have no reason to." KarRa's body was loose, ready.

Pru's face flickered with glee. {Secret} she signed with her hands, even though both of them were missing several fingers. "Bet you never thought you'd lose him, did you? Thought you were better than us. Turns out he's just a cock like every other man. Kar-Ra, Kar-Ra, Kar-Ra's lost her Rylan..."

The hideous taunting singsong scraped down KarRa's last nerve. Sooner than she'd planned, the club flashed out in a thrust strike straight across the barrel. It was an unusual move, for most of the wildlings knew nothing of knife work and swung the favored clubs in sideways sweeps. Old Pru was on her back, eyes wide and tearing as she clutched her bony throat with her poor tortured hands. KarRa was on her in an instant, wrestling her in her moment of weakness so that Pru's hands were under her knees and the club was across her throat. Pru was old, at least thirty-five, but street smart, and they'd tangled too many times for KarRa not to respect her abilities. She had to hurry or the people gathering in the shadows would see KarRa's back as an opportunity.

"Who. All I want is one name, and if it's the wrong one I'll come back here and use this club a lot more freely." Pru opened her mouth, eyes still tearing but looking nothing but vicious. KarRa pressed down with the club, causing her to choke. "The only word out of your mouth is going to be a name."

She kept the pressure up until she saw the subtle decision in Pru's eyes. She let up ever so slightly and Pru gasped, "Vili."

KarRa nodded once to her and raced away, ignoring the ear splitting curses that turned heads.

There was a café that fed her three times a week in exchange for traps she set on

their cellar. When she entered, there were two men on her right playing dice, three at the bar, and a group of six seated on her left, all of whom were displaying cocky shoulders due to the pets that were leashed at their feet. Everyone looked up to see who entered, as always, and a hush spread as she walked across the room. One of the bedpets giggled.

A man holding a leash on a too-young brunette muttered, "I got another leash, bitch."

She stopped. She turned, and pulled her club. You didn't pull your club unless you were willing to use it.

"Say it to my face." She assessed quickly. Black-hair first, and the two reds after. The rest would run. She didn't know the allegiance of the other five in the room, though. The cook and serving boy wouldn't help her or hurt her.

Luckily, KarRylan's reputation held. Whoever had muttered the insult stayed quiet.

"I thought so." She held the club until she'd passed into the kitchen.

By the Shadows, she missed Rylan. She missed sharing a grin with him after turning from a facedown, she missed his hand on her back when she met him on the street, she missed seeing his eyes glow with the heat of challenge. Day four. *What was he thinking?*

She sat at the kitchen table and served herself some stew. The cook ignored her. It killed her to do it, but she cleared her throat and asked.

"Saxley?"

"Yeah, KarRylan."

"Who is Vili?"

"Uhhhhh..."

"Just who is she."

"Daughter of Bim's Clan in C. Younger than you. They've kept her out of the mix, mostly. She's no tavern skinlicker, but she's not her own woman, either."

"Thanks." Now she'd owe him. She always paid her debts. She just wouldn't come in for meals next week. Then he couldn't spring a favor on her later.

He wiped his grungy hands on his grungy shirt, turned his haggard face more fully to her. "KarRa. Don't go walking up to Bim's people without yours with you."

Was he worried for her?! That was as close to friendship as Saxley was capable of.

"Thanks."

Next she visited a few of the taverns in D and bashed heads. Not Bim's territory, but close enough to hear Bim's business. She finally got someone to name a wedge on her third tavern. And she only had a bruised thigh and jammed fingers on her off hand. Pretty good for doing some knocking on your own. Never pay for information when you can knock it loose for free, Scuffle said.

On her way back south, she was flushed with success. So she turned off the main crossway in H and swung up onto a balcony without breaking her stride. From there it was a quick leap to an awning, which allowed her to reach a window on a third story. It was trapped and she had to work quickly before someone shouted from the street, looking for a warning reward.

She took the pathetically unoriginal trap down and hoisted herself into the room with a smooth somersault. After latching the window she crouched behind a chair. Her heart pounded so loud, it was all she could hear.

She couldn't believe she was doing this. It had been three days since she scoped the place. For all she knew, the ever-changing fortunes of wildlings could have brought a new tenant to this lodging. The balcony could have been trapped. The awning could have

been damaged. New watchers on the street could have been hired. This was insanely stupid.

KarRa didn't do stupid. Not since an ill-timed snatch had seen a client return unexpectedly. She'd been cornered in a small room. It hadn't been bad as rapes in the Dark went, according to the other girls in the Clan. There were no knives, only one man, and it was quick. He'd stunned her with a lucky punch, pinned her on her stomach over a table with his hand gouging into the nape of her neck, ripped down her pants, and stuffed himself in. He'd struggled behind her for a few moments, then dragged her over the table and tossed her out the door screaming, "And don't come back!"

The utter lack of any touching had made it easy for her to consider it no worse, really, than any beating she'd taken in a fight, and actually with much less damage. She was used to violence in this life, both the giving and receiving. Not a week went by when she didn't carry bruises from fist or warclub, even as good as she was. The only lingering damage seemed to be that she took no pleasure from having a smoothskin boy surround her from behind. To be fair, the need to keep your back protected against a wall was so innate in the Dark that her dislike of being mounted could just as easily have been from habit as from the rape.

She had thought to keep the event a secret, but even though washing was the first thing she did, Rylan said he could smell it. He had come storming into their shak, where she'd curled up, already knowing she'd been hurt through their magepath. He had stood there, stunned, yellow eyes stony, nose flaring, and then gone storming out. He went directly to Scuffle, who had the man in hand, literally, within the hour. They had listened to his defense, "She was thieving from me! I was protecting myself!" and his pleas. Scuffle had handed him to Rylan, and left. Rylan never would tell her what became of the man as no one ever saw him again. He swore he hadn't killed him, and KarRa believed him, as the Beasts never came. She was grateful to never have to see that weasely face again.

It was a miracle she hadn't been raped sooner, actually. And Rylan was one of the few men who had grown up in the Dark not to be raped. It was a fact of life. True, Scuffle trained his madechildren better than most, and what those skills didn't cover, Rylan usually did. Until he'd begun to separate them on jobs.

"It's easier with two," she said.

"To cover more ground," he said.

"The risk of solo jobs just isn't necessary," she'd argued.

"You're good enough," he'd scoffed.

After the rape, she'd thought he'd return to their working partnership. He hadn't. He'd worked her harder in hand to hand, and encouraged her to take longer in planning. Most thieves in the Dark were too stupid or desperate to plan. It's what made KarRa and Rylan so successful in their snatches.

So here she was, back in another job without the kind of planning she preferred. She was going to end up raped again. She wondered if she wasn't doing this because of Rylan's bizarre absence.

"See what you make me do?" KarRa muttered to herself. She instantly was ashamed. This was her choice. She had to get her head straight.

She scanned the room for traps. Finding invisible traps was KarRa's one shining strength. Rylan often joked that KarRa had magecraft in the seventh Element: thievery.

No one could sense wards, traps, and scans like she could. There was a trap on the door. She undid it across the room. She stayed where she was and scanned the shak. No one was home.

Moving out the door and mentally cursing at finding a decent ward on the next door in the hall, she took precious moments in the open. She was a feather's whisper from the latch when she felt an excellent, subtle trap, and took more time to mentally twist and sway it into mist. Then she scanned beyond and sighed to see her old information was holding true.

She eased into the room, quickly assessing. She only wanted small, easily traded, high end things. She ignored the rare candle on the table, the gleaming City sword on the wall. The book snagged her eyes for a long moment, but she passed over it. Seeing the curtain in the corner, she walked to it.

It was warded. The personal energy in a ward was draining for her to dispel. You had to let it seep into you, or the imbalance would tip toward the person who placed it, warning them of the disturbance. Wards were tough, but if you were strong enough, you could merge with them, never revealing they'd been disturbed. When she had it undone, she studied exactly how the curtain hung on the rod. She drew back the cloth.

There was a row of clothes on pegs. She'd never seen so many clothes. Her eyes caught a white net sort of thing. She knew that. Lace. There were a few people in the Dark who could make it. It would be rare enough to be a bit of a risk, but not rare enough to be utterly unique. And it was worth a month of water. She hovered her hand over it, checking for traps. Snatching it up, she crushed it into a ball and stuffed it down her pants. Then she subtly arranged the clothes around it so that it could possibly be covered.

Fixing the fold of the curtain to what it was before she disturbed it, KarRa went to the sword. It would serve as her decoy. She breathed deeply, bounced her knees. She flexed her hands. She hated this part. Rylan wasn't waiting in the hall. He wasn't even waiting in the street. But that had never been part of the plan. He only planned solo jobs for her now. She missed working with him so much. And now she apparently was to miss sleeping with him as well. Rage swelled through her. *How dare he.*

Picking up the sword, she triggered the trap. She ran. Up onto the roof, tripping three traps on the two flights up. She hit the rooftop wall and skittered across the hand-width edge as graceful as a chuck. In a flying leap she soared onto the next rooftop a story below. The boards that covered that rooftop gave but she had enough leverage to push off as they crumbled beneath her. She landed in an ugly windmill, caught her balance, and considered the hole she'd created. She dropped the sword in. There was a shout from the street, but they couldn't see her from here. They'd go into the main building first.

She crossed another rooftop, then scaled down two stories to an alley. Two turns down, a running crowd caused her to duck down and wait. Then her third planned turn was thwarted by a new pile of boxes from someone apparently moving. An alternate route snapped into her mind. She made sure she wasn't seen leaving H. Her heart was still pounding in her ears, but she rolled her head on her shoulders. Another major snatch. Scuffle would be proud. Would Rylan?

Off to K. He was staying with the woman near Scuffle's Clan territory in L. KarRa was aware of this significance and it added to the roiling confusion inside. He had practically extended Clan protection to her. Her Clan had known Rylan was staying in the next wedge and hadn't told her. She couldn't trust anyone but Rylan. A shiver eased

down her spine.

By the time she had threaded her way to K, she had her heartrate under control. She turned down the blind alley where Justo was good for swapping snatched items. She waited in the shadows of a doorway until a customer cleared the corner, and stepped forward.

“Justo.”

“Ah! Good afternoon, KarRylan. Hello. Say, I was just closing up today. Marta needs me inside for some...”

“Justo.” Her voice chided. {Where} Her hands demanded.

He turned his face over his shoulder and called, “Coming, wife of my heart!”

“Her name is Vili, Bim isn’t looking for her, and they’re somewhere in K. I know everything but the location, and you don’t want me to go to Bowk with all my snatches from now on.” She eased her hand in her pants and let a bit of the lace peek over the top of her pants.

Justo sighed a deep sigh, but his eye shone with excitement. He was only a few years older than she, but he looked ancient. His face had been caved in with a club in a riot last year and he was missing one eye. He gave all his food to his skinlicker to keep her with him and was thin as a skeleton.

“Bowk wouldn’t know what to do with a lovely like that. KarRa, are you sure you want this information?”

What was with all the concerned advice today!? {Where}

He sighed again, studying her with that one bloodshot brown eye. She saw him fingering his quick-release rope that would slam down his awning and close his shop.

{Stop} {Calm} “After I prove the snatch to my Clan, the lace is yours.”

Then he told her.

* * * *

It was dusk by the time KarRa tromped up the stairs to a second floor room. Rylan had claimed a shak for this woman. All the fear and confusion that had been building the last three nights swelled high. *My life is going to change this night. I know it*, she thought.

It was she who had discovered bedplay first. Perhaps two years after her skinmarking, when she was just eighteen, she’d come across a man and a woman fucking on one of her snatches. Not that that was the first time, but it was the first time she stayed to watch. The first time she found it compelling. She’d begun to watch for people fucking, not as an opportunity to snatch food or loot to trade, but to learn. To feel.

Shortly afterward, she began to explore herself. Of course, Rylan was next to her. He was never far. His face would tighten as he watched her hands dip between her legs, her fingers tracking wet designs over hips and thighs. The soft sounds of her wetness or his shafting fist were the only noises they made. Aside from limbs brushing in proximity on the small pallet, they never touched the other, never spoke. What they shared was somehow too secret to risk in the Dark’s dark, and a strange invisible wall of taboo kept them apart. She would watch him watching her, they would open their magepath, and the rich scent of their skin could sometimes make her dizzy faster than graperot.

Sometimes they would touch themselves at the same time, mirroring the other, watching as their skin turned slippery beneath their hands. Hands pressed firmly, fingers trailed goosebumps, nails rasped faint tracks. There were nights when their hands

traveled their bodies in privacy, their eyes never leaving the others'. The depth of his tawny eyes as she rose into them was burned into her mind. Usually he'd wait to spend his cream, always onto his stomach or into a cloth, until after her body relaxed after release. Other nights she'd be aggressive, daring him with her frantic panting, upright upon spread knees, pinning her women's lips back with the magelight set before her, pulling and twisting her clit to its furthest, her huge nipples teased to a bruising red, until he'd arch first, writhing. Some nights it was only one of them taking pleasure, gently, while the other watched sleepily.

Always, after the cream and sweat were wiped away, they settled into their sleep sprawl, entwined like kittens, or lovers. Rylan was the first to seek out another for pleasure. Lying in bed one night, he had told her hesitantly that he had fucked a girl in a tavern over in a distant wedge. She hadn't been mad at all, and he'd been grateful, his body sprawling in relief. He'd been so beautiful, his muscles just starting to thicken. She saw now she should have been afraid. Afraid of the fact none of his girls were really skinlickers desperate for anybody. They'd all been a step up. Afraid of how often he visited Clan who had children. Afraid of how he'd stopped touching himself as much when she shared her night pleasures with him.

She pounded the weathered planks with her fist and her brain, feeling his presence inside. Somewhere up above two male voices shouted at each other. She was scanned, a buzz of magic, then a woman opened the door. Alarm flashed over the young, pretty face, framed by long, black curls. KarRa didn't register much more than that before the girl called over her shoulder.

"Rylan, KarRa is here."

Rylan came to the door. His blank face looked down at her, his fighting face. It made her hands go numb with terror.

"What?" his voice was belligerent, but quiet.

"What yourself!" Heat flashed through her body. "Why have you not sent word?"

"Isn't it obvious? I've moved out. I'm staying with Vili from now on."

KarRa stood in the dusty hallway, gaping at him with her mouth open. He stood stiff and tense, ready for battle. The statement was so bizarre to her experience, her brain struggled to process it. For an instant, his tall, familiar, golden-haired presence seemed to shimmer in front of her, then everything went white, tinged with red.

"Staying ... with...?!"

She leaped at him. It involved no decision. She just did it. A wildling fight was not a fist to the face or a flashing exchange of silver blades as it was in the Guild songs. It was two nearly wild animals falling tooth and nail upon the other, trying for gut, neck, or face damage. It was only the third fight they'd ever had. She'd won the first two. The first was a distant memory of pre-Scuffle. Rylan said it was when he tried to eat some of her food. The second was shortly after being taken into Scuffle's labyrinthine rooms, before they'd joined his Clan. Rylan had not wanted to sleep inside the shak and KarRa had. He was scared, and distrustful. She'd insisted, physically.

This fight was entirely different—KarRa experienced, furious, and afraid, Rylan defiant and a warrior in his prime. In the end, he was seven heads heavier, over a head taller, and as always now that he'd come into his strength, just a little more wild than she. In moments, he leaned gasping against the thin doorframe; face and arms clawed bloody, eyes full of pain as he stared at her.

She was in a heap in the hall where he'd thrown her, arm twisted, ribs bruised, skin ripped and oozing at her neck from a bite, the worst kind of wound. She looked up at him, and knew in her bones her life was forever changed. She curled up in surrender, and he closed the door.

* * * *

The next three nights were the worst of her life. Worse than losing Trakk and Shui to sickness. Worse than the days of Far's capture and retaking and all the tense Clan meetings afterward. Worse than the nightmare memories of hunger and fear before Scuffle. Her understanding of her world, and her place in that world, was shattered into tiny bits of glass that ground inside her with every breath she took. The strong, solid companion she'd meant to go to the end of the world with was gone. She looked at her future and knew a Truth: *KarRa was Alone*. Her anger was completely gone, but so was her sense of self.

She looked at her forearm's skin design and wondered at how she had felt when Scuffle was pressing it into her. It was one perfect dark blue feather. Scuffle had given it to her on her adult making day when she was sixteen, just three years ago. She had wanted a physical symbol of Rylan's soul marked into her flesh. How had she been so wrong? How had nineteen years of absolute trust, unheard of in the Dark, been abandoned for a skinlicker?

She went out the second night and spent all her rainy day loot, except for the lace, to fuck a boy at the smoothskin house. Since he was doing it, she would too. Maybe she'd missed something last time. It didn't help. In fact, the brief and weak pleasure of the flesh left her even more confused at Rylan's betrayal.

On the third night without him, she was still having trouble breathing, wondering why she should even bother to fight for survival in this vicious world. She lay in the sultry darkness on her roof pallet, where she liked to sleep in the sun season. The open space spooked her without Rylan's strong presence in it, but she forced herself to stay, lying in the middle of the open roof, trusting her traps down below. *Get used to it*, echoed a cruel inner voice. She was dozing, tears drying on her face as they had for days, when heat woke her.

Rylan lay at her side, his head on her shoulder, his hand across her chest and curving over her far shoulder. His other hand was tucked down between them, fingers laced with hers at her hip. She was instantly swamped with happiness and relief. Her heart pounded in time with the throbbing pain in her neck, *He came back! He came back!* But she knew better than to think they could go back to the way things were. Everything had changed. The Truth still sat in her throat like acid.

He spoke softly into the green mist flowing overhead, nightly overspill from the massive City wall. "Why do you think I went to Vili? Why do you think I closed the door on you?" Her breath stuttered, but she could not answer. "I am so afraid you're never going to start surviving for yourself, KarRa." His voice was low and passionate. "I had to bring you to your first fuck, and even then it was too late, your first time ruined by that dungscum walkingskull. You forge no future for yourself outside of me! I cannot be your sole focus anymore, KarRa. If I had not split us up on jobs over a year ago, you would never have found your strengths that make you one of the best snatchers in the Clan. Like the lace you just grabbed a few days ago. But still, even though we work apart now, you

are content to just take each day as it is and turn to me in the night! You have to let go of me KarRa. I could disappear any day. You have to find the life you could have without me.”

A small piece of the rage bubbled up, the wild rage that had driven her to attack him when he had refused to come home with her. “Ah, you are so wise to do this thing for me. I’m so impressed by how you just pulled this decision out of your ass without talking to me! It is clear now that I *am* so much better off without you. So much stronger, safer, more complete. Magic has come bubbling up in me. Food rains from the clouds and I no longer have to waste it on you!” She twisted her hand out of his to wrap it around her middle, to hold the pieces together.

He sat up, dragged his hands through his thick mop of hair and ground his teeth. “I know I handled it badly. I was scared to tell you. If I had to explain it, I was afraid I’d never do it. KarRa, don’t you see, I’ll still be with you whenever you need me. Sleeping without you makes me ache, and I will always be yours at the core. But I need space. And I want you to have that space too.”

KarRa sat up as well, scooting away so they were no longer touching. “No, you want me to want that space so you don’t feel bad about yours. Space! We have a three room shak! Bring the fuckbitch here and you can go from her bed to mine—have us both! I’ve never cared who you fuck.”

“Oh, charming. You are so charming. And you know what kind of space I mean.” His voice was bitterly cold. “Don’t you know we are so much stronger working in tandem while apart? And there are things I need ... that I would never ask of you. That you wouldn’t want to be part of.”

KarRa was stupefied by his comments. His words were so unfair. He’d left because he couldn’t ask her for things? “I have always backed you in anything you needed. I have never made you think I would not help provide for us. How will having that woman do it for you instead of me make you happier, or me better?”

Rylan stood up and paced over to the low wall that ran around the rooftop. His voice was low. “KarRa, I want children. It’s more than a dream now. I need them. *I ache*. I feel like small ghosts of possibility follow me everywhere.” His voice was flat, hollow.

Shocked, she wrapped her arms tighter around her middle. To dare to plan for children in the Dark meant you had to have a lot of power. Yet she knew Rylan had enough. They had had this conversation in a “what if” sort of way for a few years. She just could not imagine wanting to bring a child into this wild, angry, violent life. Street riots were a weekly affair in one wedge or another. It took a successful, dangerous snatch from a more powerful Clan to afford a week’s water. Meals were never regular. Besides, the few children she had met, true kept children and not feral discards like they had been, made her feel both itchy and stiff at the thought of being responsible for such a helpless soft creature.

He understood how she felt. He had often talked of planning to tend children’s innocence and the desire to help guide a new generation. She just couldn’t do it. She couldn’t bear children into this wretched struggle of a life, even with Rylan by her side. It was one of the few things they truly disagreed on. He knew it, and he wouldn’t ask it of her. Not that they were fucking anyway. That he would want a child more than he wanted to be with her drained her fingers of warmth. He was right. She couldn’t face that need.

Rylan paced along the wall, his muscular legs taking him smoothly around the nearly

dry rain barrels. Leaning against the low adobe wall, staring at his feet, he asked softly, "Why do you think we've never been lovers?"

Her bones ached with sadness when she considered his question. "Why do we never make love? We do. I thought we did. I thought watching each other take pleasure was showing our love, trusting each other at that moment."

"Oh KarRa, you know what I mean."

No, she thought, It's you who doesn't understand.

"Why did we never fuck?" he insisted.

Because you never reached for me, she thought to herself, and I didn't know how to reach for you.

"I suppose fucking you would be like fucking myself." She gave him a half answer, as Scuffle would say, not adding the rest. *And it would have been the most beautiful thing in my world.*

She remembered her first fuck in the aftermath of the rape.

He walked her to a smoothskin house a few weeks afterward. A beautiful boy her size, with enormous blue eyes, all hair scraped off, and skin kept clean and soft, was waiting. She'd looked at him in wonder, then at Rylan.

"I chose him for you. You don't have to stay if you don't want, but I wish you would. I want you to know what a real fuck is like, and not think about that fire-damned rape." He held his body so rigid he almost quivered, and his voice shook with emotion she took to be irritation.

She had been so touched. Confused—*hadn't their shared bedplay already wiped out the memory of that violence?*—but touched. Accepting the luxury, she'd gone with the boy into a room with a wide, deep, comfortable pallet. She'd discovered fucking. She'd liked it fine, but had no intention of continuing the activity, as it was insanely expensive. Unlike Rylan, she couldn't imagine fucking people she knew casually from the street. She certainly never had any urge to take a lover. Why would she share her body with someone who would no doubt slit her throat for a week's water? All the satisfaction she needed was in rising for Rylan upon their shared pallet.

Now, she knew she'd never share that with him again. Her pride wouldn't let her. He was on a new path, and she wasn't going to give herself over to him when he had ripped himself out of her life.

He was quiet. She picked at a scab on her knee, feeling sick inside.

"I used to dream about fucking you. One time when you were sleeping, I touched you like a lover. I felt full of shame. I ran to wash, and hated myself for breaking your trust like that. I was so scared at what I could have done to you. The next night I took my first woman."

KarRa nodded. That had been almost a year ago, shortly before her rape. She hadn't cared about the woman, but now inside she screamed at him, *Why didn't you just wake me up?* If he had taken her, the rape wouldn't have been her first experience. They sat on the roof thinking their own thoughts. Shouting erupted from the street below and died off. Crazy laughter echoed from the tavern a few shaks away.

"KarRa, I will always care for you. I can't stand it that we fought. That I hurt you. That I pushed you to it—when all I've ever wanted is to protect you. The echo of your pain is driving me mad. I feel sick that I've left a mark of violence on your skin, that inside you're so ... sad." They both knew it was an inadequate word for what she was

feeling. “Just because we’ll sleep apart doesn’t mean I’m out of your life. We have a magepath and Vili can’t change that. I want you to meet her. I’ve wanted to for weeks. She will be a good mother.” He drew in a deep breath, his wide chest expanding to tighten the sleeveless leather shirt he wore, and seemed to hold it waiting for her response.

“All right,” she said quietly. “I’ll leave here.”

He stood from the wall. “I’ve found a new shak, KarRa. You stay here.”

“No. I cannot stop you, so let me be a part of this some way. This is a good shak. If you have children, it has room, and it’s defensible.”

He seemed stunned, slowly relaxing back against the wall. She felt relaxed now too. And far, far away.

“What did he tell you about us when you were marked?” she asked idly.

Rylan replied matter-of-factly, even though they had long avoided sharing the details of their private skinmarking ceremony. “Scuffle? He told me we were soulmates, literally, and that he had never seen two souls find each other so young.” She felt Rylan grin, even though his face was heavily shadowed. “He said you were my key to a new gate.” Her lips twitched too. A “key” was the Dark’s most common term for a man’s cock. “And a mighty fine key you are for me, too,” Rylan added with a smooth chuckle. “Tell me what he said to you.”

Tipping her head back, she let the pain swell and settle inside. She kept breathing through it as she watched the glowing green tendrils of magelight seep and swirl overhead into the night. Finally she said softly, “Scuffle told me you were of the Beasts. When you mature in their way, you will die if I do not get you to them.”

Rylan froze, his hands dropping from across his wide chest to grip the ledge on either side of his hips. Throwing himself around, he braced his arms on the clay wall, back rigid. She noticed he was staring away from the City, toward the True Wild.

“You know it’s true. Your eyes, your nails, your voice when you fight. This past month you can no longer deny it and say you are caught in the heat of battleblood. You have greater strength, speed, and stamina than human men.” She touched the raw wound at the base of her neck, where the skin was punctured with the look of many tiny knives, not the ragged rips of dull human teeth.

He shuddered, then slammed his fists into the top of the wall. It cracked slightly, sending adobe flakes cascading into the street five stories below.

“I know you used to sneak into the forest. It drew you. You’ve stopped.” He had always returned to her. She thought if not for her he would be one of the glowing eyed wildlings that skittered through the night on the edges of the Dark, near the trash heap that circled the narrow crooked streets, utterly mad. She looked at his clenched jaw. His golden hair drifted in a warm summer current.

“You will have to go to them someday, and I will go with you.” The words hung in the air, heavy with power. “That is what Scuffle meant when he told you I am your key. I’ve had three years to think about it and I know I can do it. It will be an adventure.”

He whirled, eyes glowing with vivid green magefire, fingers curling, snarling with a mouth that had grown protruding teeth. “I would *never* give you to them. Are you *mad*?! Why do you think I’m so desperate for you to start living on your own?” His speech was garbled, but she’d gotten better at understanding him. She simply waited. It was like this now whenever he was angered or threatened.

When he finally sagged, crumpling to the floor, she dragged her will around her. Her fingers actually clenched to hold the invisible tatters in place.

"I love you Rylan. I will always support you just as you have always been at my back. But you are right. There are some things I cannot do for you. And there *will* come a time when I need to be able to sleep without you, after I take you to them. I will meet your woman. Bring her here, and I'll move to another wedge."

He still said nothing, slumped against the wall. She went to him, kneeling and reaching for his strong shoulders. They leaned into each other, and it was sweet. His smell filled her head and she breathed in time with him, just as she always had. But in her heart she knew she was never going to be KarRylan again. Only KarRa. Alone in this Dark.

Her heart pounded with a wild fear as she choked out a whisper, "I'll love your children, too." She pushed down the bitterness at how she'd ended up comforting him, when he had destroyed her. Eventually, he led her to the pallet of some straw and thin blankets, all she had left after selling even the bed to afford the night with the smoothskin boy, and they slept, entangled, as they had since they were small and clanless.

In the morning, she sat on the building's front stairs while he fetched the woman, Vili. She stood when they approached, and bade the woman welcome. Her voice was calm, polite. Vili was lovely, darker than KarRa, with the full curving figure of a woman much older. Nothing like KarRa's wiry, muscled litherness. She left them with nothing but a scrap of lace, feeling just as fragile.

She did not like to remember the next few weeks of her life. It was a blur of pain and hunger. She held no grudge for the scar on her neck. She'd started it. It was the pain inside that mattered. It would have been easier if she could hate him. But he was part of her. Her clansisters helped, even a few clanbrothers. Rylan checked on her often, forcing her to eat. The stiffness between them wore off in a few months, and they regained the ability to laugh and share.

The woman Vili did not become the mother of his children. She lasted almost year before leaving him for a newly exiled potter. Rylan would return to sleep with KarRa between lovers, potential mothers for his ghost children. Sometimes it took him months to find a new one. But he always did. He was beautiful, powerful, and strong. He was ruthless but not vicious and women sought him out. He always was there, even unasked, to help her if she was in a tight spot. They saw each other several times a week, sometimes at the clanhome, sometimes at meals. She still loved him with a wrenching fury, and knew that he cared deeply for her.

The one thing they did not ever share again was night pleasure. KarRa remembered their nights together with an ache in her heart and between her legs. An ache her own fingers always failed to soothe when she tried to pleasure herself alone. If Rylan was staying with her, she crammed her desire to share their pleasure down deep, and waited until he was gone. Rarely, she'd give in to the desperate loneliness and indulge in the expense of the safe smoothskin houses. But the stranger, no matter how beautiful, never soothed the ache either.

She worked at running messages, planned snatches, tried to stay out of riots. She ate. She laughed with her Clan. She managed to protect herself, make good trades, and learn new tricks as needed. Life, as a kind of consistent struggle, continued.

She waited for the news one of his lovers was pregnant, but it never came. When

people called her KarRylan, she corrected them. “It’s just KarRa,” she'd say firmly, her stress on the second syllable almost a snarl. “Get used to it.” She waited for Scuffle's prophecy to come true, for signs of the Beast sickness that would announce Rylan’s time as a human in the Dark was over. And like all of Scuffle's visions, it came.

* * * *

Rylan's shivering woke her up. He was convulsing so hard the creaky bed trembled. He was still out. Almost two days now with no waking and she had to swallow down her dread. She rose from the clammy blankets where she had dozed. She glanced at the hand-sized window high in one wall to gauge the light. If he had been aware for the few hours she'd been asleep, he hadn't woken her. The room stank. She cleaned him, then lolled him onto a clean, damp towel she'd soaked in a bucket. She carried the blankets outside and threw them in the burning can. They were not going to be staying long enough to make the effort and cost of washing them worth it, and no one would trade for such a disgusting mess.

Back inside she lit a small handful of dry pine needles and left them festering on the hearth to help scent the air. She wiped his sweaty body down again, sat and ate. All the while she watched his quaking body, golden still though the warm sun was five months behind. She listened to his uneven harsh breathing, a sound she thought she'd never get out of her head. She focused on remembering what his low smooth laugh was like, so different from her brash donkey braying, and was satisfied she could remember it.

The room was cool. She hadn't bothered to cue the mageheat for her meal of dry crusts. She was trying to keep his body cool anyway. She was wearing all three of her sweaters, and her leathers, the only clothes she owned now besides the traveling set she'd saved for Rylan. She sat at the table, the sky slowly lightening, Rylan huffing.

He wasn't going to get better this time. This was it. For the last year he'd sunk into these sweats for a few days, then revived. They knew his time was running out, and still he would not talk to her about leaving. His options were the same as they were the last time she'd had a meaningful conversation with him three days ago. Go—or death. They were out of things to trade and she could not leave him to run a snatch. It was time to go.

Finally. She snorted at the thought. *I'm twenty-five,* she thought firmly. *I've been waiting for this since I was sixteen. I'm ready.*

KarRa smoothed her hand over her beautiful skinmark on the inside of her left forearm. During its making was one of the few times she had ever been alone with Scuffle. He was a busy man, leader of a small made-family of just over fifty souls, all of whom he was constantly training in some capacity. This man, who had given her words, skills, warmth, strength, was her made-father, and her loyalty was fierce and undying. Before him she had truly been wild. How she and Rylan came to be with the other, they did not know. KarRa did not care, although Rylan thought there must be something to find, to go back to, that was better than this life in the crooked, vicious streets of the Dark. He said he could remember comfort and kind people. She couldn't.

The tattoo was her own design, as all the Clan dreamed up their own unique skinmarks. Scuffle gave each member of his Clan one when they pledged their life to him. He didn't allow children to do so until they were sixteen. An exile from a high Guild family, his own tattoo had been cut from his arm when he was turned out of the gates, barred from ever entering any of the Kingdom's Seven Cities again. He had simply

remarked it on his other arm.

“They cannot take who I am. They can deny me, but not erase me,” he would say.

He had given the high Guild tradition to each of his made family, although he would not give them his design. In the Dark of Fourth City, they were the only marked Clan. She had dreamed and plotted on her skinmark design for years, searching for a physical symbol of Rylan’s mark upon her mind.

Once, when Far had been taken by some stupid new-rising Clan angry with one of his daring thefts, they had scraped his skinmark off him, among other things. Scuffle had chopped the man's arms off. To get to him, he had left a river of blood, so many people falling before his magic and club that KarRa lost count. Killing was one thing wildlings did not do. Ever. You knifed, you clubbed, you beat, broke, whipped, and raped. But to kill...those who killed were visited by the Beast Guards and never seen again. Occasionally there were tales of someone who killed in self-defense being allowed to go free. But as harsh as the Dark was, the violent magic and blade Scuffle had unleashed that night to rescue and avenge Far had been extreme. No one had died, but the numbers of maimed and wounded were well higher than a normal all out riot. It had seared into her fourteen-year-old brain, and was still her gauge of badness.

All of the Clan gathered in Scuffle's shak over the following nights as they nursed Far's broken body. KarRa had been among those to see the Beast enter. It was a silent conversation, the large, darkly tanned man standing confident and still, his hand never going to the knife at his belt, his only visible weapon. As if the Beast would need it. The legends said they could kill ten men with their hands before one even moved. Scuffle's eyes had locked with the dark eyes of the Beast in magespeak, and it had been only silent TruBeth who had kept nursing Far the long minutes during that discourse. She was the only one brave enough to move. Eventually the Beast had left. Scuffle lived. And could have ruled the Dark after that, but continued on his crooked strange way, dancing down the center of the vicious politics of Clan control fights.

Remembering the smooth dusky skin, the strong flowing muscles, the powerful air of the Beast Guard that night drew KarRa's eyes to Rylan on the bed. He was going to become such a thing. She would see to it. Unlike most women who talked of the Beasts with revulsion, KarRa thought he was beautiful even in the twisted form he grew when angered. It was his lack of a third, animal form that was making him so sick. Killing him.

Idly stroking her fingertips over her blue feather, she wished Scuffle were here to argue with him. At least he would take joy in it. This last year was the first time in his life Rylan had fallen sick. Still he'd denied the coming change. Every time she had tried to talk to him about going to the Beasts, he cut her off. Arguing only made him leave, and being alone in the Dark when you were weak with sickness was very dangerous. Off and on he had faded and recovered. He'd grown too weak to keep up with a schedule of thieving or running messages this time, and his latest lover left.

Now here she was, sitting in this one room shak, only four paces wide and stripped of everything but necessities. Listening to his struggle for breath, thinking on all that waiting, all that struggle to stay alive, she grew resolute. She was going to fulfill the destiny Scuffle had seen years ago during her skinmarking. She could finally be of some real worth to Rylan, and he had better make it, so all of these years apart could mean something.

When she had arrived to care for him in this most recent sickness she had ruthlessly

stated, "I'm through giving you time. You know what happened to Borl. We have to go."

He had rolled onto his side, giving her his back. "Don't start. I'm not giving you to them."

"*Stories!* That's all you know! And I'm going there by my own will!" But he had not budged, ignoring her until he passed into fevered gibberish again. She wanted to choke him. The Beasts lived to the south, in great stone mountains and dark caves. She had paid dear City coin to know that much was not just a song. The Beasts were the ultimate guards, the ultimate punishment, and the ultimate protection. She had seen them many times, from a cautious distance. They were uniformly large, muscular, quiet, and never came into the Dark, at least that anyone saw, passing only through the mage guarded roads into the City. They were distinctive in their richly crafted all-leather clothing, usually embossed with animals. If there had been a suspicious death, and someone disappeared shortly thereafter, night whispers carried tales of how the Beasts had eaten another murderer.

Despite their lack of influence on daily life in the Dark, stories abounded. About how they could work greater magic than high Guild mages. How they killed the guilty by drawing out the agony as they ate them alive. How they could transform into horrific man-beasts. How they could possess animals. How they raped women, and if those women bore a child, both disappeared. How the cities paid them with women and children, who were raped, enslaved, eaten.

KarRa's skin had prickled to listen to the stories in the taverns and on the streets, knowing her destiny lay with these magical, secretive man-creatures. She'd listened to every story she could. And told herself in the still of night that the reason she lived, fought to survive, plodded through dangerous daily thieving snatches among the sly and stinking alleys, was to discover the truth behind the stories when she would trade herself for Rylan's life. The night whispers said that if one of the lost Beasts who grew up outside of the mountains wanted to be taken in by the Beasts, he had to bring a woman in offering, and the right woman at that.

Borl had been a member of Morg's people, the one other Clan that lived in L with Scuffle's Clan. Borl had been a Beast, and he refused to go into the True Wild, the forest beyond the rimming garbage wall that was the Dark's poor version of the City wall. He had taken ill a few years ago and died an agonizing, screaming death that had taken days. He had shocked everyone by not suiciding, nor even attempting the journey south. They whispered that no woman cared for him enough to sell herself for him. None of his Clan would end his cries, of course. To kill even in mercy might bring the Beasts upon you. The shaks for three blocks around had emptied as people fled the constant death echoes. KarRa held Rylan tight as he shuddered and shook, sweating, after silence had finally fallen.

It happened rarely, that a man discovered he was a Beast in the Dark, and it was so memorable everyone knew the results. A few years before Borl there had been another Beast who'd grown up in the Dark, who had gone insane and killed eighteen people before two real Beasts rose from the earth and killed him. Everyone knew the Legend of Trey, a man who went into the True Wild shortly before Scuffle had come, with a woman, and never returned. Then, a few years later, he had been spotted, healthy and glowing with power, along a road into the City. The woman had never been seen again.

There was also the story of Kir. He had been a Beast also, at about the same time. He

had gone into the wilderness with a woman, and when they returned two weeks later, he had suicided when the sickness came upon him. The woman had refused to speak. The night whispers said her silence was because of what the Beasts had done to her before they turned them away. Sometimes the Beasts liked the woman, and sometimes they didn't.

KarRa believed in Scuffle. She believed he had been one of the most powerful men in her small crowded world. People who taught themselves to control their magic became powerful. True trained mages, with secrets and knowledge of City life, were rare. He had told her, in the trance he held as he pricked her skin with cobalt dots, *She would save Rylan*. He had told Rylan she was his key. Rylan had argued with that man his entire life. Well, to be fair, most people had because he had been ornery and snappish. But for just this once, couldn't Rylan see the truth? KarRa had been having dreams of being late for months. Nearly all of their Clan had come by to talk to him, but he had ignored them all, even Far. Finally she had contacted Sera, Far's woman, and a powerful prophetess. Rylan had always disliked her.

When Sera came to the door, Rylan had bellowed, "I will not listen! I will not believe I do not make my own fate!"

KarRa snorted and shouted back, "She's not here for you, pukeface! She's here for me!" He stared at her with angry, slitted eyes. More calmly, she had asked, "Sera, will I come to harm if I go to the Beasts? Read my eyes, so I can find the courage to face what I must."

Sera speared her fingers into the tangled brown locks around her clansister's face and KarRa sank into the pale grey eyes before her. Coming back into focus, Sera studied KarRa's deep brown eyes, then said firmly, "No."

KarRa turned to Rylan with her hands on her hips. "Now may we go?"

He turned to the wall. "You asked her to say that. She's lying."

Sera hotly jumped in, "You stubborn, rockheaded..."

KarRa laid a hand on her sleeve and shook her head.

They left together to walk out past his hearing. Sera gave her an old loaf of bread that would come to be her only food for days.

"Thanks for trying." She hesitated, not sure if she really wanted to know. "Did you really see something?"

Sera nodded, looking away. "I focused on harm and I saw some harm." KarRa's stomach fell away. She stumbled to a stop. "But I followed your thread on and there was no harm on your soul. Indeed, the harm I see in you now was ... not gone, but healed. I sensed someone so much more than the KarRa you are as you stand here, I wasn't sure I had followed the right thread. But I traced it back and it was you."

"How can a soul be more than itself?" KarRa had not had such a mind-twisting thought since Scuffle had died. He had loved philosophy.

Sera looked at her incredulously. "You, KarRylan, ask me that?!"

KarRa turned away, confused. "My thanks, clansister. Give Far my farewell and best wishes. Everyone's been by now, I think. We'll be going soon." Sera nodded, touched one of KarRa's dark flyaway hairs hacked off above her ears, and left.

Yet it had been two days now and she had not been able to get a coherent word out of Rylan since. She was terrified, furious, that it was too late. Now she sat in this winter cold room that was Rylan's latest shak, a poor one as he struggled between sicknesses.

Her eyes drifted over the cracked walls, the gaps and the chips, the rough clay floor. *It is empty of more than the belongings I've sold for fresh water and food, she thought. This life of ours is dead, and this key is going to pick the lock of the Beast caves.*

She wrestled Rylan into a pair of thick pants, a tunic, and a sweater she'd been using as his pillow. She was rough, glad when she shook him awake. She was panting as she finished wrapping his belt on and tying his warclub to it. She stuffed his feet into boots and stood glaring down at him.

"I'm leaving. If you want to live, get up and follow me."

Her words fell hard and cold, but she knew he would heed them. He could not delay any longer. The final chance to decide in favor of life over death was here, and she was confident of his choice, despite how his fear for her had made him wait until his body was at its weakest. She turned and walked out into the harsh white sun.

She waited outside, leaning against the house. The sun was bright, but not warm enough to heat the adobe. As she waited for him to summon the will to follow her, her mind raced. Free of the burden to convince him to go, she thought again of her weak plan on how she was going to get there. Her only supplies were an oilskin wrapped around her waist with a coil of rope, and sharp throwing stones currently tied around a smaller rope's ends like a bolo. She had no food, as her stomach growled around the dry heels she'd forced down. But she wouldn't have gotten this far in life without being able to think on an empty stomach. When Rylan staggered, wheezing, into the doorway, she ducked under his arm to drape it around her shoulders, and they were off, heading due south. South out of the City, and south to find the Beasts.

It was incredibly easy to leave the Dark. She had done it a handful of times before with Rylan when he was in the throes of fascination with the Wild. It seemed strange to her that their close, wretched world that contained all wealth, pain, friends, and future was in truth no wider than a half hour's walk straight out from the City walls. They would not be leaving along any of the City roads, nor even tracking along them once in the forest. It was the True Wild for them.

Rylan's current shak happened to be on the southern side of the Dark, which made the journey infinitely easier. Her information said the Beast Caves were a three-day run due south from the City. All she had to do was get him to a water source in the forest, and then she'd go on alone. She refused to think about them separated, Rylan weak and alone, for days in the forest. For now, she just had to keep him moving. Even within the Dark there were good and bad areas, but you could always count on the outermost fringe, out near the trash barricade, to be a bad area. The nicer compounds were near the City wall.

On a normal day, KarRa could have cleared the Dark and been at the barricade from Rylan's shak within a quarter hour. Today it took two hours. They fell four times, and she only managed to snatch a moldy roll and three carrots from the street level hovels, always those of the weakest, as they wound their way past. It took another hour for them to get clear of the debris encircling the Dark, that which had no trade value and was too big to be burned. She thought she had never strained so hard as she pushed, pulled, lifted, and rolled her man through the man-made obstacle of wood and stone scraps. Two shaks high, it worked well enough for wild men and creatures, providing a warning at the very least. It utterly failed to protect against fuzzies, the magical scourge. Their name sounded innocuous but they were a main reason for the City walls. The blurred dregs of loose mage energy drifted around until they came into contact with a human, where they

burned the body to blackened char.

The clearing on the other side was kept up by City guards, no brush or trees for three hundred paces so the rare attempt at crossing could be monitored. It would have been better to cross at sundown, but Rylan was shaking now, occasionally muttering to people not there, pouring sweat, and had wretched up all the liquid in his body. She knew once he went down he would not rise again easily. So they crossed. Sure enough, a guard called out at them when they were half way, but she flashed her skinmark and he fell silent and turned away. Far and Sera had done a good job of strengthening Scuffle's Clan reputation. Luckily, this guard must have some lawless ties to the area.

They fell again within a bodylength of the forest. Scrambling for some leaves off a bush at the edge, she thrust them into Rylan's hands.

"Feel it," she gritted roughly, panting from hauling his weight for hours. "You're almost home."

She did not know where those words had come from, but they seemed effective as he staggered onto his feet with her help. He could no longer get upright and leaned over heavily. She tucked his hands into her belt and towed him like a child through the dense scrub at the edge of the clearing and finally they were among the canopy of full trees. Day was already sliding low now, and what small warmth the light had held was gone from the low angle of sun and the cool of the thin winter shade. She tugged her war club free, just to be safe. Every small hair on her nape thrilled to attention. *Here it begins*, she thought.

She had gotten him into the forest, and she knew that if all the Winds flowed her way, she could get Rylan accepted by the Beasts. But she also knew she would not be returning to the Dark. She would not even be returning to the forest. She did not know why some of the men who were Beasts were turned away, but she knew, *knew in her blood*, that Rylan would not be. And that meant that she was going to disappear. Eaten, enslaved, sacrificed, magebound, she yanked her mind sharply from spiraling scenes of horror and torture. She had come to terms with it after Borl's screaming death. Then she had known that she not only could, but would do this. No screaming death agony for her man.

Rylan's life was the purpose that gave her strength to get up and keep living. Whether he slept by her side or not, whether she went a year without smelling his scent warm in her nose with his arms around her, she owned him in a way no other could. She was alone in life, that lesson she had learned when he had closed the door on her in that crooked hall, yet Rylan was still somehow hers. For his constancy in childhood that had saved her sanity and life, for his lasting friendship and support through all her struggles, for his flesh against hers in the night all those years, she would willingly die to see him to his new Clan, where he would grow to become one of the powerful, privileged Beasts.

Dragging him through the soft needles and cracking twigs, she lost track of time until it became too dark to see. She cued her war club and checked her path south again, then lit it softly with a word. Rylan had done the direction spell for her, but lighting was one of the few spells she could handle herself. They continued crashing so noisily her nerves were numb with terror for several hours before Rylan's legs gave out. Then she focused on getting him to drink water she painstakingly gathered from the leaves of the winter bushes around the area.

Lying down behind him she spread the oilcloth over them and curled around him.

She would have to be alert until Rylan revived. Her skin crawled with the feeling of openness around them, no walls to trap and spell for protection. The scent of True Wild all around her seared her nose with its sharpness and utter lack of any human taint. Without her club's light, she could not believe how black it was. There was no green tint to the air this far from the City wall. She strained to listen to every sound, and every sound was strange. Rylan's breathing seemed to even out, an old lullaby for her traitorous heart to follow.

When she awoke, birds were singing. It was a sound she had heard but a few times before in her life, and then faintly. This pure calling seemed to pierce her mind. Wind was blowing in the trees. The light shifted to and fro. Something not human chattered a ways off. Cold air was seeping from somewhere, yet warmth was mostly trapped around her stiff, sore body. Cataloging the strange sounds, she decided all was normal in the forest around them. Her pounding heart was commanded to accept her failure to stay on guard. They were still alive.

She checked Rylan. He looked ... better? He was not sweating, not shaking, not so yellow, although his lips were chapped, his eyes bruised and sunken. All that day she let him sleep as she explored in a spiral around him. She found no water, but collected what she found trapped in the crooks of plants and gave it to him. She ate the carrots, although she was not hungry. She thought with a sarcastic shrug, *Why bother to eat when I'll no doubt be dead or as good as in a week?* Snorting at her high Guild drama, she determinedly munched and swallowed knowing her journey was far from over. KarRa always did what was needed to survive. It was a favorite phrase of Scuffle's: "Live to spite and despite them."

Curled around Rylan again the next night, she strained to separate danger from forest. Her body melted with relief to feel his stir into wakefulness. He turned to her and gathered her close. They lay in their KarRylan tangle of old, feeling the strangeness of the forest around them.

"What news," he asked softly, hoarse.

She shuffled around and brought out the stale roll. Ripping pieces off it, she mouthed them until they were soft and moist, and then put them in his mouth.

"I think we are a half day's run into the forest," she said after he had swallowed the last. "There is no water nearby, so we must go on. If we can find water, I'll leave you and go on by myself."

He was still, stroking her hair with weak curls of fingertips, then nodded. "Now or in the day?" he asked.

She shrugged.

"Now then," he said. He rose, tottered to a tree, and relieved himself while she rolled the oilcloth and bound it to her waist with the rope. He took his main war club and muttered words. "Water is closest that way." He pointed south and she breathed a sigh of relief. Not backwards, nor angling west toward one of the City roads. The winds were flowing their way.

He started out and made it a half hour before he had to ask to lean on her. She was astounded by this improvement. Following him, some of the worry knots eased under her ribs. He was going to live.

It was just starting to creep light when they came upon the river. They both stood there, stupefied.

“Have you ever?” she asked.

“No,” he said faintly, “But I’ve dreamed it for days.”

They sat, heavily, leaning against the other and just took in the wide, sparkling, chattering waters as the sun rose.

She chuckled, “From no water to too much!”

She spread out the oilcloth for him to sit on, brought him scoops and scoops, and then drank deep herself. She wet one of her sweaters and bathed their faces and arms. He lay down in the shade of thick bushes and she went off to hunt.

Taking her bolo from her waist, untying one of her throwing knives from one end, she again studied the forest for prey as she had yesterday. But whereas before she had only seen flitting tiny birds high in the trees, now she saw the waste of ground animals. Eventually she even found a little path. The air smelled so fresh. The sounds of wind in dry leaves and distant water were so strange. Heart thumping, creeping slowly between trees, she watched for a shimmer in the air of a magic creature, as well as watching the ground for signs of wild ones. She was a good hunter, as chucks were one of the main sources of food in the Dark. Vermin, they crept in the dark, emerging from City sewers. They were small but long and quick, and hard to catch. She had no trapping supplies, but she did not need them.

Finally she spotted a small furry grey creature that chittered and squeaked as it moved about the leaves at the base of a tree. Her knife found it with a quiet swish. She took it away from the small path to skin it. She summoned her own weak mageheat and seared the chunks of flesh. She choked it down, saving only a small portion for Rylan. From here on out, she would travel alone and needed strength. On her way back, she recognized chive stalks and pulled several handfuls. Not his favorite, but too bad.

She woke him as soon as she returned. She fed him, helped him drink again, and had him lay a return spell on her backup club. She was leaving the still damp sweater laying on a nearby log, and her throwing knives. She tucked the oilcloth around him, leaving his right arm free of the cocoon so he could use his club quickly if need be.

Kneeling next to him, they both stared at the river leaping and splashing a few paces away. She’d never seen anything so strange and beautiful as that wild road of water. It seemed to be alive, talking, laughing, always running but never getting away. She could have sat there for days.

Eventually she turned to him and he raised his eyes to hers. They studied each other, dark eyes to gold. Leaning forward she touched her forehead to his, noses side by side, breath softly blowing onto each other’s lips. Her heart thundered in her throat as pictures of him whirled in her mind’s eye. Rylan snarling at Scuffle when reprimanded for not knowing his lessons, feet too short to reach the floor. Rylan laughing silently at her from the shadows as she bungled a roof hang and slid with a crash onto a garden wall. Rylan shirtless, washing his hair, the summer he came into his growth, all smooth strips of muscle and tan skin. Rylan cursing her in a fury, Rylan stone-faced calm and liquid quick in battle, Rylan wrestling Far and shouting with laughter.

Her head spun in a whirl of golden brown that had been the only beauty in her life. Pulling back, she saw his pupils retract in the midst of his incredible tawny eyes. Beast eyes that would reflect any mage light at night with a green cast or glow with power during strong emotion. His stubble had come into a soft thin beard during these last days and her fingers rasped through it as she trailed the tips along his jaw. He swallowed. She

stood. His eyes traveled down her length and smoothly passed on, his head swinging around to the river.

“You *survive*, KarRa. I will find you, find a way to protect you...” His hoarse voice broke.

“Perhaps. You will live, and that is my satisfaction for my entire snarly life.” He closed his eyes and she felt his anguish and self-loathing beating along their magepath. She sent back love, then turned and walked away.

Chapter 2: Dawn

Her legs were sore. She sat and rested with her back to the wall. That she'd survived to get here, to the Beasts' City, was half the miracle she needed. The small underground room was rounded, carved from rock, with niches for large balls of magelight. The wall was bumpy against her back. It was warmer down here than it had been above, and smelled of earth.

Taking his old warclub off her belt, she cradled the precious magic that would find Rylan again, and held it close. She tried to imagine that she was like a Beast and could smell him on it. She managed to bring up the memory of his neck scent at night, then angrily banished the feeling when it made her eyes foolishly wet. It was an indication of just how close to the bone she was. Tears were an indulgence of the weak, Scuffle said. Fit only for the true dark, when you were alone.

She checked on Rylan through their magepath, and found him weaker, stirring her anxiety. She sent *comfort* at his query to her stirred emotions. That he was still alive, lying defenseless in the wilderness for two days, was another part of the miracle.

Then she focused her mind in her favorite activity of soothing yet wakeful concentration that she used whenever she had to wait patiently, which was often in her career as a thief.

She began listing all the knifedances she knew—formal ones Scuffle had taught them based on City knife fighting. Not particularly useful for real fighting but good for concentrating, balancing, and stretching. She went on to holding her memory of Scuffle's shak before his death. She had made it to his upper floors when her guard stood aside as stepping feet sounded down the hall. She let her fighting face settle into place and stood. So far she hadn't been touched, or even questioned much.

Five men swept into the room smoothly and fanned out around her. The one who entered last paused in mindtalk for several moments with her first guard. He was taller than the rest, with thick black hair but tan skin and wearing only a knee length leather skirt. The rest were all dark-skinned and dressed as her first guard, in complete sets of leather, as she was. Then he turned and strode up to the stone table opposite her, putting his hands flat upon it and looking her all over.

He rolled his shoulders, expanded by at least a half a head, and then his magic hit her like an entire basket of wet laundry dumped on her head.

Her breath left in a rush and she nearly cried out in shock. She had never known anything like it, and she had been scanned by powerful exiles before, but that had felt more like ants or chucks swarming her than this incredible crushing force. When she became aware again she had no idea of how much time had passed, but she was listing against the wall, shaky.

"Your name," he spoke with utter command.

"KarRa."

"Your whole name," he demanded impatiently.

"Just KarRa," she responded calmly to his harsh commands. At this there was a swift exchange of eyes around the room. She had dealt with hostility and cruelty all her life and if he thought to shake her knees with simple intimidation he was mistaken.

"From where do you hail?"

"Outside the wall of Fourth City."

He tipped his head. "Tril tells me you speak Truxet. What Beastspirit are you tied to?"

"I do not know what any of that means."

The man frowned even more ferociously. "The guard that found you says you spoke in our way, in complete understanding."

"I was using Dark bodyspeak."

"You have had no contact with any Beasts?"

"I've known Borl and Rylan."

"And what Clan were they of?" He was getting frustrated with her.

"Borl was of Morg's clan, and Rylan is of my clan, Far's." This caused more eye flicking among the men.

"Which is the one you want us to go to?"

"Rylan. He lies in the forest beyond the river two days north from here. I have this club keyed to lead you there." She stepped forward and laid it on the table, the guard closest to her tensed, growled.

"Rylan lived with you outside the City walls?"

"Yes."

"When did he come there?"

"I don't know. We were very small and wild when we found each other. We have been tied from then to now, living in the City fringe. We only left when he was near death. The forest has been good for him, and he is revived a little, but still very ill."

"How old is he?"

"We call each other twenty-five." She wanted to be as accurate as possible with these people.

"How long has he been sick?"

"Months. Seriously, about ten-to eleven days, now. Please go to him while you put me to your tests. Ease him..."

{Stop} he motioned. He stared steadily at her and she waited, maintaining calm.

"Why are you here?"

"Rylan wishes to live, and I will make sure he does. I will do what is required."

More eye flicking among the men. She definitely thought they were using magespeak.

"What do you know of what is required?"

"Only night whispers."

"Tell me them."

She raised her chin. "For a Beast to be taken into the caves, he must give them a woman. They say I must die, or become a slave. That I will be given to dark mages, and drunk of my essence." He grunted. She took that as a prompt. "I know only that Trey was accepted, yet the woman he took with him never returned."

"There are seven Cities. She could be anywhere."

"Yes," she acknowledged. She reminded herself, *Scuffle told me that I would be Rylan's key. Sera told me that I will be harmed but not in a way that matters.* But her soul whispered, *She lies to protect her friends, you know it, you know it.* Inside, her heart began to tremble and she couldn't stop it. Her soul whispered-*alone, unwanted, unneeded, useless, alone...* Aloud she told it and the men, "I will do this."

“Even if I tell you to take your knife and open your wrists?”

“That would be easier than many of the other whispers.” A few eye flicks this time among the men.

“None of those things happen to the women who are adopted into our caves.” She blinked at this statement. His tone had softened considerably, almost apologetic. “What were you in the City fringe?”

“My way of life is that of scout, messenger,” she paused and added reluctantly, “and thief. I am, was, part of a small clan outside of the Guild controls and Dark status wars. I live simply and do not require much. I have a few other skills. I don't know what you value.” This made her feel itchy, like a smoothskin girl calling her charms.

“Have you children or husband?” She couldn't stop her hands from twitching and knew they had seen the telling reaction.

“No.”

“What are your mageskills?”

“I have none. Well, I'm good with traps.”

“That's all? No element?” Everyone fell into the six elemental strengths. She was the only person she knew of that did not.

“All that Scuffle, our old clan leader, thought worthy to train.” Her heart moved from trembling to thumping. *Would she have enough skills to be of value?* The Beast closest to her shifted and she thought, impossibly, that he could hear the change in her heart.

“What of Rylan?” the tan man growled. His chest was massive, heavily muscled. He'd be a tough opponent on a one on one. KarRa's stomach churned at the thought of Rylan being judged and found wanting by this hard man.

“He is golden inside and out. He is powerful in a fight, skilled in magic, yet wise in his ways. He is steady, the most honorable person I have ever known. He...”

“Stop. Are you mated?”

“Married? No.”

He tipped his head, motioned with his hand and the closest guard crowded her as the gate guard had. She stood her ground, showing him her neck.

“Are you mated to Rylan?” the Beast asked again.

KarRa turned her head and looked directly into the dark guard's eyes. “No.”

He leaned into her and sniffed in little huffs, then backed away, eyes flicking to the mage. Could they smell lies?

The tan Beast spoke again. “You have run together from childhood, you would die for him, yet you are not lovers.”

“Yes. I mean no.” She thought she saw a smile flick through mouth.

“He is gold haired?”

“Dark gold. Yes.”

“Unmated?”

She hesitated. He had such a focus on that word and she was not sure she understood it.

He clarified, “He has not chosen one woman to keep in his bed?”

“He has chosen several over the years, but they do not stay long. The longest lasted a year.” *And I hated her guts.*

“He has no children?”

“No.”

“Look at me.” She raised her eyes from his chest to his eyes. She held his black stare for many minutes and couldn’t read him at all. He turned away and mindtalked with her first guard. The room was entirely still.

He looked over at her again. “There is only one test you must pass. It will take only a moment and will not hurt. Turn around and put your hands on the wall at shoulder height. Spread your legs wide.”

She did it immediately, hating that her heart was still thumping hard. The guard nearby took her club from her belt, then nudged her feet farther apart, rather gently. He moved away and another presence came up.

“I will touch you. This is a simple body reading.” It was the tall mage. He crouched down behind her and slid his hand between her legs to rest low on her stomach, fingers spread wide. He was under her sweaters but did not try to get into her leathers. She hardened her muscles so as not to betray any reaction, and was glad she did when his other hand came between her legs and stopped, the heel of his palm pressing firmly up against her core, his fingers curling into her mound.

In an instant she became hyper aware, and although everyone remained utterly still for many moments, she swore she could feel the other men become vividly more focused on her than they had before. Heat washed through her lower stomach to leak out between her legs—she swore she could feel it pulse through her body between his hands, flowing like water and her skin only a sieve.

After a half dozen pulses of heat, his hands slid away and he stood. She felt him move away and he said, “Turn.”

She was surprised that he was still so close to her, on her side of the table, leaning casually against it, his legs and arms crossed in front. He stared at her with a heavy lidded look that reminded her of drunks. She could have reached out and touched him. That she wanted to was a completely uncharacteristic urge.

“You are fertile.” Not drunk then, randy. All of the guards shifted restlessly in a ripple of power around the room. He blinked sleepily at her. “The price you choose to pay for Rylan’s rescue is fair. If you want us to take him, Clanless and untrained, we take you as well. You will become one of us. You will be matched to suitable mates, and given a choice among them. You will have children. What you do among us is up to you—there are many duties to choose from.

“Our lands are vast. You will not be enslaved in dark caves, but you will not return to your old life in the human world. You will find a place for yourself among us when you accept a mate. You will be matched no sooner than a moon from now, but it has taken up to three years to settle mate choices on an adopted woman. You will be taught our ways, some of which will seem strange. You will have a place of respect among us, and many freedoms. In no way will you be abused. All of this will come to pass if you agree.”

“If you do, we will try to rescue Rylan but we cannot promise he will live. Unbonded, untrained, unguided Beasts such as he have become spirit lost, and if his sickness is at the stage you say, he has a good but not total chance of recovery. If he lives, he will be adopted. It is common that your paths will separate.” He came to an end and continued to watch her.

As soon as she realized he was waiting, she said, calmly and firmly, “Yes. I agree. I accept. I so pledge to any terms you state.” Her head whirled, unable to take it all in

immediately. *Not abused ... children ... freedoms ... never return ... good but not total chance...*

He reached behind him and withdrew a gorgeous carved stone knife from his waist. Moving back around the table, he motioned her forward. She came to it in one pace, holding out her right arm without being asked, pushing the sweater sleeves to her elbow. He held the knife to her forearm, looked her in the eye and asked formally, "Do you KarRa of Far's Clan and the Fourth City swear by your lifeblood to accept a mate among my people, the Truxet, with open heart and firm mind?"

Holding his gaze she said, "Yes."

He cut fast, turning her wrist and dropping the blood onto the stone. She noticed he chose to trace the line of one of her previous scars, leaving one less. Nice touch.

Letting go, he cut his own arm and turned his blood on top of hers. "I see your oath and hold it in keeping as the sacrifice you make for Trux Rylan." He lowered his arm to his side, and she did the same, ignoring the sting and the warmth of the small cut.

He stared at the tiny puddle of blood, and it began to glow. She glanced at him, but he had not stiffened and swelled the way Beasts seemed to when they used magic. She looked down in time to see the blood begin to steam, and the edges sizzle; yet the stone at her hips was not hot. Three of the dark guards stepped forward, laid hands on the stone, and stated, "Witness." They stepped back from the stone. The blood sank away and the cut on her arm sizzled faintly.

"Welcome KarRa. Know you are honored and needed by our people. We will hold you well. This is Tril." He motioned to the guard that had found her at the edge of the forest. "He will take you to meet our other women awaiting mate matches." He held his hand out to one of the other guards and was handed Rylan's club. He stared at it, began to swell.

She blurted quickly, "I want to help with Rylan's recovery. He responds to me as to no healer. I need to know his progress." He gave a sharp nod without shifting his concentration. There was a popping sound in her ears and all five of the men were gone. She swallowed her shock.

Turning to Tril, she met his dark black eyes for the first time. He was looking at her, fascinated. "That's it?" she asked. "Was that your leader?"

"He is Merk, a Council spiritmage, an alpha gold pack Wolf. Not a leader."

"Oh." They stared at each other a few more moments and she became aware that Tril was quite young. His size was misleading, but his youth was clear on his face. "Should we go?"

"Oh! Yes." He didn't move.

"Is it far?"

"In distance, yes, but I will sift us there." At her blank look, he added, "The way Merk left. We call it sifting. Magical transport."

"All Beasts can sift?"

"No. But we can all use a magestone to do it."

She looked down. Walking through the woods for two days and two nights was catching up with her. "I'm very tired. And hungry." She realized that for the first time in days she truly was. Rylan was going to live. She knew it. It had to be so. She would make it be.

Her heart was still pounding, and her arm still stung, but she was suddenly so

incredibly full of energy. *I am going to live as well.* She thought of contacting Rylan, but did not want to interrupt what was happening with Merk. “Let's go Tril. I can't wait to see what's next.”

He led her out of the room and down the tunnel, no longer concerned about showing his back to her. “We can't use that stone?”

“No. That's a truth stone. Wow, I can't believe I actually helped bring a new woman in on my first duty. Wait till I tell Sed! Hey, wouldn't it be wild if I was your mate?!” She tipped her lips wryly to the side. How had this child seemed so powerful on the cliff? He chattered as they walked past several other small rooms.

“I mean, the last woman came in moons ago! It's so hard for us, you know. Humans think we're animals. City mages are jealous and scared. Willing women are worth more than gold. Especially when they just walk up and agree to be adopted. And you brought in a lost brother too! I hope he makes it. That hasn't happened in forever. Most women find out they're being traded and have to come here to mate and flip out. Or they try to put demands in-” I want this many dresses and that kind of mate. “Like we're a pleasure shop!”

He sounds just like any boy from the streets, she thought, wondering.

He turned into a room just like all the others. “Put your hands on the table. So, when I sift us, you might get a little of dizzy after, but it's fine, it doesn't hurt you. You'll get used to it.” She laid her hands on the stone. All of a sudden searing heat went up her right arm, and her left felt icy cold. The room seemed to fall out underneath her, and while it spun in a drunken wave her knees threatened to buckle.

She was in a similar, room but the magelights were in different locations. They stepped out into a hall, with two men talking a short distance to her right. They did not look up. Tril led her through what appeared to be a maze. She tried to hold onto the path, but every glimpse of a Beast had her tensing, wary. *Fool. This is their territory. Calm down.*

Finally, after ascending some stairs, Tril was speaking to a man standing next to a carved doorway. Even though he was not armed he was obviously a guard.

All the other doors they'd passed had been entirely open, or had fabric hangings over them. This one had a pivoting stone slab, currently open. The rock halls appeared as if a giant had simply chewed through it, looking naturally jagged. This doorway carving was of flowers, and fruit, graceful feminine hands, curvy bodies in silhouette, with flowing long hair. Scruffing the shaggy ruff on her head, she thought if that was their idea of women, she wasn't going to do well here.

Tril led her down some halls and into a room with a red curtain. It was perhaps two bodylengths across. A solid wood table and two chairs stood in the middle of the space. A bed with a thickly stuffed mattress and heavy, well made blankets was beyond it against the wall. The rock walls held several empty niches and a few magelights.

Tril cleared his throat. “Wait here for your mentor. She may be a few minutes.”

“I am under guard?”

“No! I just showed you the way. I have to go now.” His voice held more disappointment.

“The guard in the hall?”

“Safety. To keep us out, if someone slips their grip. Which really never happens. Well, I mean, there was this one guy a few years ago—I think he was a Watercoaster, he

went a little crazy and took an unmated woman back to the Cove, that's their clanhome, but of course he got caught."

"Of course." One guy? A few years ago? She didn't think so.

Tril edged toward the door. He chewed his lip. "Well, I hope I see you again. I mean, maybe at the Darkmoon gathering. It would be nice, if, maybe, we could dance..."

"Goodbye Tril," she tried to make her voice kind. "Can you check and see if they brought Rylan in? Will someone tell me?"

He suddenly stood tall again. "Sure! I'll do that! I can do that!"

He bounded out.

KarRa looked around the room. One door out. One guard at the main entrance. If this wasn't a jail she didn't know what was.

It was perhaps an hour later when Tril was back. "Your mentor didn't come?" He seemed surprised.

"No."

"Huh. Rylan is amazing. He's so strong willed. Man is he stubborn. He insists on having you there. He wants to live but he's willing to let go for you. He's refused the bonding ceremony with his Alpha. It's really weird you two aren't mated."

"Our souls are." The words slipped out, so easy to respond to the chatter of Tril's back. It was a stupid mistake. Exhaustion was no excuse.

Tril stopped dead and spun to face her in a blur of black skin. She leaped back and into fighting stance. He stared at her open mouthed, blinking his black eyes at her. "Wait 'til I tell Merk," he breathed. Whirling again, he began to jog and she followed.

Only a few turns later they pushed through a knot of people in the hall and she came to a room three times as big as hers, but darker. A raised pallet in the middle was the only furniture. Three groups of men gathered in whispers around the edges but she went directly to Rylan at the center.

Falling to her knees she clasped his hand and drew it to her chin, doubling his arm up. It went smoothly with no resistance and his eyes were closed. Her heart stopped. "Rylan!" It was a command. His eyes flowed open, the gold glowing in the low light and her breath eased out long and tired.

She smiled gently at him. As always when coming into his presence, peace settled deep into her bones. "Look at you! You are here in the Beast caves. You are home!" They were so close to finishing this.

His brow creased, "They said all women were well treated here, and free, then they told me some story about you being safe..."

"Hush. I'm well. Not one unkind touch. And they tell me you are not agreeing to a bonding ceremony." Laying her head next to his she hissed into his ear, "You will stop delaying and do this immediately. You are weak again and I will not have it."

He chuckled weakly, more of a hiccup in his breathing, and turned his head to her. "You did it, KarRa. You made it through the Wild."

She smiled, feeling a thrill of pride. He didn't need to know about the near miss with the fuzzy. Or the recently shredded carcass she'd stumbled over, or the red eyes that had followed her for hours. "I didn't do it for nothing. What's going on?"

His eyes were devastated, confused and lost. "They chose my Clan in a Council," he whispered. "A mage poured energy onto me and it bounced off onto a couple of men standing in a circle around, and the others left, then they proceeded to debate who had

last had a birth, who had more deaths. They never even looked at me.” He closed his eyes but not before she saw the fear and hurt. “They never even talked to me.”

“Rylan I'm sorry.” She smoothed his hair, hot and sticky, from his brow. She didn't know what magic they used that didn't take into consideration the will of the man they were adopting, but didn't care. She agreed with Rylan that beginning their life among the Beasts by being bartered like a chuck-hunting kitten was unacceptable.

“They are fools. I will prove one for you. I will do it right now and return shortly. And you will bond to the man I bring you. You'll prove your worth later as he will prove his to you. But for now, for your weary body, let me take on the proof and damn their Council.”

His eyes opened slowly, dazedly, and her heart thundered even more in fear and sorrow. “Do you choose to live Rylan? After all your chances to quit before, will you do it now when you hold a bloodclan within a breath?” She held her own breath as he rolled his head back in line with his body and sighed.

“Prove one for me KarRa, and I will take him.”

She squeezed his hand and laid it gently to his side. She stood, starting as she realized for the first time that a man was sitting opposite her across Rylan's body. He was red-gold. Eyes, hair, and skin. He was power breathing and she froze in his gaze, hard and flat on her. She couldn't believe she'd been so careless, despite his stillness in the shadows.

“What proof do you seek?” he asked.

“It is a small magic only, that Rylan has a childhood belief in.” She glanced down at him, and thought he must be unconscious again. Her heart thumped.

“Can you help me find someone in charge?”

He stared at her for a series of heartbeats then pointed to a man dressed in black leathers in one of the small groups at the edge of the room. “That is our Dom. He is our Council leader.” She went to him, praying a new Beast brother was worth more than their politics.

Not ten minutes later she was facing a handful of men, including the redgold man, in a small empty room much like the one Tril had brought her to. The table was pushed back and the stools set atop it.

“You are the men the spiritmage felt would match Rylan. I am here to review for him, as he refuses to be given to a Clan by a discussion of strangers. What your Council decided by your laws and logic they have agreed to undo according to my proving. You have to do nothing but answer my question.”

She stepped up to the shortest man, who was dark skinned like Tril, but as thick as a tree and still a head taller than she. Raising her palm up and out until it was hovering over his heart, she sent out her energy.

Scuffle had watched her prove someone once. He had grunted at her findings. “Interesting,” he had muttered. He had gone to a jar, opened it, and tossed the empty air inside it at her. Nothing had happened and he closed it muttering, “Oh well.” He scuffled out of the room and never looked back. Rylan had been hoping that the exercise would reveal which Element she belonged to.

He had been disappointed and angry on her behalf, believing her ability to attune herself with someone to get the truth, to find connections between people, incredible. She had shrugged to Rylan and pulled him outside to try to find new bread, but secretly she

had been devastated. Her most closely guarded secret, her kernel of belief and hope and pride, had shriveled to a pea that day. There was no denying she had contributed a few times with her gift, but the time and concentration it took made it impractical.

“Would you take Rylan into your Clan?” she asked with her eyes closed, seeing with her energy now, not her eyes.

“Of course!” the man answered. The question didn't really matter, nor did his words. She felt the inner response, measured it to what she knew of Rylan, and closed her hand into a fist. She heard his breath huff, but took a gliding step to the left, to the next man in line.

Her eyes stayed closed as she moved, not listening to their words, some so long and polished as to be poetry. She listened to their hearts, energy, and souls. Finally she had passed down to the fifth and last man. When she had closed her eyes, this had been the redgold man, and her breath slipped from her in a small sigh, her shoulders lowering slightly in dejection as she realized she was not going to be so lucky as to pick the same man they had. What would be the political fallout from this she did not know enough to say, but she could tell from the cold eyes of the Dom that Rylan's demands were not appreciated.

Sliding to her right again, up one man back into the line of five, she opened her hand on the fourth man again to be sure. She was pleasantly surprised to find that the spiritmage who had chosen first was right—any of these men would be able to embrace Rylan's soul. But this one would understand, respect, and grow it.

“You,” she said, closing her fist. She opened her eyes and couldn't stop the gasp. He had changed places! The redgold man was in front of her, eyes still hard and assessing. She cleared her throat. “How fortunate,” she croaked nervously. The whole process felt like it had taken a day to her but had only taken a quarter hour.

He brushed past her and strode to Rylan's larger room. The men gathered around the doorway muttered in surprise at his entrance. Looking at her speculatively as she scurried in behind red-gold, most drifted away. Only two remained, they in leather skirts, and then Merk strode in, his muscular legs making the leather whisper. They stood at equidistant places around the room, a triangle she thought from her place by the door. She didn't know what to do, but wanted to stay. Simply standing here against the wall felt safer than asking, or calling attention by approaching Rylan as she yearned to do.

The red-gold man strode up next to Rylan. He touched his shoulder gently and soon Rylan's breaths came stronger and he opened his eyes. “You again,” he said.

The man smiled, a small closed mouth movement. “Yes. I am Grif. I am the Owl. I am your Alpha.”

Rylan looked at him, then rolled his head down, his eyes going to KarRa's without searching. She nodded once. Her eyes filled with tears. Rylan looked back up to Grif. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back so that the crown was all that was touching the table, and the strong column of his throat was fully extended and bare.

KarRa was shocked at what she saw next. A wildling would have hummed in acceptance of the submission or if he was being really snarly, touched it. But Grif bent down and took Rylan's flesh in his teeth, his mouth wide across Rylan's voice box. Then he bit slow and steady until the skin broke under his incisors. Rylan never moved. When Grif pulled back from the shallow punctures, Rylan relaxed his neck, still breathing deep and even. KarRa's heart swelled with pride at his dignity and beauty.

Grif moved to stand at the crown of Rylan's head, and laid his hands on either side, gently holding his skull. "I have taken your smell and taste. Picture a doorway in your mind. Through that door is all that you are, your secrets, your past, your pride. I will go through it, and help you find the path to the Owl. Open it to me." It was a command, calmly and firmly given. KarRa slammed back into the room's wall with the mental shock of Grif entering Rylan.

She felt him. The room swayed and dipped, the light flaring bright and flat and hot. *Crowded.* She gasped as she began to see scenes from Rylan's life running in a torrent in her brain. Squinching her eyes tight, she tried to pull away from the intrusion, her brain screaming, *You should not be here!* As she fought to leave, her soul screamed back against her efforts, *Alone! Unneeded! If you leave him you are lost.* Her breath coming in pants but not caring, she let her legs fold as she slid down the wall, knowing instinctively that if she stayed connected to Rylan during this bonding, it would not go well for either of them.

Sinking her head between her knees and folding her arms over the top like a small child hiding from a fuzzy she concentrated all that she was into dividing herself. She drew herself away at the same time she tried to leave strength and love behind. After an eternity in a hot dark wrenching pain, she saw herself standing on a bright blue line as wide as her shoulders, grey fog all around. Turning, looking down, she saw that she was at the end of the magepath that stretched off the way she had come into the fog. She could not make herself step off that line into the fog.

Suddenly a rounded rock opening came sliding down the line like a bird on wing and came to a slamming stop just a length from her. Through the fog, striding down the line, her skin crawling with a feeling of otherness, came the red-gold man, Grif. He stopped on the other side of the round rock door and looked at her with a strange look. Shock? Awe? Concern? He reached out to the side and rolled a rock door, just like the gate she had seen at the women's caves, across the line. Then she felt nothing. Not him, and not Rylan. *Alone,* her soul hissed in a bitter mocking voice. He had closed the intimate magepath KarRa had depended on her entire life.

How long she sat there shivering and rocking she did not know, but commanding chanting drew her head up weakly, her neck aching and stiff. The three mages had their hands up and out and vivid green magelight streamed from palm to palm making the triangle visible. Grif now had his arms extended, palms down, hovering over Rylan's torso. He was shaking, sweat visibly rolling down his neck as he chanted too. It seemed to be building, and Rylan began to shake.

The chanting grew demanding and a green glow settled over his body. He suddenly jerked, and began to thrash. Grif's face turned savage as he continued to spit the strange magewords down onto Rylan. The tension held and held and held and held until KarRa thought she'd scream and suddenly she was. On her feet, fists clenched, she shouted, "FLY! FLY! FLY!" in time with the strange chanted words.

Rylan jackknifed, white light blazed, and a huge Owl sat blinking, dazed, on an empty blanket. Its beak was open and wings mantled out from its body, feet shifting nervously.

It looks shocked, KarRa thought and would have laughed if her throat worked. The glowing triangle was gone also in the sudden silence. Grif's face broke into a smile. KarRa blinked. By the Winds he was different when he smiled. His face beamed with

pride and relief and joy. *Rylan's Beastsprite is an Owl*, KarRa thought in wonder. Her face felt stiff as it curved into a smile of her own when she thought incongruously that chuck had always been his favorite food. The Owl flung its enormous wings out to their widest and keened a cry that pierced her with beauty. Tears flowed over her face unnoticed.

"Now you will return," Grif's voice grated and low, raspy. "You must. I guided you to the Owl, but you must find the strength to return so that it does not own you. Prove yourself. Return. Now. And I will take you to your Clan." The Owl cocked its head at him, and then rotated its perfect glowing eyes around the room, blinking at the other mages, but not focusing on KarRa. It hopped experimentally up and down the pallet, folded its wings, then mantled again.

"Follow the path. Come back, Rylan. Master the Owl." Grif said again, calm but with a push of power in the words. The Owl turned away from him and began to glow. Grif's breath breathed out in a rush. He was muttering, staring intently at the great feathered shape in front of him. What encouragement, she could not say, but KarRa was sure that Grif was lending Rylan his will.

Suddenly she was worried again, for how difficult it had been to shift that first time, and Rylan had been so weak for so long. The glow grew and faded several times. The Owl's wings were now dragging, his body hunkered down over the huge talons, his beak open and hissing. A ruff of dust swept past one of the magelights and the Owl jerked its head to attention on it, predator eyes intent. Grif's face flashed alarm and fear and KarRa was sure the Owl was taking over.

"Rylan!" she screamed harshly. It was a reprimand born of fear, a mother's cry at a child balancing on a high place. Instantly the Owl's head snapped to her, those golden-orange eyes focused. It stretched out its wings, and one of them became a muscled arm reaching out to her.

Grif's face went shocked then intent. "Follow it! Keep going!"

KarRa stepped forward, unconsciously answering the plea of that straining hand and the unblinking eyes but Merk barked at her from across the room, "Stay back!" She froze. All was silent as Rylan again glowed and dimmed, glowed, swelled and with a snap of pressure that rang her ears lay gasping and sweating upon the pallet in human form.

With a cry that sounded just like the Owl's, Grif swooped down to raise him into an embrace and Rylan's arms came up to surround his shoulders in return, laughing breathlessly as the men grasped each other. Pulling back from him Grif stared intently into Rylan's dazed eyes and said fiercely, "Welcome!" Gathering him up he tossed him in his arms for a better grip, uncaring at his nudity, and strode out the door in a rush, calling for a healer, a spiritmage, and Dom, the man in black, as he went down the hall.

Cries of excitement and relief rang out. "Make way!" "Hail!" "Praise!" "Welcome Owl!" Two of the bare-chested mages hurried out after Grif, seeming to follow the murmuring swell of voices down the hall and away. Merk hovered in the door, looking over at her where she stood rooted, still facing the raised stone pallet a few steps from the wall.

"You did well. He is bonded and guided in his first Change. In no time I'm sure a man of his power will be trained and assigned." He hesitated when KarRa did not respond in any way. "Your work is done. He is saved, and home. Go to the women's caves." He swept out.

KarRa listened to the silence for a long time. There was the earth beneath her feet, and the comforting scratch and slight stink of her old sweater, a prime thick one she had only stolen a month ago. Her hair was suddenly itchy and damp. Her stomach lurched unpleasantly even though the room stayed still, and a wash of heat and damp swept from her nose down over her lips to drop off her chin. *Alone.*

The cave was utterly silent. As empty as the feeling inside her where a connection had always been. Somehow, it was suddenly important to go. She turned stiffly and shuffled out. *I'm scuffling like Scuffle* she thought inanely. *I have no strength. When was the last time I ate?* She had gone a short ways down the hall when she realized, *I'm bleeding again. Getting blood on my sweater.* Blood seemed to be a big deal to the Beasts. *I better get inside.*

She went into the first room she came to, another small room just like she had woken up in, but this one was dark. She couldn't remember how to turn up the magelight. Her hand went to her waist to light her club, but it wasn't there. She looked at the room in the light from the door, closed her eyes, and dropped the heavy, thick curtain. Remembering the layout from her glance, she scuffled to the bed and sat down. The blood had soaked through her sweater onto her chest now and was cold and clammy.

Blood ran down her throat and she coughed, gagging and spitting. Soft silent sobs, because if someone hears you crying they usually come to steal or hit, at least laugh.

By the time the light came, she didn't know who she was, and didn't care. Each moment was endless, an echoing solitude. Then thudding feet and dark men, handsome, came into the room, staring, shouting, bringing up bright light that hurt her eyes.

She was having trouble breathing, something sticky catching in her nose and mouth, clinging to the back of her throat. She was cold and shaking. *Shouldn't be shaking,* she thought stupidly. *Mustn't shake in front of the monsters.*

Her voice croaked and bubbled, blood spraying as she whispered to them, "Don't be scared." Then a tall man came toward her slowly, but she noticed he was between her and the door and even though he looked gentle she wasn't stupid. Suddenly angry, she sprayed at him, "I'm cold!"

He flinched when the blood landed all over his bare chest, his eyes wispig with green light, but then he breathed out, "KarRa, it's Merk. What happened? Who did this to you?"

She just stared at him, not understanding. "I'm cold," she said softly. "Rylan went away. I'm so cold."

The man's face eased into an expression she didn't understand but he said softly, "Come then, I'll help you." He held out his hand slowly and she looked at it. She looked at it for a while. It was strong and muscled, with a little bit of hair on the back. She wanted it to touch her but she didn't know. She didn't know that hand. She just didn't know. Then her eyes closed and she knew nothing.

* * * *

From the blackness came a firm touch, a strange hand encircling her wrist. Just like that the dark and the pain were pushed back as her every instinct came rushing in a surge of blood and light so bright it made everything seem flat. Her arm twisted and pulled, sliding expertly from the firm grasp. She struck out in a full extension of her opposite arm, fingers stiffly held as claws as she slap-raked the lower face and neck of the man

sitting next to her.

At the same time she kicked her legs up to her chest and out, arching her back and flinging herself into a crouch that lurched sideways at the soft bedding underneath her. The man swung down in a fast counter sweep, pounding her arm away in the same direction she was tipping and she tucked and rolled as her body fell off the softness into space.

She hit ground and came up in a low fighting stance, torso even with her spread thighs, bent in half, feet firmly shoulders width apart, arms extended, her head traveling the room in a snap to take in the danger and escape. She was in the corner of another stone room, barely clothed in some sort of thin dress tied around her neck. The man was by a raised pallet she'd been lying on, a woman was at a table. The room was only three bodylengths wide and long, yet the only door—no windows—was across the table between the two.

However, in the instant before her legs tightened to spring up onto the table, both of the people in the room dropped to their knees, palms up on thighs, still. In the second it took for her to understand their deference her legs gave out and she fell in a heap, scrabbling with her heels to put her back to the wall in defense.

Her heart was pounding much too hard, and blood splashed warm over her lips from her nose. Gasping and shuddering, suddenly soaked in sweat as if it were midsummer. The light became a soft golden glow from a mageball set by the door, the man became a grey and lined older Beast, and the woman was clearly terrified, staring wide-eyed at the floor.

About ten seconds after waking she gasped out, “What are you *doing* touching a sleeping person!? Are you insane?”

The man rose and sat again on his stool, feeling gingerly at his face. “I can't believe you got a blow in. You're the fastest human I've ever seen. Or I'm older than I thought.”

The woman gave a wavering, “Sir? You are wounded?”

“No, no, just surprised. The skin didn't break.”

“Oh praise!” said the woman, slumping with relief. Her eyes lifted quickly to pin KarRa. “How dare you strike him?! The Wolves' most respected bodymage! Healers are sacred even in the Seven Cities...”

“Meera, it's fine, leave be. I'm not a child in need of defense. Although I admit to being surprised at the need for defense just for touching a body in sleep.”

Meera humphed.

“How long,” KarRa gasped, astonished that she still could barely gather her legs under her as she tried to rise up against the wall.

“Unfortunately, four days. We finally realized the change in Rylan's soulair was causing havoc with your bond and balanced it.”

Change. His soul had been changed. He was in a real Clan now. He had an Owl form. He was safe. *Alone*.

The man stared at her calmly. KarRa took in his lightly lined face, still strong enough to crush her she was sure, without her element of surprise. He dug into one of the many leather pouches and pockets at his belt. He handed her a soft spongy leaf as big as his hand. “Use this on your face. Press it up into your nose as well, then throw it in the magelight.”

She did, pleased that it stopped her bloody nose, and he handed her a cup of water

that tasted odd. She gave him a look when she set it on the table. "I better stay awake long enough..."

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, "It's just an energy boost." The only piece of clothing left in the room was one of her old sweaters and she took it from the woman, her thin blanket-dress fluttering oddly about her calves underneath.

"I'll send your mentor to you, but one of the unmated women has been sitting with you when Meera and I couldn't be here. She'll be glad to see you're up. Eat lightly, soup would be best, for a day."

He and a still grumbling Meera left, while KarRa sat, shakily and assessed her frighteningly low energy.

"Hallo? KarRa?" called a lovely voice from beyond the red door curtain.

"Come." She surged to her feet, readying.

There was a cloud princess in the doorway. She stepped forward, put her hands on her hips and laughed. "My goodness! Calm yourself and be at ease. You are safe." Her speech proclaimed her a City woman. She was small but bold, looking KarRa all over, deeply interested.

Still her voice was kind when she asked, "How do you feel? Would you like water?"

She's beautiful too, KarRa thought inanely. *Is no one in these caves a normal person?* KarRa looked hard at her and her softness. Her fear drained away. This woman was used to being kept and the source of little danger.

"Yes. Please."

KarRa sat gingerly on the side of the bed as the woman—*Silverhair*, KarRa thought—sat across from her at the table. She poured water from a clay jug into two cups and pushed one to KarRa.

"When you first came in, I was very worried. I've never seen so much blood before."

KarRa cleared her throat. After an awkward silence where she sensed she was meant to reply she said, "I often got bloody noses as a child. Whenever I tried to use magic. Sometimes I got sick too. When I grew tired of bleeding and puking I gave up on magic." The woman shrank back a bit at this, her eyes growing round.

KarRa fiddled with the strange thin dress.

"Can I get clothes?"

"Any kind you like."

"The ones I had before?"

"Ruined. You want more fighting clothes like those?" Her voice sounded surprised.

"Leather pants, a heavy tunic, boots. I have no money."

"You don't need any here."

KarRa puzzled over that for a moment, decided to ignore it.

"Rylan? He is well?"

Silverhair shrugged. "I am sure. We are unmated and have no Clan, so news filters to us slowly here in the women's caves. From what I heard he has been introduced to Clan and Council, fully adopted. We won't see him until the next Darkmoon dance in five nights. And he's so new he probably won't even come to that, although most unmated males usually do."

She fell silent and they stared at each other. The silence grew until Silverhair said brightly "I'm Freezha. Are you really a wildling? While you were sleeping I counted six scars on your face! How many people have you killed?"

KarRa stared at the young woman, appalled by her cheerful bloodthirstiness. Her long, gleaming hair was so white it sparkled. Her eyes were violet. She was small, pale, and petite, with an enormous chest, which she showed off in a low-cut blue velvet dress that plumped and displayed. Her features were fine and smooth, with a rosebud mouth. She appeared to have not a single scar. She had spoken the word “wildling” as if it were an exotic honor.

KarRa looked at the floor. *I am going to spend the rest of my life here. This woman will be my companion for at least the near future. She could be a guide.* “Yes,” she said calmly to Freezha, looking into her incredible flowery eyes as an equal. “I lived in the Dark around the walls of the Fourth City. I was of Scuffle's Clan.” Her mouth twisted wryly as she was aware of the ridiculousness of her naming Clan as if she were a City dweller.

“My name is KarRa.” It no longer strangled her to say her name in two beats and stop at the ahh instead of adding —*ylan*. “I may have killed people in the course of riots but as I never had any intent, I consider myself innocent. The Beasts never came for me.”

“Is that how you got those scars? In riots? I heard from Guild women that sometimes people inside the City could hear them happening outside the Walls.”

“I usually didn't die in the fights I was in because I fought back. So did they.”

Freezha did not look suitably disgusted. She looked fascinated, eager. KarRa was suddenly angry.

“And I didn't live in a nice tight shak like I bet you had, with a family and guards. I mostly lived on the streets. I stole for my food, which often involved falling, jumping, and smashing. And my body was the thing that got smashed just as much as any box or lock. Any clothes that I had I got by stealing. The shak that I slept in was won by fighting, and the complex traps that I set guarded the sleep that I got. My Clan ran messages and messengers are often not very popular.”

Her words were now falling like rocks. “My life has been one long fight for survival. Every scar on my body is proof that I was better or luckier than somebody else. I survived. Many didn't.”

Now Freezha looked suitably fearful. Smaller than KarRa, the girl's eyes had grown as big as cups, her face as white as the moon.

KarRa breathed through her nose, lowered her heart rate. “I came here to save my friend Rylan's life when he fell ill. Thank you for your care of me while I was weak.”

“Ahhhh,” Freezha's enormous eyes went dreamy. Her shoulders relaxed. “That is so beautiful. Your story is the most romantic here. Two wildlings, daring the wilderness, braving the unknown horrors of the Beasts for each other. They say you are soulmates! You came here thinking you were going to die didn't you? I want my mate to love me as much.

“My father is a Second City pearl merchant, the head of the Guild actually, and some of the women say that for the price of Beast guards on Guild caravans for the next year he sold me.” Her blonde brows drew together delicately as her chin quivered.

“My father loves me!” Freezha burst hotly, tears welling instantly to cascade in sparkling diamonds over her strawberries and cream skin. “He's always given me the best of everything. This will be his last year at the Guild before he retires to the Royal City. He knew I would be honored and cared for here! I chose to come here.”

KarRa cleared her throat. “I'm to understand Rylan will not be my mate.”

Standing in a rush that made her start, Freezha slammed her dainty hands onto the table. “Hateful!” With a twirling rush of ribbons and velvet she spun herself to land in an artful spray on the pallet. KarRa leapt away and turned in confusion, staring down at her.

Freezha lay spread on the pallet, her tears still sparkling, her small fists clenched upon the silken curtain of white blonde tresses. “They should not hinder the path of true love! They above all must recognize its importance and truth. To keep you from fucking...” KarRa's eyebrows rose at that from her rosebud mouth, “your one pure mate is—is—*beastly*!” Her breasts heaved and threatened to spill out of her dress in her horizontal position.

KarRa cleared her throat. “Actually, we don't.”

“What?”

“Umm, we don't fuck. It just never really was an option for us.”

The woman stared at her for a moment.

“Soulmates? Don't fuck? And I thought I had it bad! Absurd!” Then Freezha began to laugh, her open mirth spreading across the room like mageheat. Finally KarRa joined in. The princess would do. She barked along with the tinkling bells and couldn't remember ever feeling this relaxed with a stranger. She was alive, Rylan was well, and all else would follow.

In the hour, KarRa had her first meal in days, a small bowl of the most delicious soup she'd ever tasted in her life. Freezha also brought supplies for a much needed sponge bath. Then she returned with leather trews and a long sleeved, well made brown jerkin, the nicest she had ever worn. It was finished at the cuff, waist, and collar, the edges being turned down and stitched across to make a smooth fold in the fabric. When Freezha caught her studying it in wonder, she brushed it down, pretending to nock away crumbs, even though she had eaten only soup in her thin illness gown. She knew better than to ask for her warclub back, though she felt strange without it.

Then she met the other dozen women in the unmated caves. Looking them over as they all sat in murmuring groups around their common lounge later that night, KarRa thought about how the Beasts seemed intent on treating these women with honor. The women's stories varied widely. Bartered, some pregnant and volunteering for a new life, chosen in payment or punishment, their human families seemed to hold them in considerably lower worth.

There were four children among them. They each seemed to be a restless surging bundle of energy that made KarRa tense. She was grateful when they tumbled, literally, out of the room to play.

The room was large, and plain, with no decorations other than the colorful floor pillows and wall hangings over the doors to various corridors. The smooth stone floor and rougher walls radiated warmth instead of the damp coldness she expected of a cave. The tables were carved, and the women were all richly dressed. She and Freezha lounged on large round pillows the color of jewels. She was still surprised at how at ease she was with the City dweller already. There was enough space between the tables to feel like their low conversation had privacy.

“So, the Beasts are wanting women. Do you know how many of them there are?” KarRa asked, idly twirling her ceramic tea cup.

Freezha answered promptly, “Much more than a typical City, but a smaller population than the Royal City. Of course, usually they're spread out over a very great

area as well. And try to start calling them Truxet.”

KarRa stared at her in wonder. This knowledgeable tone was not what she’d grown used to from the lush woman.

“That includes all adopted women and the children, too,” she added. Seeing KarRa’s astonishment, Freezha murmured wryly, “The women snipe that I’m only a pearl, pretty and simple, but I’m smart enough. Yet another reason Father valued me so.” Her voice grew heated. “I trust him to make such an important decision for me and I honor him by accepting it. I could have run away...”

KarRa thought, *And been dead in a day—*

“But I believe this was a good choice for me. I’ll always be safe, and comfortable, with a handsome husband who cares for me. He could have married me off to that fat gem Guild toad that wanted me. So I don’t want them to keep saying I’ve been thrown away by my father!”

She would have kept going but KarRa dared to physically touch the now flushed girl’s arm, and with a meaningful look motioned with her hands the symbols for {Try again.} “I’m sorry, Little One. I for one would not speak on relationships I’ve never known.” KarRa cast about for something else to talk about. “Why don’t the Beasts seem to have any women of their own?”

Freezha shook her head. “There are never any daughters. It is the cause of much sadness, frustration, and research. I guess there used to be, eons ago. All these women have to be carefully taught their ways and worked into the Clans. Your training will start tomorrow. A woman who’s already mated will mentor you for a while. It’s a very ineffective system they have to gain mates, which is sad because they are literally driven to be family men.”

“Only twelve women for what has to be many unmated men,” KarRa said in wonder.

Freezha sat straighter, sniffing. “Rarely, some of them father children without being mated and sustain their family drive that way. Their fertility is much lower when they’re not mated. But most warriors will never have a mate, never have families. So many desperate men.

“Very soon they will have to be more open in the gathering of women. This trickle of women is slowing their growth. It is unnecessary and cruel that so many go unmated. If they would just change the communication their Council sends to the Seven Cities, I know women would come to them instead of the other way around. But noooo! They’re too worried about their privacy and traditions and...”

“Hey! Silverhair, take a breath!” KarRa said this with a drawl and gave Freezha an arch look. And after a beat they both cracked up, neither knowing or caring why.

KarRa learned the room she had awoken in was assigned to her. No other would go there without her permission (she snorted in disbelief at this) and she would not have to share it. Nor was she allowed to lay magetraps in defense of it. Lying under the warm blankets of her roomy pallet that night, she opened her magepath to Rylan. It was blocked. Concerned, she measured her breathing, cleared her mind, and pulled up her mists. The rock door Grif had set was still sitting on the path. Furious, KarRa rolled it open. Trying again, she felt another door on Rylan’s end. She pounded on it, but it would not open to her. Too exhausted to try to force more sharing, KarRa told herself it didn’t mean anything. They were both alive, and well.

KarRa slept fitfully that night, constantly waking to check the status of her

surroundings. How did these people live with no locks or traps? By the Winds—not even a real door! Her body was still weak the next morning. Breakfast was another watery meal in her room with Freezha and the healer for company.

“The last,” she muttered to herself, as she could hear new women trailing down the hall into the lounge. The chatter ratcheted up and soon groups were drifting off down the halls. Freezha and the healer left her when a young woman stood in the doorway, rocking heel to toe, her arms clasped in front of her chest. KarRa looked at the bouncing girl and waited.

“Welcome to Vladaya, home of the Truxet! And River Mountain! The ancient cave citadel of Beasts!” The exclamation came with a flurry of hand waves. Then she threw her hands over her mouth to stifle a whinny like a horse.

She was about KarRa's medium size with the same trim build, but her hair was even shorter—a cap of bright orange curls that danced around her face. Her eyes were the green of hot magic, pale and ghostly, made more so by her dark brown skin. They were set strangely angled in her face, and thickly lashed with orange lashes. She had the most striking coloring KarRa had seen. She finally planted herself flat footed and gasped a breath.

She announced again in a grand way, hands flowing smoother and slower this time, “I am Cro, mate of Proteus, Alpha of the Mountaincat Clan.”

KarRa searched desperately for something to say other than, *Why are you doing that with your hands?*

Finally the girl, Cro, dropped her hands to her side, and being still, seemed deflated. “I'm your mentor,” she said with a hint of disappointment.

Ah. The mysterious absent mentor. “Greetings. I'm KarRa. That was quite a, er, very poetic greeting.”

The girl threw herself up onto her toes, hands flying up above her head to flutter her fingers crazily. She looked like a mage on speed weed. “*Was* it? I wanted it to be special. You are special. The men are all *soooo* excited to hear a new woman has come. It's so incredible that you're here!”

KarRa just looked at her, feeling as if she must look like Freezha with goggle eyes and open mouth. Feeling her mouth was indeed open she closed it with an audible snap of teeth. Cro jumped.

She whinnied and KarRa thought that the sound made her human, with her magical looks. “Let's get started.” She waved and fluttered her hand down a walkway, one that led further in, away from the outer hallway.

KarRa tilted her head and led the way, Cro bouncing behind like a child's paper toy on a string. “Ummm, do you have news of Rylan?”

“Yes! Of course!” Her exuberance actually made KarRa twitch. People in the Dark were mostly very contained unless at a tavern, Clan meeting, or riot. The less attention you drew to yourself the safer. “He is well. He is adopted, and has been tested. He has started his studies over these last few days when you were so ill. His Clan is a small one, but all Clans hold a place in Vladaya. They rejoice in his coming to them.”

“What is that word? Vladaya?”

“Oh, this place. All of it—the caves, the rivers, the mountains, the land the Truxet hold, and the magic in the land.” They had come to another of the draped doorways, and Cro flitted past her and flung the curtain back, rising so high onto the points of her toes

KarRa felt she might float away to the ceiling.

“River Mountain's main plaza!” she exclaimed. KarRa moved forward, then seeing that she was on a balcony about three shaks up above a wide-open space, she edged to the shadows at the side, standing against the wall so she would make no silhouette, but edging closer to the railing so she could take it all in. Cro went right up to the middle of the balcony, resting her hips against the railing, her arms angled out to either side. “Isn't it amazing?! The Truxet are extraordinary and I thank the Skyfather and Earthmother that I found my way to Proteus and his Cats.” She fell silent and KarRa let her eyes drink in the scene.

The hall was the biggest open space she had ever seen and it made her skin crawl. As wide across as the City walls were tall, it went up at least as high. An enormous gaping hole up near the ceiling high on her left let natural light stream in. There were balconies small and large spread all up and down the walls along the great space—sort of circular she judged. There were some balconies higher than they above her head. None were exactly the same, some elaborately carved, some with railings, some with pillars. The hall floor was paved with smooth stones large and small. Around the base were many doorways, and some of the balconies higher up had long twists of stairs down to the floor.

In the center of the hall a sort of market had been laid out. Some of the shops looked permanent, but some were facades on the front of large wagons, or tents. Others simply had large canopies of sorts held up with an intricate array of sticks as they sold from crates and barrels on the ground.

At plaza level off to her left, on the same wall of unshaped stone with the sunny opening, there was a wide archway with shallow steps that sank out of sight. There were no balconies between the natural opening above and the carved open arches below and she understood that must be an outer edge of the mountain they were within. Off to her right, another cluster of shops and people set up in the shadier area farther from the sun. All those appeared to have to do with food.

Those two clusters seemed to dominate the floor space, but people were coming and going, from the outer doors and the inner ones, and from the balconies. She saw one group of young men jump off a balcony with no stairs to land two shaks below as casual as if they'd walked. There were children and women too. Looking carefully she saw that most were accompanied by men, walking hand in hand, or some arm to waist, and some more formally. Watching the women she saw no fear on any of them. They wore no leash chains, had no glaze of mage blankness in their eyes, and did not follow behind their men in fear and submission like skinlickers. A few times as other men came up to some families or couples, the woman did fall back a step, but it seemed out of deference to the meeting, and she was greeted as well.

She studied the way some men watched others, apparently acting as guards, and where people came from and went. She studied the variety of clothes, all thick and well made, and colorful for the women. She wanted to study the scene all day.

“We can stay all day if you like, but we shouldn't go down and mingle yet. Not until you learn the laws.”

KarRa started, wondering if the woman had read her mind, but she wasn't even looking at her.

“I don't know about you, but I never get tired of the view.” Cro whinnied.

She tossed her bright curls and waved to a group of young boys who were jumping

in athletic twists and turns, shouting from out in the middle of the plaza. They stopped when she acknowledged them and their eyes immediately turned to KarRa, intent. They couldn't see her clearly in the shadows she told herself, especially standing in the harsh light as they were, but that they had no trouble knowing where she was made her edge back, until one of the watching men standing still around the perimeter of the floor came up to the group and motioned them away.

"My boys are trying to get a glimpse of you. The odds of finding a highly compatible mate are so much higher when you are here than when they are out in the wide world looking for you."

"Your boys?" KarRa asked.

"I have a son. Andeus is six. As mate to the Clan Alpha, I am Clan Domina. All the men in the Clan are beneath me in status. I am mother, sister, and master to all the Cats. I call all of them my boys. It's exhausting." She whirled to face KarRa, leaning on the side of her hip and crossing her arms.

"First lesson. Everything here is based on Clans, which are based on the Beastspirits that manifest for each Trux as they mature. Mostly, this is hereditary.

"It is wise of you to learn of all the Clans. The odds say that you will be adopted into one of the GreatClans, Bears, Wolves, or Mountaincats. They tend to go their own way and look to their own. But the world of the smaller Clans is more intertwined. You should be prepared. And also understand the life Rylan is coming to know." That Cro would know how important it was to KarRa to know about Rylan's new life, even if she could never see him again, made her swallow with gratitude.

"There are eight clanhomes for the eleven Clans. River Mountain is the largest, and the Council's seat. The Bears, Mountaincats, and Hawks claim it as their permanent clanhome, although all Clans have lairs here. You will be expected to live at the clanhome of your mate. Some women accompany their mates on duties if the duty is distant from their old City life.

"You will find that if there is discord among a Clan, it is usually the women at the source and not the men. We have come from all Cities, even some like you from the wild, and all positions. Your friend Freezha is highly educated, well on her way to being a skymage if she can learn some control. She was in a position of wealth, but not much freedom. You—KarRa, you've come from a place of little wealth but near total self-reliance. You have a great deal of adjusting to do. When you are taken into a Clan after you've chosen a mate, a great many people will feel they have a right to know everything about you, but will also want to help you."

KarRa considered Cro. "I know a little of politics. My home was thick with it. My Clan was also small, and not one of the most powerful. Our Clan leader kept it that way, teaching the wisdom of walking a middle path. It's interesting that the Clan I chose for Rylan should fit this pattern. I'm more concerned about finding a skill to prove myself than gaining status.

"But the Clans you talk of are really all of one family that have a common purpose. The Clans I grew up with would as soon rape the other as look at them. Most couldn't even hold themselves together for a few years. That these Clans all live in this one place... Does this Council rule the Clans well?"

Looking down on the plaza KarRa gestured to the men who were still and watchful among the peaceful, calm people. "Freezha says there is no theft. No personal attacks.

Our rooms have no locks. Yet in the Dark, Beasts are known as the strongest of warriors, those in charge of the killers. Are the Clans really that peaceful?"

An expression flitted across Cro's face at KarRa's response. Something pleased and surprised. "Yes and no. The Clans have not truly fought each other in generations, having finally learned, the hard way, the truth of your statement, they are all the same family. But among such a volatile people, fights are a part of their nature. Control of the Beastspirits slip. Rivalries develop. There has been some violence, but it is rare, and dealt with harshly. Especially if it involves women. Whenever a mating or a pregnancy happens in a Clan, the leaders have to be careful. It can make the unmated Truxet ... intense. Self-control is even more important around us.

"Lesson number two: The men's primary goal in life is to have a family. I've only met a few of the men who say they don't want families—even the lone alphas. It's just the opposite, it seems, of human men. Women are honored, and mates possessively guarded, but they literally crave children. They are wonderful, doting fathers. That's why it's so sad that some of the births they don't know about never get reported to them and men like your Rylan grow up alone. Sometimes they come to us mind broken, sometimes we find them wild..." She sighed, shaking her curls.

"You know, being a father is in their blood, I think. That's why they take Beast children from women who cannot or will not leave the human world to raise them here after age six. I think they would go insane knowing they had a son and weren't part his life. The women can come if they want, and find loving mates if they do, but many are too scared." Cro tossed her head scornfully. "I can't imagine a woman choosing safety over staying with her child. You'd be horrified to discover how many do.

"You should know that you will be expected to have as many children as possible, although most Beasts aren't very fertile. Their fertility increases when they're mated and the average family has three children. Some women have a hard time accepting that they will give birth to something not human. And they aren't. You should understand that right now. These men," she waved her hand, "as beautiful of form, intelligent and caring as they are, they have a Beast within that you always have to remember."

KarRa looked over at her. Cro frowned and picked with her fingernails at the carved stone railing. "Some women can't handle it. The idea of a Beast child. Some women think they can, then are frozen when the child ages and starts to manifest a Beastspirit." KarRa didn't think having a family of Beastspirits would bother her. She would have to see how truly safe this Beast world was before she knew how she felt about being a mother.

Cro looked away, nonchalant, arms still crossed. "What did you think of Grif?" Even though she had not thought of him since seeing him carry Rylan's body out, she suddenly had a clear memory of him standing watchfully in front of her as she opened her eyes from the proving. *Red-gold, strong, powerful*. She swallowed again and also looked out over the plaza, no longer seeing it. Why on earth would Cro ask that question? "I thought he looked like a hard man, a warrior. And he is smart, very smart, about people."

Cro hummed. "He is that. He is the Owl Alpha. He wants to see you this afternoon. I'll take you after midmeal."

Suddenly uncomfortable, KarRa cast for a neutral, new subject. "I'd like to stay here and watch this place. I can ask you questions?"

"Yes, of course. Can I ask you?"

KarRa looked at her out of the corner of her eye and smiled wryly. Cro was bouncing

again, curls flopping, fingers riffling along the railing. “Probably,” she replied.

The morning passed quickly, as they mostly discussed a Clan's shared treasure (KarRa's mind boggled) and how jobs could be changed, fulfilled in rotations called duties.

Then KarRa asked, “How much do I have to work to earn a meal?”

At Cro's quiet, their eyes met, brown to green. “You will never go hungry here. Not an hour, not a minute.” Her voice held vehemence and promise.

KarRa shivered at the realization that food was not something you had to work for. Swallowing, she looked away.

“The Truxet grow much of their own food. Of course, hunting is not an issue, although here at River Mountain it's harder than elsewhere due to the size of our population. To eat in one of the specialty tents is a private privilege, but there are three food windows around the plaza at groundfloor that always have food. No payment needed.”

“As much as I want?” At KarRa's dazed look, Cro had reached out and touched her arm. KarRa shifted back.

“I'll show you where the kitchens are tonight. We'll just scoot out and return right away. Clothes as well. You will always be given three basic sets of living clothes. As a woman waiting for a mate, you have access to one of the Clan's shared treasure rooms at River Mountain. You can borrow whatever you see fit, and will be given a trunk to fill as you like when you're mated.”

“Oh, this is fine for me,” KarRa had smoothed the tunic self-consciously.

Cro smiled and said, “So it is.”

KarRa was pleased when Cro agreed to a picnic lunch on the balcony. She didn't seem to know about the healer's soup restrictions, and KarRa enjoyed tasting the unusual fruit and fresh, soft bread.

Freezha joined them, taking a break from learning self-defense. She was dressed in pink cloth pants of a heavy material and a lightweight purple top that had swirling silver stitches. Her breasts were bound but still swelled the shirt. KarRa had never seen such rich clothing in her life as she had here in this place.

“You are just learning to fight?” KarRa asked carefully, confused.

“Well of course! Daddy had guards protect me all my life. Here, well here it is so safe I hardly need this stupid training.”

Cro spoke up. “But away from the main caves there are lone alphas, exiled from their Clan and half mad from loneliness, whose control cannot be vouched for. And enemies have been known to sneak in also. Proteus always tells me,” here Cro dropped her voice into a low purring that sounded remarkably different, “Just because women don't need protection doesn't mean they shouldn't feel capable of it themselves.” KarRa thought it a wise statement, even if she couldn't imagine a world where anyone wouldn't need self-defense at some point. Life was simply that violent. If she went a week without getting attacked in the Dark, it was a good, lucky week.

Freezha moaned and dramatically buried her white blond tresses under arms, her face curling down between her knees. “I will never be able to flip Vyur! This is my second month on this training. All the other girls have left!”

“A flip?” KarRa asked. “As in over the shoulder? He makes you *fight* him?” KarRa's skin chilled in horror at the thought of this delicate beauty having to actually deflect a

Beast's attack.

"Well sure, it's the best way to learn," Cro answered. "He doesn't hurt her. He just teaches her moves."

KarRa didn't understand. Doing *was* the best way to learn. Scuffle had believed it and taught them that way. But how did you teach someone to really fight and not hurt them? "Will I have to fight him?"

"Definitely. It's required in level three. Don't worry about him. You're a wildling. I bet you will pass out of his training in a day," Freezha said glumly, propping chin on her knee.

Cro looked at KarRa who turned away, feeling angry. "I will not fight a man I have no quarrel with. There is no sense in it."

Cro blinked at KarRa. "You just have to show him what you know."

"What is the punishment for a woman wounding a Beast?" Cro and Freezha looked at each other in astonishment, then burst into gales of laughter, Freezha actually holding her belly as she rolled on the floor.

"Do you think YOU can actually hurt *Vyur*? Oh oh ho, hoo that's funny! *Vyur* is the Truxet champion. He has won the combat challenge for Lizzed the last three years at the Autumnal gathering. And before that he has been in the top contenders nearly his whole adult life. KarRa, you will not hurt him."

She stiffened and turned even more away, so that her whole body was facing out toward the plaza.

"Oh KarRa," Cro said, reaching out to gently touch her arm.

KarRa jerked away in alarm.

Cro let her hand fall and sighed sadly. "We didn't mean to say that you are not a valiant fighter. Of humans. But you will see when the time comes, that *Vyur* is another level of being entirely when it comes to fighting. And you would never be punished for wounding *Vyur* in training. It's a physical course."

"Yeah," Freezha nodded, "When I first came a few months ago the women were all abuzz because someone actually managed to scratch his arm."

KarRa was still confused. The strange meal she had eaten surged in her stomach. Maybe she should have stuck to soup. "You mean you never managed to land even a hit on him?" she asked Freezha without looking at her.

"Of course not! I'm a merchant's daughter! I had hardly been out of my father's compound before this journey."

KarRa looked more closely at the women walking in the plaza below. There were fewer now with the meal hour. Could it be possible that none of these women who came to the Beast caves were able to truly fight? She couldn't conceive of it.

There were a few women in the Dark who did not know how to fight. But the women who did not fight lived like slaves to their men, cosseted pets, or treasure to be hoarded. Any woman who was part of a Clan in her own right, instead of brought in as a bedpet, could fight. The few men who had thought her a shadow of Rylan when they were KarRylan had learned differently to their sorrow.

Although the supremacy of the Beasts was acknowledged throughout the Dark, she thought that any of her clansisters could at least manage to land a blow or a bite on a Beast before being brought down. If this man, *Vyur*, was used to batting down women with one hand, should KarRa pretend to be like them? Should she actually try to fight

him? She had never fought on command before, without heat or fear in her blood. Maybe she would feel afraid when she saw him. She hated fighting. It was messy and tasted bad. But still, if the Beasts rarely took women from the Dark, maybe they didn't know they could fight as well as men when they had to. And if it was such a rare thing that most women never needed it, this was a life she could grow soft in.

"I can show you some warm-ups, Freezha. Stances, repetitions."

"Wildling moves! Thank you KarRa!"

KarRa spent some time showing Freezha how to place her feet, hold her stance, and pivot her whole torso. Freezha cared more about moving gracefully than stiffening her spine and soon had KarRa laughing by inventing a flip dance.

Eventually Cro picked up the bowls and cups in a stack with a sigh. "Come on in and help with clean up. Everyone always helps, and it's usually after lunch."

The women left the balcony and trailed through the lounge into a room that appeared to be entirely for cleaning. There was a steady stream of water splashing from a carved spout in the wall, and it poured into a shallow bodylength bowl before trailing into various grooves to different locations. There was a knee-high trough where most women were sitting washing dishes. There was a waist high trough where some were washing clothes. There were three sunken vats of water where two women were standing nude, washing. The water came all the way up to their chests. What would it feel like to stand in water so deep?

As KarRa looked on, Freezha whisked her top over her head and hung it on a peg near these vats and proceeded to unwind her chest binding, despite the crowded room. There were small washing vats all along one wall where one of the small boys was apparently pretending to drown a carved bear with much splashing and growling. She'd never seen so much water in one room, and all just flowing past, unchecked. Women came and went. She looked away as Freezha eased into the deep water, her body glowing white and absolutely unmarked.

Looking into another doorway, she saw that there was a row of stone seats. Each seat had a hole cut out and flowing water ran along the bottom. When Cro found her looking in the hole, an odd expression flitted across her face. "It's a waste chair," she said softly.

Suddenly KarRa knew. The dividers between the doors, the curtain to pull across front, the seat with a hole in the middle..."Oh!" she said, "How clever. Where does all this water come from?"

Cro cocked her head. "Our watermages maintain the flow from the river and underground lake."

KarRa sensed Cro pitied her and changed the subject. "I'll help wash."

They went and knelt at the long tub of flowing water. KarRa marveled at how much they wasted as they cleaned. She learned from the chatter around her that the water was not wasted, but cleaned in large fields where it seeped down into the earth to come out at the river downstream, purified. Clans had cleaning rotations, so that everyone took a share of the general cleaning of River Mountain. Along with the shared wealth, it was incredible to KarRa. In the Dark, mostly women cleaned. If men did it, it was less often, and half the quality.

After the dishes had been put away and the clothes hung to dry, Cro led KarRa along a new corridor. The room reminded KarRa of the first room she had met Merk in, what felt like a lifetime ago. It was small and bare, with a pillar of stone in the middle and

nothing else but two chairs pulled up near it.

Cro stopped dead just inside, clearly unsure. Grif was standing behind a chair, his big hands clenching around the chair back, his eyes pinned to the door, his whole body tense. KarRa immediately tensed as well, moving up onto the balls of her feet, raising her hands up to the ready.

Grif's gaze flicked from Cro to KarRa and back, his whole body awkwardly softening as if he forced himself to tone down.

He nodded his head deeply at Cro, "Mountaincat Domina, I did not know you had been assigned to KarRa."

"I have been honored, Owl. You have met before, but the time was difficult." She held up her hand to the man, "This is Owl, called Grif." Moving her hand toward KarRa, she said, "This is KarRa, of Fourth City." She nodded her head deeply to Grif, a sort of half bow with chin against chest. "I'll be in the lounge when you're done, KarRa." Cro waited, watching her.

KarRa nodded her head deeply the way she had and said "Thank you, Cro."

Cro left, smoothing the cloth over the door opening.

Grif smoothly stepped around the chair to stand in front of it and motioned to KarRa. "Please sit."

KarRa moved forward cautiously, shoulders rounded, hands at her sides. She noticed her chair was positioned with the back to the door. She moved the back of it so that it sat at a side angle to his, facing the pillar. Now the door was to her hard left. Grif eyed her as she sat, then moved his chair so that they sat face to face, with the pillar at his side.

She sat in the silence and waited, keeping her eyes low, on Grif's chest. Many moments passed and she sensed him studying her.

"I have spoken with Merk, the man who took your vow, your healer Xu, and Tril, the black Wolf who found you. I've bonded with Rylan. I feel like I've gained a good sense of you. In the course of the bonding, and later the testing in the Clan, I've come to know Rylan very well. Yet your relationship with him concerns me." He stopped and waited. KarRa fought to keep her breathing steady under his regard. She still sat relaxed, her eyes on his chest, a neutral position. After a moment he continued.

"In the depth of our bonding, I found Rylan's earliest memories, which he did not consciously remember. It doesn't fully explain how you came together, but it gives a few clues. Would you care to hear what I found?"

KarRa could only nod.

"Bedplay in the human world does not mean a woman is entirely supportive of the Trux, although many seek us out for our status. But no Trux would abandon a woman if she was pregnant, and most in the Cities now know that our children are extremely precious to us. In Rylan's unconscious memories, he talks to you via a magepath when he is living among people who care for him. He was part of a family, and it was a good one. His mother must not have told his Trux father about him. But there are no clear memories except for you in his head, and a burning desire to find you. Not just a female presence, but *you*.

"He finds you alone in the forest, and you are both very young. I question how two children of perhaps six ended up in the forest when humans fear it so. It was winter. He wanted to return and could not find the way. You especially cried for your mother, constantly. He became distraught at your fear, and not being able to find the way home,

closed down. You became the leader for the first time, and sometime after this, a human who Rylan only remembers as some sort of dark monster captured you.

“He beat you both, but fed you and gave you warmer clothes. He took you to a crowded, stinking place that Rylan found completely overwhelming. I believe this must be the lawless fringe settlement you grew up in. You somehow escaped this man together, but his memories are nothing but a blur of hunger, beatings, fear, and you, until you were taken in by the mage named Scuffle.”

“Oh.” KarRa was stunned. *Rylan had a family. He gave up everything for me...* KarRa had only wondered the briefest moments of her youth about her past. Rylan had dwelt and brooded on it endlessly. KarRa had always been more deal-with-what-you've-got, while Rylan was forever wondering about the unknowable. Her mind whirled. Six seemed awfully young to be living in the woods, but she didn't really know anyone who was six. Lilu, one of her clansisters, had a child on purpose a few years ago. It must be about five now. From her memory of it, she couldn't imagine such a tiny soft thing surviving in the True Wild alone. Rylan had left his people for her. He probably had saved her life if she was alone in the forest. He must be devastated to learn that they were real, and probably lost to him forever.

“This is where his conscious mind picks up. He remembers hating being trapped inside the mage's shak and fighting with you, viciously, about wanting to leave. He remembers hating the way you laughed with the other children. He sees the City exile Scuffle as a sort of all powerful warrior. He remembers fighting and making friends with an older boy named Far, who he still holds in respect. Are these memories meeting up with what you know now?”

KarRa had to work her throat to start the saliva enough to move her tongue. She had to force her clenched jaw to open. Grif's voice had been matter of fact, calm. She nodded.

“Do you have anything to add about how you managed to find each other so young?”

She raised burning eyes to the red-gold gaze of the man across from her and held it despite the wash of power off him. “Scuffle had a sort of adoption ceremony. He would go into a trance. He would mark our skin with needles and ink. He would tell us what he saw. Sometimes it was the future. He told me when I was sixteen that Rylan was a Beast. I mean Trux. Everyone knew that most Truxet who actually survived to show signs died in agony or suicide. Except a few legends of those taken in by you—like Trey.”

“Trey is a legend?” Grif's eyes crinkled with humor. “I'll have to tell him,” he murmured.

“Scuffle told me I'd get Rylan in here. When I finally told Rylan this, after ... after ... well, later, he refused to consider it. It was widely believed, as you probably know, that horrible things happen to the women who come here. Even I believed it. I got a clansister powerful in foresight to agree to lie to Rylan when he was ill, so we could go. But she saw true, and saw me here, slightly hurt but changed in a good way. It is only right, I see now. I took him, and I helped give him back.

“One of the things Scuffle told Rylan during his skinmarking was that we were soulmates. I don't know about that. I only know that he makes me feel better whenever he is near, and that our magepath is true. Have you seen Rylan's skinmark?”

“Yes.” Grif nodded, still holding her eyes with his power. “It's beautiful. The wind and the moon.”

“Yes, it is. We were allowed to design our own. Most of the Clan spent years

changing their minds. I knew that I wanted mine to be a symbol of Rylan.” She drew up the tunic sleeve and turned her wrist over, holding her arm angled out. Grif’s eyes seemed to glow redder as he studied the design.

“An Owl flight feather,” he whispered with amazement.

“So Scuffle told me when I described the shape I wanted it to take. It’s blue because that’s the color I associate with Rylan in my magescape.” There was a pause as KarRa let her eyes drop down to his chest, not wanting to seem aggressive, and feeling she had held them long enough for pride’s sake. He was unnerving her.

“You were beautiful on the spirit plane, glowing gold. I put a door in place for each of you for Rylan’s first Change. I cannot believe the two of you have managed with such an open bond your entire life. He was in agony over the separation of your spirits. I think it almost killed you both. It affects him still.”

KarRa’s eyes snapped up. “What?!”

“He cannot sleep. On his third night with us, he finally asked for a bed partner and has managed a few hours here and there. Until you woke yesterday, he had to struggle so hard to control the new influx of magic open to him. Now he is controlling it much better. Please understand. I *had* to give you both a way to close your bond during the Change.”

“You think putting the doors up almost killed us? It was just a bloody nose.” But she remembered the echoing *wrongness* of the sensation.

Grif’s voice softened. “At the bonding, I was furious with you. You shouldn’t have been there. It was a shocking breach of privacy. I couldn’t believe it when Merk didn’t order you out, but I was impressed that you recognized the Owl was for him, and I told myself I was going to focus on Rylan.

“He was on the verge of failing his first Change when you added your voice to the chant. And he was on the verge of being lost in the Owl when you called out again. I’ve meditated on it and I think without you he would have failed.

“At first this made me sick. I was sure that I had failed as an Alpha. I was sure he had not truly bonded with the Owl, through me. But I was hard on him at the Clan ceremony and it was clear to me that we have bonded. But closing your bond like that should not have had such an effect on him. Unless you were soulmates.”

He stopped, his voice almost a whisper. “You probably don’t know what it meant when his hand reached for you out of the Owl.” Now his voice was a whip. “I haven’t told this to Rylan.” He stopped and she nodded her understanding of a secret.

“He will be an alpha. His partial change on his first return makes it a certainty. He will know as well in a few days, when he starts to work with a spiritmage.” Grif stopped and when KarRa glanced up he was looking away into far space.

She waited until she thought she would burst. “What does that mean?”

“It means he will have a narrower path to choose from than most warriors. Less than a quarter of warriors are alpha, although our Clan and the Bears show higher numbers. Alphas are stronger, more powerful in magecraft, but the Beast is as well. Alphas need to mind their balance much closer than other warriors. There can only be two alphas in clanhome, for Owls it is our Nest, for any length of time. These are the Clan Alpha and his second, called the Alpha’s Shield. All other alphas leave if they do not choose the four-path challenge for those positions. They do it for the good of the Clan, as their Beastspirit cannot help but want to constantly test and challenge the other alphas near.

“They can be tested by the Council and trained for three years. They will then work

as an element mage in a duty set by the Council. Council mages are our highest level of warrior. They sublimate their Clan ties for ties to their element brothers, and bare their chests to show that they are Council bound first, for the good of Vladaya. Within the element bond, the Beastsprits are quieter, less aggressive than within their own Clan. Warriors who are not alpha can train to this position as well, but often fail their final tests.”

“Like Merk? He is a Council spiritmage, an alpha?”

Grif nodded once. “Some alphas choose not to follow the Council's direction, and a few don't have the level of mage power needed for the training in the first place. They become lone alphas. They go their own way, without help from Council or Clan, still managing a duty. Sometimes they return at the Autumnal gathering, sometimes they stay gone from Vladaya forever.

“I am wondering if Rylan has gone his own way for so long ... he may not choose to take on the structure of a Council mage warrior. Or he may try to meet me in Challenge.” He looked back at her with a piercing stare. “What do you think he will do?”

“I think he will stay with the Council,” she said promptly. He stared at her and she held his gaze. “He isn't interested in being a leader, or he could have easily formed his own Clan in the Dark. He wants a family. He will want to hold them safely. He will stay in the best position to keep them safe whatever it means to him personally. He would not take them to go live in the wild alone. Rylan learns from his mistakes. He has mourned his lost past his whole life. He has always been the more cautious of us. He thinks more, he plans more, he waits longer. Not that he isn't capable of action and decision,” she added hastily. “He just likes to feel protected. It's definitely something important to him.”

Grif moved his body over his spread legs, elbows on knees, and idly folded his hands together. Still, he kept his head up and his eyes on KarRa's face as he said, “Let me get back to the mystery of your bond with Rylan. I saw your spiritpath to each other. I saw the effect doors between you had upon both your health. You seemed to have connected from an incredibly early age, spurring him to protective action he should not have been able to take until well into his teens. I saw you through passion in his memories. He craves you. He wants you. Yet he is always turning away and seeking bedplay elsewhere. Why?”

KarRa's breath caught in her throat. Instantly she looked at the floor and curved her shoulders in, tucking her hands tight in her lap. Nothing could make her feel so small and broken as remembering that Rylan was no longer hers. She swallowed stiffly and whispered, “He said it felt wrong.”

Grif shot to his feet, toppling the chair over backward, and KarRa curled herself lower in the chair. She knew when she was outmuscled. Grif paced around the room, agitated. She could feel the waves of power roll off him, yet it didn't taste exactly like anger. Finally he stopped, between her and the door she noted, and his power rolled over her in concentrated waves. It prickled her skin and made her stomach heave. Her nose stung like fresh greens had been broken just beneath it. Somehow, she was being challenged.

“Rylan hasn't asked about becoming your mate at all. It is an unnatural reaction, as mates are entirely possessive. Physically, they *need* to be in close contact often. I can't believe the willpower it took for him to leave you, to keep from fucking you. It's a testament to his dedication to protecting you. If it wasn't for your magepath, I don't think

he would have stayed sane. That extra bond kept him together. But he's still thinking with human ideas. He seems content that you will be well treated, and given a choice. He visited you briefly to reassure himself you were recovering a few days ago. He did not speak of you again until yesterday, to tell me you had awoken and he wanted to see you again."

KarRa let a choked breath. "When will I be able to see him?"

Grif shrugged. "His training is intensive, and unmated men are usually not allowed in the women's caves. He wanted to see you last night. I decided to test his bond with you another way. I said it was time to pull away from you, so you could go to a mate without looking to the past. He turned absolutely white, then said, "So be it.""

KarRa could not have controlled her reaction if she had had ten warclubs cued in her face. She doubled over in the chair with a gasp and began to shake. *You knew you were probably going to lose him*, she told herself.

Grif strode toward her. She could feel his power pushing out before him like a rushing wind. He flung himself into a crouch before her, grabbing her arms and lifting her so that he could see her face. He gave her a shake. "Stop! Think! What is between you that he does not fight for you?"

KarRa was paralyzed with hurt. An image flashed into her mind, Rylan looming above her, leaning in the doorframe of a narrow hallway, face twisted in rage and cold determination. *AloneAloneAlone*. Her body seemed to be beating the words and her hand flew to the scar on her neck as if it was freshly made.

Grif shook her again, his huge hands making a doll out of her and KarRa tried to scramble away, her feet pushing the chair back so that his arms extended. "Holding himself divided from your future is the only way he has survived. Your culture had no meaningful marriage and he had no concept of mating. He feels guilt and jealousy!"

KarRa shook her head.

"Yes! He has such concerns about what it took for you to come here, and how severely the spiritpath's doorway damaged you at his first Change. Yet he thinks this new doorway will be a way for you to be free. He has always worried that your tie to him is unhealthy and unnatural. He thinks you are going to be given to someone else, and that a new man will be better for you, but it makes him insane."

KarRa gave a choked wail and wrestled from his grasp, crashing sideways to the floor, scrambling up and away to the wall. "No! That's not true." The words were guttural with emotion as she spewed all her darkest secrets to this powerful stranger like a child. "He doesn't want me at all. He never has. He wants other women, with long hair and soft breasts. He knows I'm wrecked inside. I have hardly any power at all. This is his chance to be free. He feels trapped and obligated out of loyalty.

"When we were nineteen, he left me. He took his first lover and I gave him the shak. He was glad! I knew he was glad! He thinks I'm a coward for not wanting children. He has finally gotten full use of his power with this door between us and he fears having to help me again. You said how much power he has now! It was because of me! Because I sucked it up! And now he's discovered that it was because of me he lost his family, his bloodclan. He's always been kind to me, because he feels sorry for me that I love him *so much*." Her voice choked on the words. She hardly knew what she was saying, but she knew her hurt was pouring out in unmeasured words, dangerous but unstoppable.

"You're so wrong. You know him better than I, so stop being hysterical and piece

together what you know about him.” Grif’s face was hard and cold as he crossed his arms, standing to face her.

She hated how high and wild her voice was. “He’s free of *me* now! So be it! I am no soulmate for a man such as he!” Whirling, she ran from the room, ignoring the warm, thick wetness cascading over her lips.

She ran to the little room she slept in. Flinging herself down she fell into a storm of weeping, unable to care who overheard. Gut wrenching, gasping, heaving sobs that shook her so hard she thought she was going to be sick. Never had she indulged in such an uncontrolled display. Cro came and left. She didn’t care. She did not know how long she lay there crying. Finally, after she had lain for an eternity as an empty shell, Xu came in and turned up the magelight. He walked in calmly, and she ignored him. He wiped her face, gently prodded her nose, and packed one side with soft leaves. He touched her arm in a healer sort of way at wrist and crook of elbow and all the while she just lay, staring at the ceiling, on the pallet.

He left and returned with a bowl of soup. It roiled her stomach and she turned away. “You will eat this if I have to tie you down and pour it down your throat,” he stated matter-of-factly. After a moment she rolled over and stiltedly moved the spoon back and forth until she had eaten half of it, then put it down, and lay back in bed again.

Tears leaked from her eyes and she angrily dashed them away. She *never* cried in front of people. But the tears kept coming. The healer sat by her side so still for so long she forgot he was there and started when she realized it. Still he sat until she said crossly, “Won’t you leave?” Her voice was hoarse.

He leaned over and removed the leaves, dabbed at her nose, and took off his shoes. Then she stiffened in shock as he climbed over top of her and lay down beside her so that she was along the outside of the bed. When she made a move to slide away he laid a heavy leg on top of hers and his arm shot out to her far shoulder. “Stay. Sleep. I will be with you.”

“I do not need bedplay,” she hissed sharply.

He chuckled. “And you will not get it or my mate would gut me. You need to be with someone. They have not yet assigned a spiritmage to you. My presence will have to be enough comfort tonight. We often share sleep among our people. Close your eyes and be at ease.” She lay like a board, but his body was warm, his breathing even and deep, his spirit soothing. Soon, incredibly, she was asleep.

She awoke later, feeling stiff and tired, yet groggy as she swam up from a deep sleep. She was amazed that the healer was gone. She should have awoken when he left. Freezha was at the table, reading a scroll, still in a sleeping gown, sheer enough her breasts were clear beneath, round hanging globes with delicate pink nipples.

KarRa sat up slowly. “What time is it?”

Freezha walked over and sat next to her, not touching, but close. KarRa could feel her concern and accepted it. She felt like a clansister, despite their short acquaintance, despite her excitable and open manner that spoke of a chasm of status. “It’s the wee hours, not yet dawn. The healer left just a while ago. Would you like some hot tea?”

KarRa nodded.

“You know, that Grif, he’s got a reputation for being a hard man. Many people don’t like him, or are afraid of him. I’ve only seen him from a distance. He’s never come to a Darkmoon dance even though he’s unmated, but he gives me the shivers.”

KarRa looked down at her leathers. Her skin was damp beneath them. Sleeping in leather trews was never a good idea. She needed to wash. "He wasn't hard. He just told me a lot of truths. And sometimes truth is hard."

"Harder and sharper than any knife," Freezha murmured. "He's really cute. Did he try to kiss you?" This was more perky, a hopeful look on her face. KarRa scowled at her, but she just laughed her tinkling bell laugh.

"Of course not. I completely fuzzed out and I'm sure he thinks I'm a child. He said I was hysterical."

Freezha simply humphed. She rose, and returned shortly with tea. KarRa sipped it as they sat side by side. Eventually Freezha put her arm around KarRa, and rubbed her shoulder in a gentle sort of way. After stiffening, KarRa relented, leaning into her. It felt odd, but good. Completely different from Rylan's larger hard presence, the only one that had ever consoled her before. KarRa allowed herself to touch that lush silver hair that lay pooled on the bed behind them. So lush. So soft. If it was truly safe here, she could grow hers out. If she didn't have to fight as often.

"Well?" Freezha asked softly.

KarRa cleared her throat. "I think I went a little crazy."

"So? If it wasn't a kiss, what happened?" Freezha prodded again.

KarRa looked away. She wasn't used to talking to people about anything so personal. "Rylan has a new life now. I'm going to have a different life too, without him. It hit me pretty hard." *Like a club to the ribs*, she thought.

Suddenly the heat that had been sadness burning inside her shimmered down to her fists as anger. She clenched them tight and let it out. "I mean, I knew going in that I'd be away from him. By ash and flame, I thought I'd be dead or enslaved while he'd be free. And later, I knew he'd been adopted, and I was to be fucked into dropping babies"—Freezha nodded calmly at this crudity..."but still, it just never really sank in. He's an Owl, and a warrior, adopted into a Clan, with a family somewhere in his past. He's more powerful than ever before." She bit her lip, keeping his alpha status to herself.

"Soon he'll find the family he's always wanted." She looked down at her fingers twisting in her lap. "He's just going to let me go." She choked on the words and wished Rylan's neck was between her hands. She sent her rage winging along their mental path on purpose, only to have it slam into his stone door.

Freezha looked adorably confused when she asked, "I thought you were his soulmate?"

"Maybe. But so what. A soulmate is like Clan. You don't get to choose them. You just have to deal with them. He's never fucked me, so I guess it's kind of unfinished. He said he tried once and it didn't feel right."

She spat the words bitterly. Freezha stirred but KarRa spoke on. "He doesn't want me that way. And even before he separated from my bed he worked to keep us apart on jobs. He wanted to work alone. He said watching me work drove him crazy. We had such different styles. He told me it was to make us cover more ground that we should work alone, but I knew it was because he wanted to get away from me. The soulmate thing confused Grif too. People tend to think it means we should be together. And it's true I would be happy to be with him. But Grif was wrong. Rylan isn't jealous."

Freezha reached out and covered KarRa's twining fingers firmly. "KarRa," she choked out a laugh, "I find it hard to believe that someone who is your soulmate doesn't

like you or want to be with you.”

KarRa huffed a breath. “He likes me fine, I guess.” She was confused about this, remembering her sense of connection with him when she left him by the river, a lifetime ago.

“We depended on each other for a long time. We’ve had good times. But mostly he checks in on me out of habit I think. He stops by out of loyalty. He’s always telling me to go my own way. Now,” she shrugged, “he knows I’m safe. I’m locked in here. He’s free of me, and he wants it to stay that way.”

Freezha took her hand away and clenched her fists in her lap. “Grif told you that?!”

“No, he had it all wrong. But in talking, I understood Rylan. I know.” She couldn’t force out the words, the nightmare words—*I’m really alone now*.

They sat silently. “I need to wash,” KarRa said softly.

There was a presence in the doorway. KarRa looked up.

Freezha sat up straight. “Greetings, warrior.”

Rylan. She blinked. *Rylan*. She swallowed and tried to straighten up from her inelegant slump. She opened her mouth. Nothing came out so she closed it. His golden brown eyes were hard as he took her in from tousled crown to dusty toe. He came toward her in his smooth strong stride and now she blinked to clear her eyes of liquid.

Her heart thundered in her throat. She hadn’t seen him strong in so long. He knelt at her side, his eyes pouring over her face, his nose flaring. When his gaze got down to her hands clenched in her lap, he leaned over and took them gently in his own. His hands were warm. Big and rough. So familiar. She bit her lip viciously to still its tremble at the tight happiness, afraid to move from its uncertain cage within her. His arms rose and gathered her gently forward to lean against his chest and she allowed herself to relax into him. She inhaled his earthy smell deep and breathed easier. She sat back.

“Rylan.” This time she said it out loud.

“Oh!” Freezha’s laugh wrapped around them as she offered her upturned wrist. Rylan hesitated, and then bent to it, taking her scent as was polite. “Hello Rylan. How nice to finally meet you. I’ve sort of adopted KarRa here in the women’s caves.”

Amused, KarRa said, “Rylan, this is Freezha.”

He nodded. “I am glad to see she has found a new madefamily sister.”

KarRa beamed at his understanding. “She is good to know.”

Clearing her throat, she said, “Freezha, perhaps now would be a good time for you to bring me a pretty robe as you were telling me.” And maybe she’d put one on herself.

“Of course! The treasure is shared with us as we wish. You simply have *got* to see this room soon.”

“Thank you Freezha.” She smiled at her friend and glanced at Rylan.

Freezha reached to touch KarRa’s knee. “I’ll leave so you can get some...” she looked slyly at Rylan, “—rest.” Freezha winked at KarRa as she drew the curtain behind her.

He lifted himself up and sat next to her on the bed. Leaning back against the wall, he pulled her into the curve of his shoulder. She relaxed again.

“I can’t believe you’re in my arms. Days you slept. I feared for you.”

“I can’t believe you’re in *my* arms. I was just telling Freezha how I’m not part of your life.”

He gave no response, his hand continuing its gentle path up and down her arm. So

much time passed that she found her breathing synching to his. Her eyes were drooping when he finally spoke.

"I missed you."

Instantly tension seeped into her. "I spoke with Grif yesterday," she said.

His hand stilled. "I heard."

She cleared her throat. "I don't know why you're here."

Now his body began to tighten. With a sudden lunge and twist she was on her back on the bed, he to the side but half on top of her.

Her heart pounded as she looked at his face. He seemed so much stronger. More focused, harder. He'd never seemed a boy to her, but now he seemed to have found himself. *He has become what he was meant to, while I am more lost than ever before.*

"KarRa, of course I am here now. I felt your need last night, just as I always have. I felt it right through these stupid new doors. You will ever be the most important person in my world. There has never been a moment that you *weren't* part of my life. You're my heartbeat."

She blinked up at him. He was here. The touch of his skin was as amazing as his scent.

His face was still stone serious. "Grif and I talked about you again after he came from seeing you. He was upset. He said some things to me that were hard to hear. He said some things that shamed me. I'm not sure he's right about some of it, but for the most part—KarRa, I love you."

The bed fell out from under her. She had told him she loved him often since she came to have an understanding of the concept with Scuffle when she was about twelve. He had never returned the words. He had said other things, beautiful things. But not that.

Bringing one hand up to cup her face he leaned close. "You are the air around my soul." She gave a hiccupping gasp. He was always so good with words. "You are an inspiration, a comfort when no other soothes. I beg your forgiveness for the pain these doors have caused. When I felt you go under after my first Change—I was ready to just let go and follow you. I was so tired of fighting, so tired of thinking I'd live at your expense. But they healed us, and everything was so *good*. Owl, this place, it's all beyond any dream I ever could have imagined. I was just waiting for you to wake up. Everything was going to be different."

Rylan's big hands clutched at her. "Then Grif told me to stay away from you. He closed the doors on all my hope and excitement, just like he closed the doors on us. If I didn't love him so much I'd hate him. I started to think with my old patterns. I knew it would be agony to be apart from you, but I thought this was your chance to grow into yourself. To become strong and find a place like I have, so quickly. I thought I would just be a complication from our old life. I was still thinking as I did in the Dark, that I had to make you stronger, had to separate from you."

Now she gasped with indignation, but he rushed on.

"I was wrong. KarRa, I belong with you. You *are* my soulmate. You came here, giving up a life you knew for me. You crossed that river for me. I hear you demanded to go against the Council and prove my Clan when I was afraid and out of my mind with sickness. You helped guide me through my first Change, lending me your strength. I felt later what that took from you—how weak it left you. You are amazing. My little rabid chuck." Her mouth trembled between crying and laughing at the old nickname. "You

know your skinmark? The feather? Look at how wise you are.”

She nodded. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. This was a dream and she was so afraid she'd blink and return to the nightmare.

He let his forehead drop to touch hers. “When I felt your pain today, felt your despair last night, *again*, all I could think of was how stupid I'd been. Grif and I talked all night, and as soon as I got it all together in my head, I came right over. I was thinking the craziest things on my way over here. It took forever. I didn't know the way and had to keep backtracking. I was selfish—I want to show you how I can fly. I wanted to smell you, to hold you. I don't want to be doomed to a future without sleep. You know I can't sleep without you.”

KarRa's deliriously happy brain interrupted with an evil gloom—Unless you've exhausted yourself with fucking. Your lovers help you sleep just fine.

Rylan kept going. “I thought—‘She's with the Beasts now, how does she keep managing to hurt herself?’” It was an old annoyance of his, that she always managed to injure herself in small incidents yet emerged unscathed from serious ones.

KarRa barked a laugh again. “I've had a healer twice now.”

Rylan buried his face in her neck and growled his frustration and she laughed again with joy to have him in her arms. His body rolled in a wave against hers as he tucked his nose behind her ear and inhaled, moaning happily. He hardened against her hip but she knew it wasn't personal. He often became hard holding or sleeping with her. It usually subsided.

“Your blood spilled is my burden to bear. That you had to face them for the first time alone. That the adoption harmed you. That I listened to Grif and stayed away. No more. I'm not going to be responsible for hurting you ever again if I can help it. I want to hear everything that happened. From the minute you left me at the river in the woods, right through this way overdue meeting. And I have so much to tell you.”

She couldn't seem to stop laughing. She allowed her hand to reach down and lay on his leg; his muscles leapt under her hand. “That will take awhile. Do you have time? I need a bath. And water. Did you see that they bathe together here? And they have really good tea. I've liked all the food so far except...” his voice joined with hers as they both chimed “—that blue grass.”

Chuckling he added, “And they don't eat chucks. Not worth the effort, and not many around in the mountains.”

Nodding somberly KarRa added, “And beneath their dignity.”

They sat up together. “I'll help you bathe,” he said.

She hesitated. “I'm not sure you're allowed. It seems to be women only here.”

“Too bad,” he said, suddenly scowling.

She couldn't help herself. She reached out to touch the soft waves of his hair. In the sun it sometimes looked like spun gold, but appeared as streaks of light and moderate brown in magelight. It was longer than hers at the moment, Rylan having neglected to trim it some time before falling ill. It fell onto his forehead, and loosely brushed his shoulders. He made a face, took a leather wrapped many times around his wrist and retwisted it in his hair, making a short tail at his nape. She had never seen the look on him before and huffed her laughter.

No one was up yet as Rylan led KarRa into the bath. The room was used so often no one ever drew the heavy curtains across the wide arch, but Rylan did.

“Do you have to use the waste chair?”

KarRa did and when she came out he was nude, clothes on pegs. She drank in the sight of his body. She still appreciated the sight after all her viewings. Spare and muscled, he was a head taller than she, his shoulders wide, his hips narrow, his thighs corded, his ass sculpted. She even liked his arched feet. Then there was his cock. Even at rest it hung thick, fascinating, from the tangle of golden hair that was two shades darker than the wide strip across his upper chest and the narrower line down his center. He tossed her tunic to the ground and knelt to help peel the leathers off her.

“I can take my own pants off.”

“Let me take care of you. I need to. You deserve it.”

Her memory supplied a vision of him wracked by chills, pouring sweat, cursing her. She smiled. “All right.”

He helped her sit on the side, jumped in, and lifted her in after him.

“It’s warm!” Standing with her feet braced apart she wiped the water from her eyes. It was delicious, warm and fluffy, swirling all around her like a wet windstorm. It zoomed between her legs in a way that made her think of bedplay and she struggled to focus on his directions.

After she had bent and wet her head he worked the soap into her hair while she kept her knees bent to lower her chin down to the water so he could reach her head easier.

“The Owls have an enormous washing room. Our caves are near the top of the mountain, on level eight. Only the Hawks are above us, although this is their clanhome and their cave system’s much bigger. Aren’t the waste chairs wonderful?”

She nodded. “So simple.”

“Yes. Rinse.” She straightened and bent over to put her face in the water, holding her breath as he worked the soap free.

After she stood up he went behind her and soaped her back gently. “The power of their watermages to keep this all flowing is amazing. Same as the magelights are lit by firemages, and the caves are maintained by earthmages. In my early testing it looks like I’m a firemage, but all warriors are trained in basic skills of all the magics. I’ve already learned so much. They were impressed with what Scuffle had taught me, but say it’s very uneven.”

She took the soap from him and began to clean her lower body herself. He washed his hair, his back flexing.

He got another bar and also bathed. “The largest pool in the Owl caves has stairs. It’s really much more convenient, especially for children, and women who are constantly wounded.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Chuckface,” she muttered darkly, but she smiled with her eyes.

After he had scrubbed his skin with the sandy stone, he vaulted himself out of the bath, water pouring from him as his shoulders flexed. He wrapped a towel around his waist. She held up her hands and he lifted her straight up until her knees cleared the edge and she knelt. He enveloped her in a huge soft towel.

They had bathed together always until they had moved apart after Vili. Water was very expensive and nearly everyone shared his or her bathing bowl with someone. She was surprised at how natural and smooth it went though. It had been years since they had last done this. Even when he was sleeping with her between lovers, they had continued to

bathe apart.

He was combing her hair of its tangles to a sleek cap on her head when Freezha came in. He was dressed, KarRa was still in the towel. She stopped dead, staring in curiosity at the tableau.

“Did you bring me a pretty robe?”

Freezha held out her arm, which had a waterfall over it of some sort of orangey-brown color KarRa had never seen before. The fabric was silk on the outside, but it was lined with a soft fluffy thick wool. The inside was a dark red, also with a sense of brown. The shoulders of the robe were embroidered with a metallic copper leaf pattern. It was truly beautiful.

“Are you sure I can wear it?” asked KarRa when Freezha held it up.

Freezha just rolled her eyes and held it up. KarRa stood and shrugged out of the towel and into the robe. It wrapped around her like a cloud, and the heavy fabric gave her skin an odd shivery feel at its weight and softness. She tied the belt of braided copper and smoothed her hand over the vibrant silk.

“Thank you Freezha.” She smiled at her friend and glanced at Rylan. His eyes glittered with emotion, green seeping into his eyes.

“To see you dressed so... It makes me feel...” He blinked and his eyes were once again the light brown they appeared in the low light, where the sun did not pick up the golden glow. He cleared his throat.

KarRa nodded. “I feel in a dream myself half the time.”

Freezha beamed at them, her perfect beauty taking KarRa’s breath away for a moment. “I’m off to practice some of those dance moves you were sharing with me yesterday. I know today is the day I’m going to make Vyur fly like a Hawk!”

Freezha departed as they went to KarRa’s room. Rylan arranged them on the pallet and turned off the magelight with a thought. In the darkness, arms wrapped around each other, they rolled open the doors on their magepath. KarRa felt a physical relief, like a rush of peace at his mental touch.

“The days without you in the woods... It was bad. The scents and sounds would send me into this need to run, which of course I couldn’t do.”

“You were scared?”

“Yeah. Something big went by really close one night. But I was asleep so much, who knows what near miss I don’t even remember. Sometimes the need to run wasn’t from fear though. Sometimes... I just felt like I was coming home. Like I was close.”

“You like the Wild.”

“More than like. It’s like I can finally hear myself when I’m there. And watching the river, it was so incredible. Then I’d be staring at that beauty, at the same time wondering if you were dying somewhere alone, captured, raped...”

His voice had grown sharper and she squeezed his hand.

After a moment, he said, “The tall, black and tan Trux rose up out of the ground. He said, “Your offering is accepted. We will take you into our caves.” I knew they could hear my heart, it was pounding so hard with fear for you. “She’s not an offering. She’s a person. Where is she?” I asked. “Safe,” he says. “By whose standards?” “Yours, and ours.” “What will become of her?” “She will choose a mate and breed sons for our people. Breeding is our nature and need and can’t be fought. Be still in your mind about her. We recognize and honor her. More will be shared later, when your Beast and spirit

have been secured.” He was so cold, it seemed to me, so controlled. I felt like screaming, “WHERE’S KARRA?” I have to say when they sifted me into the caves, I was sick. I was furious when they told me you wouldn’t be coming. It just seemed so suspiciously convenient. Then this spiritmage came in and the Clan choosing started. By the time you came to me, I was so weak.

“You know what the first Change was like, and then... They told me you were simply in shock, and bleeding from a bad bloody nose. They said, “Nothing serious.” But I felt you on the inside. You’d gone so small. I was so scared.”

He hugged her tightly, burying his nose in her hair. “Praise the Six. You’re all right. You’re alive. You’re here. You did it, KarRa. You believed. You got us out, you got through, you proved a Clan for me. It was your strength that let me focus. I was one breath from being lost in the Owl, overwhelmed. You did all that, and then I wasn’t in any shape to know how to get the spirit-blighted doors open. I could feel you slipping away and I wanted to go too, even though I’d just found Owl. Only when they healed you did I feel my own strength begin to return.”

“It wasn’t such a life and death thing as all that, Ry. We were just tired.”

“Don’t. Don’t belittle what you did. With me so fucking useless. And you sit here and look at me and say you don’t think you’re part of my life. It’s enough to send me running in fear back into the Wild.”

“Well you’re not going to. You’re home now. You’re whole and you’re where you always should have been. It feels right doesn’t it?”

“I belong with the Owls. KarRa, they’re so strong. But they’re quieter, more introspective, than Scuffle’s rough group. Those Hawks, they’re just a bunch of hot-calling high Guild. The Owl is in me now. He’s in Grif, too, and Grif is his master. My Owl, he’s just under my skin, and that time I changed, it was like I was swallowed up. He liked being out. He wants out all the time.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It’s like a power just waiting to break free. Like he’s always waiting for the signal of the start of a race. Especially right now. Ever since I felt your pain, actually. The Owl’s really pulling at me, to meet you.”

“Then let’s meet.” She was breathless with anticipation.

KarRa reached out gently with her energy and they were both quiet as she met the Owl for the first time, on the mageplane. He was watchful. He seemed an endless well of patience, and at the same time, deadly energy ready to erupt. She tried to summon a visual image, from what she remembered at the bonding, and as soon as she looked into yellow gold eyes, she was swept forward into a mental landscape she’d never seen in Rylan before.

It was a much darker, shadowy forest. The great shape sat still in a wide spreading tree. The forest was alive, rustling with the wind, with energy and small moving creatures. She stood on the ground looking up at him and he considered her, bobbing his head. Wild energy prickled her skin in a rush and seemed to echo inside her. Finally he blinked and looked away, studying the movement of leaves in nearby brush. She had been accepted.

KarRa withdrew into herself until she was once again in her personal fog. “He’s beautiful, Rylan.”

Rylan nodded. “I feel so much—more. I feel right, but it’s so surreal. I feared this for

so long, feared for you.”

She took a breath. “You should have come here long ago. If it wasn’t for me...”

“No.” His hand came up and brushed her lips. “The past is done. We can only go forward.” His arms tightened reassuringly. “And we will go forward together. Grif helped me finally believe I belong with you. Here, it’s all different. Simpler. We can live out our own actions, but our paths really are entwined. I don’t have to stay away to prove your strength. It’s as simple as knowing two ropes twisted together can hold more weight.”

Her stomach churned at these words. Words she didn’t understand coming from him. Words she’d ached to hear.

“Tell me everything. Did you run into anything in the Wild? How did they treat you when they first found you? Have you met any of the other warriors? What do you think of this place?”

She talked. She poured out every observation of her incredible journey. The days in the forest, the fears and near misses, the young Beast that found her, the testing, the proving, the agony of seeing him half dead before the adoption.

They talked on into the morning, sometimes stumbling over each other’s words, sometimes finishing each other’s sentences. He told her he already had a favorite child he ate breakfast with every day, Tam. He was an older brother whose mother was busy with a small infant, and whose father held a morning job. She shared her observations of her new friend Freezha, whose open spirit had pulled her right in.

He talked to her about his first flight in the Hawk Eyrie at the peak of the mountain—a great open room with many perches. It was where they could come and go in privacy. He talked of the thrill and how awkward he’d been. She told him of how her assigned tutor was the Domina of the Mountincats.

He shared meeting the Council when he was officially adopted, and how his skin shivered at their combined power, even restrained. His voice became passionate when he described the bond he had with Grif—about how intimidating Grif was—yet how strong and wise. She heard the respect in Rylan’s voice and swallowed a tart comment about her take on his wisdom, thinking of his cruel test of separation, how he told her Rylan wasn’t going to choose to stay in her life.

“I respect him so much. But sometimes I can’t help this feeling of challenge that roars up in me. I feel like I want to rip his arms off. Like when I think about what he put you, us, through with this stupid delay.”

He was whispering now. “I owe him so much. I like him as a man, and my Owl trusts him absolutely. I want to please him—more than I ever did Scuffle.”

KarRa snorted. Rylan was always challenging and butting heads with Scuffle, but Scuffle was so harsh that most people did.

“I just need so much more control now. It’s like I’m half drunk, with my emotions all over.”

KarRa touched his shoulder softly. “All right. So you think you’ll be a firemage? Doesn’t that mean you’ll see a lot of battles?”

Turning to hug her, he said lightly, “Let’s let the future sleep. We’ll wake it up as we go.”

They compared information they’d gleaned on the laws so far, and the structure of the Clans. His hours of training were longer than hers, going from dawn to past dark in this winter season. He had also spent several days wounded, recovering a day after the

first Change.

He told her more about the scope of River Mountain, and what he'd heard of the Nest, clanhome to the Owls that was six days east. She shared the details of the awe she'd felt standing on the balcony.

Rylan explained that the Council had ruled the Clans for longer than the Kingdom of Seven Cities, for over two thousand years. He felt the peace that had held for generations was a measure of the success of the respect and control the Truxet fostered. The Council managed the mages, mage training, and the subcouncils. The Clans bowed to the Council's rule for the sake of order, or chaos and war would result. "These men have discipline and honor. There are consequences for breaking the rules. I'm already starting to trust the people around me. It's ... confusing. To rely on strangers to be fair."

She dared to say aloud the thought that had kept jabbing at her as she had watched the plaza. "We can be safe here."

"Yes. After just a few days, I really believe it. Your voice is hoarse. Do you need some water?"

KarRa nodded. After he had brought it, she tried to continue their talk. "I want to hear about..."

"No more now, KarRa. You need to rest. I have to go back to my Clan. They'll have heard by now why I am not at lessons, but I just have so much to learn. I will come to you again soon and we'll talk more."

"No more talk of keeping away from me?"

Rylan's face flexed as shame crossed it quickly. He said softly, "Never again. Not even should the Council Dom himself decree it." He nuzzled her ear, humming, before reluctantly loping away. Her brain whispered, *KarRylan*. A darker, more sarcastic voice laughed from deep inside.

Later that day, Cro, Freezha, and KarRa sat on the balcony eating lunch. Freezha was delighted to tell Cro how Rylan had visited before dawn. Cro frowned and fussed at who had let him in. KarRa grew cross and snappish in defense.

Freezha cut in brightly, "I have news! I passed self-defense this morning!"

KarRa paused but when Freezha stuck her tongue out at her, she let her irritation seep away and praised her. When KarRa questioned Vyur's retaliation for the flip Freezha looked at her strangely.

"KarRa, he was happy for me. Actually, he doesn't ever look particularly happy. But I think he was relieved. That he wouldn't have to come up with yet another way to try to explain it to me. He gave the longest exhale after he landed from my flip. When he stood up he gave me a head nod. That's ... well," she blushed, "the highest compliment from him."

KarRa was relieved that the warrior had the understanding to know that Freezha was a kitten among the Beasts and not to be harmed.

"Not that I'm ever going to be anything remotely like a fighter." She gave a shy smile as she looked down. "He just stood there like a mountain the first time I tried to bring him down. I hung all over him trying to get him off balance. I climbed up onto his shoulders and he never even budged. When I started to tickle his ears he shifted his shoulder in this sliding way and all of a sudden I was upside down on my back on the mat. He looked down and said, 'You must belong to the monkey Clan.' He had been so stern and cold, but with that one joke I knew he wasn't going to be, you know, a beast."

KarRa was shocked to hear this tale after all the moaning and complaining about the mighty warrior. “Vyur?! Told a joke? Oh Freezha, I bet he likes you.”

Freezha blushed completely scarlet now. “Don't be ridiculous. He's Vyur, the combat champion. He's like a prince here. Besides he's mated. I saw him with his son and mate one morning.”

Cro said, “Freezha, he is not mated, and has claimed no children.”

Freezha frowned and nibbled her lip, clearly surprised. “Oh, I thought—they just seemed like...” Finally she whispered, “He looked just like him.”

KarRa cleared her throat. “Well, they say that Lizzeed all look alike.”

Freezha was suddenly fierce. “Oh! What a thing to say! Like those young Wolves joking that it doesn't matter who their mate is since all women mate the same in the dark! That's an outrageous thing to say...”

KarRa laughed and held up her hands. “Freezha! Relax! It was a joke!”

Jaw dropping, eyes widening, Freezha gasped, “A joke? Could it-?! No! Not KarRa!”

“Keep it up pearl Guild. I'll show you my own inner beast.”

Lunch ended with the group clean up, then Cro took KarRa to begin her lessons in Truxet law. The next entrance down the hall from the women's caves was where they taught lessons. The walls were lined with shelves of books. There was only one other pair of women, and a chattering clutch of boys at the far end with their teacher.

Cro brought an enormous book over to the small table. “How are you feeling?”

KarRa told the truth. “Like a skinned chuck.”

Cro shook her head and sighed, then opened the book. “The Truxet have really worked out a complete list of everything you need to know. It will take months. Level one should only take you a few days. That's laws. Level two is a lot more complicated than level one. Eventually we'll cover Clan structure, family structure, sexuality, duties, celebrations, politics, economics, religion, social activities, councils, and history. Religion, art, history, and economics are all extended in lessons that you can pursue on your own when you reach level four. That's where your learning becomes deeper and you get to direct what you learn.

“Today we'll check your reading and writing to see if we need to start there. Hopefully you'll have enough to pass that. I haven't even really talked to you about magic yet. What is your element?”

KarRa shriveled from eager alertness to dismay.

Cro paused. “I know you were a thief. Were you able to sense mage traps?”

KarRa nodded slowly.

“Well, that doesn't narrow much down does it? Anchored with earth, triggered by spirit or air, consequences of fire or body, neutralized by water...”

KarRa looked at her, surprised.

“I'm the Domina of Mountaincat. I know quite a lot about defenses. And there is a story of how you spirit sensed each of the men the Council spiritmage had approved for Rylan.”

“We called it proving. I can sense relationships both current and possible, also the intent of a person. It was one of the other jobs I held in the Dark. When I'm in a fight or on a snatch, working traps just happens. I can pass through barriers, see traps and how to stop or skip them. I can tell it's not going to be a real useful talent here in Vladaya. These

people don't even have doors for Wind's sake. I mean, they put all their treasure in a common room and share it."

Cro interrupted. "That doesn't mean there aren't many places we could use your talent. In the Cities, and on the roads. We have enemies—in the wild and the Cities."

"My made-father, Scuffle ... he was a high Guild mage. Banished. If he couldn't identify my magic, train me in it, I doubt I have any. Other people tell me what their mindscapes look like. All I see is fog, and when I concentrate on proving, colors."

Cro touched KarRa's arm comfortingly. She looked at Cro's delicate dark hand. She had hardly ever been touched in the Dark. Touching was a challenge, a domination, and an invasion. Here it was different. A comfort. Like touching Rylan had always been different.

"Your mindscape is what your spirit chose. Just because it's fog doesn't mean that's not what it's supposed to be."

KarRa blinked, astounded with this idea. Everyone else had scenes of some physical setting.

"I mean, if you were living in the Dark, it makes sense you'd want to lay low. Stay hidden. Maybe your mindscape reflects that. It sounds to me like your sensitivity to traps and relationships means you could be a watermage, or maybe spirit. Your spiritmage will help you.

"Today, let's start with what you should never forget: their beasts."

Cro withdrew a slim book of colored drawings. KarRa had never seen drawings so fine, as if a mage had pressed a creature to paper.

When she told Cro this, the woman hunched shyly. "My mate Proteus did these. He is an artist, when he has time."

All of the Beastspirits were beautiful, dangerous predators. Animals. The men moving through the plaza, they could all become animals. Rylan could fly as an Owl. It was a difference that would forever be between them. *KarRa is Alone* hissed the nasty voice in her head. She studied the pictures in silence.

Chapter 3: Morning

The next weeks fell into a pattern that relaxed KarRa. She often visited with Rylan before breakfast, and touched minds with him every night. She gloried in his open and affectionate ways, as if his lovers had never come between them. It was as if discovering his Beastspirit helped him discover her. She marveled at how quickly he was mastering new magecraft. He was always exhausted, but it was a satisfying, proud exhaustion, nothing like being ground down with daily survival on the streets of the Dark.

Nearly every day he presented her with some tidbit of information, some new skill, or a gift that cost nothing but meant the world. She never felt like he was boasting when he showed her the flame he could summon to his palm. It was more like he was presenting himself for approval. She didn't really understand the breathless, almost anxious air he had when he showed her how he could pull just his talons from his fingertips, a built-in weapon. Another morning he brought her a wing feather, the same shape and size exactly as the one on her arm. A favorite day of hers was when he brought her delicate flowers in a tea mug. A perfectly peeled and sliced fruit he fed her just as she was waking.

He shared his emotions as he hadn't in years. He laughed as he related embarrassing misunderstandings with his new Clan brothers about some aspect of daily life here. He blushed when he told her how good it felt to scratch his neck while he was in Owl form. The safety of the place, the calmness of it, seeped into them. How exceptionally daring it was that they could casually touch, even in the presence of others. The pitch of their voices no longer needed to be hushed. No one was hunting them for a weakness.

It seemed he was constantly prodding her with questions whose answers surprised her.

"Are you able to sleep with these curtain doors?"

Surprisingly yes.

"Have any of the women challenged your personal space?"

Surprisingly no.

"Are you able to read well enough for the books you're studying with?"

Surprisingly yes.

"Do you ever have nightmares remembering the old life?"

Surprisingly no.

And always, daily, were these new, heart-stopping declarations of love. The concerned questions about lingering weakness from her bloody nose. The pulses of deep emotional warmth he sent down their magepath each night as she drifted off to sleep. The praise for the smoothness with which she was facing all these changes.

Usually the women bathed together before or after breakfast, and it was a time of laughter. KarRa grew less shy, able to get into the baths without comparing her scarred, thin self to Freezha's lush perfect curves. She learned more about the others' lives before the Truxet, and enjoyed their comments about what they were learning in these new lives.

The Darkmoon dance came and went, with Freezha whirling lustily among crowds of eager men, dressed in a scanty dress that threatened to lose the battle with her breasts. KarRa had watched from a balcony, spying comfortably from the shadows. So many

men, moving like dark pinwheels around a speck of a bright dress. So many men for so few women.

Breakfast was with Rylan, even meal was with Freezha, lunch was on the plaza balcony with Cro, and their days were spent in free flowing conversation that like the first day rarely managed to stick to one aspect of society. Life was a whirlwind of amazing new ideas.

KarRa's brain had never been so alive. In the evenings she performed her workouts in her room, then bathed and looked at the books. She loved the books. Scuffle had had several, but they had not been shared so openly. She loved their heaviness, the soft scrape of the paper, the beautifully embossed leather covers. The pictures were amazing to her, and Cro proudly shared some more her husband had drawn. KarRa did not understand how an alpha warrior managed to do such intricate and gentle art.

Later in the evenings the women would talk about their day, their hopes and fears. Small groups would cluster in the lounge, some singing, some gaming. She stopped jumping at the casual touches of Freezha and Cro. Days passed, and there was no violence in the plaza below, no shouting beyond high-spirited men and children. She began to forget her fear of hunger.

One morning at the end of her third week in the women's caves, Cro sat down in the library for their society lessons with no books.

"Today is your brightmoon ceremony, KarRa," Cro said softly. "Only a few more days now until you may be choosing a mate."

"You mean, I could learn who my mate choices are?"

The woman nodded. "Possibly by tomorrow if enough choices are found. But today your spiritmage will come and test your soulair, to find your matches. A souldance. After they get a taste of you, they meditate until they find a trail that matches. Sometimes they're able to follow the trail easily and find several matches. The brightmoon ceremony is very personal, and frightening. When you first came, do you remember a mage testing you?"

KarRa had a flash of standing with her hands against a dry dusty stone wall, with a man's hot hands on her lower body, and his even hotter magic flowing between them. "Yes."

"Well, that test is the fundamental test of fertility. The Truxet don't care about personalities, wealth, any of that." She grimaced. "Today a mage will come and perform a souldance with you. Have you had this done?"

KarRa thought back to being wrapped in Scuffle's magic as he marked her skin. He had seemed to be inside her. "I don't know."

"You know how to meditate?"

"Yes."

"Well it's that, but you have to open yourself and let the mage in. He will not force his way in—that would be like rape, and painful, even deadly. It takes some women hours to forge the connection that lets a spiritmage in. After the spiritmage has a mental sense of you, he smells you, and he'll taste you—a small nick in your skin. It's intimate. I am still friends with my spiritmage. Many women continue to see them as they have a deep understanding of you from the series of souldances. They act as counselors when you need guidance or comfort outside of your mate. After the souldance you'll leave and he'll seek a match on the spirit level with your spiritair fresh in his mind."

Cro studied KarRa curiously. “KarRa, the Truxet respect the soulmate bond as sacred. If Rylan is truly your soulmate ... KarRa, he will be your mate. Yet I sense you've not been expecting that path.”

KarRa suddenly felt hot and tight as her throat tightened. She let her eyes slide away. “Rylan and I chose not to cross that path long ago. I know he does not want to mate with me.” Despite the touch he lavished upon her when he visited, he had accepted the Truxet dictate that he not sleep with her in the women’s caves without argument. She thought of the bed partners Grif mentioned he had acquired already.

“It's very odd that a lost Truxet would find his soulmate and not mate with her. The act of will to keep from it would be amazing. That he thinks to give you to another ... that just ... isn't possible for a soulmate. It's not something a soulmate on either side would accept, that the other took a different mate.”

KarRa shook her head. “Rylan is fine with it. Indeed, it's never bothered me that he fucks others.” She didn't add, *Just that he leaves me sleeping alone for them.*

Cro sighed. “Well. Perhaps you are not soulmates, just incredibly bonded friends. This souldance will decide it. After a day, your spiritmage will tell you how many choices he found. If it is not four, as Council law requires, you will wait until the next month and the next brightmoon ceremony. The spiritmage will continue to seek mates that match your spirit each month.

“But if he does find four choices, you will be escorted to a ceremony room, like the one where you saw Rylan take his first Change—yes? You don’t have to do anything but listen and the men cannot touch you. Each of the men will introduce himself. He will tell you a short bit about himself. You've told me you can prove relationships? Can you do it for yourself?”

KarRa shrugged. “I've never tried.”

“Well, this would be a good time to try. After the introductions, you can ask questions, then you will choose who you'd like to spend more time with the following day. That day you spend with the men who interest you the most. It will be the most important day of your life here, your choosing day. At the end of the day you are expected to choose your mate.”

“A *day*?!” KarRa was shocked.

Cro sighed. “When the men find out they have a potential mate ... they get a little wild. Their Beastspirits don’t really care you’re a stranger. They’ll sense your compatibility to them, and every fiber of their being will want to claim you. When more time was given ... it was very violent. There were deaths. And more time to decide means more time to grow attached, because you *will* be drawn to all the men you meet.

“Some women go through a grieving process after they “lose” their other potential mates. Some of the rejected men have to be guided by spiritmages, or go to the wild to forget their pain in their Beastspirit. For many, this could be their only chance at gaining a family. The Truxet could just hand you to the first compatible man they find, but they respect us. We are loved within our Clan. We aren’t dogs to simply breed. This choosing is for *you*, but it is devastating for them. So they make it as quick as possible.”

KarRa remembered her astonishment at learning the few women here were for hundreds of unmated men. “I never thought of how they would feel, to be powerless before me...” *A DAY!* KarRa gnawed on her knuckles as her mind whirled. “When you choose your mate a day after meeting your choices, you will then have six days to get to

know that man. At the end of the week, you will be bonded, officially mated, by three mages. This involves a souldance with your mate, and on top of the smell and taste, you will physically mate. At the point of orgasm the mages will reach out and swap pieces of your soulair, binding you together tighter than any human marriage.”

“You mean the mages are *there*? For the fuck?” KarRa’s mind was full of images of skinlickers fucking in the taverns to men singing all around, of how some Clan brothers kept a pleasure pet together, sharing her.

Cro looked away. She nodded once jerkily. “KarRa, there may be many others there. It is an oath. It is witnessed by the Clan Alpha, and sometimes key members of the warrior’s family, especially fathers, brothers and any adult sons. Your spiritmage will of course be there. The matebond ceremony is the Truxet marriage. They don’t believe in the Skyfather and Earthmother. They believe in the great spirit of Vladaya, formed of the elements. Promises without blood, magic and witnesses do not mean anything to them. Their Beasts need to claim you before their Alpha, physically and magically, to assert their connection.”

She chewed her lip. “I should have told you this much sooner, so you could get used to the idea. Some women ask to take verra wine, to make them relaxed and dull their perceptions, during both the brightmoon and the matebond ceremonies. It seems disrespectful and intrusive to some women, to have the witnesses there, but it is very powerful. The watchers are respectful and a good five paces away. They do not participate in any way. Your pallet in the middle of the room is sunken, and you don’t really feel exposed.”

“By the Winds,” KarRa muttered. “You did this when you were eighteen?”

Cro sighed. “With Proteus, I was just overwhelmed. I spent even my first night in Vladaya in the Mountaincat Lair doing my best to get into his bed. I didn’t want to wait for some spiritmage to prove what we both knew.”

Cro grinned. “I thought he was magic!” Tossing her head she whinnied, “We got over that stage!”

KarRa grinned too. “I’m glad you are happy. That it worked all right for you.”

Cro became serious. “KarRa, it works for everyone. If there are unhappy bonds, it is because the wife cannot let go of her old life, or her old perceptions in this new one. The actual connection between mates forged at the matebond ceremony never falters and never fades. That is the purpose of the brightmoon souldance. It doesn’t allow for mistakes in compatibility. Your mate will want your acceptance and affection, and will work for that, supporting you and easing your transition. Women debate which is better: a long period of adjustment in the women’s caves, or being landed in a Clan within a few weeks. There are pros and cons to each. Most women that come to the caves are placed with a mate within their first three months. There are very few women who are returned to the human world for lack of matches.”

Cro paused and let out a deep breath. KarRa put a hand to her head. Rylan, spiritmages in her head, tasting her blood, public fucks. What would it feel like to meet strange men she was going to have children with? KarRa gave in to the pressure and laid her head on the table, her heart pounding.

Rylan said he had felt instant, complete welcome upon being introduced to his Clan. That it had been just what he had always dreamed of experiencing—a belonging, a warmth. KarRa had no expectations, only the sense of a coming burden, like when she

knew she was going to take on a particularly nasty job. Still, this was the price she had agreed to pay, had been waiting to pay, ever since Merk sifted away to save Rylan. Cro laid her hand on KarRa's arm and just sat quietly until she was composed.

Sitting up, KarRa looked at the vibrant woman. "Thank you for all the help and advice you've given. When I stepped into Vladaya, I never dreamed I'd be living this well. I'm glad to know you."

Cro's beautiful green eyes welled up with tears as she smiled back at KarRa. "You *will* be happy here, KarRa. The men are good."

They turned to a scroll and were talking about the current political climate in the subcouncils when KarRa saw movement in the doorway. She always sat with her back to the corner of the room to have a clear view. There were two men in the doorway, dressed as Council mages, bare-chested, with leather skirts and armbands. One was Merk, the other a Lizzeed. Cro stood and gestured them in. KarRa stood as well, uncertain.

Both men bowed their heads to Cro and said, "Greetings, Mountaincat Domina." The women offered their wrists and both men bent to them.

Merk turned to KarRa. "It is time for your testing, KarRa. When I found that I had been paired with you, I explained to one of my brother mages also assigned to this task these next few days that I had been the one to take your first oath, and that you might not be comfortable with me, as such a meeting is usually filled with fear. We are giving you the choice."

KarRa looked at the other man. He was shorter than most of the warriors she'd seen, being almost her height, but thickly built. His eyes were even blacker than Merk's. She looked at Merk, who was calmly watching. He was just as big as she remembered, a good head taller than Rylan. "I can see that it would be a comfort to have an unmet mage at my side further down this mating road, but I think I will choose you, Wolf."

Both men bowed their heads to her and Cro, and they all filed out. The other mage nodded at Merk and turned back toward the women's caves with Cro. Merk and KarRa continued on away from them, walking for quite a ways, through halls and open areas, even past a sort of garden at one point.

Finally they came to a small circular room, the smallest cave KarRa had seen, barely two bodylengths around. It had no furniture at all, just scattered pillows, blankets, and furs. Most striking, it had a stone door that swung on a pivot like the women's caves. Doors were rare in River Mountain. Only two small mage lights glowed by the door and the room was dim. There was also a jug of water in a niche near the floor, and KarRa accepted a cup. Merk drank three to her one and put the cups back. He sank gracefully into a cross-legged seat on the floor against the back wall.

He looked up at her. "KarRa, I will see you more clearly today than you probably even see yourself. First you must thoroughly relax your body, and then you must meditate.

"Try to create a doorway, and imagine yourself welcoming me into your house. I will not go where I am not welcome, but you must make me welcome. You must know that nothing I see here will ever be shared with anyone. Indeed, I have done so many of these journeys, that I have forgotten much of them. Think of me as a human priest.

"I do not need to be touching you, although some women feel that a physical touch makes it easier for them to concentrate on letting me in. Some choose to lay back with their head against my legs, some sit opposite me, mirroring my position. Others lie

alongside my front and rest a hand on me. Do whatever feels comfortable.”

KarRa considered the room for a minute. She was surprised at how calm she was. Looking at Merk now, she was shocked at her lack of rebellion. She was actually going to trust him. To let this strange man see her soul. Feeling as if she was moving toward a night with one of the smoothskin boys, KarRa arranged a row of wide pillows across the blankets and lay down, fussing with the one at her neck until she was comfortable. After a minute, she sat up and took off her boots, then pulled one of the fluffy blankets over her, and began to force her body to relax. She tried to hear Merk breathing but couldn't. He had been off to her right. Her ears strained to listen, and she sent her energy out to make sure he was still in the same place.

He chuckled. “Be still KarRa. Be at rest. You are safe with me. I am an experienced spiritmage, with honor.”

After she had relaxed in silence, clearing her mind, accepting his nearness, he murmured softly, “Build me a door.”

KarRa thought of the doorway to Rylan. She journeyed inward in meditation until she felt it, the Grif-made stone doorway along her path to Rylan. And she gently, with a rush of affection sent to reassure, closed the door. She didn't want Rylan in her head while this man was there. That would be bizarre. Turning, she found herself in her comforting, enclosing fog. Like Grif, she built the outer casing first, then the door.

She closed it firmly, and then said in the barest whisper, “Come.”

Instantly the presence of a man surrounded her. He was strong, both as mage and in spirit. She smelled a musky smell that reminded her of the forest, and she felt his pure intent. He was all around her, strong enough to go where he wanted, but waiting at the door. KarRa rolled it open, and Merk was there with his head lowered, shoulders rounded in submission.

KarRa looked around her mists. Merk would come in here. Eventually he would wander around until he knew about her fights with Rylan. He would see her nightmares of being alone in the darkness, hunger gnawing, knowing that death was lurking around every corner. He would see the smallness of her world, the wrong things she had done to people. The men and women she had hurt.

He would certainly see her secret longing for Rylan. She was standing here, on this threshold, on this journey to a new life bound to a strange man because of her love for Rylan. She was not sorry. There was no stopping this. She stepped to the side and said, “Enter.”

Merk stepped forward and jerked to a stop, his eyes going directly to hers as if in shock. He was frozen, tense, as if only his strongest will kept him from reaching out to grab her. KarRa looked at him curiously, and stepped back. The space between them was as nothing in the spirit world, nor the physical world with his Beast abilities, but it felt better to have the distance and she gestured out into the mists.

“Should I lead?”

Merk seemed to forcefully rip his gaze from hers. Breathing deeply, his mouth flattened. “No. You did well. You may rest. Take yourself to a peaceful place, or wait here.” He strode off into the fog and disappeared.

KarRa examined how she felt. It seemed as if she should feel crowded. Or worried. Or afraid. She felt no different. His presence still pressed around her like a blanket, and she realized it was similar to when Scuffle had marked her skin. Grif's presence had been

much more shocking. Shrugging both mentally and physically she turned from her rock door to a slightly crooked wooden slat door washed blue. Pushing it open she turned to the right and began to imagine the walls, floor, and furnishings of Scuffle's shak when he lived there.

She had moved from the finished shak and its roof view to a new mind game: trying to remember all the beautiful things she'd seen on Freezha these past days. She had remembered a dozen rainbow-hued outfits when Merk called her, a gentle tug. Dropping the image of a peach colored robe painted with gold, she turned and strode into the fog, her heart beginning to beat harder.

Merk was waiting by the door, and he seemed bigger. He still was of a size to fit through the opening, but his entire presence seemed more. Closer and warmer. He looked at her, and in slow movements strangely awkward for him, he came to her.

Standing in front of her he reached out and touched her jaw softly. Heat seared through her physical body. She looked into his dark eyes. They were intensely deep and heavy lidded. She recognized this look now, the same she had seen on him after her first test in that distant room. He was aroused.

"KarRa," he breathed, extending her name into a primal chant. "You are beautiful."

Surprised and confused she stepped away and he let his fingers fall. No one ever called KarRa beautiful. She wasn't. And if he had seen even half of her life in the Dark, he wouldn't have found any beauty at all.

"Oh yes, you are. And it is my pleasure to name, finally, the Element you belong to."

Her whole being poised on the edge of a cliff. "I... Me?"

"You. They didn't value it in your old life. They didn't recognize it because they couldn't kill with it. KarRa, you are a Spiritmage."

"Oh!" That teetering disbelief launched into the mists and soured into rapturous joy. "I'm...a Spiritmage!"

"You are. We'll help you."

"I want you. You to help me."

His black eyes seemed to sparkle with emotion. She felt the gratitude and respect swirling in him. "We'll see."

He nodded at her, the formal chin tuck of respect, and turned and went through the doorway. When she didn't move forward, he swung it shut himself, his eyes on hers. As soon as it grated closed in her mental ears she opened her physical eyes.

Her body was lethargic, as if it had swum up through a heavy sleep. Turning her head toward Merk, she found him sprawled back against the wall behind him, his legs extended, loose from their previous tight cross. His hands lay upon his thighs, and his black eyes were on hers. He blinked lazily. His body smoothly, slowly began to draw up.

He came forward onto all fours and began to stalk forward, his gaze now sweeping hungrily down her body as he whipped her blanket off her. KarRa let her breath fall as slow and deep as his, and her thighs began to tighten and release as dampness came to her. He was magnificent, his dark hair soft and thick, falling long around his face, his tan skin shimmering with a light sweat.

He came up to her side and didn't stop, smoothly moving right over her until she was caged between his arms and legs. He stared down at her and she stared back, until he began to growl low in his throat. A nonhuman growl, the low rumble of a Beast. Smoothly and calmly KarRa tilted her chin up showing her throat, keeping her body lax.

He immediately stopped and lowered his head to her throat.

She thought he might take it in his open jaws as Grif had done to Rylan, but he nudged her jaw with his nose, pushing her head to the side. His hot breath washed over her neck for an eternity, her breasts beating with the need to be touched, before he finally put his tongue out and drew it smoothly up the side of her neck. It was not lewd or damp, but purposeful. The rasp brought up every fine hair on her body. Then he buried his nose behind her ear and inhaled long and deep. It was one of Rylan's favorite things to do with her, but she was still surprised at the shivers of pleasure that quivered Merk's skin.

After a moment he sat back on his heels, his weight resting across her thighs. He was so aroused now she could see the press of his erection tenting the soft leather of his loose skirt. He reached for her hand and brought it to his mouth. Her gaze was riveted to the look of her extended forefinger between the clasp of his darker hands, poised in front of his mouth.

"Look at me." His voice was a rough command and her eyes snapped to his glittering black ones. He put her finger carefully, gently into his warm mouth and nipped once, hard. The pain was a quick spike up her arm, then a dull ache as he closed his lips around her finger and drew hard a few times. His lips were firm and soft, his tongue working smoothly along the length of her finger. Her belly throbbed in sudden, surprising jealousy to feel the soft wet heat. He let up on the suction and swallowed, her hand falling from his as his hands hung poised in the air in front of him, lax.

He shuddered, transfixed at the taste of her blood. It was clearly a powerful thing for him, and KarRa felt her thighs clench and release again, her hips lifting against his weight in a slow roll, trapped beneath him. His eyes flashed open and this time they were mage green, whirling with mists of power. KarRa's breath stopped in her throat.

"Was that an invitation?" The words were even more gravelly than before.

KarRa looked up at this powerful stranger who had wandered in her mists and called her beautiful. He was so comfortable. His physical heat was an echo of his mage presence lingering inside her.

Tightening her stomach she raised her body to an incline and propped herself with an arm. Raising her hand to the rock-still man's jaw, she let her eyes follow her finger as it drifted down his carved face, over his strongly muscled and furred chest, so different from the few smoothskin boys she had known with their slight, wiry, bare frames, to the black leather trapping his searing heat against her legs.

Slowly dragging her gaze back up to his, her finger pressed brazenly against the tip of his hard heat hidden by leather. She whispered, "Yes."

There was no hesitation. He swooped down on her neck, kissing, giving sucking nips and hard long licks. Exhaling in pleasure, KarRa fell back on the pillows, stunned at her response, but not sorry. It had been a very, very long time. This man felt so good, inside and out. She would take this heat and enjoy.

His hands were hard and quick, moving over her body smoothly. He peeled off her tunic and tossed it aside. Plumping her breasts, tugging, tweaking, turning her nipples until she writhed, her own hands came up to his small nubs and echoed his movements. His chest fascinated her—the slabs of muscle, the hidden nipples in the soft hair.

She learned the scope of his shoulders and the curves of his biceps as he moved his voracious mouth down her body. Her hands went to his head to glory in the feeling of his soft long hair trailing coolly over her hot skin, the silkiness as it threaded her fingers. She

massaged the nape of his neck as he began to worship her slight breasts.

His legs moved to the inside of hers, and her thighs drew up to cradle his ribs in welcome. His face rolled over the softness of her skin, rasping it but soothing it with the scorching damp heat of his mouth. Fire bloomed inside her. She lifted herself into his weight, canting her hips, and pressed herself teasingly against him.

Rising, he smoothed the leather down her legs and tossed it aside. He reached under his skirt and worked at some constriction containing himself, then bent in half to spread her legs as wide as they could go. He drove his nose into her wetness and breathed, his breath hot, flowing across her in pants as he took in her scent. KarRa cried out at the intensity of it.

Surging back up to press his body now skin to skin with her wetness, he ground himself in tight to her, causing a soft cry to escape her lips as he again lavished heat and moisture on her thick nipples, scoring them with his teeth. His key burrowed thrillingly between her wet women's lips, but her thighs wrestled with his to move him lower. Her hands swept restlessly over the expanse of strong shoulders. Her fingertips tingled as they traced crown, nape, spine, biceps, ribs.

The heat and tension built until KarRa's body was twisting so strongly against Merk he began to heave from the force of her thrusts. His hardness chafed the pinpoint of agony between her legs but he still wouldn't slide into her. The feel of so much skin, so much want, made her drunk.

Surging higher up to put his face over hers, his cock sliding in her hot crease, his eyes a brilliant unnatural green and his teeth gone into serrated points, he gritted out- "Keep those doors closed, KarRa, both of them." He waited for her to struggle up through her passion to understand and she gave a short nod, mentally firming both her door to him and to Rylan, not sure what he was afraid of but trusting him.

He seemed to feel it but just as he pulled back to enter her, Rylan battered on her door. Always before she had battered on his, but had never barred him before. To feel Rylan pushing in her head when all she wanted was Merk pushing in her body made her stomach heave and head pound. Merk snarled as her hands flew to grasp her head. She gave a cry of frustration at the strength it took to keep Rylan out, wrenching her concentration from her body. She built a lock on the door and turned it, mentally set a trap to it for further protection. All the while her body shivered, missing Merk's heat as he crouched between her thighs, waiting to see who would win.

Finally Rylan retreated and her hands fell lax to her sides. She was gasping for breath, aware of her aching breasts, the air cooling the moisture on her thighs. Merk watched her somberly, his eyes black once more. He knelt between her knees, waiting. She wanted to scream at the distance she saw on his face. Instead she allowed herself a frustrated snarl worthy of a Beast. Merk's hands went gently to her taught hips as she swirled them demanding at him.

"I know, beautiful. I will soothe your need. We are alone again?"

In answer she drew her knees as far up and out as she could, splaying her center open to him. A thrill of satisfaction twined in her core at his gasp. His thumbs went to her folds, his fingers burrowing in her dense curls, twining tight in them. She moaned when he pressed into her depths, pulled her opening wider, swirled his fingertips teasingly around the entrance.

"So beautiful. Your scent..."

Why was he talking? Where was the wild urgency they had just had? She attempted to pull him down to her with her feet on his shoulders but he was too far below her for her to get a good grip on him. He simply turned his head and nibbled on her ankle propped next to his neck. Three of his fingers drove into her depths with a wonderfully hard thrust and his thumb ground her clit in a wet circle.

She shrieked at the satisfaction. He did it again, only this time his mouth sucked lightly where he had nipped her leg, and his other hand closed hard over a nipple. Her hands flew to press his hand deep between her legs, her body bowing forward with the lash of pleasure.

Dimly she was aware of his voice, low and urging her to squeeze, to tighten, to hold. She did as he asked, winding herself tighter with every twist and drive of his hand between her legs.

Reaching up to his stark face, she placed her hands on either side of his skull and hissed, "Merk! Give it to me now!"

He started to shake then, his hand moving so much faster, slapping wet sounds in her heat. KarRa realized nothing but his hands were on her body.

The intensity held and held and held until finally Merk dropped his head to her breasts with a cry. KarRa arched beneath him, echoing his cry with a long wail of her own as she rose up into a beautiful dark to meet him. Falling into a sprawl, they lay entwined, panting in time together, completely winded. He wrapped his arms comfortingly around her, and she felt his magic pull in around them as well.

She hummed with contentment. "Mmmm, an extra layer of Merk."

He paused on top of her, his cheek pillowed on her small breasts, and laughed. It was a deep rusty sound. Rolling to the side he brought the cups and pitcher over. After they sipped their thirst away he used a corner of blanket to wash first her then himself under his skirt. KarRa remained in a comfortable sprawl before him, accepting his intimate touch. She wasn't embarrassed.

"You rose with me?" Her voice was husky with contentment.

"More like exploded, but yes."

"Why didn't you join with me? Rylan's intrusion bothered you?"

He held his skirt up with his chin and she saw there were shorts beneath it that attached with buttons on the side. After he had righted himself, he knelt at her side and gently smoothed his hands over her body. It seemed he was soothing himself as much as her with the sweeping touches. "I'm not sure I should have—you were vulnerable..."

She cut him off. "Merk. There was no dishonorable seduction. I made my decision and am glad of it. Haven't you ever taken pleasure from a woman after souldancing before?"

He nodded at her but still seemed uncertain.

"Are you mated?"

He appeared appalled. "No! Of course not!"

She stretched and began to dress. "Well then. Will you take a meal with me?"

He looked up at her at last. "I would. But this was—a delay. I need to use the spiritair you've left me with to seek for you." He was definitely growing tenser.

KarRa frowned. "Will it be harder for you to do that after having shared pleasure with me?"

He sighed and seemed to will his tension away. "It should not be."

That was a half-answer, but she let it go. He stood and they embraced. She laid her head on his chest, rubbing her cheek in his crisp hairs, and enjoying his surrounding strength again. She was like melted butter. She felt touched in a way she'd never felt with the smoothskin boys she'd rarely paid. *Was this what Rylan had with his lovers?* She pushed the painful thought away.

"It was ... good, Merk. Thank you." She felt him nod. "I'll see you again." He nodded again.

KarRa said, "I don't know how to get back to my room."

He chuckled. "There will be someone waiting for you in the first room on the right." He kissed her on the forehead. "Goodnight KarRa. Thank you for sharing yourself, inside and out."

"Goodnight." She rolled the door closed again on the image of him settling back into a cross-legged position.

The young warrior, yet another of the seemingly endless black Wolves, led her silently back to the rooms. His nose had flared upon her entry, but he had directed his eyes to the ground and kept his mouth shut. KarRa realized that around the Beasts, privacy in bed pleasure was impossible. They would all know as soon as they got near you.

She went directly to the baths to find Freezha already there, the other women whispering furiously in the other tubs. She joined her, more casual now at stripping and entering the tub, although she still made it a point to have her towel nearby before she got in.

Freezha greeted her and after a moment it came as a relief to know Freezha did not guess she had been with Merk. She would not have to share that private moment. Still, she turned the magewind on in the tub to hide the completeness with which she cleaned between her legs. To her surprise, Freezha was a bit afraid of her spiritmage. A Bear named Wat, she said he was the biggest man she'd ever seen in her life and made her feel like a child. A naughty child. She was entirely relieved to have let him in quickly this month, and that he had been quick in turn.

"I was out of there within a half hour! I am a souldance expert! I couldn't get in the baths fast enough. I feel so-so-consumed." Freezha shuddered, apparently distraught by the souldance.

KarRa moved forward to hug her and then pulled up, hesitating at their nudity, but Freezha was so unhappy that she carried the motion through and hugged her friend tightly, dismissing the odd feeling of her friend's breasts against hers.

Freezha clasped her hands under her chin, "Oh KarRa! He found matches, I know he did! Wouldn't it be amazing if we were both mated this week?" Freezha seemed to deflate a little. "I was so hoping to find a soulmate. It would have been perfectly romantic. But none of us have one. I mean, you do, but you've decided to waste it by not fucking him. This will be my seventh time. I know that others have gone longer, but it just seems so sad that they can't find four men for me. My stomach aches thinking of being sent home. I can't imagine going back to being a wife for some whiny, fearful Guild man. The crowded living, the smell of the City." She grimaced. "I want to stay," she whispered fiercely.

"Perhaps they found enough matches this time."

"We'll have to wait until tomorrow. I hate waiting. I won't sleep. To think that I

could finally be having sex within a week!” Flinging herself dramatically backwards with a splash, she had to stop and steady herself, choking on the water’s backlash.

Sighing, she asked, “Is it fabulous KarRa?”

It was a question Freezha often asked, and KarRa replied, as she always did, “For some.”

“I’ll curl my fingers for you KarRa, that this soulmate thing will work out for you.”

Even KarRa knew the reference to the childish gesture of protection. She shrugged. “I’m in no rush Freezha.” *Maybe Merk and I will come together again if it takes awhile,* KarRa thought. Then she looked down into the frothing water. *I see now why women hesitate to take night pleasure here. If I grow attached to Merk, it will be awkward with my mate.*

It was evening now, with the women coming into the lounge at different times, in different emotional states. KarRa’s news about claiming an Element was cheered, but the topic on everyone’s minds was men. The women talked late into the night, the talk turning to men they’d had, Freezha full of questions and the women laughing over embarrassing moments, comparing prowess, endurance, and appearance.

KarRa found she had less experience than all of them. First of all, the only safe sex to be had was in the expensive, guarded smoothskin houses, and also, she just hadn’t felt the itch that Freezha described.

When the women were saying “What was the best you’ve ever had?” KarRa had to pause to keep from blurting “Merk” and said instead that her first paid boy, whom Rylan chose for her, was best.

Shocked silence met her statement. “Rylan chose him for you?!” Freezha said in trademark goggle-eyed face. Her mouth flapped a few times. “But did he join in?”

“No!”

“Well, did he watch?”

“Freezha! For a virgin you have knowledge of experienced pleasures.”

Freezha nodded seriously, “I know. I’ve studied hard.” Freezha shared her opinion of the potential of a variety of objects as tools for self-pleasure, much to the women’s hilarity. Eventually it seemed their sexual secrets, at least those they were willing to share, had dwindled out. As women stood and stretched to move to their rooms, Freezha jumped up in a flurry, tripping over pillows. “Well! That was fabulous! I’m going to go bring myself some pleasure. I think I have a candle in my room.” She swept out in a whirl of hair.

KarRa murmured, “By the Winds, I hope her mate lives up to her dreams.”

KarRa was lazing in bed in the morning from the late night when Rylan slipped into the room. Beaming she sat up and greeted him brightly. “Hey! I had a big day yesterday-”

“I know.”

She took in his tension as he stood rigidly at the door. It seemed that every time she saw him now he seemed bigger, more muscular, stronger. “You heard I had a souldance?”

“Who was he?”

KarRa blinked. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed she said cautiously, “My spiritmage was named Merk. He was one of the mages at your first Change.”

Rylan stayed where he was, fists clenched so tightly the muscles in his arms bunched.

“What's wrong? You're angry.”

“Was Merk the man you fucked yesterday?”

Now KarRa stood, angling so she had more room around her. Leaning back in a slouch against the wall, she crossed both her feet and her arms. “I don't really see how that's your business. You haven't asked who I'm fucking since you first dropped me off at a smoothskin house.”

“That was a gift. To erase the memory of the rape.” His voice was very quiet, and very angry.

“I know that.” Sharing our pleasure in the Dark had already erased it. That boy against my body was a pale shadow of what we shared.

“Grif told me you've had bed partners from your third night here. I don't bother you about them.” They stared stonily at each other for several moments.

He exploded into motion, swiping a clay cup off the table to smash it against the wall in a spray of water. “You did something yesterday that mattered, something intimate with a Trux! The day you were tested for proof of a soulmate! Are you trying to make me insane?” Fists planted wide as he leaned over the table toward her, he glowered.

She glowered back. “I was told bedplay was allowed for unmated women. I was not aware that the day of my testing was some sort of off limits day for fucking. I took some much needed and rare pleasure. I am not trying to make you insane.” She refused to explain they hadn't actually come together. Despite the lack of that final intimacy, she felt close to Merk.

Pushing off from the table with a growl he paced back and forth, his strides so long and angry it took only two paces to cross the small room as he turned back and forth, not crossing the barrier of the table between them.

She tried to hold on to her patience. “Why are you...”

“I haven't slept with anyone! My bed partners Grif blabbed about were Clan brothers, warm bodies I could relax with enough to sleep.” He bit this off as he continued to pace.

KarRa considered his defensiveness with a thoughtful frown. “Rylan, if you've been avoiding the skinlickers because of me, you don't need to. You've always taken your night pleasure as you needed it. Why would it be different here?”

He stumbled to a stop, nose only a handspan from the wall. His fists clenched and unclenched. Slowly he turned his head toward her and she caught the green swirl of strong emotion flicking in his eyes.

“That you could even ask that question shows me you do not understand this place, me, or us. You share my soul. I have told you that I love you, that we are going to be together from now on.”

KarRa shot to her feet, his anger now echoing in her. “The day I understand you will be the day I grow wings myself! You chuckface!”

After another tense moment he sagged, leaning his head against the wall. “I have been so wrong to you for so long I don't know how to undo it.” This came out in a whisper.

KarRa didn't know what that meant either, but her anger was still tight in her shoulders. “Don't you dare try to make me feel guilty or sorry for you. You just take your little feathered butt out of here and don't come back until you remember you're a wildling and not high Guild.”

He shook his head as he turned away. "No, KarRa. We're not wildlings anymore. It's you who needs to remember. I'm a Trux warrior, and you are to be a Trux woman soon." Pushing under the curtain he left.

KarRa was left angry, confused, and wary. She tried to sort through what just happened. She had the feeling she had missed something important. *Was he jealous?!* What would he do when she took a mate?

Feeling afraid and jittery, she shoved her table to the wall with a crash and moved into her Guild knifedances, stretching her body and practicing her balance. She threw herself into the motions, blocking out everything but the harmony of her body, pushing the limits of her ability to hold positions and shift her weight without faltering.

Only when someone cleared their throat at her curtain in an overly loud way that denoted the fact they'd done so before did she stop, her legs quivering with fatigue, sweat matting her hair to her head.

"Enter!" she said calmly, proud of herself.

Freezha cleared her throat. "We couldn't help but overhear the raised voices this morning. I brought you some fruit." She lifted a tray.

KarRa fell into a chair and began to devour it.

Freezha moved the table back out and sat down herself. "What have you been doing in here?"

"Knifedance," KarRa said briefly. "I usually do it in the evening. I missed last night."

Freezha nodded, looking at KarRa with concern. "You had a fight with Rylan?"

KarRa snorted. "That wasn't a fight. He'd have left here dragging his bleeding proud Owl self through the dirt if it was."

Freezha seemed taken aback. "Oh." Clearing her throat again, Freezha said in a determinedly different, cheerful voice, "The announcements came in this morning—both of us are going to mate choice!"

KarRa stopped herself from gnawing on the sweet round red fruit and looked at her. "We are? Matched? Me?"

"Yes!" Freezha clapped like a child. "And three other women too. I for one want to be gorgeous! Today there's no lessons. Cro's in the lounge waiting for you, though. She wants to help with the fixing." Freezha gestured gracefully at herself. "The women who are meeting their choices usually pamper themselves. We'll choose a robe to wear tomorrow, design a hairstyle, discuss body paint or jewelry. We experiment with face paints and do our nails. Some women smooth their skin. It's going to be fun. Lessons are suspended until after the matebond. We'll finally have time to teach you element dice." It was Freezha's favorite Beast game and she was always trying to get the others to play it.

KarRa frowned, still feeling snarly. "I have a robe to wear, I have no hair to design, and paint would look ridiculous on me. I have no nails, will not smooth my body, and would be happy to play element dice with you."

After a few blinks Freezha inclined her head. "Sounds like a plan."

It was after KarRa had dried off from her bath and joined the women in the lounge that Cro told the women she'd asked Fler to join them later. Only Freezha had heard of her.

"Fler is mated to a Mountaincat, and she's the best of those who work women's hair." Freezha jumped up and ran around the table with squeals of joy to hug Cro, who laughed

in her high odd way as they toppled over backwards in Freezha's exuberance.

Sitting up to see KarRa's dour face Freezha said, "None of that KarRa! You want to feel as confident as you can when you face your choices for the first time. One of them will be your future, and you want to dazzle them!"

KarRa rolled her eyes.

Freezha nodded so fast her hair flew. "I'm going to pick the one with the best body! It would be easier if they were Council mages, so I can see more of them."

"Freezha, what a completely shallow—Actually, I've been giving this some thought. I can prove them for you. I mean, after you choose the ones who interest you the most. Instincts are important. Listen to them. But of those, I can prove them. It's not an absolute answer, but it's another piece of information."

Cro nodded. "That's wonderful KarRa."

Freezha leaned forward, "But, what about your bloody nose? Will it weaken you?"

KarRa shook her head. "Not really." Actually proving four men, possibly more, would tire her considerably, but it wouldn't last.

"Let's go look at robes," Freezha sang happily.

KarRa had not been Freezha's friend these last few weeks without getting towed into the treasure room on several occasions. She'd been interested in it, from an ex-professional view, and awed. But it was also overwhelming to her and she shook her head. "I'll stay here."

"But you need to choose something to wear!"

"I'll wear the robe I have already Freezha. It's lovely."

"That old thing! Come..."

"No. I'm fine."

Throwing up her hands, Freezha pulled the others from the table. "See you later," Freezha laughed.

Cro looked at KarRa, wringing her hands. "KarRa, it's time I showed you something. I was leaving it 'til later because it's very ... intense, but with your quick match, you need to know it sooner than I had thought."

KarRa followed Cro the short way to their usual table in the library. Cro had a thin, worn book covered in red leather.

"This is going to be shocking. You know that all of the Truxet can change into a Beastspirit. These pictures show that transformation."

She opened the book. It was a series of drawings showing the stages of a Bear warrior's change to Beast. He was nude, a rugged, muscular man with dark hair. The most fascinating changes were the middle ones. The book labeled it "battleform." KarRa thought of it as pissed-off Rylan. KarRa calmly looked at the changes—increased height, the claws, the extra teeth.

"I've seen this many times. If he lost it to this point, he was no good at watching my back."

Cro was shocked at KarRa's nonchalance. "You've seen Rylan like this?"

"Sure. Lots. It took a certain amount of practice to understand his speech in this form."

Cro just blinked.

The next picture showed the man contorted in a rictus of clenched, unnatural muscles, and a blinding golden glow surrounding him. "Brief moment of unknowing,"

read the words. Then, a Bear, standing as tall as the man had been while on all fours.

KarRa turned to Cro. "Is the human still aware? Can he remember?"

"The human is sometimes aware in the battleform, but can remember images more easily. Some Beasts can be directed with magespeak. They fight as Beasts based on their human loyalties, and travel with messages when given direction before their Change. A Changed Beast is really much safer for you than a wild animal. But the human is more of a shadow in the Beast mind, as the Beast is a shadow in the human mind."

KarRa thoughtfully pulled at her lip. "If a Beast, I mean Trux, is aroused, why would he start to turn aggressive?"

Cro tipped her head. "He often doesn't. Rarely," she looked away, and KarRa detected a rosiness even to her dark skin, "at times of particularly high passion, they'll turn to their battleform. But it's not at all usual. Many women never see their mates in battleform their whole lives outside of the mating ceremony."

"Battleform? At the mating ceremony?" KarRa asked.

"It is the first time, and probably the only time, the Beast acknowledges the human mate physically. The Beast needs to dominate the mate. That's one of the functions of the mages holding containment around the ceremony, and why the Clan Alpha is there. To control and reassure the Beast as it binds to the woman."

"But this doesn't happen every time a Beast fucks out in the Seven Cities," KarRa asked, confused.

"Oh, no. Usually, it is just a Trux mating with human lust. There is no question of the warrior losing control of the Beast inside. KarRa, the Beast inside a Trux knows when a mate match is found. And that Beastsprite wants nothing more than to claim her. If a Trux finds a mate out in the human world, it's actually very dangerous because the Beast rises, needing to claim the woman before anyone else does."

Cro looked at KarRa doubtfully. "Your history with Rylan really is extraordinary."

KarRa shrugged.

Cro sighed and continued. "A Beast is really very simple. See the woman, smell the woman, taste the woman, fuck her, take her back to Vladaya and get her claimed by the Clan. And the Trux is always in danger of transforming into battleform until the bond is witnessed by the Clan Alpha.

"Even with the innate trust a woman feels upon recognizing her mate, she would be—*should* be—terrified of a Trux in battleform. If a Trux suspects he has found a potential mate when he's outside of Vladaya, he pops back here as quick as the earth will carry him before his Beast does serious harm trying to claim the woman without mage protection. The matebond ceremony is all about gentling the Beast, and keeping the woman safe as he rises to claim her in front of his Alpha."

KarRa considered Merk's form as he thrust against her yesterday. The teeth, the scratches on her hips. The sense of closeness, the ease with which she agreed to bedplay. She was fairly sure she could guess who one of her choices was going to be.

* * * *

Fler was a wonder. KarRa had not thought anyone could outtalk Freezha or out-motion Cro, but Fler surely did. Loud and boisterous, she fluttered around KarRa's hair, praising its color and thickness, despairing how it had been cut. KarRa jumped and lifted her arms to block the suddenly appearing shears. Laughing and swatting her down, the

woman began to comb and fluff and cut.

In half an hour she held up a mirror and KarRa stared. Her uneven ragged hair was sleek. Curving around her ears and laying smoothly down onto her nape, it framed her face and drew her eyes to her wide mouth. It still had a raggedness to it, but it was purposeful, and when KarRa moved her head sharply, her hair moved in a smooth, loose swing that settled nicely into place. She liked it, even though she still intended to grow her hair long from now on.

I am lovely, she thought with surprise. I am rough, and have no magic, but I am also smart, and tough. I got Rylan here. I have made friends. I can stand before strange warriors like this and keep my chin high.

The women continued primping throughout the day; KarRa found it odd but relaxing to listen to their banter. None of the women looked outrageously colorful like the women who painted themselves for the taverns in the Dark. The colors were subtle, the shading dramatic.

One of the women brought over a tiny wooden rack full of small vials. There were strong scents in each, that when added to an oily body cream would leave a scent on your skin. Freezha chose a delicate floral scent. Of them all, KarRa couldn't bear to have any of them clinging to her, but liked vanilla and cinnamon very much. Cro laughed—she wore cinnamon herself.

For some reason, that made KarRa choose vanilla, and she allowed the woman to put only one drop instead of the usual four into the lotion. *Luxurious*. She smoothed it in. As the women all bent to apply it, KarRa saw that some had scraped their body hair, smoothing their skin to bare luster. Freezha had such fair hair that her body hair could hardly be seen. Looking down at her soft slight fur on her arms and legs, dark against her lightly tanned skin, KarRa ran her hands over it. It did not bother her. It was soft. And if she started to smooth herself, she'd have to keep it up or let it grow back rough, like some men's faces. She shook her head. Being a smoothskin was not for her.

Finally the women ate evening meal together, Cro and Fler saying goodnight to return to their families. After the meal Freezha taught KarRa element dice. KarRa learned it easily. The first roll set up your chances. You claimed what element alliance you thought would win and had two more rolls to try to achieve a majority in the alliance. KarRa won the first round with fire allied with air.

Some hours later, Freezha murmured, "I am sad that this is over." KarRa looked up. "I wanted it to be over, but...we will never be together like this again. We have a week left, but we'll be busy with our new men. We will have to leave and learn a new place and new women all over again."

"There is the Autumnal, of course," KarRa offered. "And I bet our husbands, I mean, mates, will let us visit."

Freezha nodded, but KarRa could see her eyes were filling up. They went out to the balcony. Finding that several Wolves were playing chase in the moonlit plaza lightened their mood again. Their colors were uncertain in the dark. She now knew there were five packs. Perhaps red, or grey.

KarRa marveled at the strength and speed of the beautiful bodies as they twisted and leaped at each other, tearing around the open space, nails scrabbling on the stone. One stopped and looked up at them laughing and hanging over the railing and howled, and she thought the sound went right to her soul. Wild. Free. Eventually their energy died down

and they trotted away, down the steps into the outside. KarRa had not yet braved that open space to see the river she had learned was out the door.

“What Clan do you think I should choose?” Freezha asked. Speculating on Clan strengths occupied Freezha late into the night. Freezha was firm in her thoughts of the mysterious and powerful Lizeed surrounded by rumors of atypical sexuality. KarRa thought the quick, playful Marten Clan would be a good match for her.

Privately she thought of seeing Rylan on that raised platform, mantled wings and open beak, a perfect hunter. Her brain also flashed to the Wolf howling at them in the shadows, and Merk hovering above her, his hair enclosing their heat.

When they began to get tired, Freezha convinced her they were hungry and trooped down to the food counters to see what had been left unclaimed. Beasts were great eaters and all that was left were some bread rolls.

After sharing a few, KarRa took some and stuffed them in her shirt. “Oh,” she fluttered, tossing her head, “I’m Freezha! Look at my huge breasts.”

Freezha shrieked and attacked her, trying to get at the rolls, and KarRa was off, running the maze of stairs and halls with a sense of being out of time. They ended up in the grand darkmoon meeting hall, Freezha taking up some sort of formal City dance down the middle. KarRa impressed her by scaling one of the two story columns and coming down another.

Next they went to the treasure room, where Freezha piled on jewelry until you could barely see her skin. After a parade, she put it all back.

Freezha asked KarRa for stories behind some of her scars.

“Well, there’s a funny story about this one here.” Pointing to the back of her left elbow, she explained how in the middle of a riot where she and Rylan were outnumbered six to one he had shouted, “Behind you.”

Feeling the fast approaching body, she only had time to brace her hand onto her hip and swing into a rear elbow jab, expecting to connect to a stomach, or ribs.

“Imagine my surprise,” she barked, gasping to remember, “when I looked back and saw that it was a tiny boy the size of my waist! I banged him right in the mouth! It knocked his head back so hard he almost did a back flip, and left me with a perfect print of his upper teeth for two weeks.”

She was snorting with remembering her stunned assessment of his laid out body that had surprised everyone surrounding her into pausing when she realized Freezha was not laughing. Looking at her friend’s distinctly queasy face, she turned the talk to the few scars Freezha had.

Freezha had a surprisingly long scar on her calf from where she dropped one of the long knives she had taken from a guard and to play with.

KarRa gaped at her. “What made you think you could handle a long knife?!” Most in the Dark had used heavy wooden warclubs, as knives were City weapons and hard to come by. Plus, it was too easy to do too much damage quickly, bringing the Beasts down on you.

“Well, I was pretending. I was swirling it around to keep a pack of wild children away from me, sorry KarRa, and it just kept on swinging into my leg. It’s weird to think of that, now. My best friend is a wildling.”

By now, they watched the first merchants wander onto the plaza to set up their wares and tents. One of the other women came out onto the balcony in wonder that they were

still up.

Laughing, they helped gather breakfast. KarRa's thoughts drifted to the men she would soon meet. Men whose skin she would touch. Men she hoped she could trust.

Breakfast was over when the Lizzeed mage KarRa had met with Merk entered the lounge. He called forward one of the other women, who immediately burst into tears and sat down. KarRa was shocked. He went to her, and they whispered, the other women awkwardly trying to give them privacy. Finally she rose, shaking and clinging to him, and he led her out. And so the day started somber.

KarRa was looking through some books, when another man came and took Freezha. His chest was so deep KarRa wondered if he had fully turned back from being a Bear. She waved to KarRa on her way out, eyes feverishly bright, her step jerky. Then it was the other two women she did not know. By now it was time for midday lunch. The other women not going to the brightmoon ceremony kept well away from KarRa.

She went onto the balcony and sat watching the plaza in peaceful silence. She tested their magepath, but Rylan had his door closed. KarRa thought, *Today I will be made apart from Rylan in a way I have never been before. I wonder if he will be jealous still?*

She worried that it would change his ability to be with her. If he would turn away from her as before. But he had said he would not. That he understood their bond better now, and he had admitted that he loved her. She fretted, sitting in the shadow along the wall, the rock cool at her back. Why hadn't he come by yet this morning? Was he still mad about Merk?

Then Merk was in the door to the balcony. She looked at him and he was dear to her, though she really knew no more about him than before. They smiled at each other at the same moment.

"You look lovely," he said, reaching out his hand.

She nodded her thanks and took Merk's hand. It was big and warm and steady. She walked out into the main hallway by his side. They walked along the same general path they had gone on to the souldance, but went beyond it.

There was a man at the door they stopped in front of that surely must be a white Wolf. His skin was pale, his eyes an eerie silver, and his hair was grey and white. Thinking he would be a fine match for Freezha, KarRa wondered at her calm. She was so taken with him that she didn't notice another man leaning against the hallway wall in the shadows beyond.

He stirred and her eyes saw no more than a flash of hair before she knew..."Rylan!"

The Wolf nodded to Merk and went in, leaving the door ajar. KarRa dropped Merk's hand and went forward to Rylan arms. She settled into him as she always did, with a perfect sense of peace, her head perfectly tucked into the hollow of muscle above his chest and below his shoulder.

Stepping back she asked, "What are you doing here?"

The Wolf came back out of the room and said softly, "The Council is ready."

Merk gestured her forward and KarRa dropped Rylan's hand. "Bye..."

"He's coming, too," Merk said softly.

KarRa frowned at Merk and he again gestured her in.

Uneasily putting herself between the two men, KarRa entered a fairly large room, about the size of the women's lounge, only it was perfectly round, even up to the ceiling, so that she felt inside the dome of a cheese plate. There was a painted star in the middle

of the room and KarRa stopped before it. Merk stepped up onto it, pulling KarRa with him as he did so, and Rylan followed on her other side. They both bowed their heads, so KarRa did too. She had not dared to look up, keeping her gaze down in polite submission. Merk was going to get it for springing this on her. Meeting with the Council was not part of a normal brightmoon ceremony.

A man spoke from directly ahead of her. "Greetings to you, KarRa. Be at ease. We thank you for your efforts in bringing Rylan home to us."

KarRa looked up and recognized Dom, the dark man in a great deal of black leather from Rylan's bonding. Thinking silence wiser she nodded again. This was the high Council of the Truxet, and it was not normal that she was here, with Rylan.

Dom was seated at a thin curving desk with men spaced on either side of him that continued around in a circle behind KarRa, but she did not turn to look. She knew that there were nine councilmen here.

"We have recently met and accepted Rylan of the Owls, and I believe you all know Merk, a golden Wolf. Merk and the spiritmage Alpha, Quor, came to me this morning, and I've shared with the group that he warned us of an unusual circumstance with you KarRa. Quor told us that he had conferred and agreed with Merk's desired proceeding."

Merk spoke loudly and clearly. "Thank you, Dom. KarRa has been with us less than a month, and yet I am asking to bring her to her mate choice with only three men." He paused and KarRa sensed the focus of the group intensify. "One of those men is Rylan, her soulmate. Despite the fact that Rylan has known he was KarRa's soulmate since childhood, he has not consummated the bond."

A man spoke sharply from behind and to KarRa's left. "The bond is open?!"

Merk turned and spoke to him. "Yes, Wolf Council, it is open."

Turning back to the front he continued to address Dom. "Rylan turned away from KarRa in his first needs, and has never asked her for a deeper connection. Indeed, he took active steps to weaken the connection."

Rylan tensed even more, and his hands fisted. She felt a change in his energy as well.

"What steps?" This came from the man to Dom's left.

"There were several, and they continued through his return, Groundbear Council. First, he created distance between them during their work, despite the fact that they had the same jobs. He was then not able to protect her as well and she was raped."

There was an audible murmur that rippled around the circle, but KarRa didn't hear it over the roaring in her ears.

Turning on Merk she spit viciously, "How dare you! My personal details are not to be shared like common news!"

Merk's face was stony as he faced her fury.

"And you know nothing of the circumstances..."

Dom stood and tried to interrupt but KarRa kept right on going.

"—That place was like the eternal burning of the Untrue and no one escaped rape—not even most of the men!"

Dom shouted louder but she ignored him.

"If this is going to be some sort of attack on Rylan it needs to stop right..."

Rylan's hands came up to her shoulders and jerked her back. She spun and slid away and turned on him, to be brought up short by the high color riding his cheeks and his flat closed expression. His hands said {Stop} {Silence} and she snapped her mouth closed

and resumed her position, standing facing front between the two men, stiff as a board. Dom stared at her until she dropped her eyes and he sat.

“KarRa, this is an extraordinary relationship. In fact, Quor thinks it has never happened before in all the history of our people. What Merk shares with us will never leave this room. We often discuss delicate and personal matters, and our people would not trust us if we betrayed confidences. This Council has worked for hundreds of years based on this policy of respect and privacy. Be at ease. Nothing shared here will cause Rylan punishment...” he paused and looked at Rylan, “at least Clan punishment. Continue Merk.”

KarRa heard Merk swallow but his voice was just as loud and embarrassing as before. “He gave her to other men.”

Again an interruption, this time from the man on Dom's right. “He allowed her lovers?”

“Yes, Lizzed Council. In fact, he literally walked her to another man and handed her to him at one point.”

KarRa bit her tongue until her eyes stung at this unfair view.

“Eventually, she left their shared dwelling entirely, driven out by his coldness to her and his choice of another woman, and he allowed it. He told her he wanted to start a family with the other woman. When he came here, he failed to challenge his Alpha when Grif suggested he allow her to live a separate life. He has consistently and diligently attempted to push KarRa away, yet has remained unable to distance himself, returning to her friendship and her bed often.”

Dom turned to Rylan. “As a small child, you felt the pull of her soul so strongly you abandoned your family to find her and you risked your life to keep her. How has it come to this?”

Rylan stepped forward. “I offer myself up to a souldance with Merk.” A shifting and murmuring ran the circle. “Only then will you believe me when I tell you that every action I've made toward KarRa has been from love. Do you know of any other soulmates who found each other so young?”

He waited, and Dom raised his brow regally at Rylan's demand. “I have already said this is an extraordinary relationship.”

“We grew up together. We survived like animals in a cage, without dignity, but we survived against all odds. My feelings for KarRa grew, and the guilt began. She was as my sister, my best friend. In our world, fucking was not about respect. It was about pleasure if you were lucky, rank and dominance if you weren't. When I began to realize it could have respect as well, when I began to crave a family, I was already trained in my will to hold KarRa innocent. I was protecting her from myself. I felt if I added that role to our relationship I would consume her. Already I worried she was too submissive to me. I wanted, no—I needed to make her as strong and independent as possible so that she could survive.

“Death was on us every day. The times I almost breathed my last are too many to tell, and I shiver to think how many times KarRa came close as well. But it was the way of the people around us. You do not know. You do not know what that dark vicious pit was like. If you are imagining some poor and secret corner of a City, you must then imagine that the people there have no hope, no kindness, no law, and no access to change.

“My desire to hide KarRa away, to keep her by my side, was a possibility in that

world. Those women were kept on leashes, chained like pets. That was not the way of my love for KarRa, despite my desire for her safety. If I wouldn't keep her like that, then I had to go the entire other direction—I had to make her so strong she could exist without me, because I would not always be there. All life was on borrowed time in that place.

“It was after my Alpha forced me to see how much our lives have changed now, that my thought to set her free was broken like a mirror. I began to realize that my entire understanding of us was different now. I will not say that my actions in that place were wrong, although I know that you think it was so. KarRa thought so too, I know.”

“But here, now,” he turned to face her, and KarRa was struck to see his eyes swirling with tears and magic, “my love for her is freed from fear for her.”

This was just like the night he came to her after her despair. Stunned wonderment, awe, and some confusion. His passionate and eloquent words were a marvel to her.

Merk spoke, “The fact remains, whatever Rylan's motivation, that KarRa does not consider him a potential mate.” The words rang out clear and firm.

KarRa blinked from Rylan's gaze and turned to Merk again. His eyes were on her. She began to feel itchy at the center of such exposure.

“She tried to fight for him and lost. I have seen into her soul, and though she has desire, she has accepted their relationship as he chose to make it.”

Rylan spoke quickly, a low rasp adding to his words as his control of emotion slipped. “Her desire will finally be granted freedom. I am her soulmate. You cannot deny us.”

KarRa blinked at him, feeling like an Owl herself, her arms limp by her sides. *If an attack came now*, she thought, *I'd fall like a log*.

Merk spoke again. KarRa turned back to him, feeling her neck would be sore tomorrow. “It is my recommendation that KarRa be granted the choice of all three men. To match her to Rylan, despite their soul connection, with their history ... it would be cruel. She deserves a choice, after being forced from her natural inclination for so long that it now feels foreign.”

Rylan roared, “*She's mine!* Our souls are connected! How dare you deny your most sacred bond!” His eyes gone green and his voice a distinct gravel, KarRa reached her hand to his arm, which was so taught it quivered.

“Rylan—stand down. Now you're blowing it.”

She waited until he took a breath and focused on her, appreciating the silence of the watching men. “Rylan, you know that nothing they can do will take away my love for you. They will not take me from you. I am here. I will always be here.”

When his shoulders had dropped and he was purposefully gulping air in measured gasps, she asked, “Do you think that if I have children with another man I will love you any less?”

Rylan bowed his head. “KarRa—I could not bear it. To think I asked acceptance of that from you—I don't know how—I will not have children with any other but you.”

KarRa blinked. She dropped her hand and stepped back without thinking. Her heart seized as soon as she realized the entire room had recognized her physical rejection of that statement. *I'm just surprised*, she wanted to say but her throat was too tight and Dom was speaking.

“I place the vote before the Council. Will we give KarRa to Rylan based on their soulmatch or will we give KarRa a choice of mates due to their extraordinary history?”

He sat and waited. After what seemed an eternity, where KarRa had to drop her gaze from the agony on Rylan's face, a man behind and to her right spoke. "I'll call for the vote."

There was an expectant pause and Dom asked, "No one calls for time or further questions?" The silence seemed to skin down KarRa's neck like a razor wire. "Place your vote, hands raised for allowing KarRa a choice."

Her eyes flew up from the star to scatter around the room. She saw that only a few hands were up.

Dom looked soberly at Merk. "This Council denies your request for mate choice. I for one cannot imagine the sanity of either one should they fail to close their bond. Do you recognize and heed this Council's decision?"

Merk nodded calmly. Rylan threw his head back, jaw and eyes clenched as tight as his fists. He did not look triumphant.

"Lady KarRa, I agree with this Council's majority that a souldance cannot be denied. But I hear the wisdom of Merk's argument, and I offer you another choice. If you stay in Vladaya, you will bond with Rylan in six nights. However, I offer you back your vow of adoption. If you find that bonding with Rylan would be too painful, we will give you a new start in a City."

Dom stood, "KarRa, I suggest you meditate, and listen to your heart. Tomorrow evening you will acknowledge your soulmate before Merk, beginning the wait for the matebond ceremony. I sincerely hope that Merk will be able to guide your forgiveness of Rylan in that time."

Rylan growled, but Dom merely nodded at Merk. Merk turned, his hand gently touching her arm to guide her out. Rylan stalked ahead, a menacing roll of power pushing the air.

The white Wolf turned as the door opened and closed behind them.

"Is there an unused room nearby?" Merk asked.

"Second door on the left," he gestured. Eyeing Rylan's visible loss of control, he asked, "Shall I summon the Owl?"

Merk nodded stiffly. "Thank you."

He again touched KarRa gently to urge her on, and Rylan snarled viciously. KarRa was wound so tight she actually jumped.

"You've won, owlet. Control yourself." Merk's voice was bitter, vicious. "Let's take this into a private room."

The room was a smaller domed circle. It was empty.

Rylan had frozen just inside the door. His eyes were pinned to Merk and a low rumbling snarl was steadily seeping from his throat. KarRa touched his arm and he jumped half her body height in the air and came down in a crouch facing her.

"Rylan, calm down."

Ignoring her, his eyes cut to Merk standing just slightly in front and to the side of KarRa, protectively.

"What are you still doing here? Leave."

Merk shook his head. "I belong here more than you know. She should have been able to consider me."

KarRa knew before he leapt that Rylan was going to attack Merk. She met him in midair, Merk wrestling with them both to put himself between them. Rylan wanted to get

to Merk, not KarRa, and he eagerly turned to grapple with him, despite KarRa grimly beating him back.

Then Grif was there, his hand gripping the back of Rylan's neck with a hard shake as his voice boomed out "ENOUGH!" with a force that echoed in the bare room.

KarRa was spun out of the pile and stumbled to the floor. When the tangle failed to completely stop, Rylan snapping at Grif's arm, KarRa was shocked to see the man pick him up and throw him to the ground one handed, stepping on his throat before he could twist away.

She froze, as did everyone else. Grif's voice was a steady low growl. "I am your Alpha. Submit."

Rylan stayed rigid, quivering, and Grif ground his leather booted foot down. KarRa cried out and scrambled to get her legs under her, prepared to spring on Grif. Grif bent at the waist to stare directly into Rylan's eyes, invading his space until they were nose to nose.

And just like that Rylan went limp, turning his gaze to the side.

"Do you challenge me?"

Rylan lifted one of his hands from where it had reflexively grabbed at Grif's ankle, and motioned {No}, letting both hands fall to his side.

Grif lifted his ankle and reared up, hands on hips, feet spread in a position of utter confidence.

"Throat." It was a demand. Rylan immediately rolled to his knees and bent his head back. Grif bent and took the raised column of his voicebox in his jaws, clamped down and gave his head a little shake.

Rylan's head jiggled limply and after a further minute, Grif released him and stood, leaving the clear red imprint of his teeth, but no blood. He turned only his head, his eyes a demand of Merk.

"They gave her to him." Merk's breath was still coming hard. Surely that was why he sounded so bitter.

Grif turned again to stare down at Rylan. "You are not in the human Dark, to go your own way now. You will follow our ways. *Never attack a brother Trux*. That you did so when you have what *you* wanted disgusts me. Go to the wall, and you will stay there until after everyone has walked out of this room. If you move from it, I will demand balance from you and submission before the Clan. Do you recognize this order?"

Rylan's eyes flew to KarRa's and she saw despair. She didn't understand where it came from. {Yes} he gestured. Smoothly rising to his feet without using his hands he went to the far wall.

KarRa noted there were bloody scratches on his arms and quickly turned to scan Merk. He had scratches as well, deeper.

Grif asked him, "Would you like to go heal?"

Merk shook his head disdainfully, wiping at the blood and smearing it thinly down his arms. "I'm fine." Turning to KarRa, he said, "You are well?"

KarRa had just one scratch, and perhaps a bruised shoulder. She nodded. "Merk, I'm still angry that you told the Council those things. If you truly walked inside me, you know it wasn't like that." She took a steadying breath. "What you said to Rylan... You would have been one of my choices?"

Merk rounded his shoulders. {Apology} "Words without meaning, KarRa. You are a

soulmate.” He flicked a glance at Grif, who crossed his arms.

“All is not final, KarRa. Tomorrow night, you declare your choice. Even though you have only one mate choice due to the soulmatch, you can still choose to refuse him. It would result in your leaving Vladaya, and returning to the Seven Cities, although we certainly wouldn’t dump you back into the fringe of Fourth City. If you cannot join with Rylan with a clear spirit, we—I—will make sure you are able to start a new, better life in a City.”

KarRa stared at Merk for several heartbeats. *A new life?* Not with Rylan? Dazed, her eyes traveled to Grif. He was scowling at her. She moved her eyes to Rylan, rigid against the stone a few paces away.

Rylan took a deep breath. “KarRa, I love you. Nothing would bring me greater pleasure than to have you by my side, and in my bed, from this night on. I recognized that wish the morning I lay with you after Grif’s visit. I have always wanted it in my heart, but never dared to allow myself to think it.

“When I knew I could now come to you as a mate and not just a friend, I wanted to give you time. I wanted to prove myself as a Trux warrior to you. I’ve been moving so slowly, being so patient. Yet here we are, and I can tell you are surprised. KarRa, I know you want me. All you have to do is come to me and I am yours. We are KarRylan.”

Her breath caught in an audible sob at this last.

He finished softly, “We belong together. You have always known this and fought to make me see it. Finally, I am in a place where I am ready to accept it without fear. I am sorry you had to wait.” He looked over at Merk, annoyed. “I am sorry you are in this position because of my choices.”

She heard the implied bitterness at having to argue his right to be with her. Looking back at her, his gaze poured over her features with loving desperation. “KarRa, I can’t imagine you even considering leaving. Please, won’t you stop this?”

KarRa looked at his face, carefully found the strength to stand, then moved to Grif’s watchful gaze and Merk’s dark eyes. Turning back to Rylan she whispered, “I think... I need to hear the spirit paths that are opening before me. You think you cannot bear it that I think about another future?” Rylan’s face tightened but she continued.

“Rylan, I have lived with you going from lover to lover for years. And I could have lived with it for the rest of my life. It might hurt now that you feel I am turning from you, but you can survive it. If I so choose, you will live with it, as I will live with another for you. You trained me well, Ry. You trained me to exist without you, and now I want to think about where that existence might take me.

“You were all I had. No one but you can understand that. You left. No one but you can understand that. You made me strong enough to fight my way out of anything. I’m just not sure I’m strong enough to trust you again.”

Even as she felt Rylan reeling in pain from her words, KarRa acknowledged the flash of satisfaction, of righteousness that swirled through her. Rylan wanted to fuck her?! Rylan wanted her to be the mother of his children now that they were in a safe world? Rylan wanted her instant and adoring acceptance? *I think not.*

“So, I just go?” she asked Merk.

“KarRa! I get to see you tomorrow! Before the choice!”

KarRa nodded, sighing. “Rylan, why don’t you just come at your usual time, first thing in the morning?”

She was taken aback when he grinned widely, a predatory toothy smile of anticipation. It was entirely different from the tension and anger he'd been projecting. "Until tomorrow," he murmured.

KarRa blinked. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

She turned and left in a whirl, her robe swishing oddly around her legs.

She hurried down the hall past the white Wolf, but when she came to the first intersection, she ducked into an alcove and crouched next to a statue of a snarling cat. Wrapping her arms around her knees she buried her face and gave in to deep shivers. She rocked there for some time, her mind full of frozen images from the day, mostly of Rylan's astonishing passionate admissions. Finally she realized her legs had gone numb and let herself slump to the side, leaning on the cat.

Her gaze still down, she ignored the quiet passing of people. Scrubbing her eyes with her fists, she chewed on her knuckles. *What am I going to do? Does Rylan really want me?* she thought helplessly.

First, she would exercise. That would calm and settle her. She'd meditate. Then she would meet Freezha and find out how she was, about her choices. They would eat together. It would be a relief to not think on her dilemma eternally.

And last she would make a list of goods and bads, as she did when planning which major job to work long-term next. She was exhausted. Maybe a nap was needed. It was perhaps not wise to go sleepless before such an important day.

Shaking her head, she felt better at having ordered her day. Struggling awkwardly up with the piles of fabric around her legs, she stood shakily, smoothing the lapels and tightening her belt.

Looking up, preparing to step out from her hole, she froze to see Grif sitting cross-legged across the hall from her, calmly waiting on the floor. She blinked at him. He had been there the whole time and she had not sensed him? Her cheeks flamed at her weakness in front of this man, suddenly recalling her completely bizarre emotional screaming fit back at their talk in the women's caves. He rose smoothly from his seat, not using his hands.

Shifting his stance wide, he nodded at her. "Would you like a guide to your rooms?"

Yes she would, although she hesitated at having it be him. Feeling foolish, she nodded. He turned and she followed. She was surprised when he did not attempt to touch or talk to her. He simply led her at a smooth even pace. Finally she passed the library and she knew where she was. He stopped and turned to her at the entrance. She looked at him cautiously and he seemed amused.

"Good evening KarRa. Be at ease. Your heart will decide at the right time." Turning he went past her. Heaving a relieved breath, she went into her hallway.

The first thing she did was throw off her robe and scrub her face with some water from her pitcher. Slicking her hair back she went into her stretches, ruthlessly keeping her mind on her body and balance. *Left hip lean, right leg extend, weight to right heel, carry to right hip...* When she had completed all the dances she knew and her body was warm and limber but not nearly tired, she sank to the floor and pulled up her mists.

KarRa rarely reflected on her life. Scuffle had believed in meditation as a way to find the truth of things hidden, a way to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in a problem and had taught and encouraged all his Clan to do so. KarRa could do it as well as the next person when it came to studying a difficult job, a tangled relationship knot in her

made family, or sensing which way local Clan alliances were shifting.

But when she reflected on herself, she didn't find it very helpful. Half the time it left her depressed and convinced she was a weak and useless person, and half the time she ended up thinking, "Yep, I'm still me and that's still my life."

First she considered her past. Her closeness with Rylan in the past years, while not nearly the kind of consuming intimate bond she had shared with him before, had still been very close. They met often, and occasionally still shared sleep. They still kept each other's backs in tight places and shared loot as needed. By anyone's standards they were closer than most friends.

She tried to sort out her feelings for how her life had been with him in the last few years. The sadness that pulled at her, the lonely nights, the catches in her chest when he would bring some new woman to a Clan gathering.

The women he used to have when they were still together had not bothered her. She had been curious about what he did with them. She had been mildly puzzled at his excitement both before and after he found someone new to fuck. But when he had someone worthy to *sleep* with, someone he felt he could start a family with...

She could clearly recall the despair that had sapped her physical strength after she had left her old shak after meeting Vili. When she compared her now self to her nineteen-year-old self, she thought that he could possibly be right. She *was* more independent without him.

But mostly, life was about the priorities: food, shelter, safety, and Clan. Safety meant the ability to sleep and eat. Clan meant your likelihood of safety increased. She had fleetingly thought of her Clan these past days. She had thought she would like to send them a message so they would know she had succeeded and be proud of her. But she had not wished to return. Never. Not once.

This surprised KarRa in her drifting reflection, and she spent some time examining the feeling. It was true, she did not want to go back. She did not miss her old life. She had not been here long enough to get a solid feel for the Truxet way of life. But she knew that she would not have to live vigilant and afraid. She would not have to fight for food or shelter. She may still have to fight for safety and Clan, but she would have much more power on her side in those fights. These people valued order, peace, and family.

In the Dark, betrayal was a way of life. There had been a dozen Clans who ruled AlphaZeta, the main City gate, in her time there. And none of them lasted after their fall from power. Scuffle did not work that way, another reason that he lasted. He had hangers on that came and went as they moved up and down the power ladder, but his true made family had to stand the test of time, and magic, before they were marked, literally, in an adoption ceremony. Of his made family, none had betrayed him. She wished Far well in his efforts to hold and grow them.

This life seemed so rich, and peaceful. There were emotional risks, with women having to join with strangers and make new places for themselves. The Beast spirits made things more uncertain, but mostly, men were fair, controlled, and honorable. That was what she had seen, watching for hours from that balcony, and that was what she felt in the air around her.

This was a new world. Food and water was so plentiful it was left out at all hours for whoever wanted it. The fruit KarRa had started taking to her room "just in case" was unnecessary—there was always more. She could study here, for the rest of her life if she

liked. KarRa had always liked learning. It was interesting. Rylan had both craved and hated it. He always had more questions than there were answers for. It made him restless. Maybe he would find those answers here.

Carefully, KarRa allowed herself to remember some of his words. She rolled them around inside her. *Satisfied*. He loved her. *Sad*. He wasted all that time they could have been together. He felt bedplay between them felt wrong, when she had been showing him her sexuality, her most private inner self, for months.

Disappointed. He thought so little of her will that he must prevent the depth of her love, and control her desire to help him, so that she would be “stronger.” Walking by his side her first years hadn't stopped her thinking or speaking her own thoughts. *Shattered*. He abandoned their bond. He purposefully decided, *KarRa does not want to have children so I will go to another*. Now she understood his jealousy the morning after Merk. He was wrong. And he now knew it. He was still justifying it, saying that their history and circumstances confused these decisions. He was wrong. He had wronged her. Even some of the Council had agreed.

She looked at this vindication in her heart. She looked at it in her darkest places. And she was *not glad*. She was still sad. She felt she had lost something.

Now she was being offered it. He was telling her he loved her, that he wanted to be with her, by her side, for always. He wanted to touch her. He wanted to claim her. It was hers for the taking, everything she had cried for silently, secretly. Every dream she had forced to shrivel and hide was unfolding before her.

But now she had another powerful choice. Her feelings twisted with disbelief. If the choice had been taken from her, it would have been easier. *Freedom*. A life *inside* a City, with a place, a purpose of her own shaping.

With Rylan she would have someone she had known well, but who was becoming someone new. She would have a connection that others couldn't touch, but it was hers without taking him as mate. Even if she went to the moon, she would still be his, and he hers.

Five years ago, even three, she never would have considered leaving him. She would have thought being by Rylan's side was the only possible way to exist. *WAS it?!* He had asked her to stop considering it, and she hadn't, angry at his presumption.

How shocked he must be that she thought it *was* presumption. She had never given any indication she would not jump into his finally open arms with joy. Her calm, controlled, purposeful meditation was getting all twisted up now, her mind and heart confused, amazed, dazed.

She opened her eyes. The solid grey rock walls and smooth, slightly dusty floor greeted her. No chucks or bugs crawling, no eyes prying, no fingers picking at weaknesses. Food and bathing water were waiting, as were friends who welcomed and accepted her without first having stood at her back, bloodied, facing down rage and terror. Her life was different. Rylan was different now. She was becoming different. It was enough for this meditation to recognize that, and to accept that she *was* considering leaving.

When she went to bathe, the others were there, talking softly about what they thought the Autumnal would be like. Freezha had stayed at River Mountain last fall. Clearly they were all avoiding the looming decision. Joining them, she thought that Freezha looked as if she had been crying, and was plainly fading in and out of the

conversation. After they finished, KarRa discovered she had missed even meal. She fixed herself a plate of food from the one left on the table in the lounge, and trailed into Freezha's room.

Freezha's room was surprisingly barren when it wasn't strewn with clothes. The only difference between hers and KarRa's was the large iron bound trunks at the foot of the pallet, and a thick black fur on the bed. The women sat, KarRa forcing herself to eat.

Freezha burst out immediately, "I have news! I'm choosing a Lizzed!"

KarRa leaned in and hugged her warmly, "That's wonderful Freezha. I wish you much happiness." She added weakly, "You made a decision quickly."

Freezha nodded happily as she settled again, "I know. It was easy. I told my spiritmage when he walked me back, and guess what he said—the Lizzed was the first match he found for me! It was meant!"

KarRa tentatively offered, "Freezha, I hope you looked at the men as individuals. It seems dangerous to choose based on your daydreams, which were based on rumors."

Freezha was still nodding. "I listened carefully to all my men. But I chose one before I heard any of them speak. You *see*, I *knew* one of them!" She paused dramatically, leaned forward and whispered with glee, "One of them was Vyr!"

KarRa paused with her mouth full of food. "Oh. My. Winds. *Vyr*!? The combat warrior? Are you out of your moon-blinded MIND?!"

"YES!" shouted Freezha back, with a huge smile. Her hands flew to her mouth as if to hold in her joy. "Pitifully weak, tiny, fluff headed, sex-obsessed me is going to mate with strong, dangerous Vyr. Isn't it completely odd?!"

KarRa could only nod.

Freezha heaved a big sigh, clasping her hands between her knees. "It's as romantic as you finally getting to fuck your soulmate!"

Another pause. "Excuse me?" KarRa swallowed with an audible gulp. "What makes you say that?"

Freezha goggled, "Wasn't he your soulmate after all?"

Her skin was twitchy. Sullenly rolling a berry on her plate she muttered, "He is. But I don't have to mate with him."

"WHAT?!" Freezha cried.

"Well," KarRa shrugged, "everything is messed up between us according to Merk, my spiritmage. So he didn't think the Council should just match us, but they disagreed. I still have a choice. I'm considering leaving. I don't know if I can, or should, make a family with Rylan. I could start a new life, my own life, if I wanted to, knowing Rylan was where he's meant to be."

Freezha still stared at her shock, her eyes deepening to lavender.

She added defensively, "I really don't know if I'm meant to be here."

Freezha pounded her tiny fists on the bed. "How dare you! You have true soul love laid at your feet and you turn your nose up at it?!"

"My true soul love can be a real bastard and he'll be my love no matter what choice I make." KarRa bit out the words at Freezha.

Pink spots appeared high on her white face. "KarRa, I'm sorry for yelling at you. I don't know what your life with Rylan was like, and I do know that it was hard. But I'm telling you, soulmates are magic." Her voice was soft, but passionate. "It is the rarest, truest, most infallible magic there is. I think you'd make a mistake choosing another path."

Rylan would still be there for you, but you wouldn't experience the truest form of the bond. It would be like a child who never grew up, forever frozen in immaturity."

KarRa looked at her searchingly. "I hear your words Freezha." Changing the uncomfortable subject she asked, "So what did Vyur do when you told him?"

"Oh, I wouldn't make it that easy on him." She waved her hand dismissively. "He's going to have to sweat this. I chose one other to see tomorrow, this super big, super sexy Watercoaster." She growled as she shivered dramatically. "I can tell he's just the sweetest, gentlest guy. I'll tell him right off so I don't mislead him. I wish I could have told him tonight. Vyur's kind of in a category of his own. Maybe I'll get a test fuck..." Freezha burst out laughing at KarRa's shocked look.

"Some women think they should know what they're getting before the matebond ceremony, where we get to find out in front of witnesses. And the Beasts are already crazy to get to us. Seduction is usually a big part of the waiting week. You can't see the guards, but our balcony and the hallway are guarded tonight. The men have been known to ... be overeager." Freezha shivered. KarRa didn't know if it was from fear of excitement, but she'd bet it was the latter. "Can you imagine the danger of them losing control of their Beasts! Well, Lizzeed control their Beasts better than any Clan. So maybe I'll do it."

KarRa yawned, which triggered one in Freezha. Freezha laughed, "Let's do another girl's night out before the matebond!"

KarRa groaned and pretended to lift her empty plate to beat Freezha with it. Laughing, they said their goodbyes with a hug.

The next morning KarRa was awakened by a hissing at her curtain. "KarRa! Wake up!" The monotony of it told her Freezha had been hissing for a while.

"Enter!" KarRa called hoarsely. She couldn't believe she had slept the night through so soundly!

"Are you dressed?"

"Well enough." Her sleeping shirt was nothing like the lacy gauze Freezha wore.

Freezha ducked in pulling a massive, reluctant Lizzeed. His thickly scaled bald head shone in the low light. KarRa sat bolt upright on her bed, her feet scrambling underneath her in a position that she could spring from if necessary, her back to the wall.

"KarRa, this is Vyur! Vyur, this is my friend KarRa. She gave me pointers on how to flip you." When Freezha spoke, Vyur watched her carefully, as if every sound from her lips was of the utmost importance. He turned when she finished and bowed briefly to KarRa.

"I am looking forward to our meeting on the training mats soon." His voice was flat when he looked at her, as was his gaze. Despite his absolute control, KarRa was more aware of the Beastspirit in this man than any other she had met. It was a shadow in his eyes. KarRa kept herself tensed, not relaxing for an instant. She was in the presence of one of the most dangerous men she'd ever met.

She cleared her throat. "This is an early introduction Freezha."

"I know! But not that early. It's time you're up anyhow. I met with my Watercoaster already and told him I couldn't consider him, then called Vyur in early and told him just a while ago." She glanced at him shyly. "I decided after I meditated last night that I couldn't make him worry. It wasn't kind. This is too important to play games."

KarRa was amazed that Freezha was so modestly dressed. She had on a cream tunic

much like KarRa's, whose neck only dipped slightly at the throat, and a long brown skirt that was admittedly frilly and flowing, but the hem fell clear to the floor. Her hair was pulled into a simple roll at the back of her neck. Freezha looked like she was thirteen.

"Why are you dressed like that?" KarRa couldn't help the curious question leaving her mouth.

Vyur's gaze seemed to grow even colder, his immense shoulders squaring.

"Ummmm. Yes, well, actually, Vyur suggested I change after I first saw him, and then when I did, he suggested it again. It's so funny you should ask about that. Because you know, well, it got me thinking and I thought, "Maybe I'll ask KarRa for her *magic* blessing after all." "Freezha, not so subtly, opened her eyes wide and innocent and blinked rapidly at KarRa, using the motion to hide a wink from the side of her face away from Vyur.

KarRa understood instantly. Freezha was unhappy with Vyur's clothing preference. He had dictated something already that conflicted with a very large part of Freezha's nature, and now she was nervous.

"Ah." KarRa nodded. "I see." She looked at Vyur, whose hard gaze was now suspiciously on his promised-mate. "I am going to rise and approach you," she warned Vyur. "I will not touch you, but I will be close."

"You are a spiritmage to offer blessings?" he asked, again with a hint of suspicion.

"Not really—ummm, well yeah, I guess I am! Freezha knows of my magic and likes it."

Vyur stared hard at her but finally nodded.

KarRa rose smoothly and slowly, a controlled movement that would sooth Vyur. Stepping off the bed she glided up to Freezha in balanced steps.

Closing her eyes and raising her hand to hover over the middle of Freezha's chest, she drew up her mists. Catching the essence of Freezha, which she saw as lavender blue that matched her eyes, she moved her hand over to Vyur, and up to his center. She concentrated on the deep purple she saw, then opened her eyes and stepped back. Freezha was holding her breath with her tiny fingers curled together at her stomach in childish superstition.

KarRa smiled fondly at her. "You *are* blessed Freezha."

Breath whooshing out in a rush, she seemed to deflate, looking perplexed. Vyur watched her with, KarRa thought, a faint wisp of worry. "There are many things in life magic does not fix, Freezha. Even a spiritmage would say so."

The girl nodded unhappily, then determinedly drew herself up and gave KarRa a hug. "Thank you," she whispered in her ear.

Spinning to Vyur, she said, "I have lots of questions for you! Let's go to the river and walk."

KarRa thought he might have given the faintest sigh of relief. She jumped, bracing herself when he bent toward her.

But he was merely giving a formal head bow. "My thanks for your blessing. Good-bye."

KarRa pulled on her clothes and went to use the washing room. After she was put together, she picked up a teapot from the side of the lounge and had just set it down on the table in her room when Rylan stalked into the room without asking. He continued to stalk right up to her until he'd backed her into the wall.

“What are—?!”

He cut her off by lowering his head and running his nose all over face. Pulling back he growled, “Who’s been here? I can smell him.”

“Yeah, I had a little test fuck...”

Rylan's lips slammed down on hers, eating at her mouth.

Stunned, she stood frozen beneath the hard licks and demanding wash of frustration for about two seconds before she tentatively began to move her mouth under his.

He growled again and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight to him with a hand at the small of her back, the other at the back of her head. His mouth was slanting back and forth, his teeth nipping, his tongue stroking. The pressure changed from hard and desperate to coaxing, to frenzied, to savoring. A wisp of fire flickered between her legs, grew into a flame that licked her belly, and explored into an inferno.

They had kissed many times, sometimes quick hard smacks of pursed lips, sometimes soft nuzzling touches. Never with passion. Never like this.

KarRa wondered at his taste, how it went perfectly with his smell, both of which settled deep into her body. The raspy feel of his tongue, the perfect way he sealed their mouths, broke apart to tease and lead her tongue, and then shifted for another sensation. He was Rylan, but as she had never known before.

Soon his hardness pressed between them, and his hips began to surge against her. Shocked, she jerked away from the aggressive heat. He followed, grinding against her mound. His lips picked up the same rhythm. The beat of him against her belly filled her with an urgency that made her heart wild.

She hesitated at the intense feeling, and he fused his mouth to hers and drank deep while he ground himself into her in a rolling slide.

He was saying, Yes I'm hard, and no it's not like before, where we'd both ignore it like it meant nothing.

It went on and on, the deep pressure against her stomach, and her tongue so tangled with his she didn't know whose was whose. His taste was sliding down her throat, and she wanted more. She wanted to eat him, every inch of his skin. Her hands fisted in the sides of his vest. Any minute now her skin was going to combust.

In the middle of the incredible building sensation he broke away, literally staggering away to brace himself with his back to her at the table. They were both heaving for breath.

After several breaths she was still without anything to say, but he turned and her breath caught at his lowered and forward thrust head, his eyes the green of carrot tops with mageheat, his hands in fists.

“KarRa, I love you. It will be so good between us. It will be my final homecoming. Know this—no matter what you choose, we *will* fuck sometime soon. I won't be able to help it, and you will just have to deal with it. You. Are. Mine. No matter where you think to go.”

KarRa opened her mouth, to say *what* her stunned brain didn't know. What would have fallen out she never knew, because he lunged for the door and left.

About twenty heartbeats later, KarRa unlocked her knees and sagged against the wall, slowly sliding down it to sit stunned on the floor. *That* was Rylan? She had just *kissed* Rylan? He had *promised* to fuck her? After several more moments she finally had a thought beyond her surprise. *What was she going to do?*

The day passed with agonizing slowness. She did set after set of knifedances, read, bathed again, ate when she wasn't hungry, and watched the plaza from the balcony. When she wasn't brushing her fingertips across her still tingling lips, she was imagining living in a proper shak inside safe City walls, perhaps part of a Guild where she was trained. With high Guild mages to teach her, perhaps she could discover the key to her magic. She remembered the intimacy she felt with Merk. Could she take lovers? Her thought churned her stomach, and brought not the memory of Merk's heat, but Rylan's as he pressed her into the wall, his erection like a warclub against her belly.

After the evenmeal she saw Freezha hesitate at the opening of the lounge. {Follow me} she motioned, and went on to her room. Freezha had piles of clothes on every surface, from the morning's difficulties no doubt.

"KarRa of the soulmate! How did it go?!"

Like a child, KarRa blurted out the thing that had kept her brain frozen the whole day. "Rylan kissed me today!"

"Best ever incredible? Or just happy toes incredible?"

"I think, best ever."

Freezha sighed sadly. She said mournfully, "I didn't get any happy toes at all. Not even a tummy wiggler. Just some shivers. Vyr's so proper. He says it isn't official until star-rise. And I'm mad at him for keeping secrets! *He knew!* He knew he was a potential mate of mine from the first moment he met me, and told that big behemoth Wat, and they *both* didn't tell me! He thought I wouldn't pick him! Have you ever heard of anything so silly? As if any man could compare to him."

Shaking her head she said, "Well, KarRa, if you got the best ever from your soulmate, it just seems like an easy decision to me. Your old life will fade. Let go of the hurts you shared in it. He'll change; you'll change here too."

"But Freezha, I can see a future..."

"KarRa. He. Is. Your. Soulmate!" Freezha turned to face her more fully on the bed, her face deeply concerned. "You are still considering this. KarRa, I just don't understand."

KarRa looked away from her searching eyes. She didn't know why this reaction made her want to dig in her heels, but she knew it wasn't fair. "I know you don't. I'm going to go meditate."

As she stiffly stood to go, Freezha asked softly, "Did you try to prove Rylan with your magic?"

KarRa shook her head. "How can I prove a man when he is so saturated with myself I can't tell our soulair apart?"

"The soul doesn't lie."

KarRa didn't respond to Freezha's quiet, searing words, and left.

KarRa decided to work out, again. Then she decided to brew some tea. Then she rearranged the table and chairs in her room. She heard a woman walk past crying in the corridor and finally forced herself to sit folded on her bed. Her mind spun. *Rylan could be hers.* Did he deserve her after making her live alone? *Rylan could be hers.* A City life, even inside the Royal City itself, could be hers.

And then she came to a realization, eyes flashing open to stare at the pretty pattern hanging heavy over her door. The City was safe. The City was hiding. The City was protection from a Rylan who wanted what she had fought hard to push deep inside herself

and close ruthlessly off. She wouldn't have to face her best friend who had become a passionate stranger.

Rylan had turned away from her over and over. *She was afraid*. She was afraid he would do it again.

She was still staring at the curtain, her thoughts stunned, swooping, when she heard Merk's voice call softly, "KarRa, are you there?"

"Come," she croaked out. He came in and stopped just inside the drape, clearly surprised at the look on her face. Blinking rapidly she felt the wetness of her lashes, and reached up to touch the strange tracks on her face.

He came to her, kneeling in front of her, his hands folded on his thighs. "Can I help?"

She looked at him and felt small, and sad, for what would not be between them, and what they had so briefly had. Swallowing, she whispered, "Can you tell me that Rylan will not decide it is "good for me" to leave me again?" She held her breath, falling into Merk's deep eyes as if the answer would appear there.

Merk tilted his head. "No, KarRa. I cannot tell you that. But I can tell you that you are in a position now to fight much harder than you did before. You will have children now. More than your skills and his now protect you. He is no longer afraid of fucking you. You are older. All of his excuses are negated."

"Not that he can't make up new ones," KarRa said bitterly.

Merk nodded. "Then it will be up to you to fight for him. And this time win. You are strong, KarRa. You deserve love. Demand it. Then accept it. If you hold and return it, I do not think your fears will come to pass.

"Tell Rylan of these fears. He betrayed you, and that will always be between you. He cannot undo it by his sudden righteous claiming at the final moment. He will have to earn your forgiveness, and you have the strength inside you to grant it. But the insecurity he caused between you could last forever. He should know about it, so he can always tend a fire of reassurance. He will have to keep it bright to keep the shadows away."

KarRa let out a sob. She reached out her arms and he rose up on his knees and folded her close. "You are so wise. But I do not know if I have the strength that you say. I'm so scared. Why should I take this hard road, when I have another before me?" With her face turned away into his shoulder she found the courage to whisper, "A City life would be easy, something I never thought to have."

Merk pulled away and settled again on his knees, keeping a hand loose around her wrist. "You can choose that path if you want. You're right about that future. But the jobs that you had to work harder at, plan and scheme and fight for, those had the biggest rewards. You are meant to be more than happy, KarRa. You are meant to be a shining, blended soul, with a love that is mirrored back into itself into infinity." He sat quietly, calmly.

She clenched her fists to stop her fingers from trembling. "I want to lie down and sleep forever. Never wake up. I want to run away and live by the river in the forest until the winter steals my old breath in the night. I..."

"Well, it's not going to happen. So spend your time deciding instead of avoiding. You have about ten minutes."

Rolling to his feet with flowing grace, he nodded a controlled bow and said formally, "I, Merk, Wolf spiritmage, summon KarRa to her mate choice. Please follow me."

He went to the door and waited as KarRa stood, rubbing her legs. Licking her lips she nodded to him and they walked out.

They returned on the long walk to the room she had been to before, just past the Council chamber, which was open and dark. He walked in ahead of her and stopped inside the door.

Swinging her gaze up to Rylan, dreading a confident, demanding stare, she instead saw him standing with shoulders squared awkwardly, arms hanging loose at his side, with tears rolling down his face.

She had not seen him cry since Scuffle's death, and that had been the first time she had seen him cry since he held her through the night after her rape, weeping silent tears she did not, the only safe way to cry in the Dark. She hesitated, surprised at the despair she saw on his face. His need and love were laid bare, without any pride. She looked down.

Merk spoke. "KarRa, your soulmate awaits your choice."

Looking up at him, she said quietly but clearly, "I choose Rylan."

Chapter 4: Day

An hour later, KarRa sat on her bed in her room, staring at the ceiling. Freezha slinked in at last, her cheeks blazing, eyes sparkling. “Finally! A happy toes moment!”

Freezha gracefully folded herself onto the floor in front of KarRa, just as Merk had. She took KarRa’s freezing hands in her own, frowning at their chill and chafing them. “Tell me?”

“I chose Rylan.”

Freezha shrieked and launched herself at KarRa.

KarRa batted her away, feeling snappish. “Shhh! It’s late.”

Freezha ignored her, spinning and leaping around the room. “Oh! Oh! I’m so glad! I hope you have the most incredible fuck of your life!”

KarRa rolled her eyes. “Freezha will you stop?!”

Freezha hugged her tightly, ignoring KarRa’s stiffness. “You did right. I know it. Once you sleep on it you’ll see,” she whispered in KarRa’s ear. Shrugging at KarRa’s stony face, she left, and KarRa had nothing to do but sit and remember.

Rylan had fallen to his knees, shoulders shaking. “KarRa, KarRa, KarRa,” he had cried. She had stayed frozen at the door.

“I hear and confirm that KarRa has chosen Rylan of the Owl. KarRa, do you agree?”

“Yes.”

Merk had nodded, and left.

Rylan had risen shakily to his feet to take a pace toward her. “KarRa?”

The uncertainty in his voice broke her heart and she finally unclenched her fingers and went to him, folding into his embrace as she always had, as if the hollow of his shoulder was made to cup her head. Her body at ease against his, her heart thundered crazily, and his pounded, too.

He bent his head over her and brushed his face back and forth over her hair. Pulling back, he looked at her with wonder and reached out to grab her hand, holding it tightly between his own, almost desperately.

Looking down at their clasped fingers he choked out, “I was so sure I had lost you. I felt your anger, and fear. KarRa, you have to tell me why you chose me.” He knelt in front of her, as if he would pray to her.

Her eyes drifted over his face—the chiseled jaw, the blade of his nose, the arch of his brows. The tear tracks could still be seen on his cheeks.

“I didn’t want to.” Her words made him flinch, but he tightened his grip on her hands.

It was her turn to look at their entwined fingers. “Rylan...” It was so hard to say the words to him. “I’m so afraid you’re going to tell me to go away again. To protect me, to “free” me, to give yourself something I don’t want to give... I can’t believe that you will want me for long.”

This last came out in the barest whisper, and with a cry he surged up and wrapped her in a tight hold.

“KarRa! Never again. I tell you now: *I will hold you*. I will never turn from you. I will never want another and will never let you leave.” He pulled back, shaking her

shoulders as he looked at her with feverish eyes. “Do you believe me?”

KarRa’s chin trembled. “I believe you mean that now...”

Rylan threw back his head and roared with pain. Spinning, he paced wildly around the room, fisting his hands.

Whirling back to her he snarled, “I can never take it back! I did it! I separated us. I will have to live with that decision for the rest of our life. I will not try to explain to you again why I made it. But I thank the elements that came together to give you the courage to allow me to try again. I hope it is because you can sense the truth in my soul—that I love you. I crave you, I lust after you, and I honor you. I have forever and I will forever.”

KarRa’s eyes welled up as she stood limply, looking into his fierce eyes. “It is hard for me to believe. I am not special. I look nothing like your other lovers. I am not beautiful...”

Groaning with frustration he ground his clenched knuckles into his forehead. “KarRa—you are the woman I will love for the rest of my life. If you died tomorrow, there would be no other.” He glared at her, his scowl at odds with the beauty of his words.

She dropped her gaze and he padded up to her, tipping her chin up. His voice was softer, but firm. “I, Rylan, see you, KarRa. Your beauty and wit and honor. I see you and I know that you see me. You have seen me at my worst. My worst toward you. I pray that you never see me like that again.

“I, Rylan, dare to love you still, KarRa. I am KarRylan. Know that the pain I caused you has bounced back to live as deeply in me as it did in you. I can never erase it. All I do is lie awake trying to think of ways to apologize, to make you believe how you still need me, still want me.

“We are bound in ways I couldn’t break even when I was terrified for you, thinking I was about to die and leave you defenseless. I pray those bonds hold true, now that you are in a place where you truly don’t need me. You will thrive here, finally valued. I want the chance to cherish you, spoil you, dream of a new life with you. I know where you’ve been. I understand your nightmares and the miracle of your survival. I’m finally in a place where I can let myself believe that our bond won’t endanger you, won’t bring you down.”

His fingers curled tighter to grip her chin firmly. Leaning down to peer intently into her dazed eyes he growled, “Do you know why I was so afraid to fuck you? Have you guessed?”

“I thought perhaps I was too familiar to you...”

“No. By the Fire, when I think of watching you take your own pleasure, just inches away. The way your scent tortured me, the craving I had to taste you... You have no idea how many times, how *every* time I watched you I wanted crawl on top of you, hold you down, drink your blood from your throat, and bury my flesh *so* deep into you, over and over, and never stop.”

KarRa’s breath caught, her head pulling back unconsciously at this surprising passion.

“Yes. You will face this. I wanted to devour you. To control your pleasure until there was nothing you could do but take it. It was possessive and violent and ugly.”

“No—not ugly!” Her hands came up to gently ring his wrist holding her chin. “Never ugly, Rylan. I know passion isn’t pretty and gentle.”

He curled his fingers into hers and stood, eyes glittering down at her, breathing thickly.

"It was more than passion. It was dangerously close to ownership. It terrified me. I felt ashamed of how I wanted you. And I needed children and I know and understand that you didn't want children in that place. We'll have to talk about children another time. But I hurt you. That's all you need to remember, so you can push out all the anger and pain. It won't happen tonight. But I know it's there, and I know I deserve it. I understand it. I'm so, so sorry."

His hand moved from stroking her lip to touch the scar at the base of her neck. "I'm so sorry. But sorry doesn't change what happened. I can only go forward, and show you day by day it will never happen again. And day by day you have to find the courage to believe me, and try."

KarRa smiled shakily. "You speak so beautifully. Your words are like touches on the inside of me."

He smiled back, a glowing smile full of relief and love. "It's your beauty, inside and out, that inspires my words. KarRa, thank you for joining with me. I won't disappoint you." His smile lengthened into mischief and satisfaction. "And for the record, I'm asking *you*. KarRa, will you be my lover?"

She blinked at him. "*Now?!?*"

He chuckled, his eyes crinkling. "If you like." He took her hand that was still in his and pressed it to his cock, rigid and throbbing in his leathers.

"Oh! Rylan..." she looked around dazedly at the bare rock room. "Can we go somewhere else?"

He pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "Oh, KarRa," he sighed as he wrapped her tight. "We won't love tonight. You're exhausted, and I think, still confused."

Pulling back he wrapped his hands around her head and whispered, "But I think I can give you something to dream on."

So smoothly, so naturally, his head angled to hers, their mouths meeting in a rush. This time she was a full partner from the first instant, lips clinging, brushing, lingering, tongue flicking, folding, and twirling. He was delicious. He was so warm, so exciting. His body so familiar against hers, and so new. Her arms snuck under his to curl around his back, broad and strong, and up over his shoulders. He tightened, shivered.

They stood for moments lost in time, an eternity of falling, with their souls flowing through their breath, mingled and exchanged. He was murmuring to her every time their lips came away, *my love, my woman, my only, mine, so beautiful, so sweet...* KarRa went taut in return as the moments spun on, the soft moist sounds, slight groans and whimpers coming from her making his hips twitch every time he heard them. Panting, the kisses softened to brushing sweeps and he rested his forehead against hers, a move so dear and precious to her that her throat swelled closed.

The past had goodness in it. The darkness in it would be overwhelmed with all the good that they had shared, the support, the laughter, the trust. She would work to make it so.

Finally, he pulled away and led her, hands together, side by side, back to the women's caves.

The next morning, KarRa had Freezha brief her again on the layout of River Mountain. After knowing every twist of her thin circled streets all her life, she found the

complexity and vastness of the strange place daunting. Because River Mountain was the seat of the Council, every Clan had a lair that was their territory within its maze. No one entered these private tunnels without escort by that Clan. But it was also the permanent clanhome for three Clans, and they had more extensive caves.

There were twelve levels to River Mountain, but three of them were subterranean and referred to as underground one, two, and three. This was where an underground lake and hot springs was. The ground level was taken up with the enormous plaza, food service rooms, and storage. The plaza was an enormous empty core that continued up through the middle of levels two through six.

After breakfast, KarRa sent a note to Cro about her choice, and the women filed out to meet their promised-mates. Freezha, again dressed modestly, leaped with a shout of exuberance onto Vyur, wrapping her legs around his waist. He greeted her stoically, but his eyes betrayed his emotion, full of awe and love and heat. His hands caught her up gently, but KarRa clearly saw the possession in them.

KarRa shyly approached Rylan. She was uncertain and awkward, but he smiled his beautiful grin and took her hand as if greeting her like this was natural. He led her down the hall, not letting her separate their hands. Squeezing it he offered, "How was your night?"

"Surprisingly short. Rylan, I have something to tell you that kept getting put aside in all this mating stuff. It's really important."

Tipping his head, he asked concernedly, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. It's a good something."

"Well for an important something good, let's go to the Owl caves."

KarRa nodded. "Sounds good. We were talking about the layout of River Mountain at breakfast. I have a lot to learn. It sounds as complicated as the Dark."

Rylan laughed. "If we learned that, we can learn this. I haven't explored much actually. I was taken on a tour shortly after I arrived, but I've been in training so much I haven't learned much more than the path from the Owl caves to the main library, and how to get to the plaza. Want to take it on?"

It was a long walk up to the Owl caves. The caves were not much different than the women's caves, except for a larger wash room and lounge. Taking her into the comfortable lounge, he sat with her, pouring tea.

"Tell me."

"My spiritmage found my Element." She watched him cautiously.

His head jerked up. The spout sloshed tea when he dropped it. He stared at her, shocked. Then that wide, beautiful smile took over his face and he shone like the sun, eyes glowing.

"Spirit or Air," he whispered.

"Spirit," she whispered back.

He whooped. Staring at her, he laughed outright, jumping to his feet. "I knew it! I *knew* it!"

She jumped up too, her loud laugh bursting forth with love that he knew what this meant for her.

"Finally!" he shouted, grabbing her up in a hug.

"Finally," she sighed.

He launched into a wild sashay through the tables, tossing her, manhandling her into

spins, until they were breathless.

Back at their tea, they raised their mugs in a toast. "To Vladaya. Look at this new life we found. Because of you. Here's to Spirit and Fire."

She slugged back a swallow. Sera had warned her that she would be changed. This was change.

Later, he showed her the Eyrie, a cone shaped room with thick wooden branches set all about the walls. Massive Owls and sleek Hawks took her breath away.

"Do I get to see you fly?"

To her astonishment he blushed. "Can I get better first? There's still a lot of ... flopping."

She laughed. "Just like old times, learning how to flip from a roof hang."

By the time evening drew near and Rylan was walking her back, she was so at ease he took her by surprise when he pulled her suddenly into an alcove with a statue of a woman covered in flowers, the Earthmother. He wrapped her close, rubbing his hips into her, and inhaling deep.

"I love that my scent is the only one on you." He dropped soft nibbling kisses on her face until her heart kicked up from waiting for one to fall on her lips. He finally hovered over her mouth, and then surprised her again by dropping to his knees.

Pushing up her tunic with rough hands, he began to kiss her stomach with hard, nipping kisses, lavishing his tongue in swirls around her belly button before sucking on it softly.

Looking up at her, he gasped, "KarRa, I have to smell you. Please, please, let me smell you. I won't do anything else, but if I don't take your scent deep soon I think my Owl will take me tonight."

Confused, KarRa let her hands drift wonderingly through his hair. "All right."

Rylan surged to his feet again, pulling her around the corner, past the now ever-present knot of men at the women's door, and on to the park along the hall. She was surprised to see that it was not a garden at all, but a sort of natural space where a crevice in the mountain let light shine through. It continued in a serpentine river of green away from the hall, brush and small trees all around a slender path worn between them in the dirt.

He threaded through the bushes, still striding so fast KarRa was towed behind him. When he was out of sight of the path he stopped, fell to his knees and began to work at her leathers with frantic fingers.

"Rylan!"

"What? You said. You said I could. KarRa, just a smell, it's been so long, I have to..." his voice halted as her leathers cleared her slight hips and fell to her calves in a whisper. Mesmerized, Rylan urged her legs as far apart as the pants would allow, and ever so slowly let his face fall toward her curly bush, until his forehead pressed into it tightly and his nose was pushed past her lips.

His hands were around her thighs, and he inhaled, at first deep and slow, but changing to harsh pants. She stood with her hands on his head, her heart pounding at the strangeness, but recognizing this was important to him. It was strange to her to feel him pressed against such an intimate spot. He'd never before touched her down there. He began to put out waves of heat, yet his skin shivered. Her skin shivered too.

After what seemed an eternity his breath slowed and deepened again, his nose

nuzzling in her moisture, his breath hot across her core. He pulled back and looked up at her again, now appearing thoroughly drugged. This was the heavy lidded Truxet look of lust she had learned.

"KarRa," his voice was a low growl, "Thank you. Let me repay you. A taste. A taste of the pleasure I owe you. I want to shower you with it."

KarRa froze. She couldn't find the courage to ask her best friend to suck until she came. There was heat at her knees, feeling his fingers lengthen, nails scraping lightly as they extended. Her mind flashed to her finger being suckled in Merk's mouth and she croaked, "Blood?"

He shook his head, fingers trailing up her leg to brush against her curls. "Too dangerous. For now, this. Your woman's milk. Just enough of a taste to make you rise."

His eyes glowed and she found herself whispering, "Yes."

Using his hands to pull her lips open and pin them to her thighs, he stared at her soft pinkness until she squirmed. "Rylan!"

He looked up at her and growled, his eyes now radiating green. "I watched you touch this so often. No more holding back." He leaned forward, then pressed the flat of his tongue to her and dragged it firm and smooth to the tip of her clit. Falling back onto his haunches he growled at it, then leaned forward, burying his nose against it as his tongue reached further back. He swirled it around in her moisture and pulled away again, panting.

"Oh Winds. That's too much," KarRa gasped out. "Let..." she squeaked as he surged to his feet, kicked one leg behind her to force her knees to unlock, and then lowered her backward to the grass.

With her feet tied by her pants she couldn't stop him. Propping herself up on her hands she was stunned as he ripped at her boot and wrestled one foot out of the pants. Not bothering with the other leg, he leaned against her, knocking her arms out so she fell completely flat, sweeping her knees up and back to her shoulders so her hips were rolled up high and her center spread wide.

He attacked her cunt, eating, sucking, licking, driving his tongue as far as he could into her depths, worrying her clit with his teeth. KarRa gasped, choking back screams as intense pleasure hit her out of nowhere. Once again, the inferno exploded through her body, triggering a pulse pounding lust. In heartbeats, she was heaving her uptilted hips against his mouth, unable to keep from reaching for more.

Crouched between her legs, he looked up her body. With a voice gone gravelly, he said, "This is just the beginning. You deserve so much. Finally, I can unlock you. I'm going to set you free."

His hold kept the nails from her skin as he folded himself over, sealed his mouth to her, and began to suck hard. KarRa squirmed as his tongue lashed her wildly. The growl vibrating from his throat only drove her higher. The pleasure was harsher than anything she'd ever dreamed. In no time, she crested with a shudder, panting soft mews while her fingers twisted in his hair.

He let go of her legs when her body fell limp and she opened her eyes to see him on his feet, in complete battleform. His lower face glistened with moisture and he licked his lips awkwardly around his extended teeth. He stepped forward with each leg until he straddled her torso, staring down at her ferociously. His cock appeared to be trying to tunnel out of his leathers.

Immediately, KarRa rolled her head up, baring her throat, keeping herself still. *Would Rylan hurt her in this form?* He never had before, but it had never been directed at her before. He kneeled slowly, bending to lick with small, damp flicks along her throat, up her jaw, around her ear. He gripped her lobe lightly in his teeth and worried it. Then he set to suckling it, grumbling and growling and purring in her ear. She could smell herself on his skin. His breath raised goosebumps over her whole body.

A few moments later he pulled back and looked down at her, human Rylan again. "Hey," he said hoarsely. "Are you well?"

KarRa smiled shyly, her heart still thundering from the sudden devouring of her cunt, and the unknown of him crouching over her. "I am very, *very* well. But we're not done. I want more."

Concern furrowed his golden brow. "Whatever you need, love. Anything."

Her fingers swept around from his shoulders to burrow along his taut stomach, slipping inside his leathers.

The sound Rylan made as she brushed the silky soft head did not sound like pleasure.

"It hurts?"

"Yes, Elements, so good."

"Kiss me."

He pulled back from her neck, her cream showing damply on his face still. "My face..."

"Yes. Kiss me."

He lowered his head and gently, softly, fed her her own taste.

"Is it all right?" he whispered softly.

An expert flip twisted them so that she lay along his torso.

"Rylan, I love the taste of me on your lips." Her fingers quickly unbuttoned him. "I had to know..." She opened the flap and his cock lifted into the air. She could feel a wave of heat escape. The smell was familiar, yet she'd forgotten it. She drew in a shaky breath. "I wanted to know that taste, so that I could compare it to this."

She swooped down, opened her mouth, and closed her lips around the round head of him.

Rylan shouted. It was still a sound of pain, but this time it held a note of triumph.

"Your turn," she murmured huskily.

Her hands traced the veins, feeling their give. She squeezed, and squeezed harder, fascinated at the way her hand seemed made to clasp him. Her mouth rolled over his tip, her tongue lazing along the faint edge flaring around the head. His skin was as soft as her own inner skin.

"KarRa, you don't have to. I wanted you to have the pleasure..."

A particularly long lick seemed to distract him from his thought. "And I do. You said anything I need."

His hands were now in her hair, their position a mirror of the one they'd just shared. She squirmed down farther between his legs, braced her hands on his bare hips, and began to lower her mouth, raise and lower, twirling her tongue where there was room.

His voice was so low, rumbling from her ears to her stomach. She couldn't make out the words over the thunder from her own heart, but she knew the tone. *Don't stop*. She continued to rise up to the fascinating dimple at the top, and lower as far as her throat would allow. She played with changing her lips, dragging her teeth, fluttering her tongue.

She played. As she had never allowed herself to imagine it, she was surprised at how naturally it came. It was perfect. Perfect to feel his cock jerk, grow longer, harder, throbbing. Perfect to feel the first wash of his taste, similar to hers, but stronger, tarter. Perfect to hear his voice rise in pitch, feel his hips thrash beneath her hands. Rylan's pleasure wasn't just beneath her hands, but in her mouth. The thought made her throb between her legs.

She straddled his leg and ground against his knee. Her hairs were crisp and her cream flowing. It was fascinating to feel the textures against her.

His hands were so tight in her hair she could feel the draw on her eyes. She was making the same slurping sounds he had as she struggled to breathe around his increasing depth.

When he bowed beneath her, driving his crown into the constriction of her throat, she choked. Her mouth was full of liquid, creamy, tangy. She closed her eyes, sucking hard at his tip. He screamed her name and drove his knee deep into the cradle of her pelvis. Nearly sobbing, she swallowed and swallowed, her eyes closed against the pleasure.

Moments later, she patted the moisture from his nest of hair.

"I messed up your leathers."

"No. You marked me. Wonderfully." His voice was scratchy.

"You kept it together this time."

"Not really. I think we should go. I really don't want to stop."

As she watched, his long limp length twitched under her breath.

She looked up his torso and smiled at his amber eyes.

"It was so good, Ry. So good."

He smiled back. "Keep in mind it's just the beginning." He pulled her up and buried his face in her neck.

"Mmmm. You know how I said it was good to be the only scent on you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm just as proud to have your scent all over me. You're the strongest person I know KarRa. I won't fail you with this chance."

She took a deep, shaky breath. He rose and helped her dress.

Looking into her eyes as he led her away, he said, "Just for the record, I remember every minute."

He chuckled when she blushed.

That night a rather subdued Cro and Merk came to her room. She thought Merk looked tired, and didn't meet her eyes as he greeted her. The three settled at the table with the tea they had brought.

"KarRa," Cro began, coughed and choked then started again. "We need to talk to you about your mating ceremony. I already told you there would be guests, besides the mages guiding you, and Grif."

KarRa nodded unhappily. She had forgotten until now that Grif would be there. To be watched by Grif and Merk while Rylan took her...

"You should know that many women wish for bedplay with their promised before the ceremony. To come together your first time in front of others can be awkward for a human woman." Cro was clearly awkward explaining this, although her dark skin showed no blush.

“The men have no trouble?”

Merk shrugged. “The men are incredibly excited about claiming their mate, they are proud to have their important people near, and it is an important experience for our Beasts. A public claiming establishes a possession we crave. Animals do not see the world in terms of embarrassment or modesty. It is only once, and it is done with the highest honor. No one will participate, and no one will ever talk of what they see.”

Cro said, “What magics would you like to ground you?”

“You mean, the other mages? I can choose the elements?”

“Yes. Grif chose earth and sky for Rylan's first Change, thinking his human experience would find common connections to them. A spiritmage is always the third of the triad. It is a popular combination for women.”

KarRa studied the table for a minute. She shook her head. “I will choose water and fire.”

Merk raised an eyebrow at this unsettling combination.

KarRa shrugged. “It is a combination that I feel right with.”

Merk held up a soothing hand. “All combinations of elements can achieve peaceful balance. This combination is just harder than others. I think it fits the road you have chosen.”

KarRa had a thought. “Does Rylan have a spiritmage?”

“Grif acts as his now. Later, when he becomes a warrior, he will souldance with one. He will tell Grif if he wants anyone else at the matebond ceremony, but he has no family to stand with him. During the ceremony, we will lightly link and Grif will link with Rylan. The triangle is empowered, and with this force in place, you will meet the Owl in Rylan's body, in battleform. Your bond is already so strong the mirror will build quickly, I'm sure.”

At her signal {Question} he said, “Your path to Rylan will become a flow. Grif and I will open it to its fullest extent, and instead of you having to travel the line to contact Rylan, you will *become* him, and he you. Your feelings will be awash in the other's. We call this state a mirror, because the reflections echo into infinity until you fall through, trying to see an end that does not exist.”

KarRa's brain began to ache as she lost her understanding of his description. “Do not worry about understanding it. You will feel more than you ever have before, and be completely aware of Rylan in a way that will be exciting and intense. He will taste you, and by that I mean blood, as we did, and smell you. Then he will mount you from behind.”

KarRa tensed. Cornered. Lucky right hook to the jaw. Stunned. Flipped facedown onto the rickety table. Pants being ripped at from behind.

“I know KarRa. I saw. You will have to trust that in the mirror state, it will not matter. I will hold your memories away.”

“Why can't we just...”

“No. Learn something now—you must never fuck a Trux in battle form. The risks are too great—a glance of connection from your eyes to his would trigger massive dominance and the play could turn very aggressive without a mage triad. The temptation of open throat and belly may grow too tempting in the heat of quickening. A Trux unaware of his body and still thinking like a human may try to hold or touch you and his claws would slice you to ribbons. Don't ever fuck Rylan when he is in this mode. Any

bedplay at all is very dangerous in that form.”

KarRa fidgeted. “What?” It was a demand.

KarRa looked at Cro under her lashes.

“Would you like me to leave?”

KarRa squirmed, feeling terrible. She nodded.

Cro said, “That’s fine KarRa. Merk only asked me to be here because he thought you'd be more comfortable meeting with someone else around besides just him.”

KarRa looked searchingly at Merk, who calmly looked back. Reaching out she touched his sleeve. “Merk, I care for you. I am not afraid of you, nor am I angry. You can come to me anytime, and I will trust you as my spiritmage. I am sorry if it is painful for you, and I understand if you want something between us, to focus on. But you do not need it for me.”

Merk smiled sadly at her. “I hear your words, and will remember.

Cro stood and took the tea set with her. “I'll be in the lounge.”

After she left KarRa whispered, “Yesterday, he already changed. He was—We...”

“KarRa. You were very lucky.” He sighed. “The problem is this. Few women want their first time with their mate to be at the ceremony, and before the ceremony, our Beasts are very needy and uncertain. They crave the mate, and crave dominance. They see a woman they think should belong to them, and know that she doesn't. The urge to dominate is high until after the mating ceremony, where the Beast is finally comforted.

“Afterwards, the Beast is confident in his claim and stays quiet for mating, mostly. But before, even experienced warriors have difficulty keeping themselves contained when bedplay starts with a promised-mate. Rylan is barely into his training. I don't think he'll be able to keep it together. I don't think you should play with him, KarRa. It isn't safe.”

She bit her lip. Actually, she felt so odd after Rylan pleased her, she would be content to go without that feeling as she got used to thinking of him in that way. She nodded at Merk. “I'll be more careful.”

Merk tilted his head. Why was he being so stiff?

“All right,” he said softly. “At the ceremony, you will be taken from behind because Rylan will be in battleform, and it is the safest position. Even this position is not without some risk. Sometimes the warrior's desire to claim their mate will include the urge to mark them, or the desire for more blood. Bites and cuts are not uncommon. A bodymage will be waiting outside. While the woman may be ... harmed, there is never any serious injury.”

“Xu?”

“Xu can be your healer. After the release, your matebond with Rylan will be closed. Your doorways will be solid. What you feel now with Rylan, the way you can sense him if you concentrate, that will be your constant resting state even with the door closed. After your mating, when the door is open you'll be getting complete access because of your soulbond. I've heard that soulmates can actually see out each other's eyes sometimes, and that they can achieve the mirror state, which is usually only triad-formed at the mating ceremony, whenever they want to.

“When you have your door in place, I'll drop the triangle, and Grif will close the ceremony by acknowledging the Beast’s claim to you. You and Rylan will remain there as long as you like. Some people go to their room in the clan caves, others stay in the

bonding room until the next day. Rylan need not take on that form with you ever again.”

“You seem so ... distant, Merk.”

His mouth twisted bitterly. “I am spiritmage to a woman I love. It is a pleasure and an honor. I am friend to a woman my body has known, but will never know again. My body doesn't understand that. My head knows you are claimed but my Wolf senses no matebond on you and claws at my gut. My dreams keep going back to the way I felt during our souldance, when you said yes. Then I wake up. I've come to dread sleeping.”

KarRa looked down, her eyes welling up. “I'm sorry,” she whispered. “Have you tried a paid woman?”

“Perhaps after your bonding. It's not the fucking that I miss, KarRa. For now, sleeping with Clan brothers helps.” He bowed his head. “KarRa, are you not angry with me? Disgusted at my dishonor? I have knowledge of you I don't deserve to have.”

She tried to talk.

He wouldn't let her interrupt. “No! Hear me. I knew within one breath of our brightmoon souldance that you could be my mate, and that you had a soulmate. I should have turned around and walked out, but I chose to go into you. I wanted to know you, to learn you as I never would be able to in life. And when I saw the damage he had dealt you, I desperately sought others, so that I would have some sort of argument to present to the Council for the crazy thing I wanted to ask, that you be given a choice outside of Rylan. I knew there was such a slight chance you would choose someone else, that you still wanted him desperately, and had just trained yourself to do without him. But I wanted that chance.

“And when the souldance was over, and I tasted you, I know that is an intimate experience. Yet as soon as you fell under the spell of our connection, as soon as you offered your body, I took it. I seized it. I knew that would be the one time I would ever get to love you. I was dishonorable, KarRa. I used my position to have experiences with you, bond with you, in ways most mate choices never see. I was wrong. I don't deserve your respect.”

“Merk, I don't see it that way. I think you should meditate on it. Decide if you can function and not become wounded as my counselor in the future. I meant it when I told you I want you as my mentor in this Elemental magecraft I know nothing about. Can you maintain that kind of connection, knowing I will never be your mate? I trust you. I care for you. I was not bespelled, tranced, or misused in any way by you. I took much comfort from our ... loving. I still do when I look back on it. I don't feel guilty about it in the least, and I'm the one with a soulmate. I would that it was a peaceful memory for you as well, instead of one of guilt and loss.”

Merk held himself stiffly, head hanging. “I—That you see me in that way—I will always choose to experience life with you, as a friend. I am honored to help you in any way you need.” He took a deep shuddering breath. “Don't worry about me. You made your choice, KarRa. Stand proud in it.”

They looked at each other for several heartbeats, KarRa feeling more trust for him than any Clan brother from the Dark.

KarRa had another thought. “Merk, if you are bonded to me, and Grif is to Rylan, won't you be experiencing what we are?”

Merk kept his eyes on hers as he calmly nodded.

Shock seeped into her skin until all the hair stood up on her arms. “No, Merk, that is

too cruel.” She felt like screaming at the injustice of it—this man having to not only watch, but feel, what he could have had.

“Perhaps after, it will be bittersweet, but KarRa, have no question that during the ceremony it will be sweet. Very, very sweet. It is an honor, to experience the ghost of a matebond. Grif and I have both done this several times. I have even done it once before with Grif.”

A satisfied gleam in his eyes, he leaned forward to whisper softly, “KarRa, we all come with *you*. You are the centerpoint of the dance. When you rise, I will as well, without any touch. The release of energy in the room is incredible, and it is not uncommon for many of the guests to quicken as well, when the woman rises to satisfaction. People who witness a matebond always, always return to fuck their mates, or go to the paid women.”

Laying his arms on the table, he leaned in even closer and lowered his voice. “Would you like to know that the last time Grif and I connected through the matebond, we went to the sixth level and shared a woman? All. Night. Long.” His grin spread at KarRa's open-mouthed shock. He pushed her jaw closed with a gentle finger and winked. “Maybe we'll do it again. The poor unmated, finding solace together.”

KarRa's mind surged with the image of Grif's redgold brightness next to Merk's midnight and tan, as they both bent over a woman writhing in pleasure who looked suspiciously like Freezha. Gasping she drew herself away from his close presence. “That is a very *potent* image. I thought Beasts did not share their women?”

He chuckled. “It will be a very potent ceremony. Sharing is not common, but the experience was intense, and we were keyed to each other, no pun intended.” He sat back and the atmosphere cleared. “Do you want verra wine to relax you?”

KarRa grimaced. “No.”

“I didn't think so. It's not like you to turn from a challenge. Rylan has not formed any bonds so great he wants them as audience. There will be no extra witnesses outside of the triad, and Grif.”

Merk stood, and for an awkward moment KarRa wanted to hug him, a bizarre urge for her. Her arms stayed by her side out of habit as he left.

“Goodnight KarRa.” He smiled wryly. “Maybe I'll sleep tonight.”

She tossed and turned all night.

* * * *

Breakfast was with Freezha, who declared the Watercoaster hot springs to be a wonder of the world. She teased KarRa, telling her there was a man-eating giant eel in the underground lake. Vyur and she had spent their first day there together. Freezha was abuzz with how warm and cozy the Lizeed lair was, and how nicely Vyur had decorated his room.

“All people see is his combat record. It makes me so sad for him that people fear him like a monster. But now he has me!” She was glowing with happiness one moment, and the next her face crumpled.

“I haven't been able to tempt him into anything serious at all. How am I supposed to inspire his undying passion if I'm dressed like a priestess!” She flung herself forward onto the table, her white-blond locks dropping over the edge to blend perfectly with the shining ribbons of a dress.

KarRa put her hands on her hips. “Why are you letting him tell you how to dress? Begin as you mean to go on Freezha! He does not control you! Are you afraid of him?”

“I want to please him! And when he looks at me in my nice outfits, his eyes go all weird, and his voice goes low and he says,” she dropped her voice into a ridiculous mimicry, ““You are not wearing that.””

There was a pause before KarRa burst out laughing. “He's jealous! Oh Freezha, he's being possessive. He wants you covered so you don't inspire undying lust in other men.”

“Well so what if I do! I'm Vyr's woman and there's nothing they can do about it.” Freezha looked totally confused.

Soon it was time for the newly chosen to go meet their men. As KarRa headed out to meet with Rylan she mentally fuzzed herself up, so that she was able to greet him with a welcoming smile. She tried not to remember the feeling of her legs spread in the air and his face in her core.

It was a glorious spring day and they walked the river outside the mountain together. Every rock they passed looked inviting enough to lay down on. Spread her legs on. Spread his legs on. Thankfully he was so irritable and snappish that he provided a good distraction from her newly fired up imagination.

“Look at that fish! Did you see it?”

“Oh yes. A big slimy fish.”

Finally, she was driven to a stop, arms akimbo. “What is your problem today?”

“We're *walking* by a river!”

She folded her arms, waiting for the absurd comment to be defended.

“You're not even aroused at all! All I can think of is getting my face between your legs, in your mouth... I haven't seen your huge nipples in months and I... I... By the Fire, walking with a hard cock HURTS!”

KarRa cocked her head, considering his words. “We're not supposed to make love. I was informed that what we did was ... not well-informed.”

“I know! I'm not about to endanger you again.”

She shook her head. “So you should be glad I'm not as frustrated.”

“I can't do this today. Can't pretend to walk next to you like this—that this *need* isn't inside me. I can't. I'm sorry. I'm about to throw you on the ground and fuck you in about two seconds.” He ran.

KarRa stood by the swiftly moving water. So much water, the Clans would have died with joy to see it back in the Dark. She stood in the thin light, smelling the strange scent of a lot of clean water. She stood there, until her nipples stopped throbbing, stopped aching to be touched, and walked back. They could touch now. They could kiss. But it wasn't easy yet. She wondered if it would ever be easy.

* * * *

Very early the next morning KarRa went with a handful of women, all still in their robes, to go bring back breakfast for the others. They had spread out along the narrow length of the room lined with serving windows, looking at all the hot and cold choices for the morning.

Suddenly the room echoed with approaching shouts, and all the women looked up, concerned. Then the room was full of men, fighting men, moving faster than KarRa had ever seen. KarRa, who had been at the end of the group, immediately thought of Freezha,

the weakest member.

Turning toward her as she crouched, she shouted, "Get down Freezha!"

Freezha did not get down. She ran toward the door they had come in from, but was soon knocked sprawling by two men who were leaping incredible heights and pummeling each other.

Glancing back down the room, KarRa was relieved to see that one lady had the other women gathered behind her in a corner, a bubble of mage air blasting any of the fighters who came too close.

While the men had no hostility toward any of the women, clearly none of them had any concern for their welfare either. KarRa had to dive in a roll to avoid a Lizzeed who drove a smaller man—was he a boy?—up against the wall and began using that surface as leverage to beat the man's head in.

KarRa pinpointed Freezha, still mostly in the same place, now curled into a fetal ball, shrieking with her hands over her head.

"Freezha!"

After several calls, KarRa sighed and dodged out into the flying bodies. Unlike a normal riot, this one had the unpredictability of fuzzies because the men could jump so far and move so quickly.

KarRa dodged and stopped and spun and shoved her way to Freezha where she grabbed her arm, which stayed locked over her head, and just pulled Freezha instead of trying to get her coherent and up.

But dragging a screaming Freezha, even curled as small as she was, limited KarRa's agility considerably. Freezha caused two men fighting backwards to trip and fall, then their wildly thrashing limbs drove KarRa on a different path to get away from them.

"GET UP!" She shouted at Freezha.

Sobbing, Freezha uncurled and tried to crawl, but just as they started to move through a gap in the bodies, a fist came flying wildly toward KarRa's face.

Enjoying a chance to share her feelings on this mess, KarRa pushed it around and spun in the same direction, to jam her elbow into the man's face. The man he was fighting looked in shock at KarRa as she turned and sprang at him, hands hooked into claws, going for his eyes.

Backpedaling, he tried to stiff arm her and KarRa just wrapped her hands around his forearm and sank her teeth into the outer edge of the offered hand. A fleeting thought zipped through KarRa's mind as he shook her off and turned to run. *They sure don't fight as well as I'd thought.*

Turning back to Freezha, she saw she had continued to crawl toward the wall, but was now cowering in front of a particularly large, seething group of bodies. KarRa ran forward, grabbed her handy bound tail of hair at the nape of her neck, and hauled straight up, getting Freezha to her feet with a shriek.

Pushing her forward at another new angle, KarRa jerked and wrestled her through the bodies, punching as she went to drive them away if they got too close.

It seemed an eternity before the wall loomed close, even though it couldn't have been more than two body lengths. Some of the men were down now, and KarRa discovered that fruit had spilled and rolled all over the floor, creating another hazard.

"Through the window!" KarRa shouted, kicking fruit and nearby struggling men with equal viciousness.

Freezha latched onto a windowsill, pushing the fruit helter-skelter as she threw her body across the counter and into the small serving window. But she had to jump off the floor to hook her hands onto the other side because she was too short. It was then, while her feet were kicking wildly and KarRa had turned to shove a pair of snarling enlaced men away, that another body flew through the air to land with a thunk against the wall directly over Freezha. Then he fell on top of her legs.

KarRa heard the crack and Freezha's bloodcurdling cry and knew her bone had snapped. "Keep going!" she yelled. "Go through!"

But Freezha tried to double her body back through the tiny opening to get to her leg, her instinct to see and touch the pain.

KarRa reached out and shoved her groping hands away. "Get through!"

When Freezha's shoulders were at last pointed in the right direction, finally there was someone on the other side reaching through to pull at her upper body, while KarRa shoved her butt. Whirling into a crouch near the still body of the boy who had landed on her, KarRa surveyed the room.

There were now even more men in it, and they seemed much larger than the first wave. They were knocking heads and heaving bodies with the clear intent to pull the fighters apart and render them unconscious.

Deciding she would be happy to help, KarRa sprang from her crouch and kicked out with both feet at a nearby pair. They were fighting with some sort of side armed, chopping motions that seemed very ineffective—the other always seemed able to block the attack with arm or body. They weren't even going for each other's throat or faces. Her kick landed squarely on the hip of one of the fighters, and he went flying sideways.

The other stopped in surprise, looking at KarRa in horror. She scrambled ungracefully from the full body sprawl her two-footed kick had left her in to reach for his arm and swing him bodily away from the other. As that boy went staggering away, tripping over a nearby body, the other had flipped himself up like he was a puppet and leaped in a dive back toward him.

KarRa, just coming off the spin that had flung boy two away, put her shoulder directly in the path of his hips and wrapped her arms around his thighs, flipping her body as she did so. When his momentum dragged her off her feet, at least he came down well short of his target, and on the bottom.

He drew up a foot that had loosened in the hard fall to kick her in the face and she dove for his thigh and bit him as hard as she could through his thick pants. They weren't leather and his hands came down in clubbing swing as he yelled but she let go and rolled so that the blow glanced off her shoulder.

She spun in a crab-like motion to face the boy on all fours when a body landed in front of her, upright and very much in control. Looking through the large legs she saw the face of the boy look up, and then in rapid succession there were expressions of shock, horror, terror, and submission as he lay on his back with his arms behind his head, neck bared.

The legs stepped quickly to turn toward her, and KarRa was looking up at a Lizzeed who had a thickly scaled head, and eyes glinting the bright green of mage light.

"Are you wounded?" His voice was urgent.

KarRa stood to face him, although she only came to below his shoulder. "I'm fine. Freezha has a broken leg. She was kicked by accident a few times too."

Alarm and rage passed over his controlled face and were gone.

Looking down the room he called, "Vyr!"

KarRa quickly tried to walk away, a bad feeling curling in her gut that she had learned to listen to, but he snagged her arm and held it in a gentle but enormous grip.

Vyr was there in a moment. He looked KarRa up and down. "You are KarRa," he stated. "Where is Freezha?"

KarRa looked at Scalyhead, who was staring at Vyr. "Vyr, I want you on your knees."

Vyr actually staggered as if he was hit.

Puzzled, KarRa looked back at Scaly.

"On your knees Vyr, and stay there."

"By the Elements! She lives!" His voice was agony and rage.

"She lives Vyr! Now on! Your! Knees!"

The two men stared each other down and KarRa opened her mouth to say something meaningful to Vyr but Scalyhead squeezed her arm once. She shut her mouth with a snap.

The sounds of the last of the fights being broken up were fading to some moans, whining, desperate pleas, and calls for help here and there by the rescuers. All the rescuers nearby had frozen in a tableau, watching the standoff.

Vyr crashed to his knees.

"Hands behind your back."

He did so. Was Vyr to be punished for Freezha's injury?! KarRa couldn't accept that they would be that unjust.

"You will stay there until I release you. Acknowledge."

Vyr clearly ground his teeth, his eyes going flat and cold as they stared murderously at Scaly. "I will stay until my Alpha releases me."

KarRa's head snapped around so fast to the man gripping her arm she thought she might have given herself the first injury of the riot. *This was the Lizzed Alpha?*

"Freezha has been wounded." Scalyhead's words were not without compassion, his tone sympathetic.

Vyr's entire body shuddered and rocked, and KarRa suddenly understood. Without his self-determination to honor his Alpha, Vyr would right now be ripping people's arms off. *Or possibly heads*, KarRa thought as she watched him swell and his neck thicken as he began to transform into battleform.

"She has broken her leg. She will be well. The fight has passed, she is out of danger. She needs you in control. I will take you to her when you restrain yourself."

Vyr snarled, his mouth full of razor teeth spraying spit as he roared with rage, shaking his head back and forth as if he had been enslaved with chains rather than controlled by the order of his Alpha.

Turning to face KarRa as if the agonized man wasn't less than half a body length away, the Alpha scanned KarRa quickly. "You were fighting. When I came upon you, I thought you were one of the boys. You felt like a Trux."

KarRa licked her lips. She didn't remember any laws against fighting.

Gesturing with his arm toward the room he asked, "Why were you in the fight?"

"Ummm. Wrong place at the wrong time. There was another woman who did some wind stuff. She's a skymage."

“There were other women here?! Where are they?”

“Uh... I'm not sure where they went. They were at that end of the room, so maybe they snuck out the far door, or went through the serving holes, like where I stuck...” breaking off she glanced cautiously at Vyur, who now had his head hanging forward as he sat back on his heels, his face covered by his hands, and appeared to either be hyperventilating or sobbing.

The man turned to look sharply at the line of food serving pass-throughs. Oddly, one of them still had a perfect presentation of neatly stacked round rolls. “They would not be large enough for us to fit through. Excellent thinking!”

“There were people back there, but I don't think they were fighters. They're probably helping her right now.”

Vyur gave a final gasping shudder and dropped his hands to his lap, looking up at the Alpha, his face wet with tears and completely unselfconscious about it.

“Are you ready to help your promised-mate? You have control?”

“I am. I do.” Vyur was flat once again.

“This way. Follow me.” They set off toward the far door, KarRa towed in his unbending grasp, tripping to keep up.

“Perhaps I could keep up on my own?”

Scaly looked at her, surprised. “Of course, Lady. My apologies. I'd like you to stay with us. Vyur knew you. Do you know his promised?”

“She's a friend. I was trying to keep her safe but this body came flying out of nowhere.”

“You are in no way to blame. Pol!” He called to another man crouched near some bloody bodies. “There were more women near. Find them!”

Down a hall, a short flight of stairs, another left, and they were in a huge room full of open barrels and tables piled with food. Ovens and kilns and open roaring flames under grills took up the far side of the room. KarRa was fascinated by the variety of dishes and utensils and the mounds of food.

Suddenly, Vyur was running ahead toward the cluster of people at the far end. “Freezha!” His cry cleared the way as he leaped what must have been four body lengths to land and stagger to his knees next to Freezha's whimpering and shivering body.

She had never seemed so tiny to KarRa, as she lay crumpled on the stone floor.

“Vyur! Oh Vyur! My leg! I'm sorry!” Freezha began to babble and cry hysterically as he sought to soothe her with shushing noises, his hand going to her abdomen to press gently to keep her in a reclining position, while the other went to hover up and down her leg, which was black, swollen, and seeping.

“I forgot everything you ever taught me. I was useless. KarRa had to save me. KarRa put me through the window and something landed on my leg—I think it was a person! KarRa stayed out in the fighting. She never came through. You have to find her!”

“I'm right here, Freezha,” KarRa called as she and Scaly arrived.

Vyur was firm now, his hand hovering over the middle of her shin, where blood was soaking damply. “You must be still, Freezha. A bodymage will be here soon. Your friend is fine and I am here. I order you to stop talking and breathe with me. Nice and slow now...”

“KarRa!” Freezha ignored everything he said. “You're all right? I'm so sorry I couldn't help. I loved it when you pounded that redhead in the throat and he fell to his

knees gasping! Oh, it was so wonderful! I completely fuzzed out!”

“Freezha!” Vyur and KarRa shouted together and stunned her into momentary silence.

“Who has sent for a bodymage?” Scaly asked.

“We sent our youngest boy some minutes ago, Lizzeed. Maybe he was needed in the food hall first.”

Vyur turned soothingly toward Freezha. “Breathe with me. The pain is better, yes?”

“Yes! Oh it's just a little ache now! Do you think I should get up?”

“Freezha! Stop! Your leg is broken. Just look at me. Look at my eyes. Breathe. In. out.”

Vyur finally mesmerized and focused Freezha.

Just then someone came bustling up behind them and sank down next to Vyur.

Pol came up to the serving window from the other side and said, “We found the women. They had gone out the North door.”

“Meet me there.” The Alpha spun so fast KarRa tripped as she danced to get out of his way. “Please come.”

Back the way they came, a bodymage was now talking to Pol, who looked bigger when KarRa could see more than just his face.

The men turned to them and said “Sto,” bowing their heads once sharply.

“The women?” he asked.

It was the bodymage, a warrior obviously not a Lizzeed, who answered. “Have been escorted to their rooms. Some minor bruises and the mage was fatigued from being out of practice. She shielded some of them from the start, propelled nearby fighters, and finally sealed the doorway so the fighting couldn't spill back toward them once the last woman made it through.” He looked curiously at KarRa. “Or at least most of the women. She'll be fine after some sleep, and the others are already healed.”

“My thanks, Groundbear. Please, I ask you to go to the kitchens, where Vyur's woman has a badly broken leg.”

The man paled, but nodded once and left.

“Well?” Sto turned abruptly to Pol.

“As you scented, the Wolf younglings dared each other to touch the wall of our lounge. Various reports put the group at four to fourteen. Our younglings on their way to the library caught them on their way out. The fight began on underground two, where several Groundbear younglings joined in, and by the time they made it to the plaza level they'd put out two guards and the Marten younglings had caught up and piled on.

“Several other small groups of warriors saw the size of the group and pulled off a few at the fringe, then went for an organized muster at a bottleneck, coming around in the front.”

KarRa had been idly examining the broken skin on her knuckles when she heard her name and a pull of need inside. Waving, she cried, “Here Rylan!”

Rylan came bounding over the bodies, and to her astonishment leapt nearly the entire length of the room when he caught sight of her.

In an instant, he was at her side, breathless with laughter. “You're well! Praise the Waters. Our first Truxet riot and I miss it!”

He held out his arms and she leaped into the hug, laughing in return. But his hands gripped her tightly, skimmed her limbs quickly, despite his laughter. Putting her down he

went to his knees and concentrated, frowning as his hands hovered in several places.

Looking sharply at the two men he demanded, "Why has she not received healing!"

"Uh, Rylan, let me introduce you to the Lizzeed Alpha, Sto, and his friend Pol."

He stood stiffly, not changing his belligerent face one bit.

Sto looked at KarRa sharply. "You told me you were not injured!"

"I'm not!"

Rylan opened his mouth and KarRa put her hand over it firmly. Even though he angrily twisted his head away, knocking her hand down, she got her words out.

"I'm fine! Just some bruises!"

Yanking her tunic up to reveal a bloody scrape down her ribs he shouted, "You are such a rockhead!"

She hadn't even felt it yet.

Pol was open-mouthed and agog at this irreverent, fiery interchange between warrior and mate. Sto blinked, uncertain.

"I'll be healed when the more needy are attended! It's not like I'm in incredible pain. Freezha broke her leg! I thought Vyr was going to blow an artery."

Rylan was instantly concerned. "That's terrible! But remember, KarRa, bodyimages here can heal that in a few hours. She'll be completely healed by tonight."

"Yeah, that's right," KarRa was relieved.

Sto cleared his throat. "You are aware that your mate was caught in the fighting?"

Rylan looked blankly at the Clan Alpha. KarRa could tell he was about to answer with some sort of sarcastic comment like "she didn't rip her knuckles by herself" or "wasn't she gardening?" but she elbowed him in a very unsubtle move. He coughed and said, "Yes! I am! And it's awful! Just terrible!"

He looked at her to gauge her reaction to this pathetically fake response. KarRa got the feeling he was not acting properly fussed out over the occurrence of a riot in River Mountain.

Pol offered slowly, as if talking to a concussed child, "She was trapped in a room full of brawling Truxet. Granted, they were just younglings in warrior training, but still..."

Rylan made a slashing move with his hand. "What do you want me to say?" When both men were silent, continuing their odd looks, he said, "Thank you for stopping the fight. I'm very relieved she's not badly hurt. If she hurt someone it was because they were doing something they shouldn't have been." Snappish and annoyed now, he bowed crisply and pulled KarRa away. "I must attend to her wounds."

KarRa snorted but waved to the men as she allowed herself to be pulled along.

The sea of laid out bodies was impressive, and KarRa and Rylan picked their way through. Calling a mage over, he asked that KarRa be healed when he was done. The bodymage was alarmed at not attending to a woman immediately, but they assured him they wanted the youngsters attended to first.

Back in her room, he soaked a small towel in cool water and laid it on her ribs, taking the opportunity to kiss a circle around her bellybutton.

KarRa looked at him fondly when he looked up at her. His eyes were relieved and full of love, and peace washed through her in return.

As he lay down beside her, head propped on a hand, he mused, "Do we have to live in strife for you to think well of me?"

KarRa laughed shortly but stopped when it made her ribs sting. She lifted a hand and

drew it along his smooth jaw. “Rylan, I’ve just had a lot to deal with. I thought I was taking all the changes with being in Vladaya as they came and making the best, but when you were there as a real mate, it just—everything was magnified. The one thing I’ve wanted for so long, now here, when I had been prepared for so long to lose you utterly, it just didn’t, I just wasn’t...” she sighed.

He waited patiently for her to order her thoughts. His eyes searched the depths of her.

They lay side by side on the bed. She no longer had to keep her hands to herself. Or her mouth. The thrill of her idea caught her breath. Curling her hand behind his neck, she lifted herself up to kiss him, mouth moving hard, tongue reaching. With a gasp Rylan fell forward, allowing her to relax against the bed and wiggle with the ecstasy of his weight on her aching nipples, his mouth opening wider, hot and urgent.

Breaking off from him she whispered against his lips, “Are you really going to be my lover?”

He kissed her harder, his tongue stroking deep into her mouth to explore the length of hers. Pulling back he gritted out, “Only me. I’m yours.”

The kiss had spun on and heated up when there was a startled “Oh! Excuse me!”

Rylan pulled away, his hand lifting from where he had held her face to just the preferred angle, and slid off the bed. “Greetings, healer. You are not too fatigued?” Rylan nonchalantly wiped his damp mouth as the bodymage chuckled.

“If I was, I’m not anymore!”

KarRa laughed in response to Rylan’s grimace.

Only a few moments of relaxation later, all the hot spots and nagging tight places faded. A few more minutes and her skinned knuckles and ribs were unblemished.

As the mage stood to leave he said, “Sto and Vyr have asked for your presence.”

KarRa and Rylan exchanged a look. “All right. Are they in Freezha’s room?”

He shook his head. “They are in the Lizzeed caves.”

They passed signs of the struggle, toppled statues, skewed hangings, flowers trampled, and one broken pitcher of juice. There were even some bodies still lying on the stairs, groaning as people bent to assist them. The deeper they went down the stairs, the warmer it grew.

At the entrance to the Lizzeed rooms, the archway covered in ferocious mouths and spiked bodies, KarRa pulled Rylan to a stop with both hands. She shook her head at his inquiring look. “I’m not walking in there unescorted. That’s how the fight broke out! Is there a way to knock?”

Rylan frowned. “I’ve never met anyone at their caves before. If I’m working with a non-Owl, I meet them somewhere neutral.”

KarRa cupped her hands and yelled loudly “KarRa and Rylan are here!”

After a moment, a small boy appeared. He stared at KarRa intently, who returned the look. His hair was oddly wispy, like that of an old man, and when he spoke, the words were sibilant as he worked to speak with his strange snake tongue. “Are you the warrior woman?”

KarRa shrugged. “I can fight if I have to. Sto asked to see me?”

He nodded in high speed and jumped from one foot to the other. “By Wave and Flame is he mad! Those younglings are so dead!”

He turned and scampered in, and Rylan held KarRa back so that he could go first.

When they came to the three doors, they heard his high voice echo from the far right, “Come on! Lizzeed, they're here! She's smaller than I thought she'd be! She has hardly any hair! Is she like us?”

There were low rumblings and Sto stepped out from one of the curtains. He looked hard at Rylan, KarRa peeking around his shoulder, then gestured them in. “Greetings. My thanks for your coming. You are healed, I hope, KarRa?”

“Yes, thank you.”

The room was just the same as hers, but a world different. There was also a low cave hollowed out at the back, about waist high. It formed a deep bed shelf, freeing up more floor space in the small room, and allowing for a much bigger bed. KarRa thought the idea perfectly splendid. It was high enough to sit up in, plus another head.

The floor was lined with overlapping rugs that reminded her of her brightmoon ceremony. There were many glass planters bursting with growth hanging about the ceiling, the walls were covered with beautiful weavings, and the niches held many trinkets. There was a trunk, and a set of shelves with books. The table and chairs were beautifully carved. For the first time KarRa got a sense of what a real family home could look like. She loved it.

Freezha was at the back of the bedspace, a tiny pale lump covered mostly by furs, her slender leg exposed from knee to ankle with compresses resting along the length of her shin. When she saw KarRa, her face lit up and she struggled to free an arm from her pile of bedding. Vyur was sitting at her hip and turned to look at them. He was as relaxed as KarRa had ever seen him. *Perhaps he feels safe in his lair*, she thought.

KarRa approached the opening and leaned her arm against the top, dropping her head slightly into the space. She stretched her hand out toward Freezha, but let it drop since it was obvious their fingers could not touch.

“KarRa! I've been so worried! I insisted on seeing you myself. Come here!”

“Uh, no, I'm fine standing here Freezha. I'm not going to climb on Vyur's bed. You saw me already! In the kitchen, remember?”

Freezha shook her head. “Don't remember that very well. Come here, I want to give you a hug! Vyur won't mind.”

“No, Freezha. I mind. I'll hug you lots later. I'm so glad you're feeling better. I heard the bone break. Isn't it wonderful living with bodyimages all around?”

Freezha laughed her tinkling charming trill. “I do feel lucky! When he comes back after evenmeal tonight, it'll be strong enough to walk on! Oh KarRa, I just want you to know how brave I thought you were. Rylan! You should have seen her. She was dodging and ducking and swinging like she'd been fighting all her life.”

There was an awkward beat of silence as everyone suddenly remembered that she had been doing it all her life.

“She's wild when she's cornered, all right,” Rylan said jovially into the silence. “I'm glad you're well, Freezha.”

“Thanks. KarRa, I'm sorry I ran out into the middle like that, and then just froze. I couldn't even think of how to get out of there—the chaos! I even failed to use my magic. It just seemed there were people all around. You got me out, and you hit those men who were going to hit me.”

Vyur was now looking intently at KarRa, who stood back awkwardly from the bed.

“Well. Uh, actually I think I was just protecting my own face, Freezha.”

“But you could have just gotten yourself out and instead you went into the mess to fetch me.” She struggled up on her elbows, “KarRa you saved my life.”

KarRa laughed an awkward fake chuckle. “Those younglings were nowhere near that kind of damage, Freezha. They were mostly just ignoring us. You would probably have been fine if I had left you there instead of getting crushed by a flying body as I stuffed you through the food hole.”

“No.” This from Vyr and instantly the room was at attention. “There were several very serious injuries. It was good that she was taken from the fighting. The broken leg was a chance accident. I've found that two of the Lizzeed youth were the ones that threw the Groundbear across the room. They saw him hit the wall and turned away. That none of the youth even cared who was nearby, who was being harmed by their vendetta—it is a basic lesson and one they will not be allowed to ever forget again when I am done with them.”

Freezha heaved a dramatic sigh and flung one arm over her eyes. She seemed completely uncowed by the two toweringly angry Lizzeed warriors in the room. “They're already scarred for life. They feel horrible.”

“Not yet they don't. They feel sullen at being faced with repercussions to their perceived justice.” This from Sto, arms crossed and leaning against the wall by the door.

“Well, Freezha, it was nice to see you. We'll leave you to rest and maybe we'll see you tomorrow.” KarRa kept her voice light. These men were dangerous. She didn't belong here.

Turning back toward her, Freezha's face tightened with sincerity, tears dripping in beautiful rivulets out of the corner of her eye. “KarRa, I owe you balance.”

“Oh, for Shadow's sake! Don't you dare even try!” KarRa was completely discomfited and paced away. She saw Sto raise his eyebrow and spun and paced back to crouch and look Freezha directly in the eye.

“I tried to protect you. I failed. I'm glad you are not angry with *me*! I'm glad Vyr's not demanding balance from *me*! You will soon be well, and that is a source of relief. Now rest. If Vyr thinks you're well enough, maybe I'll let you put one pretty, useless dress in my trunk tomorrow night.” She winked and Freezha laughed through her tears.

As they took their leave, she was surprised when Vyr leaned down and kissed Freezha's hand gently, then slid off the bed and followed them out. Sto did not lead them to the entrance but further down the hall, through the sitting area where softly murmuring voices fell silent, and into a chamber the size of two bedrooms, with nothing in it. He rolled the rock door shut.

“I watched you fight,” he said to KarRa. Rylan, staying close, took her hand and squeezed it. She knew the signal at once; he wanted to speak at this meeting.

“Is there something wrong? Is one of the men she fought asking for balance?”

“Of course not. I'm just puzzled. I watched nearly the entire thing. The way you tried to break those two younglings up. At times I would have thought you were a highly skilled warrior, and at others, an untrained person lost in an animal rage. I cannot forget that feeling I had when I looked down at you, seeing you as a woman, yet feeling you as a Trux.”

KarRa shifted uncomfortably, wondering at its significance. Rylan maintained his silence.

“I understand you are soulmates. Have you considered, Owl, that your Beastspirit is

traveling to your mate?"

Rylan shook his head once. "I have not thought this to be the case. Her fighting style is from where we lived. Most of the humans were more animal than person, and those that chose to live like people had to learn to deal with them."

Sto thoughtfully pulled on his lower lip as his eyes flicked back and forth between them. "Vyur."

Vyur had been motionless, eyes ahead on the wall, silent. "Yes, Lizeed."

"You are very lucky in the friend of your woman."

"Yes, Lizeed."

"It was an honor to meet you," Sto said, looking at both Rylan and KarRa. "I am deeply impressed by your courage, and interested in Vyur's professional opinion of your fighting skills. It's always good to learn new moves." Nodding his chin to each, he left, closing the door again behind him.

Vyur gazed steadily at KarRa. She looked back, her heart beating as her mind flashed to an image of facing him in battle. Rylan squeezed her hand and her heart steadied.

Vyur reached down, sliced his forearm with a short knife, and raised fingers coated with blood. She held herself utterly still. He reached out ever so slowly and wiped gently in a line from under her ear to the curve of where her shoulder met her neck. *Blood-debt*. She now had an ally for life.

His black eyes met her warm brown ones, and she noticed for the first time their depth. They reminded her suddenly of Merk's. She tried to stiffen herself to still the shiver that crawled her skin at that warm thick wetness on her throat, but she knew both men noticed.

"That wasn't a bad shiver. It feels weird is all." The quickness of her words told of her desire to keep Vyur from thinking his oath disgusted her. She thought a smile flitted past his tired eyes.

He nodded once at her and she returned it. "I'm honored to be in your debt." He looked at Rylan. "She will not have to use her fighting skills among us often. You have my apologies for the role of our younglings. I am one of their trainers, and their behavior is my responsibility."

Rylan responded, "Apology accepted."

"Go take care of Freezha. Be well," KarRa said, feeling sorry for him. He'd had a really bad day.

On the walk back to KarRa's rooms, she told Rylan of her fear of fighting Vyur. "He's their champion and they use him on women that are unskilled. Now that he knows that I am a skilled fighter, I'm afraid of how hard he's going to come at me. Will you get a bodymage to come be nearby?"

Rylan stopped on the stairs and stared at her. He smoothed his hands over her hair in a way that made her heart melt. She leaned forward and laid her head on his shoulder.

"KarRa, he will not hurt you."

She pulled back and looked at him disbelieving.

"KarRa! Are you thinking this is going to be a real fight? As in the Dark? Oh KarRa, they use that word for arguments, for tests, for training here." He took her face in his hands. "How can you even think that I would send you to a real fight with Vyur? Never! KarRa, all he wants to do is test you. Ghost some punches, block some of his, and step

into him and flip him. That's it! Just like we used to play with our made family."

KarRa was stunned. She slapped at Rylan's shoulder. "Do you mean that I've been having nightmares of being shredded to pieces for days for nothing? If it's a test, why don't they call it that?! You mean it's a warm-up?!"

Rylan chewed his lips under, his eyes sparkling. "I'm so sorry you misunderstood!" "Oh fine. Let it out."

His belly laugh echoed off the stone walls. "Like you couldn't take him anyway!"

His surprising confidence in her ability pleased her, but it still took her the entire walk back to settle her irritation.

KarRa looked at the bed longingly. Even though her body had no bruises or scrapes, her muscles had stiffened, and the familiar post-scrape lethargy crept through her blood. She was drained. *Curling up in the shadows beneath some stairs after a fight.* She wasn't there anymore.

Rylan came back from the washing room. "The baths are empty."

Rylan pulled the hangings closed behind them when she dragged herself into the room. She undressed with the slowness of the aged and slipped in. Warm water enveloped her to her neck. She groaned, blissful. Every time she sank in she marveled at the luxury of bathing this way. *The rough drag of a barely damp cloth trying to smear caked blood off of her arm.* The abundance and casual overuse of water was the second biggest difference between Vladaya and the Dark. Food's abundance was the first. KarRa let herself go lax, trusting Rylan as he washed her hair and body tenderly. Her mind was curious about the kitchen she'd glimpsed. *Running in the shadows, hunched, warclub gripped tight, waiting for the drunk with the bread to look the other way.*

After he rinsed her, Rylan stood next to KarRa, supporting her listing body.

"Let me hold you."

Bracing his back against the wall, he scooped her up under shoulders and knees, her head on his shoulder as if she were a child. She lay in bliss, the warm water swirling against her skin on one side and Rylan's heat on the other. He held her effortlessly. The Dark was past, now. She was safe. She had water, and food.

Her deepest fear tumbled from her lips without thought. "Rylan, am I alone?"

The water lapped at her pert breasts, her large dark nipples puckered from the sensation. Swinging her up, her legs went around his waist, his hands beneath her, her arms on his shoulders.

His eyes captured hers. She could see her own warm brown reflected in his lighter ones, as if she was falling into herself, away from him.

"KarRa?" His voice was the merest whisper over the sound of trickling water in the room.

"I think we are all alone, Rylan. At first I didn't want to believe it. Scuffle said that loving, fucking, is just an attempt by people to pretend they are not alone. Pleasure and pain are just choices on how we try to forget our utter isolation.

"I argued with him. I said that when I focused, I could see how the soulair around people who belonged together matched. And that with you and I, we had a magepath that our emotions traveled on, and that made us stronger. I told him that people were meant to be together. I believed it, and I argued. He loved it. It was a common conversation we carried over the years."

KarRa trailed her fingers down the side of Rylan's face, her fingers thrilling at every

dip and rasp. "After you left ... after I left ... because of Vili ... he said to me one day, after someone had done something stupid and he was worried and furious, he said, "Tell me again how much stronger I am with these people around me.""

She kept her eyes focused on the pulse of life beating in his neck. "I looked at him and said, "People are just shells. We're a meaningless piece of wet earth, and all the crying and laughing is just a shadowdance. We're alone, and we're small."

"I said something like that, thinking he'd finally be pleased. I was agreeing with him after all that time. But he looked at me with such an expression, I can still see it, and he said, "Rylan is a fool." I really feel like sometimes I am just utterly alone. Empty. A shell with no belonging to the spirit that sometimes dances through."

KarRa laced her hands behind Rylan's rock hard neck, looking again into his fierce eyes. She tried to smile at him. Her lips were stiff from the terror of laying out her darkest thoughts.

"It's been a long time since we had a Scuffle conversation."

When his face stayed fierce, she dropped her eyes to a bead of water rolling down his neck to sit in the dip of his collarbone.

He jounced her up in his arms, his hands tightening on her ass, dipping his head to regain her eyes. "I don't have an answer for you, KarRa. Maybe you're right."

She blinked at his honesty.

"We will have to continue this conversation over many a long night. I know that out of all the women in the world, those I've known, and those I've never met, you are the woman who dances with the spirit inside me.

"I know that I *can* feel empty, and hollow, and small. I think that I am not a shell or a ghost. I am Rylan, an Owl. And if that is true, that I am unique, I *am* alone. You are alone. Grif is alone. I don't see why being alone makes loving other people mean less. I can be alone, and I can love, and those are not exclusive things."

She stared at him in shock. His words resounded deep inside her. His words were a Truth that set her free. *KarRa was Alone. KarRylan loved.*

He dipped in and kissed her hard, his lips lingering against her skin so that she felt the pull of him when he leaned back. "I love you. I love the way our spirits touch, I love the way our thoughts connect out of habit and familiarity, I love knowing how you laugh so harshly, I love the way you feel under my hands, and I will love the way my key will fit your lock." His eyes captured hers, and set her free. Time stopped, and he taught her how to fly.

Somehow, KarRa came full circle, landing inside herself despite falling into Rylan's eyes. She jerked in his arms. Suddenly, the rock wall pressed against her feet, which were locked at the ankles on the rise of Rylan's ass. His shoulders were tense and strong, his skin hot but dry under her fingers. Her core was spread wide open, pressed against his stomach, and his hands pulled her cheeks apart slightly as he held her to him, making her conscious of the water flowing across her crack.

She saw his pupils dilate, even though there was no change in the daytime setting of lights in the room, and felt his every fingertip flex into her softness, a subtle massage. She pressed her hips forward one breath tighter against his abdomen and his breath left him in a rush.

His head inclined just a whisper toward her and checked, watching her. She mimicked his hands on her ass, spreading her fingers wider on his shoulder blades, and

flexing her fingertips.

Then, all the strength in her arms failed, her fingers slipped from their hooked hold, and his hands reflexively tightened as she allowed herself to fall backward, trusting his strength. She lay arched away from him in the water, her face just clearing the surface. It was as if hot coals were trapped at her center, and her hands drifted loose at her sides. Her body was floating so that her ears were underwater, encasing her in silence. Her hair drifted around her head.

She watched his gaze roam her breasts, whose nipples were tight and long, thrusting out of the water. His eyes circled the tips like a touch then eased down her ribs and her muscled belly, clenched against the lapping touch of the water.

His eyes stopped at her thick wiry puff pressed against the line of golden hair arrowing down from his chest. There was the hard bob and push of his blunt head pushing against her crack, trying to nestle between the globes. He grunted, but stayed locked in place, letting his golden eyes travel back up and down. She knew he saw it all—her scars, her wide, strong shoulders, his symbol etched in blue on her skin.

Every time his eyes paused, her awareness of that piece of flesh sent a throb of heat to her core. All she heard was her lone heartbeat. All around her was heat and soft slickness. All she saw was a man who was so dear, so beautiful, so precious. She loved the feeling of being suspended by nothing but his strength.

After the moment spun into eternity he adjusted his hands, dragging them hard to her hips, his fingers curling tight enough to bruise. He pushed out with his hands, and her body glided along the top of the water, her heartbeat changing to a running rhythm.

He closed his eyes, lowered his chin. When he opened his eyes, he was suddenly a predator. His face tightened, eyes going narrow, mouth grimacing. He pressed directly into the center of her hearth, the rounded head pushing, pushing, pushing as if he was trying to force a key. Closing his eyes again he threw back his head, his neck a series of straining lines that was the most beautiful image she'd ever seen.

His blunt tip popped into her entrance, and his chin snapped down, eyes pinning hers. He snarled at her, and even under water she could read his lips and feel the echo of his words. "Are you alone now?"

Holding her gaze he tunneled his hips forward at the same time he pulled her hips in with his great strength. Water sloshed over her face and she gasped, sputtering, at suddenly being full of Rylan. He drove up into her with a burrowing strength that folded her open. She took him completely, full in a way she'd never experienced. The inferno ignited, rushing down her legs and up her spine.

He reached out and grabbed her ribs, hauling her up to him again. The water cascaded off of her as she was lifted high, sounding loud to her freed ears. She laid her hands on his shoulders as he bent his knees, and slammed up into her. This new angle sent him deeper. Her heart jumped and she was sure he had touched it inside her.

"Look at me!"

Her eyes snapped open to see his glowing, green mist overlapping them like tears. He thrust again, withdrawing a few inches to drive hard and deep.

KarRa gasped. She loved the short jabs, feeling like he was trying to stuff his entire body up into her. KarRa curled her fingers into his muscles, as if she could send roots into him.

He sank out of her and slammed up two more times before he gritted out, "I see you

KarRa. I'm in you. Hold me tight. Inside, tight. *Rise with me.*"

Completing these words with another drive of his hips, she felt something break inside her, as if he had cracked through a wall. Or a shell.

Keeping her eyes on his as long as she could, she convulsed, writhing on the hard flesh lodged inside her, a tearing moan welling from her throat as she clamped tight upon him. Behind the shock came a force of heat that washed over her, burning away every fear, every thought. She was spirit. She was pleasure.

When she was KarRa again, panting, clinging weakly, shaking, against his chest, she realized he had let go of her, his hands outstretched to either side, talon claws scrabbling at the rock. He was shaking too, his eyes full green. His head rested on the ledge of the pool, staring blindly at the ceiling, his teeth razors spilling from panting lips. His battleform was upon him.

Instantly she found the strength to tighten her legs as her heart thrilled to be so close to him in this form. She tightened her arms around his neck, and tightened her sheath around him below.

He snarled, and she tucked her face into the curve of his neck and began to kiss, lick, suck, and nip in time to her swirling hips. She didn't have the leverage to lift off him, even if he hadn't swelled to a thickness that pulled and burned at her core. But she was able to tighten and release from the inside.

He began to snarl in a steady expanding crescendo until he opened his jaw to a silent scream, his head thrashing, claws scraping white furrows in stone. His cock so hard and huge inside her she whimpered and mewled as the pleasure twisted her gut.

She stayed tucked against his chest, hanging from his shoulders by virtue of arms that had locked in position, and when he softened, her feet lost the will to cling and her legs slid down the outside of his, the feel of their legs soft against the other in the water. His relaxed cock rubbed against her belly, causing her to shiver.

Finally their breathing steadied, and his hands came around her back to hold her gently. She felt cherished, as if she were some fine fragile carving. She sighed and stood, and he bent and kissed her. His lips met hers in a silky push, followed by the sweep of his tongue. They tangled, swirled, and drew on each other until her mouth felt as melted as her center.

Eventually, his kisses softened until they were sipping each other's breath, and one of his hands wandered down her spine, over her hip, and pushed through her curls to cup her.

He pressed his fingertips into her softness and whispered, "I love you."

KarRa thought she would die from the feeling that swelled from her chest, pulsed at his hand, tightened in her throat. The world dropped out from under them and rolled like a child's ball. She kissed his jaw softly and whispered back, "I love you."

He whirled from the wall, his arms tightening around her, to spin in quick rushes around and around in the water. KarRa laughed with joy as her legs trailed in the wake, and laughed again to feel his furred chest rubbing against hers when he rumbled a laugh as well.

Rylan frowned in mock confusion. "How are we to get out?"

KarRa laughed again. She didn't know why, and didn't care. "What do you mean?"

"I can't possibly be expected to let go of you, so how are we going to get out?"

"Why do we have to? We'll eat here, and sleep here, and tomorrow the mages can

stand around and we'll join here!"

Rylan tossed her playfully. KarRa shrieked at his strength and the water sloshed over the rim. "What a wonderful idea. We will become keepers of the bath, and never leave." Holding her high, he took the opportunity to close his mouth around one of her nipples. She moaned, her stomach clutching inside.

They continued the joke, talking about how their children would be Watercoasters, and earthmages, who would make tunnels between the other three baths, so that the family would have more room. "And more privacy for fucking," Rylan growled, gnawing on KarRa's shoulder.

Finally their words trailed off, and the water grew still as they stood resting against the other.

"Ready?" Rylan asked.

"I think I am," she said softly, shyly.

He slowly let his arms open, and stepped back. She let hers fall to her sides. The pool was cool without his body against hers. They looked at each other, love flowing between them as surely as the water.

* * * *

That night, after they'd spent the day trying to keep their hands on the outside of each other's clothing, Freezha and Vyr came in.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late, but..." Freezha looked quickly at Rylan, then at the floor.

"Freezha needs to talk to you," Vyr said quietly, his arm around her shoulder.

KarRa thought Freezha looked better, although the area under her eyes looked bruised. "I'm happy to speak with you now. Are you sure you should be up? Do you want to go sit in the lounge?"

"I'm fine, and will be fully healed after a good night's sleep. This won't take long. I would like to sit somewhere I can talk privately with you."

The men went out together.

Freezha drew designs on the tabletop, seeming strangely subdued. "We only have a day left. I wanted to be sure I said goodbye. Vyr is taking me to Sandhome the morning after our matebond night. I don't know when I'll see you next. He's assigned here as the instructor to the women, but there aren't any women to train at the moment, and he's asked someone to cover his duty "until I settle." Whatever that means."

KarRa stayed silent, letting Freezha work up to the reason she was troubled. "There will be nineteen witnesses at our matebond ceremony." Freezha's voice was utterly flat, and nearly a whisper.

KarRa's mouth sagged open. She was speechless.

"I feel like I'm going to be on display..." Look what I've got." Her voice was a mocking bass. "Like I'm being offered to the group, and judged. I've never even watched anyone before. I mean, I've seen people playing, but not everything."

KarRa realized Freezha was talking about fucking. "Nineteen?" KarRa's voice was as weak as Freezha's. She was having a hard time with four.

Freezha covered her face. "I know I've gone on so about men. It made me eager and hot, to think of taking a Beast mate. Now it's actually here... By the Earthmother, KarRa... I keep thinking my first time is not really going to be with Vyr, but his

Lizzeed, and in battleform at that.”

“Freezha ... have you thought about taking verra wine?”

She burst out into a strangled laugh that was half cry. “It’s all my spiritmage has been talking about since the day after my choosing when I told him I’m a virgin. I know I’ll love fucking, KarRa. I’ve always been enthusiastic in my pleasure. But all day today, I look at Vyur, and feel so ... *stressed* ... about this first time being so important, and so wild, and so *witnessed*. I’ve flirted and fantasized...”

Her eyes welled. “Just when I start to even think I can do it, all I see is those bodies in the fight today. Their teeth and claws. I hear the snarls in my head... Vyur—he’s been so controlled all his life, but even *he* is worried about hurting me. I know this is not his doing, but the tradition of these people, and it’s really for our safety, to settle their Beasts.

“He keeps looking at me, and I can see the heat, the need in his eyes. Then I think of claws ripping into my skin! He’s like a hero among his people... What if I shame him? *Winds*, what if I start to cry? What if I try to run like I did yesterday? I feel like such a baby for feeling this way!”

She jumped up from the table to hobble to the magelight, dabbling her fingers over the glazed ball, making the room jump with shadows. KarRa thought how she’d feel going into such a ceremony if she hadn’t seen Rylan in his battleform so often the past few years.

“Are you happy, KarRa? I mean, now that you’ve had time to adjust your thinking about Rylan?”

“Yes. I have so much to learn still. As does Rylan. And we’ll be leaving for the Nest soon—a new place and more people to learn. I’ll miss you, Freezha. Rylan and I...”

KarRa looked down at her forearm, running her fingers over the blue feather. “We will find a way, together. I just need to find something that I can offer the Clan. Something that I will feel comfortable and confident at. So that I can feel like I contribute something besides growing the babies of a beautiful, magical Beast. I have no magic, no beauty, and no talents...”

Freezha cried, “Not true!”

But KarRa waved her away. “A talent for getting into trouble doesn’t count. I can’t believe I will truly have a place at Rylan’s side until I understand what I have to offer him. Something I can be proud of and good at, so he will have a full partner to offer his Clan.”

Freezha went to crouch down next to KarRa, winced, and scooted the chair closer to perch on it.

KarRa wouldn’t look at her but Freezha whispered, “You have power, KarRa. You will find your place, but a duty isn’t going to make you believe in yourself.”

She reached over and pried one of KarRa’s hands from her lap, then took it to hold against her face. “KarRa, you are alive. No other woman I know could have fought so well today! Not many could even still be speaking normally after a day like that. Day after tomorrow, I will think of you to lend me courage, that solid strength in your spine. Because of you in my life.

“I will imagine your steady eyes, seeing your expectation that no matter what happens you will face it, deal with it, get by it. Remembering your strength will keep me from losing my mind. Confidence is who you are KarRa, without a hint of arrogance. You have worth! In your steady friendship, in your curious and open mind. If Rylan were

dead and you were barren, wandering back in that lawless maze of death, you would have worth.”

KarRa let her eyes move to Freezha’s. Their rare sky color took her breath away. Her fingers moved under Freezha’s grip, and Freezha let her hand fall. KarRa looked at this strong, beautiful woman with the kindest, most open spirit she’d ever known. She stroked Freezha’s thick, silky hair and tucked it behind her ear.

“Thank you,” she whispered. The women looked at each other long moments full of love. “Do you want me there? One for you to make an even twenty? They can’t keep this thief out.”

Freezha strangled on a laugh. “I’ve thought and thought of it. When I heard of the crowd, I threatened to invite every man I knew here just to make Vyr as upset as I am. But I don’t really want people I know to see me and Vyr. At least not like that. You’re the only person I trust to see me that fuzzed out, and women aren’t allowed.” She fiddled with her skirt. “I want to prove to myself, and Vyr, that I can do it, that I’m not just a pretty pearl. I think if I can just hold that image of you wading through those men like nothing could touch you... I can try.”

KarRa’s hand rested on Freezha’s shoulder. “It will be your own courage that sends you into that circle to your mate. Talk to him about all this. Ask to see his battleform tomorrow so you won’t be faced with it among strangers. Freezha, it’s so clear to me that he loves you. I’m sure he’ll do anything to make this easier on you. Maybe ... maybe there’s a way to make it not your first time at the matebond.” She almost admitted to the loving in the bath but Freezha jumped in.

“I’ve tried every flirty trick I know to get him out of his pants. He’s such a prude. And I get so angry thinking there’s a chance he won’t even remember what his Beast does. I waited a long time to give this body to a man, and I want him able to appreciate it!”

This was much more like the Freezha KarRa was used to. “Try not to think of the Lizeed inside Vyr as a separate being, but as another kind of Vyr. That’s how I see Rylan. I know fun and silly Rylan, serious and sneaky Rylan, and wild and dangerous Rylan. It’s just another Rylan. This ceremony is once, and they say that our pleasure is required in the ceremony. Lizeed-Vyr wants to bond to you, not attack you.

“Afterwards, then Vyr can finally show you the fucking you’ve always craved. But it will be better because it will be a loving as well. This will lead to the relationship you’ve dreamed of, Freezha. Your spiritmage will help you from running away, and it will be over. As for your tears, no one will judge you for them.”

Freezha chewed her lip fretfully. “That’s what I keep telling myself. It’s just this once. They’re his family, and closest friends. They’ll be kind. I’ll face it, then move on.” She nodded once, a decisive if terrified princess, and KarRa smiled at her fierceness.

Still rubbing Freezha’s shoulder soothingly, KarRa pressed, “So, this pearl will handle nineteen witnesses and a mate in battleform for her first time?”

Freezha went white, flags of red scoring her cheeks. She swallowed audibly, but gave a firm nod again. “I will.” Her voice wavered but her eyes held steady. She dropped her eyes. “Well, I’ll try one more time to seduce him and I never even thought of asking to see his battleform... I think it would help. Thanks.”

KarRa nodded back and stood, helping Freezha to stand, both laughing at her groans from her leg.

They went into the lounge. They shared tea, but it was clear Vyr was only being polite, and he firmly said to Freezha, "It's time we left," after she finished her mug.

Freezha asked, "We?"

"You're not sleeping here in the women's caves again tonight. I need you near me," Vyr said. His voice was low and intense, but his hands stroked hers softly. "Let's get you packed. The last two nights you'll stay with the Lizzed."

Freezha shyly agreed.

Rylan looked at KarRa, or rather her lips. "I like that idea too."

"Sounds good," KarRa smiled.

They made the long trek up to the Owls' rooms. KarRa trailed her fingers over the sweeping wings, hooked beaks and talons carved on the doorway.

When they were tucked in, KarRa wearing a borrowed tunic and Rylan a clean pair of cloth trews, and the magelight turned low, both of them ignoring his erection as they always had, she told him of Freezha's difficulties.

He nodded. "I guess I didn't realize it, but you've seen me like that dozens of times for years now. It never bothered you?"

KarRa shook her head. "It was always just how you were when you were angry. Really angry. But most women wouldn't even recognize their mates probably. Freezha... I can't see her falling apart at that moment. She'll be too determined."

After a pause, KarRa whispered, "Ry, I'm scared."

He grew cautious in the darkness. "Why? We shared love today. It will be just as beautiful at the ceremony." The words were gentle.

"What if I start to think of Vili? And those days afterward? The years afterward? What if I start to think of Merk and Grif watching?"

Rylan was now rigid next to her, and she waited, as limb by limb he forced himself to relax. "You weren't thinking on those memories when we were in the bath today, and I don't believe you'll think of them at the ceremony." He seemed to hesitate.

"Merk will help you," he said grudgingly. "Grif told me there is a bond between woman and spiritmage, not nearly as strong, and different, than ours. Through this bond he can direct your thoughts, keep others away."

KarRa whispered in shame, "He told me he'd keep thoughts of the rape away."

Rylan tightened his arms around her again, this time in fierce comfort. "By the deep Waters, I'd forgotten you'd told me you didn't like men behind you. Oh KarRa! You told me a few years ago those memories were put away for you. Has this brought them back?!"

She shook her head. "Just a flash, when he was telling me what would happen."

He held her close and said gruffly, "Don't think of it. Don't let the shadows and doubt in. We're starting a new future, KarRa. We're together. We're strong. Today, my Beast chose to protect you rather than attack and we were lucky. But I also take it as a sign of the bond we have. We belong together. I love you. Keep those words, in my voice, repeating in your head and we'll get past this ceremony. We're never going to be hungry again. We're going to have help watching our backs, and I believe these people value us. This ceremony... I am scared too."

KarRa tilted her head on his shoulder to look up at him, even though she could only see the outline of his chin and nose in the faint light. "We go through these days together and you are the KarRa I have always loved. Fierce and watchful, taking every moment as

it is. But inside, I am seething. I feel my Owl clawing at me to get to you.” He flexed his hips against her side and his cock leaped and pulsed.

“I still want you. I always want you. I haven't stopped, for one second, since that attack in the women's caves, and it seems you are as comfortable with me as if I were a pet bird.” His voice lowered to a rumble in her ear.

“I want to pin you down and fuck you until you lay limp beneath me from pleasure upon pleasure. I crave your blood in my mouth. I'm finally going to be able to claim you, and *he* will be there. I'm going to try not to acknowledge them in any way. But my Owl is too aware. I'm terrified I'll do something drastic to prove to myself you've chosen *me* and not *him*.” This last came out a hoarse growl, his hips swirling against her.

He threw himself out of bed and turned the magelight up. He stood with his hands braced against the wall, head hanging between them.

KarRa sat up on the side of the bed. “You didn't hurt me in the park, by the river, or even in the bath. I trust your Beast, Rylan. And if you need to add a scar to this collection to set your spirit at ease, I love you enough to give you as many as will quiet you. Pain passes. A bodymage will be waiting. You say you will love me always.”

He spun to her, his eyes glinting green. “Air to Fire! KarRa don't encourage me!” He took one step toward her and stopped. “I can't sleep here. I'll go to Kor's room.” He paced a pair of steps toward her despite his words. “The ceremony can't come fast enough. I love you. Claiming you was the sweetest moment of my life but I'm not satisfied in the least. I want more, and more and more.”

He threw his head back and drew in an enormous breath that did lovely things to his bare chest.

He snarled. “Don't *do* that! I can feel your interest! I'll see you later. Sleep.” He spun on his heel and stomped out.

KarRa blinked at the heavy curtain for a few minutes, turned out the light, and lay down in a bed that smelled of Rylan. Surprisingly, she did not think of their loving, or the battle of the day. Her mind went to the image of his joyous face greeting a little boy named Tam, tossing Tam in the air, laughing at the boy's antics. Sleep was a long time coming.

* * * *

She awoke to the drag of lips along her arm in the darkness. Smiling at the warm happiness that curled through her at his presence, she turned her head toward him and murmured, “Change your mind?”

He had turned the light up low, and was dressed. He was holding her pants. “Up my love, my soul, thief of my dreams. I want to show you something.”

She dressed, sipped some water, and followed him through the still silent halls. She realized it was not yet morning and felt like grumbling. He led her back out to the main landing and into the cat-carved arch. At the now familiar triad of hallways, there was a fourth door, only waist high. He knelt and motioned for her to go through. She crawled for what seemed like the length of ten shaks but was probably only two in truth and emerged into the cold night air.

They were on an open slab of rock, the shape of a twisted tree to the left, and the faintest light coming from a vast space to the right. She took a step back toward the mountain at their back, but he laughed and pulled her along a trail she didn't see, guiding

her down and up until they came around a large boulder twice his height to a short shelf of rock with a natural hollow.

He laid the blanket he'd brought from his bed down, sat, and gestured her down between his legs. As she nestled her rump up tight against his erection, he drew the flap of blanket around them, slipping his arms around her ribs. She sat against him, utterly relaxed in the fresh air.

She had long admired the lack of scent around the rooms at the mountain. Mostly there was the scent of dry earth. Occasionally she caught the musky scent of an animal, as if she were in the shak of someone who had a dog, and sometimes there were arrangements of flowers, or the scent of food. But there was never a bitter stink, a sour odor, or rancid stench.

This air was even more pure. She scented moisture, and dust, and pine. The sky began to lighten, and color came to be. There were tans and golds in the rocks around her, and the sky was alive, breathing with a subtle wave of change that constantly kept her eyes wandering up and down, side to side. Eventually the clash of cool and warm color flattened, not so dramatic, and the sun rose, a ball of blinding force.

Rylan drew her tighter to him and said softly, "This is the image you hold in your mind tomorrow KarRa. This. Our Dark is gone. When I press you over into the furs, when I send my flesh into your body, when I pour myself, magic, cream, and soul, into your keeping, this is what you keep in your mind. We will take each other in the light, and never look back."

His cock pulsed between them as tears flowed down her cheeks. She wanted to be blinded by the light, so that it was all she would ever see. She wanted to freeze this moment.

She whispered, "We only go forward now."

He kissed her ear softly, flicking her lobe into his mouth to suckle briefly. Letting it go with a soft pop, he breathed, "Yesss. I love you, KarRa."

* * * *

They breakfasted with Kor and Alto, two Owls Rylan had been sleeping with. KarRa was pleased to see they had a comfortable bond with Rylan that reminded her of her friends. They talked of useful books to learn of the Truxet, and directions to a certain treasure room, and how to get trunks delivered. KarRylan were going to fill a trunk for their future home, planning to decorate a shak they'd never have to defend. Both of them agreed that Vyur's room had a wonderful feeling of comfort and simple wealth they'd like to model.

After they ate lunch at a vendor down by the river, they went to KarRa's room in the women's caves. Already it no longer seemed like it belonged to her. She was visiting a place of fond memories, from a distant perspective of growth. She checked, but Freezha was still out.

In her room she found a vase from Cro with two notes. One said, "So sad to hear of the attacks. So glad to hear you are well. This is for you. Thinking of you! Congratulations, Cro." The vase was wide at the base, flowing up in a rounded sweep to a narrow neck only two fingers wide, the lip curling open to fall like a wave. After a moment KarRa saw that it was meant to look like water—the ceramic was glazed in all shades of bright and deep blue and purple. It reminded her of Freezha's eyes. There was a

painted motif around the bottom, interesting water creatures in a vivid dark green that was raised off the blue glaze. She recognized the style. Proteus had painted it. And she'd bet Cro had made the vase. An object of beauty, a gift unstolen, and she'd never have to trade it. It was hers.

There was also a knife. It was curved, with a vicious pronged barb. The handle fit her hand perfectly, and she liked the weight of it—not too heavy and not too light. She flourished it, appreciating the simple golden cap set in the handle's end. It had a leather holder with a belt loop, embossed with a lizzeed. It was not a warclub, but she could grow used to it. She knew Vyr had left it.

On one chair was a flow of deep, dark red silk. There was a torn scrap of paper that read, "Freezha's dress. Pack it!!! (Your ideas helped LOTS!!)" KarRa sighed with relief to think her friend had found a way to go forward, and then sighed with dread when she held the dress up. There were two loops of twisted gold and red cords that she took to be the shoulders. The rest just hung like a soft fall of blood all the way down to the floor. There seemed to be too much fabric between the straps, so that it did not hang flat. Even when she pulled them to their widest point, the neckline hung in rounded folds. She caught a glimmer and gathered the dress up to discover there were embroidered flames in thick golden thread. She couldn't make out where they'd fall on the dress—perhaps on the waist, or thigh. There was a cut in the dress up from the hem to the flames. Hmm. It was on purpose, because it had that even finish.

Rylan looked at the dress with awe. "Put it on," he urged.

When she refused he continued to whine and cajole until she snapped, "Later!"

He sulked.

KarRa was touched that the first things into her trunk were Cro's vase wrapped in Freezha's dress. It seemed appropriate. In the treasure room KarRa thought of as Freezha's, she took the bare minimum of clothes, still feeling insanely rich. Practical housing touches that were also beautiful thrilled her. When they came upon baby things, Rylan stroked her rigid nape gently.

"We'll leave those. Let the future lie. We have time." Eventually he distracted her with items in another room. She loved the beautiful colors they chose from among the blankets and pillows and rugs—silver grey, grass green, whispery blue, shimmery lavender. Her trunk full, they went on to Rylan's treasure room.

KarRa watched, confused as he studied and felt various wooden contraptions with wide bases, poles of varying heights, and a thick cross bar at the top. When he finally chose one he saw her puzzled look and said simply, "It's a perch. For me." She blinked, opened her mouth, closed it, and nodded. The one he chose was knee high, the base an open weave of knotwork.

Finally they went to the serving hall. It looked odd empty of bodies. He let her choose the food, and they picnicked in the park. They sat facing each other with their legs entwined, and laughed as they fed each other, and played with their food.

Rylan often adjusted himself, and she would taunt "ooooo" every time. He paid her back by giving himself a firm stroke that caused her mouth to water. They talked of how they would use the things they'd chosen, how their room could be arranged, how rich and clean and safe this world was. KarRa was dizzy. She would live in safety, in beauty, with Rylan. She felt like she laughed for hours, feeling as if she could float away.

That night, they dozed in each other's arms on his bed in the Owl caves. She awoke

to his hips pressing, stroking against hers, heat and moisture throbbing between her women's lips. He blinked slowly at her, his eyes focusing. His voice was hoarse. "I'll wait until tomorrow. One more night and we'll be together. All. Night. Long."

KarRa took a quick breath. Her heart suddenly feeling too big for her body. "I love you."

He nodded. "I'm lucky like that." He rose, handed her a white silk object she hadn't noticed in his clothes box and walked out.

She slowly unwrapped it after feeling it all about. It was a soft glove of black leather, with a long curl of extra thick stiff leather out the wrist with hooks down one side. It was plain down the middle, with embossed designs of feathers in a sweeping band on the end and on the back of the glove. Puzzled for a moment, KarRa held it up horizontally. Her breath caught when she realized what it was. *An arm guard*. For a person to use when providing a perch for a bird of prey. To keep Rylan's talons from puncturing and slicing her arm.

She tried it on. The glove fit snugly, the length going to just short of her elbow. The hooks had been designed to be easily done up with her free hand, and were hidden under the leather when it was closed. Leaving it on, she buried her face in Rylan's smell, and slept. She awoke in the early morning hours to see a blue flower on her pillow. KarRa swallowed on a suddenly dry throat. Her blood swirled urgently through her body. It wouldn't be long now.

Utterly restless, she spent a satisfying hour completing her knifedances in her room. She took time with her bath, letting her fingers linger on her skin and hair, feeling as if her body was an incredible object of sensation. Memories of Rylan in the same pool, his arms outstretched and neck arched as he quickened made her breath hitch.

She tried to rest, but her legs twisted impatiently as she lay on the pallet. She called up Rylan's face in her mind's eye, the high cheekbones, strong nose and chin, the flair of his tawny brows above his warm eyes, the bow of his wide lips.

She changed her focus to the image of the dawn coming up over the mountains, how the layers of hills were gradually pulled toward her from their initial dark silhouette, the clean air, the wide space of freedom rolling out as far as the eye could see, Rylan's warmth at her back and his strength holding her tight.

She recalled her legs wrapped around his waist as he held her in the warm water, the feeling of his mouth slanting hard across hers for the first time in this room, the feel of his knee rocking a rise out of her as she swallowed his rich bitter taste around the thick heat of him in her mouth.

KarRa let her hands drift over her body as she replayed her new, astonishing memories of Rylan in lust—for *her*. She restlessly opened her robe to feel the heat of her nipples with her rough fingertips.

An unbidden image came up of Rylan lying next to her on a threadbare pile of blankets on a dusty uneven floor, crooked wallboards gaping to reveal light from outside, arguing voices she hadn't even remembered coming from somewhere above. She was on her back, her knees raised and splayed, both hands working through her soft hairs at her wetness, and he was propped on one arm beside her.

She watched the play of his tan hand run over the taught skin of his darker cock. KarRa moaned softly as she copied the position of her memory.

His hand trailed up to his chest, where he pinched and pulled and twisted a small

nipple on a sculpted chest. KarRa knew he wanted her to mirror him but she didn't, instead thrusting her folded fingers noisily through her folds.

Her other fingers danced lightly, pinching and tapping at her clit, and Rylan's gaze dropped from her face to her hands, the skin around his eyes tightening, his lips pulling back from his teeth.

Their tempo increased together until his fist was beating down against his taut stomach with thrumming rhythm, and her hips were off the ground with the force of her tightening core. Her eyes tracked a seep of thick white seed from his dark cock and that was all it took to drive her into rising.

KarRa let her legs sprawl down, her damp hands limp on her stomach as she recovered from the memory of shared passion with Rylan. She drew her robe tighter as her breath calmed. She knew what that cream tasted like now. She knew what the thickness felt like in her fist. His hands had held her open, and his mouth had known her clit. *KarRylan*. She listened for the hateful voice, the taunting. There was only peaceful silence.

Suddenly, a wild whispery growl echoed through her magebond. *Come to me*. She was startled to hear actual words. The need was so strong she couldn't keep from pacing. She had to get to him, soon.

It wasn't long before someone called out for her at the curtain. "Hello KarRa."

"Xu!" She offered her wrist to him.

Mine-myskin-mine, howled a rough voice in her head.

"I needed your services the other day but managed without you!"

He grimaced. "I really must see you are trained in basic healing soon."

As they went off down the main hall together, KarRa's body flushed with heat, moisture dripping down her thighs, her heart pounding. *Where Is My Mate?!* the cry was frustrated, growing unsteady. Xu stopped in front of the last door in this small hall. He turned to her and scanned her with his hands from crown to foot. She took off her boots.

"I'll see you soon, KarRa. Be at peace."

He rolled the doorway open, announced, "KarRa" and she walked through.

She stopped. The room was full of smoke, seemingly denser than any in a tavern, yet fragrant and stirring instead of stifling. The magelight was low, set high toward the ceiling, leaving a sunken pit in the middle of the room in shadows. Grif was against the wall off to the left, in a brown robe. In a direct line across from him, at the edge of the pit, was Merk, his back slightly to her. Two other men formed a perfect triangle around the pit.

Her heart dropped with a nearly physical thud when she realized that Rylan was pacing the far wall in the shadows across from Grif, to her right, beyond Merk. From magelight to magelight took him two paces, then he'd turn and prowl back. Turn, prowl, turn. He didn't seem to know she'd entered. No one was looking at her. They were all staring at Rylan.

Uh oh, KarRa thought.

Finally, after several minutes, Rylan went to Grif, although he'd issued no order, and knelt on one knee at his side, both men breathing hard. After a long minute he opened his eyes and swung his head toward KarRa. He crawled on his hands and knees across the stone floor to stop at her feet, sitting back on his haunches. His eyes were reflecting green, his fingers unnaturally long.

Merk's voice called out "KarRa, promised of Rylan. Come forward to accept your soulmate."

KarRa really couldn't move forward very much, as Rylan was perhaps an arm length away, so she dropped her robe from her shoulders and knelt before him. His hands were compulsively clawing at the stone in a way that made KarRa want to flinch in sympathy for his still human nails. He was already nude. She kept her eyes on his hands as the moment spun out and out.

He seemed to gather some control, closing his hands into fists. He moved forward and crawled behind her, and his hot breath washed from the back of her neck to where the globes of her ass were cradled against her heels. His tongue lashed out across that crease and she jumped.

Then he nudged the base of her spine with his nose. He did it again harder. He began to growl and head butted her shoulder so hard she had to put a hand out to stop her fall. Finally she understood when he nudged her ass again. He wanted her to go forward.

She crawled forward, feeling ridiculous and faintly unnerved at having him behind her until she came to the pit. She hesitated at the edge, looking up at the man across from her, but his eyes were staring straight ahead, unfocused. Rylan nipped her ass and she sat, swung her legs over the edge and hopped in, standing.

The mages called out, "KarRa accepts Rylan."

The furs were deep and soft, shifting silkily under her feet. He crawled right down over the edge after her, rose up on his knees and buried his nose in her woman's nest, his hands gripping her thighs. She gasped at the sudden onslaught of extreme sensation.

All the mages spoke together, "The triangle protects."

They raised their arms and green energy roared from palm to palm. KarRa jumped from the popping pressure in her ears, her hands going to Rylan's head as he continued to root in her scent.

Instantly, it was as if they were enclosed in a smaller, hotter room. His tongue was everywhere, firm, noisy in his joy at tasting her. She thought she caught a hum of pure contentment from him. She was surprised she wasn't more self-conscious at the intimate position. Instead, a wave of inevitability washed over her. Rylan would soon be inside her. She throbbed at the quick, shallow probe of his tongue. She couldn't wait for something thicker, deeper.

KarRa was now facing the door and looked up at Merk. She could see him staring straight ahead, but she could feel him in her mind, a warm, soothing, calming presence. He was like a shadow, always just out of reach when she tried to focus on him.

Suddenly, Rylan's hands fell to the back of KarRa's knees and he pulled hard. Her legs flew out from under her and she landed hard on her back, her head bouncing, her breath caught. He then reared back and scissored her legs with a forcible twist so that she was flipped face down. She smacked her arms under her to raise herself up, struggling for breath, when he grabbed the back of her neck, and lifted and pushed her forward until her upper body was lying on the main floor of the room. The stone was cold on her forearms doubled beneath her.

Gasping for breath, her neck smarting, she thought, *I'm going to kick his ass!* But as she looked over her shoulder to glare at Rylan, she heard Merk's voice hiss in her mind, *Do not!*

She whipped her head back around before her eyes connected with his to discover

she was lying directly facing Grif. Rylan was again rooting between her legs, his hands clumsy as he pulled at her thighs, widening her stance. She was not tall enough for her knees to reach the furs with her hips and torso laid on the stone edge, so she had no choice but to hang there as his shoulders pushed her legs wide.

Merk's voice ghosted, *Feel*. Rylan's desperate need fired into her as quickly as if she were straw. She swung her hips, grinding into his face as he sought to grab her clit in his teeth. His breath was like an inferno that raged up into her core. He made rough sounds of want as his tongue seemed to unfurl inside her.

KarRa's eyes lifted and locked on Grif's. She was stunned at the intimacy of seeing only him in the smoky dim light, just a few paces away, while Rylan rolled his face in the wet heat between her legs. He looked as if he were facing an enemy, his face pulled tight in a snarl. His hands visibly trembled at his sides, shimmering. She had the sense he was handling a lot of power. His robe was tented with an erection. She unconsciously licked her lips as her gaze rested on it and she caught his groan.

Rylan rose up behind her abruptly. He slid one hand right up her spine to clamp around her neck, lifting her head more fully toward Grif, bowing her torso up as he pressed with his other hand down hard on her tailbone, pinning her hips in place. A huge, hot, blunt pressure shifted against her, then with a cry he rammed himself in.

She echoed his cry as she lost focus on Grif's burning eyes. Her flesh parted as if cleaved. His abrupt presence inside her body felt alien. Suddenly KarRa flashed to a memory of a bowl of bruised and rotting fruit falling from a wooden table she was held to.

Then Merk's presence ghosted through and KarRa was feeling Rylan behind her on the mountain, bright light flaring in front of her with the rising sun. KarRa understood at once. Rylan was doing this on purpose. It was the exact position she'd been raped in. She would never remember that again. She'd remember this. Merk was directing her to their dawn. The image of a searing sun before her eyes ignited through her body to connect with Rylan's heat, sending her into a sudden sweat.

Grif's red-gold eyes were glowing, the faint green striking in his tanned face as she refocused on his gaze. His lips were peeled back from his clenched teeth and his hips were rolling at the same pace as Rylan's. Rylan was laid out along her length, his hand stroking the front of her throat now, his other hand pressing and curling into her ass as he pressed in, dragged himself slowly out, and burrowed in again. He'd growl every time he withdrew. "*Kar ... Ra...*" he'd moan every time he pressed deep.

KarRa began to burn from the slick friction. Her woman's cream coated her thighs, making her impossibly sensitive to the wet press of his hips against her ass. This was Rylan fucking her, marrying her, claiming her. Rylan, inside her at last. She began to use the fainter strength of her trapped forearms to push back against him, grunting with the impact of his hips. His hand on her back began to swirl up and down, over the faint curves of her hip and down the backs of her thighs.

His hand burrowed down between them suddenly, his legs shifting restlessly. Then there was soft, slightly furred pressure against her clit. Small round globes shifted and rolled in her hood.

"Rylan!" She could only moan at the spiraling heat focused between them. He was pressing his balls up tight to her, grinding them against her with every forward drive.

He stroked deeper and harder, spiking her core. One instant she was rocking under

the force of his strength, the next she was flame. She reached for Rylan on their magepath, but while she felt the shadow of the Owl, he was not yet ready to end the claiming and slid out of reach. Fire roared inside, and she flowed.

She came to awareness an eternity later, her head lying on its side, ear pressed into the rock. His fingers petted the curve of neck and shoulder with a faint rasp of sharp nails, his other fingers faintly scraping the curve of her ass. His cock was throbbing like a living club inside her, his mouth leaving soothing licks along her spine. She shivered. Her toes curled where they hung loose against fur.

Sensing her awareness, he reared up behind her and eased his length out. He gently pulled on her hips, and she fell limply back into the pit. He turned her around until she was upright on her knees facing Merk. Then he snuggled up behind her, his knees to the outside of her, and gathered her back into his arms, his hands plumping and pulling on her small sloping breasts, his fingers deliciously harsh on her firm nipples. His cock was a smooth wet spike, rocking faintly in the groove of her spine.

His breath was roaring in her ears, and his voice came out garbled in his throat, but she made out the word “taste” and he was suddenly sinking razors into the flesh above her collarbone, near the same spot he'd ripped open in their fight in the Dark.

She shrieked with the burn as he clamped her nipples at the same time, then her breasts came alive with the sensation of faint, shivering pleasure as his nails dragged across their slopes. The clawed alien hands doing a knifedance over her belly and breasts mesmerized her eyes, as his mouth pulled at her blood in a burning suction. Rylan's Beast was claiming her and she'd never been more free. The suction at her throat twisted her belly, making it feel empty.

Then his hands pulled away, and he was shoving her shoulders down. She accepted the submission easily. It was Rylan. His thighs moved to the inside of hers, and his cock was pressing, pressing, probing, trying to gain access to a channel swelled too small for it.

She braced herself with arms outstretched against the base of the wall around them for leverage and he finally burrowed in using short digs, his nails ripping into the skin at her hips as he roared in triumph. For one moment he held himself poised with his groin pressed tight and his cock thick satisfaction deep inside her. She moaned, feeling her clit swell. Then he went wild. The light flared white instantly as he began to pummel her in a rhythm that was more of a deep desperate grind than true thrusts.

KarRa screamed again as a firemage's heat erupted against her hips beneath his hands, and she thought she heard Grif cry out as well. For one eternal dizzying second she was a length of aching steel sheathed in soft, warm, wetness, a core of pleasure coiled tight at the base of her spine. She heard the whisper of a forest around her. Ghostly feathers brushed her deep inside. Then all was lost to her as every muscle in her body tightened and twisted and held, held, held, then sprung apart in a screaming wash of blue heat.

When she awoke, she was raw with overexposed nerves, yet utterly lax in more pleasure than she'd ever dreamed. She was on her back, her arms outspread, and the light seemed glaringly, embarrassingly bright. She could feel every hair of the furs beneath her, and her hips ached. A mage bent over Merk, collapsed and fallen half into the circle, shouting at him. Another was shouting at Xu to “open the damn door” somewhere out of sight, and Grif was repeating a grated steady roll of words, “Come to me. Come to me

now. Now Rylan. Kneel at my side.”

Rylan was crouched between KarRa's legs, and when she glanced at him she saw he'd gone to full battleform, the most extreme she'd ever seen him. If she didn't feel his soul so completely inside her, she would have thought he was something out of a nightmare.

His mouth was now protruding like a snout, the nose flattened and the lips longer to accommodate the fused teeth that appeared beak-like beneath his lips. His black claws were the curling talons of an Owl, two of his fingers fused so that his hands resembled the Owl physiology. His neck was as thick as his head, and his shoulders hunched and bulged. He was licking and sucking between KarRa's legs, along her hips, which seemed awash in blood, and occasionally leaned up and swiped at the fine bloody lines that decorated her chest. He was continuously growling low and menacingly in his throat. He utterly ignored Grif.

KarRa moaned at the feeling of his tongue, seemingly twice as long, firmly pressing up the length of her folds. She lifted her hips in response to his seeking tongue, encouraging it to go deeper.

Grif barked, “She's awake.”

One of the men shouted, “By the Flame, KarRa, don't move! Can you try to rouse Merk with your magepath? He has to be the one to open the door!”

Her breath hissed in at the sting of the sweep of Rylan's tongue over a particularly deep puncture at her hip and she closed her eyes. Grif resumed his steady commands, trying to connect with Rylan's Beast.

KarRa tried to go to her mists, but felt utterly lost. She couldn't focus. She was a melted puddle of pleasure and simply couldn't summon any distress at the situation. She tried a mental call, imagining a pale magepath to Merk. She let the thrill of the feeling of Rylan's beak drag over her stomach add to the push.

At once Merk sat up, coughing and choking, rolling away from the circle. KarRa moaned when Rylan returned to her cunt, his tongue swirling and curling through her sopping curls, grunting with pleasure. She could feel his fearsome claws along her inner thighs. The other mage was cursing the elements steadily and finally both mages managed to pull Merk to his feet.

Merk croaked weakly, “Now.”

All three intoned, “Rylan is claimed by KarRa. KarRa is claimed by Rylan.”

“The Owl sees! She's yours Rylan. Come to me and let her be healed!” Grif barked out. There was a moment of silence as Grif's angry voice and Rylan's growls ceased at once. KarRa couldn't contain her mewl at the loss of sensation against her raw center. It seemed to echo over the men's harsh breathing.

Then Rylan slowly rose from his crouch between her legs, climbed out of the pit, and went to lean against Grif's legs, looking up at him and panting like a chastised monster puppy. Grif stared down, holding Rylan's mage green eyes with his own, sweat rolling down the side of his face as the men went to the door and helped Merk roll it open.

Xu was in the pit in one bound, his hands lying on the punctured, scorched flesh at KarRa's hips. KarRa hissed as the pain snapped through her briefly before Xu banished it. She heard Rylan give a choked cry. She rolled her head to the side to see that he had returned to human form, but had hidden his face behind Grif's leg.

“Oh Elements! Oh KarRa!”

She heard the horror in his voice, felt his self-hate, and gasped out, "Rylan! I'll be fine! Rylan don't think that! I need you."

Grif leaned down, his hand a benediction on Rylan's shoulder, "Go to her."

He crawled forward, no longer a sexual predator, but a shivering, shocked man. He went to her, his eyes wet as they swept her scratches, the bloody bite at her neck.

"KarRa, KarRa, KarRa," her name was a desperate chant.

He lifted her shoulders gently to cradle her head in his lap as Xu's hands moved slowly over her body, his fingers flowing through her hair over and over, just as soothing as the healer's. She wasn't aware of when the men left, but finally Xu spoke.

"KarRa, your most serious wounds were at your neck and hips. All your lacerations are closed, and the burns at your hips are healed, but may still be tender. I'll come by later tonight to check you."

He looked at Rylan and ordered harshly, "Young man." Rylan looked at him in dread. "Get that look off your face. You're thinking like a human. Your Owl has claimed a mate. No woman has ever been killed during a mating. It would be against our nature, and the Owl's purpose. You are soulmates. Look to your bond."

Rylan closed his eyes and KarRa sensed his clammy sweat of fear ease, felt her hair beneath his hands, and the love swell in his heart at her bravery. And Rylan was inside her, feeling her satiation, her lingering pleasure, and her utter acceptance at the minor damage he'd dealt her.

He bent over her, kissing her frantically, their mouths feeling odd coming together upside down. He tasted like blood. It sent a shiver of excitement through her.

When he finally rose back up, all the men were gone, and the lights were once more a faint golden glow. He gently urged KarRa to the side and took up the bloody fur under her and tossed it away. There were plenty more underneath. He came around to lie next to her. They held each other tightly, fingers petting, pressing, feeling.

"Am I going to lose sight every time we fuck?" KarRa asked with wry disappointment at herself.

Rylan chuckled. "Maybe now you can work on making me lose my sight instead."

She shouted a laugh, delighted with the idea. Energy fired her body.

He rolled up over her, straddling her waist, his hands brushing her nipples gently as he looked down at her, his face awash in wonder. "When I saw your body laying there, sprawled loose, covered in blood, I thought...for a second...I thought..."

KarRa put her fingers against his lips and he instantly closed his mouth around them, licking, scraping her skin lightly with his teeth. KarRa laughed again, because she could.

He leaned down to her face. "I want to love you again, mate. Like a man this time. Now."

She searched his eyes, and nodded shyly.

"It won't be sweet. KarRa, I want to take you as far as you can go."

She moaned, and stretched lazily, rolling her hips toward him.

She was to learn later that only an hour passed in that room after the bodymage Xu left. But for her, the memory of that loving in the deep furs lasted half a day.

His hands were firm then feathery, his palms gripping and stroking, his fingertips trailing and walking. His mouth was hot and wet, blowing cool air, spreading stinging nips, and settling to suckle deep on her most sensitive places until she was writhing. He suckled the length of her feather on her arm, tracing it with his tongue. She returned the

favor, swirling her lips along the paths of wind on his arm. She left a sucking bruise at the base of his neck, her own mate mark.

He rolled her onto her stomach and swept her back with touches and kisses, pulled her onto her knees to worship the firm globes of her ass with hands and teeth, turned her over and swept up her body with a hundred mouths to turn her breasts into the most sensitive flesh she'd ever known.

Leaving her own hands in place to continue the feeling, he curled his hands around her shoulders and covered her hips with his, pressing with gentle strokes until he glided into her as easy as if he was born to be there, which she knew he was.

Soon the easy rhythm frustrated her and her hands were grabbing at his ass to press him deeper, harder, faster, her mouth desperate on his neck above her, but he took her hands and she let him pin them to either side of her head.

"Just what I've always dreamed of," he whispered, keeping the same maddening, gentle, even pace, "making you take the pleasure from me."

He pulled out to the tip, swirling it around her entry tauntingly. "Just take it. Mine to give and yours to get. Feel my key in your lock. Feel yourself opening. Feel yourself, how wet you are, with our come swimming inside of you. Mine. My cream in your body. Your blood in my body."

His words were hot against her face, her eyes tearing from the fierce wonder on his face.

She mewed suddenly, writhing her hips desperately against his.

"My KarRa. My cunt. I want to drown you in pleasure."

He eased his length in by impossibly small measures. Now she was so wet their joining seemed impossibly smooth, his barest shallow dips floating his cock inside her, slow, slow, slower. Her teeth threatened to gnaw through her lip with frustration.

When his tip finally pressed against her womb, the pressure she had been reaching for shattered her.

KarRa arched, screaming hoarsely, "Rylan!"

He murmured his praise, his hands leaving hers, now laying limp, to pet her hot hair away from her face, sipping kisses along her jaw and neck. "So beautiful. Good girl. You take my cock so easy. Now you'll take it again." His voice was crooning.

And when she moaned at his words, her breasts swelling until her nipples ached so much her hands had to go to them, he praised her again. "Yes, you can take as much pleasure as you need. Pinch them hard, KarRa. Make them burn."

He was kissing her mouth hungrily, pulling back to direct her desperate fingers with a confident voice that made fire erupt in her belly. Planting her feet up by his hips, she slammed her pelvis up, trying to force him to move.

"Oh, you're ready again? You ask nicely."

He took his hands and pushed her knees down, withdrawing to the very tip. "You ask, KarRa. Tell me you want this cock."

She didn't even try to resist. "Rylan! I want your damned cock! I want it deep, and hard and now!" She was so sensitive she could feel the bulb of his head catching on her entrance, perfectly balanced at her clutching rim.

He smiled an angelic smile that seemed thrillingly dangerous. Rearing back on his knees and pulling her forward by the thighs, he rested her pelvis high on his folded legs. His cock popped out of her, but was caught in the hood of her clit. He used one hand to

direct himself gently over and over that tight throbbing ball of flesh.

“KarRa, who controls your pleasure here? Who?”

KarRa moaned, her head thrashing, her fingers closing furiously on her nipples, which had spread deep red.

“Who KarRa? Tell me. Whose clit is this?”

“YOURS!” She screamed. “I’m yours, Rylan.”

He took his thumb and pressed hard in a swirl over the tight little nub. “Yes, baby, yes. Here’s my thumb. Don’t fight it. Rise for me, baby. Rise!”

KarRa’s hands twisted helplessly in the air, too weak to make the distance to Rylan’s wrists as the pleasure broke, leaving her gasping, shuddering. Her legs and arms fell to the furs. Her strength was gone, but Rylan’s wasn’t.

“I knew you could do it. So strong, so beautiful...” His voice was rasping now, still soft and full of pride at her deep moan. His fingers were driving her mad, their gentle petting plucking at her curls, barely feathering over her throbbing clit.

“Please...” she breathed. She was drowning in the scent of sex.

“All right. It’s all right, KarRa. You’ve done so well. Once more, sweetling.” She moaned, overwhelmed. “Oh yes. You can. My KarRa.”

He pushed her knees wide and up, doubling her over so that her thighs were pressing her breasts together as her knees rested against her shoulders. His eyes, molten gold, were directly over hers and her cunt was screaming with agony at being so exposed, stretched wide and empty.

“Come into me, KarRa. That taste of you before wasn’t enough. *I want it all*. Open up, love. Let me in.” She locked eyes with him, opened their magepath, and fell forward. The room dipped and swelled as if she’d just drunk a pitcher of graperot in one instant.

When she focused, she was looking at her own sweaty face. Her teeth were bared in a grimace, her hair sticking up wetly every which way. Her hands were in tight fists on either side of her ears, and she smelled delicious—like sweat and woman and vanilla. Her throat was fascinating, small and strong, with an especially satisfying fresh red scar to the side at the base. And the hot steel between her legs wanted nothing but heat and wetness. It was so tight she thought her skin might split.

It was the most natural instinct in the world to thrust forward, and the tip probed until it found a dip to settle in. With a harder thrust, the top of her head lifted off at the sheer pleasure of that tight aching flesh being suddenly wrapped in even tighter, hotter, slippery skin.

She took a moment to savor the feeling, the satisfaction at having pushed through the clutching softness to settle deep, then she could not control the urge to thrust. Her hands were clenched around knees, small feet settled against her ribs, and the world shrank to the pull of the wet flesh gripping on a backstroke, and the drilling push as she drove back in.

She reveled in the feeling of her own hairs grinding against the other’s, their bones pressed as tight as possible, hips sealed, some sort of extra pressure pushing back against the very tip of her oh-so-sensitive cock. There was tightness below her, hanging, burning between her legs. It pulled up her thighs, gathered in her spine, but she didn’t want it to end, the pull, the push, the drag, the dig, the heat, the soft wet heat.

Then the other KarRa was screaming and clawing, gasping and writhing, her nipples tantalizing in their crushed space between her thighs, her neck beautiful and bare as it

arched under her aching jaws. Every muscle in her body locked with the sudden explosion in answer to the woman's clamping squeeze, and then the fire came in a surge, surge, surge out her aching tip.

She collapsed onto the smaller frame, feeling the gasping, quivering body beneath her with utter satisfaction. *KarRylan*. She kissed up that throat, smelling the blood under the skin and thrilling with satisfaction and knowledge that the woman would give it to her anytime she needed it, and she settled into kissing the strong sweet mouth.

She got turned around again, tongues and teeth and lips working as one, and suddenly the furs were soft against her shoulders and ass, her cleft pulled open by her position. Her hands were tangled in Rylan's silky golden hair, and her legs ached. She wiggled to get them out from under his torso, and sighed with satisfaction to tangle them around his taught thighs. His chest was comforting on top of her sensitized breasts.

He pulled up onto his forearms to look searchingly at her. "KarRa... You take me so completely into you," he breathed. "That was incredible."

She laughed her loud braying laugh and didn't care, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders, and buried her face into his neck behind his ear. "Oh Rylan. I felt you too. The weird thing is that it was completely normal!"

She laughed again at his wry face at her comment. Energy infused every cell. "Let's go to your room and fuck all night!" Moments ago she had been overwhelmed at the onslaught of pleasure, yet now she couldn't wait for more.

"Can't do it," he said with mock sadness.

She grinned. "Are you tired?" she mewed in mock sympathy.

"I'm through with fucking. Never gonna fuck again."

She blinked at him, her eyebrows twisting in disbelief.

He grabbed her face to place a smacking kiss on her forehead, "It's loving from here on out, KarRa. Only loving. So if you want to *love* me all night, then I'll race you to our robes."

She won.

* * * *

The next morning, KarRa and Rylan met Vyur and Freezha at the door to a sifting room on level two. They came down the hall among a small group of Lizzeed warriors. The men dwarfed Freezha, who was wearing a long, hooded cape of pale pink silk, her face impossibly delicate, framed by a tumble of white blond tangles as if she had just risen from a wild night in bed.

She cried out and ran ahead when she saw them. She hugged KarRa tight, crying beautifully as they whispered their reassurances and goodbyes. Both women laughed shakily to see their fresh matching scars at the joint of neck and shoulder.

KarRa nodded to Vyur as he gently guided a still sniffling Freezha into the sifting room. She put her hand on the knife she wore in a belt at her waist, and caught the flash of pleasure in his eyes. He nodded back and turned away.

After the group had sifted out of sight, Rylan pulled KarRa into the shadows of a statue of three tumbling Sandcats. They'd agreed to continue their lessons right away, but now that it was time to part it seemed unfair they would be apart for hours. They kissed deeply, until their breathing grew so heated they had to rest, clinging to each other. Finally Rylan found the strength to step away. He winked as he left her to meet Cro.

As she walked to the library, she could feel the echo of Rylan's heavier heartbeat as he ran up stairs two at a time. She could hear his mental chant—*kar-ra, kar-ra, kar-ra*, that he kept with every strong push of his legs. She grinned as she sent a mental image of her mouth stretched wide around his cock and felt him trip.

Cro greeted her with a happy bounce, fluttering her fingers, and KarRa laughed aloud to see her bright orange curls spring and sway. She settled into her corner seat and reached for one of the thick books, thanking her for the vase.

“So ... what do you know about cooking?” KarRa asked.

“Cooking? You and your food.”

“Me and possibilities.”

The End

About the Author:

Mima is a dreamer in upstate NY. When people query her on what she's reading, she answers proudly and simply, “A really sexy romance.” She firmly believes women know the difference between fantasy and reality, and need both. No matter how sweet the kids, husband, mother, cats, house(work), and job are. Mima is at runemima@yahoo.com and www.myspace.com/runemima

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