

Primal Encounter

Rebecca Airies

Book 3 in the Primal Attraction series.

Dari's a bit surprised, though not scared, when she wakes up in a cell. But finding her mate among the men held in that prison stuns her. She wants to touch and kiss the man, even as his arrogance infuriates her.

When he discovers Dari's his mate, Rygar can't get enough of her luscious body and his thoughts never stray far from ways to bring them both pleasure. But after escaping from prison, trouble follows them as they return to Rygar's home...trouble that could cost Dari her life. An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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PRIMAL ENCOUNTER

Rebecca Airies

Dedication

For Deb, for the encouragement, the help and the read-throughs. Now it's your turn. Go for it, girl!

Chapter One

A cold droplet of water splattered against her arm and pulled her out of the calm, quiet darkness surrounding her. Dari shook as a chill sent shivers rolling through her body. She knew something was wrong. Her mind felt slow and her body felt heavy. For a moment, she lay on the hard floor, stared at the rough-looking surface of the gray ceiling above her and tried to remember what had happened. She turned her head and blinked. She couldn't believe what she was seeing at first. Thick gray metal bars loomed in front of her. The musty, damp, rotting odor hanging heavily in the air proved she wasn't having a nightmare. *Where am I?* The question seemed to echo in her mind without an answer. She tried to sit, wanting to see more of the area around her. Pain spiked behind her eyes. She groaned, falling back to the hard stone. She focused on staying still, hoping that the pain would fade soon.

Her mind wouldn't stop in spite of the pain. *Rioche!* Frustration, anger and fear mixed inside her. This kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen now that the pack had males. She had been taken. That one simple glance had been enough. She was in some kind of cell. Why she'd been taken, by whom and for what reason were the only real questions. She didn't know of any enemies near Deirion where they'd been trading. There shouldn't have been any trouble on that little trip. She was almost certain her captors didn't want her dead. If they had, they could have easily done it while she'd been unconscious. Even with her captors killing her pretty much out of her mind, there were still some reasons for her capture that sent chills down her back. She didn't even want to think of being a sex slave or an exhibit in some exotic zoo.

The stone floor felt cold and almost wet even through the fabric of her shirt and pants. She wondered how they'd taken her. She'd been in the market on Deirion, waiting for Teril and some of the other males to finish trading. A little of the blame for her capture could rest with her. Some things at one of the stalls had caught her attention. She *had* wandered away from the men escorting her as well as the other women. Even with the small distance between them, she knew that the males would still have been able to sense her presence. The men who'd taken her should never have been able to get her out of the market, much less off the world, without Teril and the other Zarain knowing about it. It didn't make any sense.

Achan Raven would probably take away her traveling privileges just for wandering. She knew she hadn't tried to leave or any of the other accusations that would be leveled against her. The fact remained that she couldn't remember exactly what had happened after she'd moved away from the escort. This was one time she wished she'd followed the rules and requested an escort even though it would have irritated her. It shouldn't have been necessary, but this time it seemed that the overly cautious males had been right. Although some of the new restrictions did bother her, overall she was happy with the new structure of the pack. There were advantages to having those big males around the Taivain.

Dari slowly levered into a sitting position. Bright spots flashed in front of her eyes and hot pain lanced through her head. It wasn't as bad as last time. The change in position hurt but she didn't stop moving. She needed answers. Lying on her back staring up at the dark gray stone ceiling wasn't going to get them. She had no idea if Teril and some of the men had followed after she'd been taken or if they might have been taken as well. They might have tried to stop it and the only way to know was to get moving and see if she could learn anything useful.

Her extended feet almost touched the opposite cell wall. A quick glance to the sides revealed a narrow space, probably just beyond her fingertips when her arms were spread wide. The bars were thick and looked to be deeply embedded into the stone, forming a slatted wall with a heavy door to one side of it. There wasn't a bunk or a chair in the small space. Her cell didn't even have a window. The only light came from outside her cell, farther down the corridor. With only the sound of dripping water, she felt isolated and alone. That flickering light was reassuring in a way. Someone had to have lit it and they would probably be back.

She heard a door open somewhere down the hallway to the right. Even though she had a pretty good angle of view, she couldn't see anything. She heard footsteps coming down the hallway. Light bobbed as the footsteps came even closer. She first saw a thin older man in long, blue robes. Four large men followed behind the man. Obvious protection and muscle. Short, yellow-gold hair framed the older man's pale face. He held the swaying lantern and leaned forward to peer into the cell. The crowd outside the cell made the small space seem even tighter. The walls seemed to be closing in on her. She needed to get out of here. If he'd been alone, she'd have probably tried for a grab at him. The men with him held her back. Well, the sight of the swords hanging at their sides did.

"It's good to see you're awake and alive," the man said. A cold smile curved his lips.

She blinked. Okay, why would he doubt she'd be alive? What had they done to her? Her head still felt a little cloudy from some drug but she didn't feel too bad. She didn't say anything. If he wanted to talk, she wasn't going to interrupt. She'd need every bit of information she could get to escape. If it was possible. If not, she'd have to wait for rescue or make an opportunity to escape.

"You don't even seem as woozy as the other women have been." One of the man's hands gripped the bar and his head tipped to the side. His eyes ran over her as if he was trying to work out why she'd fared so well.

Other women? What was this place? She slowly straightened, her muscles tensed. Had she been taken by slavers? What was she going to do?

"Come to the door. This isn't where you'll be staying." The man's robes swirled around his sandaled feet as he stepped away from the cell door.

Some choice. Get dragged out or walk docilely with her captors. The only thing that held her back was the fact that she could be hurt if she fought. Risking a later chance to escape wasn't worth the satisfaction she might feel at slamming her fist into his face. She stood and slowly took the single step forward to the door. Her heart raced. She didn't want to go with them and every instinct demanded that she fight but experience told her that there might be an advantage in waiting. She was outnumbered and they had weapons. If she could change just one of those factors, it could make the difference between life and death. The only choice at the moment was to cooperate.

The barred door swung open. Two of the warriors stepped back, letting her walk out of the cell. The tips of their swords tracked her movement. She didn't try any stupid moves. It did cross her mind. She might want to slam one of those men's heads into the wall but the temporary satisfaction wasn't worth it.

"Walk. Follow the two men in front of you. There are some people who will be very interested in seeing you." The older man's voice sounded too cheerful, as if he was holding back laughter.

A growl rumbled in her throat but she bit it back. *Patient, be patient,* she silently chanted. There would be a time to take care of him. There was always a way out of any situation. She had the advantage of having people who wouldn't stop looking for her. If she couldn't escape, they would find her.

Two of the men led the way down a dimly lit, pale white-gray stone hallway. Descending a dark staircase, she wondered where they were taking her. She grew even more curious when they led her out of a building. Glancing to the left, she saw that they'd just left a large brick building but it didn't look fortified. She was escorted down the street. The few people on the street moved out of the way as the two men led the procession. The citizens didn't seem surprised to see the parade. That told her more than their expressions and frightened her down to her toes. This was a fairly common scene for them. A large high-walled structure loomed in front them.

As they neared the curved walls of the light brown stone building, she tensed. She felt the presence of other Zarain to the left. She stole a glance from the corner of her eyes. The street wasn't crowded but she didn't see anyone she recognized. Not one single man on the street looked big enough to be a Zarain male.

She knew it wouldn't be the females of her pack. Not yet. She didn't know how long she'd been unconscious and missing but it had probably only been a day, maybe two. Acine Caidi would give the Achan a chance to find her before she stepped in to help.

So who were the Zarain out there and what were they doing here?

The guards led her into the large building with high, curved walls. From what she could see, the building didn't have a roof. She had no idea what purpose it would serve. The men led her through a small door and into a narrow hallway. She followed them cautiously down a steep staircase. Eventually, the men stopped in front of a thick-barred gate. She shifted uneasily. She couldn't see anything but darkness beyond it. The

tip of a sword prodded her in the back as the two guards in front of her moved to the sides.

Chains rattled and metal screeched as it grated against the stone. She winced and tensed as a rush of energy pulsed through her. She wanted to whirl around and run back up those steps. The metal gate slowly rose. The cold, sharp sword tip pressed against the small of her back. She felt the keen edge even through the sturdy fabric of her red shirt. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward. She didn't take the chance that the man would cut her if she refused.

She stopped instinctively when she reached the doorway and found a sheer edge. She could see a dirt floor far below her. A hand landed between her shoulder blades, shoving hard. Her arms flailing uselessly, she lurched forward. She gasped. Trying to turn in the air, she landed awkwardly on hard-packed dirt. She stumbled and fell to the ground. Turning onto her side, she looked up at that opening and frowned. Almost two full body lengths above her, it was well out of easy reach.

The feeling of other Zarain approaching drew her gaze away from the gate lowering over the doorway. Grimacing, she rolled to her feet and faced the approaching men. Years of habit had her looking for a way out of the large room. She grabbed hold of the impulse to run and kept her feet planted on the ground. This wasn't the past and she had nothing to fear from these men. She had a pack. In a way, the feeling of the other Zarain was a little relieving. She wasn't alone here. She supposed there was some good in that but it complicated things.

As she waited for them to get closer, she took a better look around the area. Lanterns and torches lit the large room. It seemed to be a mostly open room with walls of the same light brown stone she'd seen outside. Large columns were spaced throughout the huge room but they weren't decorative. She could make out some furniture in the light behind them but didn't see any bedding.

She still wondered why she'd been taken but pushed the concern aside as the men drew a little closer. At first, they seemed like faceless shadows with all the light behind them. Large shadow figures at that but they must have realized she'd have a bit of difficulty seeing them. One of the men grabbed a lantern and brought it forward.

All the men she could see had blond hair. Most of them very light blond hair. They seemed at ease with each other. A couple of them even looked alike. She bit her lip. Maybe they were all from the same pack. Although how they'd caught that many Zarain at once, she couldn't guess. Their clothing had seen better days. Ripped, torn and in some places mended, the cloth and leather showed obvious signs of wear. It was clear they'd been here for a while. The Zarain she'd felt out on the street could very well be here after these men.

"Where'd they get you from?" A man with golden hair took a step forward, a smile on his face. His eyes traced over her body from head to toe and back up again.

She licked her lips. "A market, I think. I don't really remember much."

"How'd they get you? Where were the men of your...group?" The blond shot a significant glance up at the gate.

Dari frowned and opened her mouth to answer. She didn't have time. A man with silver hair stepped out of the shadows. She drew in a breath. He looked almost as if he didn't belong on this world with that long straight silver hair and silver eyes. His light golden tan only emphasized the impression. He seemed almost too perfect. Only his muscular, broad-shouldered build and the tattoos on his arms made him seem a bit more real.

"They captured her. She doesn't have a...group. If she did, they wouldn't have succeeded." He crossed his arms over a chest covered by a dark blue sleeveless tunic. From the look of it, it hadn't started out sleeveless. She could also see smudges of dirt on the shirt as well as a ragged edge where it had been snagged.

"You're wrong. I have a group. I'm not sure exactly what happened but my group doesn't treat me like a prisoner," she said from between teeth clenched so tight her jaw ached. Her hands fisted at her side.

The silver-haired man shook his head slowly. "You know better. We don't leave our women unprotected."

Arrogant, know-it-all man. How she'd enjoy proving him wrong but she didn't plan to be here long enough for that to happen. In fact, those Zarain she sensed should free them within a few days. These men might or might not be of their pack but the Zarain would at least try a rescue. The man did have part of his assumption right even though his implication that she should behave like a meek obedient cub was wrong. Zarain males were annoyingly overprotective about female Zarain. Those men had sensed her, probably even saw her. They wouldn't just walk away.

"You've landed in a bit of trouble but we'll take care of you. There are chairs and tables over here. We can talk." The silver-haired man gestured over his shoulder toward the area where she'd seen the furniture.

"Why did they take you? What are they doing here?" Dari asked.

"We'll talk over there." He turned and walked away without another word.

The other men followed him. Arrogant ass. He hadn't introduced himself as an Achan but she knew he held some power. The attitude was unmistakable. She glared at his back. She was certain she was dealing with an alpha even if he wasn't an Achan. The man was too used to having his orders followed. Dari sighed and walked slowly after them. As she trailed behind them, a scent teased her nostrils. She felt arousal slowly building and heat began boiling inside her.

She closed her eyes. Goddess, she didn't need this. Not now. Finding a mate wasn't a bad thing but the timing was impossible. She couldn't just go off with him, whichever one of those men he was. She had a responsibility to let her pack know that she was safe. The silver-haired man had already made it clear he didn't believe she had a pack. She didn't think he'd suddenly decide to believe her or let her get in touch with a group

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he considered mythical. Somehow she had to find a way to let Achan Raven and Acine Caidi know she was safe. Even if it did interfere with her future life.

A rough wood plank table had been placed almost as far away from the opening she'd been shoved through as it could be. A few of the men sat at the table but most of the twenty or so men sat in chairs or stood in groups talking to each other. They didn't seem to see anything strange about a woman being thrown into this room. Maybe it was something routine that happened here. She wasn't the only woman in the room. A few other women sat in various places around the room. So it probably had happened before.

She took a seat at the table, clutching at the unfinished wooden edge. It felt rough against her fingertips. She knew she'd probably get a splinter if she didn't watch what she was doing but her entire body was tense. She couldn't relax her grip. Energy and desire bubbled inside her. Claws began to push against her nails, threatening to burst free. She itched to get out of the seat, to move. The urge to walk around the room sniffing every one of the men until she discovered which one of them was her mate was almost irresistible.

"What are the people doing here and why did they take me out of the market?" Dari asked aggressively. She really wasn't in the mood to wait around for answers. She didn't think she could keep the urges at bay for long.

"What's your name?" the silver-haired man asked.

Dari had no doubt that he'd deliberately ignored her question. It was a not so subtle reminder that he was male with a good deal of alpha tendencies. He wouldn't meekly answer her questions or follow her orders.

"Dari Reshal, and my questions?" She rolled her eyes. Even though she understood that he'd want to make sure she knew he'd be in control, it was frustrating in the extreme. The gnawing urge inside her to find her mate grew with every breath. She knew there was no other choice but to let him have his way. He wouldn't answer any of her questions until he was ready to do so.

"Not curious about our names?" The silver-haired man raised a brow lazily.

He looked much too relaxed but she could see the glint of amusement and determination in his eyes. She cursed that male stubborn streak inherent in most warriors. He'd respect the pack leader but he wouldn't be intimidated by a warrior. What she wouldn't give for a man she could scare into answering all of her questions.

Why did he have to be so difficult? She shook her head. Why were their names so important? It wasn't as if they'd be getting out of here in the next few moments. They'd have time later to exchange names. This all essentially amounted to a power game and it infuriated her. The light in those silver eyes told her he was purposely obstructing her. Probably just to draw a reaction.

"What are your names?" She exhaled heavily.

The need in her belly curled into a tight ache. Once she knew their names or at least some of them, she could get the more important questions answered. Hopefully. She didn't know how much longer she could resist the needs. She needed to find that man. He probably knew just how much this delay was bothering her. He might not see her frustration but he had to see her tension. The only thing he wouldn't know was why. He couldn't know just why she wanted to get this basic information out of the way. If he knew that she had a mate among the men here, he'd probably be escorting her around the group right now. As galling as it sounded, it was looking more and more attractive as time passed. Before that happened, she wanted some answers.

"My name is Rygar Verasain, to my left are Gavik, Sian, Marin and Alden."

She wasn't going to ask if those last four had last names. It would take too much time. She just nodded. "Now can you tell me what the people are doing here? Why did they take me? That is all of your questions, right?"

"Well, you're supposed to be entertainment for us. The building is an arena. They pit us against other men, sometimes beasts. Don't worry. Our pack will be coming for us." Rygar tilted his head, his eyes on her face. Apparently he'd decided to ignore her sarcasm.

The fact that he'd actually said the word pack did surprise her. With the human women around she'd expected him to dance around their differences. She knew it wasn't about trusting her. He didn't trust her or believe much that she said, but he knew she was Zarain. She'd thought it was the captors and the humans around them that merited caution. It must have just been the captors. The way he was staring at her was beginning to make her nervous.

What did he expect to see on her face? Did he expect to find the answers there? Even if she was still part of an all-female pack, she wouldn't have panicked. Just being taken and being in the same room with them wouldn't have been too much of a problem. Finding her mate would have caused a few moments of sheer panic followed by a hurried effort to escape. Then, she would have tried to dig her way out of there if necessary. She'd been a little scared about mating. Before the males joined the pack, she hadn't known much about the details at all. What she had known hadn't been a recommendation for finding a mate. That was before she'd seen Acine Caidi and some of the other women in the Taivain with their mates. Her opinion had changed after that but she hadn't expected to find her mate so soon.

"I've told you I have a pack. If your pack rescues us, that will just get me a step closer to contacting them." She shrugged. She could tell just by his doubting look that he didn't believe her.

"Contact them?" He laughed. "You really don't give up, do you? I'm not going to suddenly believe you come from a pack so you can stop lying."

Dari drew in a deep breath. Anger burned inside her and she wanted to prove her words. Unfortunately that would have to wait. The scent of her mate and other males filled her senses. She let her eyes wander to each of the men close to her. He had to be one of the men at the table. None of the other men were close enough for her to catch the scent this strongly. Her eyes rested on Rygar. Hopefully not arrogant-and-thinkshe's-always-right there. He was sexy and his body made her hands tingle with the urge to touch him but she'd like someone who wasn't so...alpha and annoying.

"You don't look the least bit worried. Aren't you even a little concerned about being brought here for our entertainment?" Rygar frowned and his eyes never left her face.

So the big alpha couldn't understand her reactions. Good. He seemed so sure of everything else that even that small fact was a victory.

"I'm not worried. Even if I was going to be here for months and I did have sex with someone, nothing would change really. If you thought I'd become a screaming, hysterical woman, you're wrong." She shrugged and managed not to roll her eyes.

"You're not scared of staying her with us. Do you think we'll just let you disappear? We won't be letting you go when we're rescued. It's time you had a pack." Rygar looked as if he expected her to bolt immediately.

"I have a pack." She glared at him.

"You think they'll come to your rescue?" He raised an eyebrow.

"If I didn't get out on my own, they would. Beside that fact, I felt other Zarain as they marched me through the street. We probably won't be here much longer," Dari explained. She shook her head at his continued blindness. There wasn't much she could do about it right now.

She'd been trying to keep her mind off sex as much as possible. Goddess, she'd deliberately ignored that part of his explanation. Focusing on the facts and his arrogance, she'd managed to keep from getting out of her seat and going to sniff each of them. She knew it was short-term success. She wouldn't be able to hold off the need long. Not when she knew he was right there. Almost close enough to touch. The thought made her fingers tingle.

She'd been lucky so far. Her mate hadn't scented her. Most of the fresh air coming into this room seemed to be coming from somewhere behind the men. He would notice her scent and what she was to him. Probably soon. Then waiting, talking, explaining would be forgotten. Right now, she was having a hard time remembering just why the explanations were so important. Maybe she should just get up and go find him. Her explanations hadn't gotten her anywhere. She didn't think she'd be able to make them believe that she had a pack until she actually had word back from Oroyai pack or maybe even when they saw one of the males from her pack.

Before she could decide what to do, Rygar stood. He was handsome and she couldn't deny she was attracted. The intense feeling made her wonder if it was possible that he was the one. His silver-blond hair swung over his shoulder as he moved. She liked the color, its length. When he started around the table with easy coordination, she forgot about why she liked his hair. His gorgeous body filled her mind. She watched the play of muscle in his arms and beneath his tight pants.

"If you're right, we won't be here long. When we get out, you'll come with us. You'll finally learn what life with the protection of a pack is like. Maybe you'll find your..." His hands settled on her shoulders and his voice just stopped.

She turned to look back at him but she already knew what was wrong. His hands tightened on her shoulders. His eyes were wide and he looked stunned. She almost felt some satisfaction at his obvious reaction. Even as she watched that blank look changed. Heat flared in his silver eyes.

"Mate!" He lifted her to her feet. "You knew?"

"Not who, but yes, I knew one of you was my mate. I caught your scent as I followed you across the room." She turned in his arms and gave in to the need to touch him.

Her fingers glided over the nubby surface of his shirt. She could feel the warmth of his skin radiating through the cloth, wanted to feel more. He pulled her close. Their bodies pressed together from thigh to chest. She felt his chest expand as he inhaled again. He was taller than she'd thought he'd be. Although she was tall for a woman, he was taller. She could feel the strength in his arms. In a way, she felt small, almost delicate, cradled in his arms.

One of his legs slipped between hers. His hips rocked against hers. Anticipation locked her breath in her throat. She felt the thick ridge of his cock press against her belly. His hands cupped her buttocks lifting her off her feet. She gasped and her fingers clutched at the sturdy fabric of his shirt. Even though she knew he wanted her as much as she did him, she didn't want any distance between them. His lips slashed over hers, taking advantage of her surprise-parted lips.

She felt the sharp tips of his lengthened canines. Her eyes widened. Excitement surged through her. His tongue stroked into her mouth. His spicy musk smell seemed to grow stronger. She could almost taste it. The hands at her waist tightened, rocking her against him. She wanted him but an image of the large open room filled her mind. Admittedly, there were shadowy areas that could hide doorways but she knew of only the one large room. No privacy. She didn't want to mate in front of the other men. She pushed against his shoulders. That was just what was going to happen if she didn't find some way to stop him.

She grabbed his hair and pulled, turning her head to the side at the same time. A few more moments of this and she'd let him do anything he wanted. Her hard nipples pressed against his chest and tingles radiated from the firm contact. His thigh brushed against her pussy as he rocked into her. She could feel the slick, wet juices on the swollen lips of her labia. If he touched the fabric covering her crotch, he'd probably find the dampness. She wanted to wrap her thighs around his hips and let him take them both to satisfaction. Need had risen so high and fast that she almost couldn't control her impulses. She couldn't deny her desire but they needed to find somewhere else to explore it.

Chapter Two

Rygar frowned, a snarl growing as she pulled away from him. She drew in a shuddering breath and licked her lips. He could smell the sweet scent of her arousal. That delicious musk made him want to lay her down and lick her pussy until she was screaming for him.

The Zarain part of him stirred as the thought that she was trying to deny him rose. She was his mate. He'd been searching for her in every woman he met. Every planet he'd visited, he'd hoped to meet her, to walk past her on a street. He'd finally found her and he wouldn't let her go. She was beautiful and right where he wanted her.

"My mate, my woman." He nuzzled a few strands of golden hair away from her cheek. Most of it was bound in a braid at the back of her neck but some had escaped to frame her face. The tight curls tickled his cheek. He couldn't resist running his hand over the soft curve.

He drew his tongue up her neck. She shivered and a moan rolled out of her throat. Her head tilted, giving him more access. He could see her arousal in her large brown eyes. Heat slammed straight to his cock at her reaction. He wanted to draw more from her. She pressed even closer to him, giving no sign that she wanted to deny him.

"Yours. I'm your mate," she whispered. Her voice trembled and she moved against him.

Her legs shifted but remained as they were. He wanted them wrapped around his hips, her clothing gone. Her golden skin seemed to glow in the soft light. The tight buds of her small breasts poked against his chest. He could feel those hard nipples through the fabric of both of their shirts. He longed to see them, to taste her as he took them into his mouth.

"The people... Not here." She gulped in air. One of her hands moved up to his neck.

Her thumb brushed up the side of his neck and rubbed in small circles beneath his earlobe. She couldn't seem to stop touching him. He wanted to feel those warm hands sliding over his chest, wrapping around his cock.

It took him a few moments to work out what she meant. His mind was caught in thoughts of getting her clothes off her and staking his claim in every way he possibly could. Finally, he realized that she was talking about the others in the room. Looking around, he saw several men's eyes on them.

He growled and his hands tightened on her buttocks, tugging her closer. He instinctively moved to shield her body with his. Turning, he headed for one of the shadowed corners and the doorway he knew was hidden there. Her mouth pressed

against his neck and chest, dropping kisses on the exposed skin. The feel of her warm, soft mouth moving on his skin only inflamed the need pounding inside him. It made him think of what he wanted to do to that mouth and have it do.

He carried her through the open doorway hidden by the shadows and into the bunk-lined room. His growl sent the two men unfortunate enough to be in the room running out of it. Carrying her over to his bunk, he laid her on the blanket. She reached up and pulled at his shirt, tugging it over his head and dropping it to the floor. He worked on the laces of his breeches before sitting down to pull off his boots.

Her hand trailed over his side. For a moment, her fingers seemed to trace his tattoos and markings. He tensed as that light touch sent a searing wave of hunger ripping down his spine. Her nails scraped across the skin of his stomach. Her index finger circled his navel, dipping into the shallow indention, tickling. He jerked off his boot and froze as her fingers slipped beneath the open flap of his pants. His breath caught in his throat and his canines lengthened. Gods, he wanted her hand on his cock. Her invading hand loosened his pants even more and his cock rose into her warm fingers.

Her fingers closed around his shaft. He wanted to push up into her touch but held still beneath the light, almost tentative quest. He didn't want to frighten her away from her exploration. She squeezed gently and her thumb circled the broad head. He drew in a shuddering breath. Gods, she was pushing him toward insanity. Her hand began to slowly move on him. It felt like heaven. Her warm fingers stroked. The restricted movement frustrated him. He wanted to feel her fingers on his entire length in one smooth stroke.

His fingers circled her wrist. "Wait. I want to see you before you test my control more."

He drew her hand away and quickly finished removing the last of his clothing. He turned and noticed that she was already unbuttoning her shirt. He took over and progress immediately slowed. There seemed to be thousands of tiny carved buttons securing the bright red fabric. The temptation to rip that shirt open grew every time one of those buttons caught in the small holes. Finally the last button slipped free and he pushed the shirt open.

He licked his lips as his eyes traced over the light golden color of her skin to the gentle rise of her breasts and the darker brown of her nipples. Palming the small mound, he savored the softness of her skin. She moaned as he slowly drew his fingers across the tight tips.

Lowering his head, he lapped at one dark bead. He enjoyed her indrawn breath. Her scent heightened tempting, tantalizing and the slightly salty taste of her skin filled his mouth. That arousing flavor only made him want more. Her reaction urged him to touch and explore. He drew the pebbled tip between his lips, sucking. Her hands stroked over his shoulders as she pulled him closer. His lips worked at one breast while he plucked at the other tip with his fingers. Her hands tightened and her back arched. He lifted his head and moved to the neglected puckered peak. His tongue circled the hard tip. He scraped his teeth across the sensitive peak.

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She cried out, her hands fisting in his hair. She tugged him away from her breast as her mouth sought his. He smiled just before slanting his lips across hers. Her tongue stroked along his as her body lifted against him, demanding, asking for more.

His hand slid down her stomach to the waistband of her pants. Working at the laces, he struggled to remove the last barrier between them. He needed to feel her hot skin against his. Every move, every brush of her sweet strong body against his only made the need even worse. His cock ached. He could feel the blood pulsing into it. She wasn't helping. Her cries, the scent of her arousal only increased his need.

Finally the knotted laces released. He pushed her pants down her hips. When he got them past her knees, she kicked free of the fabric. He feasted on the sight of the golden tanned body stretched out on his bed.

Her lips were full and reddened by his kisses. The tips of her breasts glistened in the light, wet and hard. The triangle at her thighs drew his eyes. Her legs shifted splaying a bit. The scent of her arousal increased. He could see the shimmering moisture on the tight curls covering her pussy.

"Touch me please." She grabbed his hand, moved it to her thigh.

Gods yes, he needed to touch her as much as she needed him to touch her. He drew his hand up her thigh, moving to the inner thigh. He had to see if she was as ready as she looked and sounded. He wanted to feel her pussy wrapped around his cock but he wasn't going to hurt her.

His fingers brushed through the curls. He parted the lips of her labia. Heated moisture coated his fingertips. Stroking his fingers over the hood of her clit, he enjoyed her response. Her hips lifted, encouraging him. He let his fingers wander a bit, just to tease her. She tugged at his shoulders.

"Oh, yes, I like the way your hands feel," she whispered. His fingers dipped lower and stroked the sensitive skin around her entrance.

Her hips bucked and he felt the rush of moisture that slipped from her. He stroked a finger into her tight sheath. Her head tossed against the blankets and she looked so beautiful, so sexy. He spread kisses over her stomach. She was ready. Excitement slammed through him. As he pushed two fingers into her, her hips rose, meeting his hand.

"Say my name!" He moved between her thighs, remaining poised there. He needed to hear her say it. The slick liquid of her desire coated the head of his cock, tempting him but he held back.

"Rygar!" Her hands stroked down his side and her nails sank into his buttocks.

Satisfaction rushed through him. His hips rolled forward slowly. Holding back was almost killing him. He wanted to thrust deep but was determined not to hurt her. Her sheath felt so tight as it closed around him. His shaft pushed slowly into her. He wanted to sink deep inside her and holding back felt like sheer torture. Her hips arched up and the wet walls completely surrounded his cock. His hips pressed hers into the mattress. Her thighs tightened around his hips. The feel of those inner muscles tightening around his shaft sent ripples of fire up his back and over his body. He wanted to withdraw and drive into her until he found his pleasure. Giving her everything she needed gave him the control he needed. He pulled out and pushed back into her, setting a slow rhythm.

She met each stroke, her hips lifting. Her body moved against his. He could see the desire rising in her eyes, hear it in her soft cries. He felt the first contractions of her climax and drove against her hard. Her breath caught and her body tensed. She cried out, her hips pushing up against his. Her nails sank into his arms. The rippling clasp of her inner muscles and the sharp pain of her nails sinking into his arms broke the last of his control.

His hips pumped against her. His muscles tightened. The urge to change her, to bite her and begin the change from Zarain to Shadatai Zarain, grew as he drew closer to his climax. He lowered his mouth to her shoulder and bit. She stiffened beneath him, her breath catching on a sharp gasp. A moment later, he came. His hips pumped and his semen spurted into her. He felt her body tense and shake beneath him as the *re'kai* hit her.

He collapsed on top of her for a moment before moving his upper body to the side. He didn't want to do it just yet but he slowly separated their bodies. They couldn't stay like this. If it was possible, he'd stay this close to her all night. But this wasn't a private room. He moved to the side and pulled her against him, relishing the closeness for a few moments.

Her shirt brushed against his chest as she leaned into him. A smile curved his lips. He'd been in a rush. It was almost a miracle he hadn't torn it in his rush to get it off her. The feel of the fabric drew his attention now. He reached between them and caught a bit of the fabric between his fingers. The weave felt tight and he already knew the color was bright and clear. The shirt felt like it was made of quality strong cloth. Where did she get cloth of that quality when she didn't have a pack? Did she steal it? It was just one of many questions he had now that he could think beyond claiming her. He drew his hand down to her bare thigh.

"If we don't get dressed, we're going to be fucking again. I have questions to ask you. I'd like to get a few answers before we're rescued," Rygar said. He lapped at the slight trickle of blood from the bite on her shoulder. Raising his mouth to her ear, he whispered the binding words, *A'haina col tol'estal. Enalac, etal meal toralis retal.*

Her head moved giving him more access to her neck. She moaned and rolled closer to him as if she couldn't resist. Her hand trailed up his ribs. When her thumb brushed over the flat nipple, he knew he had to act fast or lose control. If she continued her explorations, he'd forget all of his questions. Her fingers felt too good on him. By the Gods, he wanted to drive his cock into her and ride her until they were both exhausted. He shook his head and drew in a deep breath. He had more self-control than this.

He pulled back and rolled out of bed before she could grab him again. He moved away from the bed and hastily dressed. He picked up her pants and put them on the bed. As much as he wanted to touch her, he couldn't do it without wanting to have her

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again. She smiled and sat up slowly. Her red shirt slid down her arms before catching at her elbows, for a moment, she just looked at him through dark brown eyes, a sultry temptress. Her braid hung over her shoulder. Looking at her, he regretted not taking the time to free her golden hair from its confinement. He wanted to see it spread, flowing wildly around her, to feel it beneath his fingers, tickling his chest. After a long look, she apparently decided he wasn't going to change his mind. She slowly dressed.

"Come on. We'll go back out into the main room and talk." He drew her to her feet as soon as she'd pulled on her boots.

Dari glared over at her *chalon*, her mate. She'd never have thought that when she found a mate she'd be sitting across a table from him only moments after their first lovemaking. It was supposed to be several long sessions before they got around to the specifics as far as she knew. She wondered if he felt the pulsing need that was building inside her.

Hell, she wanted to take the man down right here. She might even be able to ignore all the witnesses if he'd just cooperate. Her fingers tightened around the cup he'd pushed into her hands. She narrowed her eyes at him. Getting him to cooperate was the problem. She'd kissed him just as they'd walked into the room. He'd responded at first but soon held her away from him. His frown might have given her pause if she hadn't had a definite goal in mind. The man had a stern look down to an art.

"Now we're going to talk. Your clothing, especially that shirt, is made of good cloth. How did you get it? What do you do?" Rygar's eyes locked on her face as if he wanted to see her every expression.

She'd known earlier that he'd thought she was lying when she said she had a pack. That he hadn't realized yet that she was telling the truth made her angry. She had no reason to lie to him now. He should realize that she wasn't pushing him away or trying to put distance between them. What would she have to do to get him to see she'd accepted him?

"My pack made this cloth. I do what's needed to help in the pack. I can weave, sometimes I help in the fields and I can cook." She shrugged. She folded her arms and frowned at him, determined to keep her temper. So she wasn't the greatest cook but she could make breads. She kept that information to herself.

Rygar scowled. "I can't see or smell any deception so you must truly believe what you say. It's obvious you don't have any strong males around your pack. You wouldn't have been taken from that market if you did."

Dari gritted her teeth. She was almost tempted to let him believe that. Part of her insisted that it was his beliefs and he should suffer the consequences. It would serve him right if he found out the hard way that there were strong males in her pack. Just the thought of seeing his expression when her pack did find her provided incentive. She'd really enjoy proving him wrong. But it wasn't the right thing to do. Even though she

knew he probably wouldn't believe her, she still felt she had to try to start this relationship off honestly.

"I have an Achan and as it stands there are more males than females in my pack. Don't make the mistake that they won't or can't take care of what's theirs. I don't know what happened once I got to that stall but I know it wasn't their fault I was taken." She leaned forward, bracing her hands on the table, wanting him to know that she wasn't lying. There shouldn't have been any harm in going that relatively short distance away from the group.

"If they could watch over and protect you, they wouldn't have let you be taken." He raised an eyebrow at her and smiled, all male confidence.

He looked so arrogant she wanted to hit him or even better rip that eyebrow right off. Dari curbed that impulse. He was a warrior. That came with a certain amount of arrogance. She'd have to work around that.

"You don't have very many females in your pack, do you?" she asked. She already knew his answer. It was obvious in his every word that he didn't really have much experience with female Zarain.

"Not many but females are females," he assured her.

She wanted to show him what females are. And if he kept raising that eyebrow in that doubting, condescending way, she just might. "Just don't say I didn't warn you. Men from my pack will come after me."

"I'm sure we can handle the men from your pack." He folded his arms across his broad chest, looking content and confident.

She rolled her eyes. He definitely wasn't what she'd thought her mate would be like. Too much of the alpha existed in him. He thought he was always right. That arrogance would probably make their relationship a bit rocky at the start. She already wanted to push back. And she would. He wouldn't be able to totally intimidate her as the other men obviously did their women.

She slid a glance at him through her lashes. His silver hair hung around his shoulders in a long straight fall. A satisfied smile curved his lips. She did wonder about what position he held in his pack. He obviously led in some way. The men here respected him but she knew he wasn't the Achan. That wasn't a title that would have been left off the introduction once they knew she was Zarain. Maybe a *Terchal*. He certainly had the commanding attitude and warriors didn't seem to have any problems taking orders from him. She doubted he'd tell her while they were here. There was too much chance it would be overheard.

"Come over here and sit with me. We'll stay together and wait for the Zarain you felt to come. It shouldn't be too much after dark before they make an appearance." He held out his hand in invitation.

That wasn't an invitation she was going to refuse just because she was a little irritated with him. She put her hand in his and let him pull her into his lap. "Do you

have any idea how long it's going to be until sundown? It was barely midday when they marched me through the streets."

His arm tightened around her. "No. We'll just have to talk and occupy ourselves until they get here. Any ideas?"

Dari grinned and briefly brushed her lips across his. She knew he thought she was going to suggest another romp. In spite of the phrase "occupy ourselves", she knew they wouldn't be getting near a bed. He'd hold her and probably kiss her but little else. The man was annoyingly stubborn. She intended to do a little pushing of her own.

"Oh yeah, I have some questions about you and the others here. How did such capable men get captured and why haven't you escaped?" She relished asking him that.

He'd made such an issue of the fact that she'd been taken out of a market while the men from Oroyai pack were there. He and the other men obviously hadn't fared any better.

His eyes narrowed. "We were drugged. As to escape, there hasn't been a good opportunity for all of us to escape. I wasn't leaving anyone here."

She shook her head at his words. "These men took you, yet you fault the men of my group because I was taken. They weren't anywhere near me. Most of them were trading and the others knew that that the women didn't need to be constantly watched. I was born Zarain. I know how to take care of myself."

His hand smoothed up her thigh. "We don't take chances with our women."

She grabbed his wrist and tightened her fingers around it. "Don't take chances... If you try treating me like a cub as you obviously do to every other woman in your pack, you'll find out what's chancy."

"You'll adjust to our way of doing things." His hand gently squeezed her thigh.

Dari growled. She couldn't hold the angry sound back. Had these men never had any dealings with full Zarain females? She didn't know how that would happen but it was obvious that he felt coddling women was the normal way a Zarain man behaved. She knew enough now to know that Zarain females didn't unquestioningly follow orders and stay behind the protection of locked doors all the time. They might not be out fighting battles but the Zarain men she knew respected a woman's strength and abilities. Women were strong, capable.

"I'm sure you'll learn a few things too." She smiled.

"Now that sounds like a threat. You won't turn me into the weak men you've known." He nuzzled her hair aside and nibbled on her ear.

After a comment like that, she had to know more about why he had so little experience with the females of their species or what had shaped his opinion. She knew that Achan Raven and his men could hardly be described as soft or easily persuaded on their best days. She was curious, of course, but she also wanted to know what kind of obstacles she'd be facing. There had to be a way to make him accept that she could function without a constant male escort. She didn't try to fool herself that it would be

easy. Especially when she told him about her past and the life she'd led. She had a feeling that he wouldn't believe she knew much about true Zarain life when he found out that her pack had only recently gained an Achan.

"Why doesn't your pack have many females and specifically females who were born Zarain? Do you have a home world?" Dari frowned and turned to look up at him. If they didn't have a home world, it was understandable that they wouldn't have many females. They should have had experience of Zarain females in the past though.

He smiled and took the opportunity to drop a kiss on her lips. "We have a home world. Did you think we just roamed from world to world? And your guess about us not having many females is fairly good."

"There are groups who roam the worlds. They fight for others and then move on when that battle's done." She licked her lips. She could smell his arousal, feel it as his shaft pressed against her hip. The urge to slide her hand down and stroke that ridge through the cloth was almost irresistible. She reminded herself that she'd just be tormenting both of them. He wasn't going to change his mind.

"We've fought as mercenaries a few times. As to why our pack doesn't have many females, they all died. When I was younger, while most of the men were away fighting another person's battle, our Taivain was attacked by a group of Tsitike. All the men who'd remained at the Taivain were killed. The young children were told to hide and we did. Almost everyone they could find died, those who didn't were hurt badly. There weren't enough men to guard the holding." His voice turned rough and his jaw clenched. His entire body tensed.

She put her hand on his arm. She'd never imagined something like that. "Are the Tsitike a problem for your pack?"

"No, it was just a group that happened to find our Taivain on their travels. We haven't even seen a group since. Our father made sure that those who attacked never made it home to report their find." Rygar frowned.

That sounded like more than just a coincidence to her. True, most of the Tsitike groups would go out of their way to attack a Zarain Taivain but unless their Taivain was very near a gate, it should have been hard for the men to find it.

After hearing that most of the females had been killed, it was no wonder he didn't know what a born Zarain female really acted like. The females who had survived or who had been out of the Taivain would have been closely guarded in the years after that. They wouldn't have had a normal life.

"Has your pack had much contact with other Zarain?" Dari asked.

"A little. Before you ask, no, I haven't noticed much difference in how they guarded their women and how we guard ours." His hand roamed up her ribs and cupped over her breast.

"Then you visited the wrong Taivains. Zarain women are strong and capable. They don't need to be constantly guarded by men." She grabbed his wrist and pulled his

hand away before he could brush his fingers across the already hard nipple. Just when she thought she could relax, his other hand joined in his game.

"Shadatai Zarain do not leave their women in danger." He lifted his hand and once again palmed her breast.

She looked down. It would take more than the slight mound of her breasts to fill his large hand. He didn't seem to notice or care that her curves were far from lush. His entire attention was focused on toying with the nipples visible beneath the cloth of her shirt. Sharp sensation shot through her at his first touch. She squirmed as the delicious arousal curled low in her belly.

The rising need didn't blunt her reaction to his announcement. She tensed staring up at him. In a way, it did explain a few things but his attitude still seemed a little strange, a little strong. As uncivilized and overprotective as the big males in her pack were, they still recognized that a female Zarain was far from helpless. Maybe she was reading too much into his attitude. Despite what she'd told him, he believed that the men of her pack had neglected their duty.

Chapter Three

Rygar's arms curved around her. She felt surrounded by warmth and strangely secure. The flickering lamplight danced around them. Dari had no idea how much time had passed since she'd arrived. None of the Zarain had made any move to go to sleep. They waited for the other Zarain males she'd sensed earlier to arrive. She was just as anxious as they were. It seemed like time had slowed. She wanted out of this cage. The men were restless, moving around but always shooting glances toward the gate she'd been pushed through. When she heard the slight scrape of metal on wood from the darkness opposite the table, she didn't connect it to the arrival of the other Zarain at first.

Rygar stood and put her behind him. In moments, the other Zarain had formed a solid wall of muscled bodies. She couldn't see anything beyond them. She didn't try to go around them, although she was tempted to try it. They'd only push her behind them again. Listening, she waited tensely. Her mind raced at the thought of who had made that noise. It was probably the other Zarain but there was a chance it could be someone else. The men wouldn't take a chance.

She heard the sound of wood scraping against stone. All the men poised for a fight. The tension inside her grew and she wished she had some kind of weapon. She'd settle for a piece of wood but didn't see anything other than the chairs. The moments seemed to stretch into an eternity. Suddenly, she saw the men in front of her relax. She felt the presence of more Zarain and understood why they'd relaxed.

"What are you doing lounging around playing games here, Rygar?" a deep voice boomed into the large room. The man sounded cheerful, almost laughing.

"Funny, Logan. What took you so long?" Rygar stepped out of the line of warriors and glided forward.

"You aren't supposed to be in this city or even in this area. It took us a while to find out where you'd been taken. Now who's the female we saw marching through the city?" The voice drew closer but she still couldn't see anything beyond some of the men still standing in her way.

She made her way around the group of men, trying to get a better view. Finally she found a gap in the men. Rygar spotted her and waved her over to join them. He held out his hand as she neared them.

"This is Dari Reshal, my mate. Dari, this is my brother Logan, Achan of Ajiari pack," Rygar introduced them, a grin curving his lips.

Dari looked past Rygar as she stepped up beside him. She saw a man almost identical to Rygar standing in front of her. He was a little taller, his body just a little more muscular and his face was a little broader than Rygar. Dressed in black leather, he looked every inch the warrior with a sword at his side but he had an aura of power that was unmistakable. Just from her first look, she could see the attitude, the strength that had made him an Achan.

"Hello, Achan Verasain," she said, smiling as she stepped forward to greet him.

"Hello, Dari. There's no reason for you to be so formal in your address. I'm happy to meet my new little sister." He stepped forward and hugged her.

Dari stiffened in surprise. She'd never expected that open acceptance. She'd thought that he'd be a little more distant at least until he got to know her. He stepped back and released her with a laugh. He looked friendly and totally relaxed.

"Let's get out of here. We can talk once we're away from the city." Logan looked toward Rygar.

Rygar's arm curved around her waist from behind and pulled her back against him. "I'm more than ready to leave. I want to get her out of here."

She heard the possessiveness in his voice. It didn't irritate her as much as she'd once thought it would. Only moments later, everyone in the large cell left through open thick wooden doors. They walked into a tunnel. Dari looked around as they walked up an incline and the corridor narrowed. Torches burned on the dark brown walls. The group came out into a dirt-floored, high-walled arena. The men at the front of the group went to a wall near the tunnel opening where two men waited. The women were lifted out of the arena and into the stands. Rygar lifted Dari and two men pulled her onto the ledge. She moved away from the two men, giving them room to pull some of the others out of the pit.

"Don't move any farther, Dari," Rygar ordered, a distinct growl in his voice.

She stepped forward to the edge of the arena wall and put her hands on her hips. "If I was going to run, you can bet I'd wait for a better opportunity and you wouldn't stop me."

Is that so? How are you going to run from our bond? His voice burst into her mind.

She stiffened but tried to control every other sign of her surprise. She'd known that Shadatai mates could speak telepathically but she'd really thought it would take some time before he'd actually be able to speak to her. "You think it would matter if I wanted to leave?"

He jumped and grabbed the edge of the arena wall, hauling himself up into the stands. She took a step back as he jumped down from the ledge. He glided forward, a wide smile on his lips. That predatory twist of his lips reminded her too much of a hunter about to bag his prey.

"You have no fear of me at all, do you?" he asked.

"Why should I fear you? You're my mate. You wouldn't hurt me even if I infuriated you and started shouting that you were a coward." She shook her head. Why would anyone think a Zarain female should ever fear her mate? It made no sense to her.

One of the women who'd been in the cell stepped forward, drawing Dari's attention. The woman snorted. Dari turned her head to fully look at her. The woman had sun-browned hair and narrow blue eyes. She ran her eyes over Dari as if she was a little disgusted.

"Men hurt their women all the time. Believe me. He'll do it just as any other man would and probably sooner than later." Her words came out in a definite sneer.

Dari wasn't worried about the woman's opinion. All her attention was on Rygar. He stared at her as if he couldn't quite believe it.

"Other women fear their mate," he stated evenly.

Dari ignored the other woman as one of the men quickly led her away from them. The woman couldn't know that the men Dari referred to were more than the human men she knew.

"Maybe women who are new to our people fear their mate. If you're talking about Zarain women, what you see as fear might be nothing more than not wanting to be mated, a fear of change." Dari shrugged and watched his expressions. She couldn't be too concerned about it.

"No, it was fear of what we'd do to her." Rygar stepped forward and urged her after some of the other men.

Dari frowned. She'd known that a Zarain male abusing a woman could happen. Well, mentally she had recognized the possibility. She just couldn't see it happening. What surprised her was that the males around the attacker hadn't stopped him permanently after the first time it happened. She hadn't ever thought she'd actually hear of it happening. There were Zarain who didn't follow pack law and lusted for power and money but they were a minority and usually roamed alone.

"You look thoughtful. Going to change your mind?" Rygar's arm tightened a bit.

She heard the tension growing in his voice and felt the corded muscles of his arms. Walking up the incline, they headed for a large opening a quarter of the way up the steps. Later, she had to pull a few more details out of him. She wasn't going to torment either of them by withholding her answer. He needed to know she trusted him, even if he didn't think about it that way.

"I'm not going to pretend that all Zarain are good. Some woman may have come to your pack fearing every man who approached her. I'm not her and I know you won't hurt me." She reached over, grabbed his hand and squeezed gently as they walked side by side.

"How can you be sure?" Rygar asked. His expression lightened.

She shot a look up at him. He didn't seem to be half as tense as he had. The two of them followed the other men into a wide, arched tunnel leading out of the arena.

"I trust my instincts," she said and laughed softly.

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She danced away when he growled low in her throat. That sexy rumble drew a very physical reaction from her. She felt her nipples harden and hoped that her shirt hid the stiff peaks.

"Tell me the truth." He caught her and pulled her back into his side. His lips curved into a smile. "And do it quietly. We're escaping."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, it's partly my instincts and the way the other women acted toward you in the cell, your behavior. They wouldn't have been at ease with you if you'd been violent or even verbally aggressive."

"And you trust your instincts that much?" Rygar slanted a look down at her.

"They've saved my life before. I don't see why I should doubt them." She dropped that bit of information in on purpose. She wanted to see his reaction, to see if he believed her.

His eyes narrowed and his look sharpened but they were nearing the open gates of the arena's main public entrance. She couldn't see a star in the sky overhead and the small sturdy street lamps emitted only faint patches of flickering yellow light on the street. She felt the moisture hanging in the air. The air practically crackled with the energy of a building storm. A moment later, a flash of brilliant white light slashed across the horizon.

The men led the way through the deserted streets. The women were kept in the middle and a final group of guards trailed at the back of the group. The silence stretched her nerves taut. The sound of their steps on the cobbled street seemed impossibly loud in the darkness. At any moment she expected to hear the sound of running feet and shouted demands to stop. The steady walk seemed too slow to her. She couldn't really believe that leaving would be this easy.

She felt a little relief when they made it out of the city. The last of the buildings disappeared behind them. Almost complete darkness surrounded them now that they'd left the lighted city streets. Dari looked around, wondering where they'd go now. She could see shadow figures moving to one side of the road and caught the scent of mican on the air. When they drew close enough, she sensed their escorts were Zarain. She assumed that these must be more men from the males' pack. Especially when Logan, Rygar and the other men escorting them acted so calmly.

The lightning flashed, revealing men holding the mican in readiness. The animals shifted nervously as the thunder rolled over them. Before the bright light faded, another white bolt flashed across the sky. Rygar stepped up beside her and laced his fingers with hers. She knew he still had some concerns that she was going to take off running at any moment. He led her over to one of the large, powerfully muscled beasts. He lifted her into the saddle and mounted behind her.

One of his arms curved around her waist, while he took the reins with his free hand. She leaned back against him but looked back toward the city. Even now, she couldn't believe how simple it had been. She expected to hear some kind of call or see soldiers coming to stop them but the road remained empty and silent.

"We'll be away from here in only a few moments. Relax. They don't even know we've left yet." Rygar's breath fanned across her ear, hot, moist.

A shiver rippled down her spine but it definitely wasn't fear. She couldn't completely relax but she brushed her hand across his thigh, just to let him know she'd heard him.

Rygar urged the mican away from the city. The animal's hooves clacked against the paved road as the journey began. Soon the men directed their mounts away from the main road. Dari relaxed against Rygar. She closed her eyes. Since she didn't have to worry about riding or even guiding the mican, she let sleep take her.

Rygar pulled Dari closer. She was different from what he'd expected to find in a mate. She seemed so brash and confident. He didn't know what to do with her sometimes. She seemed accepting but he couldn't forget that she hadn't said anything when she'd learned she had a mate. Maybe she'd thought she could deny herself and hide the truth from him until she could flee.

She slept easily in his arms. He'd like to have the time to stop and make love to her again but they needed to travel farther away from the city before they rested. Her hair tickled his face as a cool wind whipped across the plains.

She woke periodically. He felt the tension move through her body and looked down to find her glancing up at him. Once, he'd seen her eyes sweeping the area as if to assure herself that there wasn't any danger. She didn't talk but he knew she was aware and watchful. That caught his attention. She seemed too aware at times. He wondered if she'd been on her own at some point. From what he knew such awareness wasn't a natural ability. It was learned.

After a long ride, they stopped and set up a quick camp away from the welltraveled roads. He held her as she gained her feet. She looked around the area as if she couldn't understand why they'd stopped moving. Rygar set up a pallet near the center of the group. He wanted to be certain that she was safe and that she couldn't slip away easily if she chose to try. She walked beside him to it and stretched out on the thin pallet. He lay down beside her and curled an arm around her waist. He expected her complain about the lack of padding, the lack of comforts. She didn't say a word. Her arm cushioned her head and she wriggled a bit but she seemed to relax.

"So what do you know about her? Has she told you where they found her? Where her pack is?" Logan asked. He came to sit nearby.

Rygar sat up and looked down at Dari. She'd seemed to drop into sleep the moment she'd lain down on the pallet. That was yet another thing that confused him and made him wonder about just what kind of life she'd led. Warriors gained the skill of catching sleep almost anywhere, at any time. Where had she picked up the behavior and why?

"Not much. She said she thinks they took her out of a market. I thought she was a lone female. Maybe she'd gotten separated or run away from her pack. She told me that she has a pack and that they'd made the cloth she wears. When she said it, I didn't smell any hint of a lie," Rygar told his brother in a quiet tone.

"Maybe because I was telling the truth." Dari turned over onto her side and shot a frown at him. He caught a bit of a growl in her tone.

Logan laughed. "What is the name of your pack?"

"The Oroyai pack. And before you make the same mistake your brother made and think that the males of my pack are weak and soft, you should know that they are Shadatai Zarain just as you are." Her eyes narrowed to thin brown slits.

"I've never heard of it. I'm sure you believe you're Shadatai but..." Rygar reached over and patted her hand. Now he understood a little of why she didn't seem to be lying. She'd been told things and fully believed them to be the truth.

"I didn't say I was Shadatai. I'm just a normal Zarain. The males and now a few females of my pack are Shadatai." Dari shook her head and scowled at him. "Until you're willing to listen, I'm not going to waste my breath. But don't blame me if you find yourself confronted by a few irate members of my pack."

"Your old pack. This is your pack now. You'll see the truth. I'll show you the physical diff..." Rygar began to unfasten his shirt. He'd show her the differences between normal Zarain and Shadatai Zarain.

"Don't bother. Those two sets of stripes on your back aren't going to surprise me. Your ability to speak to me in my mind didn't surprise me too much either." She bared her teeth at him and turned her back to him. "You think you know everything. You lecture me when you believe your mate should fear you."

He just stared at her. The derision in her voice startled him. She lay stiffly at the very edge of the pallet. She was angry and not at all reticent about showing it. He had no idea what to say to calm her.

"I like her spirit, Rygar. She's different from the women we've brought into the pack." Logan smiled.

Rygar knew the situation was giving his brother more than a little amusement. *Rioche.* Logan was almost laughing. Rygar would probably find it funny if he wasn't trying to figure out what to believe and how to treat her. His every instinct screamed at him to protect her. The recent trouble and her being thrown into the cell with him pushed at him to keep her near him and safe. He couldn't deny that part of him but she hadn't once behaved as he'd expected her to do.

"That spirit's going to give me a bit of trouble I'd bet." Rygar slanted a glance over at her. By the stiffness of her body, he knew she was still awake and listening.

"Probably. See if you can find out where her pack is so we can get a message to them. I'd like to avoid the trouble she was predicting," Logan ordered. "If they really are Shadatai, they won't stop looking for her."

Rygar nodded. Logan moved away and Rygar turned back to Dari. He lay down and tugged her over next to him. She stiffened immediately, trying to pull away from him. It took only few moments for her to relax in his arms. He closed his eyes, certain they were safe. The posted guards would see or smell trouble before it neared.

* * * * *

Dari rose from the pallet, managing to leave it without waking Rygar. Over the last few days, she'd learned that that wasn't as easy as she'd thought it would be at first. She stood and made her way quietly through the other sleeping men. Meeting the sentry's eyes, she nodded and headed for the shelter of the forest. So far she hadn't had as much interference as she'd thought she would. She'd been able to see to her needs without explanations. The real tests would come later. How closely did they actually watch their females? After what Rygar said, she'd expected a bit more trouble than she'd had.

Walking back toward the camp, she headed to a small stream near the spot where they'd set up camp. She knelt, washing her hands and face in the cool water. She'd have liked a full bath but the river wasn't nearly deep enough. Maybe when they reached the travel-gate they'd stop in a city and she could have one there.

She stood and looked across the shallow stream. A group of bushes caught her eyes just as she heard the men begin moving in the camp behind her. Plump purple berries bent the limbs of the bushes. Her mouth began watering and she wanted some of the ripe fruit from those *alden* berry bushes.

She crossed the stream almost before she knew what she was doing. Her booted feet barely touched dry ground before a hand landed on her shoulder. She stopped and spun. The Achan, Logan, stood in front of her, a frown on his face. His booted feet were braced apart as if he was preparing for some brazen act of defiance.

"Going to see if any of those *alden* berries are ripe," she explained easily. She pointed to the large bushes near a group of trees.

His eyes went to the bushes. She watched the suspicion on his face. It didn't change a bit. He knew she was telling the truth but he clearly had doubts about her motives. He didn't leave her waiting long for his decision.

"Go on over. I'll have a man standing nearby." Logan nodded and started to turn away from her.

Dari knew she should probably just let the remark pass. Maybe take up the matter at a later date, after they saw that she wouldn't be trying to leave them. She just couldn't do it.

"I don't need a guard to pick berries. Never have, never will. If this is the way you treat your women, I wouldn't be surprised if some of them left." She folded her arms across her chest.

Achan Logan's face hardened and his muscles tensed. For a moment, Dari felt a distinct urge to take a step back but stood her ground. His silver eyes glittered with tightly leashed anger. She realized at least part of her comment had hit a very raw spot.

"You won't be left vulnerable and you won't get a chance to run away." A growl rumbled in Logan's deep voice.

Dari frowned and she slammed her hands onto her hips. None of them listened. "There is nothing vulnerable about picking berries within the sight of camp. And right now, I'm not thinking about leaving but much more of this behavior and it'll start looking very attractive."

"And what if a wild animal happens to burst out of the bushes?" Rygar came to stand next to his brother and apparently had heard enough to know what they were talking about.

She smiled and extended her hand, letting a bit of the change roll over her. Long golden hair sprouted along her arm as it grew and changed. The claws may have been concealed beneath the shaggy fur but they were sharp and lethal.

"I've got a nice set of claws here and I know how to use them. And to further shock your male-centered world, I know how to hunt and am more than capable of catching my own meal if need be. In either form." She glared at the two arrogant males in front of her.

Rygar raised a brow. She could see amusement and doubt in his eyes. "And you expect me to believe you have males in your pack."

"Did I say we've always had males?" She enjoyed his frown of confusion. "I know my life wasn't normal but I've seen enough Zarain and Shadatai Zarain packs now to know that this certainly isn't normal. Women aren't treated virtually as prisoners by their mates and pack. Not when there is no real threat."

They stood there just looking at her. She didn't know if they were angry, stunned or just bored. She decided to get everything out now while they were both so conveniently close.

"And as soon as possible, I'm going to send a message to my Achan and Acine and if you try to stop me, I'll deliver it myself." Dari narrowed her eyes, noticed the tension in Rygar's jaw and spun on her heel. She stalked toward the bush.

She'd almost reached the bushes when Rygar caught up to her. He didn't try to stop her, just strolled easily at her side. Glancing at him from the corner of her eyes, she tried to gauge his mood. He didn't seem absolutely furious. She'd expected anything from a shouted denial to his hands on her shoulders forcibly stopping her. She'd just threatened to leave him if her demands weren't met. His calm expression made her wonder if he'd heard what she said or somehow misinterpreted it. Not that she'd left much room for that.

A gentle hand on her shoulder turned her to face him. "They are your former Achan and Acine. As soon as you recognized me as your mate, you became part of this pack. You can send a message to them as soon as we get to a safe area."

She smiled at the confident assertion. "I'm supposed to put all my trust in you and follow orders?"

"You will. You know you can trust me." He moved closer and his body brushed against hers.

She knew she could trust him to keep his word. That wasn't what held her back. These males seemed to embody every bad thing she'd ever imagined a male-run pack could be. She was willing to give him time but she didn't know how much she could take.

"Trust, yes, but I don't know if I'll ever be able to accept the way you treat females. I know you have a reason for it but I don't know if I can live in a cage." She swallowed loudly and looked at him. It hurt to think of leaving him but she knew she couldn't take the limited life he seemed to be offering.

"You won't be living in a cage!" Rygar grated from between clenched teeth. "We aren't that cautious with our women. We just want to make sure they're safe. How can you object to that?"

"Your attitude about me picking a few berries tells me differently. You have sentries posted. They'd know if an enemy was near." Dari met his eyes.

"You're overreacting." He tugged her close and tipped up her chin so that he was looking into her eyes. "You aren't leaving me so get that idea out of your head."

* * * * *

Rygar walked beside Dari as they went to find a messenger. After traveling through four gates, he was certain they were safe, finally. She'd been patient about the time it had taken to get here. She hadn't whined or complained which had surprised him a little. Her easy acceptance had him wondering about a few of the things she'd told him. Especially the part about once not having males as part of her pack. Maybe that was more than just talk. He expected lies and half-truths right now. Until she accepted that she belonged with him she'd try to leave, tell him anything. He wasn't about to let her succeed in slipping away from him but maybe she'd been telling the truth part of the time.

The market around them bustled busily. The scent of perfumes and spices swirled and mixed with that of roasted meat. A shout drew his attention to the far end of the market. One man swung his fist at a man just in front of him. The second man stumbled but didn't fall. He went at the first man. Rygar put an arm out, pushing Dari behind him. She tensed and stumbled but didn't try to return to his side. He thought he heard her mumble something about stubborn males but couldn't be sure.

The fight escalated as two more men rushed to join the fray. He wouldn't take her near that battle until the fighting had stopped. He heard a faint coughing sound behind him. He turned his head, expecting Dari to be standing there. He couldn't see her. He spun and saw her struggling. Her hands clutched at a cord around her throat, trying to pull it away. She gasped, trying to draw in a breath but he could tell she wasn't getting much air. Behind her, a man clutched the ends of the cord in one hand and punched her with his free hand. Rygar lunged forward, a growl rolling through his chest. He'd rip the man apart. The man's eyes widened as he saw Rygar start forward, he shoved Dari, turned and fled.

Rygar caught Dari as she fell into his arms. Her knees buckled and her hands pulled at the cord but she wasn't making any progress. He reached behind her neck and worked at the twisted cinch. Finally, he managed to release it and the cord loosened. Dari drew in gulping breaths of air.

He looked down the street, trying to find the man who'd done it. Her attacker had disappeared. He could track him by scent. And he wanted to. He wanted to chase after the man and beat him senseless but he couldn't leave Dari. He knelt down beside her and pulled the thin cord of the garrote off her, flinging it over his shoulder. An angry red line marked her throat where the cord had tightened.

Anger boiled inside him without any outlet. Protectiveness and a sense of failure warred within him. Instinct pulled him in two directions. He needed to keep her safe and find out who'd attacked her and why. If he left her alone, he couldn't be sure she'd be safe but letting the man go meant she'd still be in danger.

He picked her up carefully and turned back toward the travel-gate where he knew he'd find other members of his pack. The first thing he had to do was get her looked over by a physic. He'd seen her body jerk forward with those quick hard blows.

She moaned and he saw a tear slip down her cheek. He knew every step was hurting her. Her arms came up, hooking around his neck as she tried to relieve a little of the ache by taking some of her weight off her back. He knew he was causing her pain but he had to get her somewhere safe.

"Let me walk. It hurts too much to be carried." She grimaced, holding her body as still as possible as he walked. "Every step..." She groaned and her arms tightened.

He stopped and slowly lowered her to her feet. A small cry escaped her and her hands clutched at his shoulders. She drew in gulping breaths. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"You tell me if it hurts too badly. I'll pick you up again," he ordered.

She nodded and hobbled slowly beside him as they moved down the street. It seemed like an eternity before they finally reached the gatehouse. Rygar saw Sian first. Sian had been standing near one of the booths that lined the street. He straightened as he noticed the way Dari was walking. He nodded to Rygar and ran into the gatehouse. Rygar wasn't surprised when Logan came rushing out of the building followed a moment later by Boras. Boras wasn't their healer but he had enough skill and knowledge that he sometimes did the duty when the healer wasn't available.

"What happened?" Logan asked.

"There was a fight in the market. While my attention was on it and making sure she didn't get caught in a brawl, she was attacked from behind," Rygar just stated the facts. He couldn't feel any more guilty about her getting hurt than he already did.

Boras walked over to her. One of his large hands cupped her chin and lifted, revealing the angry red line on her neck. He looked her over and then looked into Dari's eyes. "So what did he do to you other than strangle you?"

Her eyes narrowed on Boras and she straightened but groaned as the movement caused her to wince with pain. "He hit me in the back. It hurts to walk and even breathe. I think he might have cracked a rib or something back there."

"Stand still. I'm going to press a little and have a look at your back." Boras moved behind her.

Dari's eyes widened and she looked around the area. He saw her look at all of the people and he could tell she wasn't comfortable doing this here. She tensed and stepped away as Boras tried to prod at her back.

"I think we should go somewhere a little more private." Her eyes followed a man who was staring at them as he walked down the street. He walked straight into a table.

"He's only going to look at your back. If he had to look at your front, I'd get you into a private area." Rygar smiled at her. He stepped close and pulled her against him. She leaned into him, her arms holding on to him.

"I still don't like it. There are too many people around. It makes me feel a little vulnerable." She looked up at him, her hands gripping his green shirt.

Rygar combed his fingers through her soft hair. "How can you feel vulnerable with me? Didn't we get you out of that prison? On your very first night too."

She smiled shakily. "I really wasn't too worried about it. I knew I'd get out of there one way or another."

Rygar watched as Boras pressed gently on her back. She groaned but when he touched her ribs, she tensed. Her body pushed against his, trying to move away from the probing fingers. She cried out and her fingers clutched at him.

He put a hand on her hip and stroked his hand up and down in a slow rhythm. He wanted to pull her against him but knew that would probably hurt her even more. Looking over her shoulder at Boras, he just managed to hold back the warning growl. The Zarain inside him wanted to rip the man into tiny pieces for hurting his mate.

Boras must have seen the intent in his eyes. He backed away and made no move to touch her again. Rygar held Dari until the tenseness left her body and her breathing returned to normal.

Are you feeling better, taneen? *Ready to hear what's wrong*? Rygar asked using the link he'd begun to establish. It still took a little effort to make the contact. She hadn't begun to reach for him yet.

She looked up and he could see the wet trails of tears marking her cheeks. He brushed the wetness away with his thumb. Her lips lifted in a small smile and he was relieved to see that small sign.

Primal Encounter

"I doubt that I look very good right now. My throat's probably already bruising and I've been crying so my nose and my eyes are red. But on the bright side, the pain's going away slowly." She brushed at the hair hanging over her shoulder.

"You always look beautiful and sexy to me. Whenever you're close, I always want to pick you up and hold you." He helped her turn around to face Boras and Logan.

Her nose might be a little red but all he saw were beautiful, big brown eyes and her pink lips. All he felt was an urge to get closer, skin to skin if possible.

"She's going to be bruised and there may be some cracked ribs. She'll have to take things more slowly," Boras advised.

"Will she be able to take going through the gate and walking a little?" Logan asked.

As much as Rygar wanted to keep Dari free of pain, he fully understood why Logan asked the question. She'd been attacked here. As long as they stayed here, it could happen again. Rygar wanted her safe and protected. The more he thought about today's attack the more it seemed like she was the actual target, not just a random victim. The man hadn't even tried to take anything. He hadn't even tried to drag her into a more private area.

"Yes, she should be able to leave the planet if need be but she's going to be very sore. The only remedy I can give her would put her to sleep so unless the pain is unmanageable that will have to wait until we stop to rest." Boras looked at Dari and then to Logan. "The pace will have to be slow, Achan."

"Can you travel?" Logan looked at Dari.

Rygar felt her straighten away from him. She drew in an audible breath and her fists clenched at her side. Her chin lifted and he knew that she'd taken the question as a challenge.

"I can travel. I still need to get that message to my pack," Dari said in a low, strained voice. She reached back and grabbed one of his hands, squeezing it. "And I need another change of clothing."

"Former pack," he corrected easily. He knew that that hadn't been deliberate slight. She still thought of the pack that way.

She sighed and nodded.

"We'll leave as soon as the others return." Logan nodded, a satisfied smile on his face. "And the clothing for you and the other women will have to wait until the market on the next planet."

Rygar held on to her hand. He noticed several men leave and knew they'd gone to help get the others so that they could leave as soon as possible.

"Do you have any enemies you should tell us about?" Logan asked.

The quiet tone nearly hid the serious intent but Rygar knew his brother well.

"No, I don't have any enemies. There's no one who'd want to hurt me." Dari shook her head. "I have no idea why that man tried to kill me."

"Could it be something connected to your pack?" Rygar looked down at her.

"No. My pack's not having any trouble. If there was any conflict, they would have kept all the females away from it if possible. This can't be about me." Only her tone became strident but he could tell by the look in her eyes that if she hadn't been hurt she'd have been acting just as forceful as her tone.

"Former pack. Maybe whoever attacked you, had you taken and thrown into that cell with Rygar had something against your pack that you don't know about." Logan frowned.

Dari sighed and rolled her eyes skyward. "How would they know where I am, much less caught up and passed us without us knowing? If they were after me and knew me, they'd probably look for me along the path toward my–Oroyai–pack's Taivain. It doesn't make sense that I'm their target."

Rygar shook his head. "If they were after coin or your belongings, they could have attacked at any point. They waited for a clear opportunity at you."

She huffed and shook her head but didn't argue with him anymore. He could sense her frustration. She leaned back against him. He held her until all the men finally returned. When everyone had gathered, they went into the gatehouse. Logan told the gatekeeper where to send them and returned to the group. The gate formed in front of them, a hazy gray mist filling the oval. Rygar guided her through the gate, moving as slowly as she needed.

They traveled to two more worlds before stopping for the night. The pain and stress of moving when she was hurt was beginning to show on her face. When they made camp, Rygar urged her to sit and drink the herbal concoction Boras handed to her. She became very drowsy after finishing the green liquid and fell asleep almost as soon as he had a pallet ready for her. He helped finish setting up the camp and settled down beside her. For a while, he stayed awake. His eyes roved over her peaceful features. He thought about the attack and how close he came to losing her. It wouldn't happen again. He wouldn't be so careless of her safety in the future. He knew she wouldn't like it. She'd already complained about the lack of freedom. The additional restrictions wouldn't help but until he was certain she was safe, he couldn't take any chances.

Chapter Four

Dari glared at the two men standing nearby. Guards. Arguing with Rygar didn't get her anywhere. Even logical statements to Rygar and Achan Logan had no effect. They were convinced she'd been attacked by some enemy from her past. She couldn't convince them that she had no enemies. There was no reason for someone she'd once met to come after her. She still wasn't sure how that person was supposed to have found her. While the pack did have people angry over some slight, those enemies would go after the Achan or Acine if they attacked anyone. As far as she was concerned, that attempt made absolutely no sense at all unless she'd been mistaken for someone else. There was also a small chance that the attack had nothing to do with her or them. It could have been someone who just wanted to hurt another person, anyone. It could have been just bad luck that she'd gotten in his way.

It had been a week since she'd been attacked. She was almost back to normal, physically. She had some fading bruising along her neck and some definite tenderness in her ribs. At least she'd gotten to the point where walking wasn't an exercise in excruciating pain. She pushed a hand through her hair. Life was far from what she considered good but not everything about it was bad. She liked waking up with someone beside her. She hadn't realized how alone she'd felt until she'd noticed just how good it felt to be with him. The sex was great. That was something she was missing right now. Rygar seemed to be afraid he'd hurt her. He'd kiss her but didn't take it much further than that. He'd always laughingly say that he didn't want to torment them both. If he'd hoped to prevent suffering, he'd failed. Just being near him reminded her of what she was missing. His weight as he moved over her. The feel of his thick cock sliding into her.

"What has brought that smile to your face?" Rygar's lips brushed against her ear as his arms came around her.

She turned.

"Certainly not them." She shot a pointed look toward her two guards. They seemed to step forward or object to the smallest things.

"Still pouting over not getting your way?" Rygar asked with a smile.

Dari turned a narrow-eyed look on him. He found this entire situation too funny. Every look, every complaint she made gave another reason to smile. She'd like to know how cheerful he'd be with two guards who seemed to think everything was dangerous. She had a feeling that the only reason they hadn't deemed walking dangerous was because it was still necessary.

"Why don't you tell me what could be dangerous about picking out cloth in an almost deserted market. Damn it, Rygar, I need that cloth. I only have two changes of

clothes." She put her fisted hands on her hips. By the end of the statement, she was nearly shouting at him.

It didn't do much good. He just chuckled and slipped his arm around her waist. She was getting tired of wearing the same clothing again and again. There wasn't any reason for it.

"It's too open. Someone could easily target you." He dropped a kiss on her lips.

The fleeting touch was gone before she could decide whether to respond or hold herself away from him. His answer made her absolutely furious. The men hadn't let her go into a busy market on another world. She could understand that and hadn't made any comments about it. Now someone was so intent on her death that they'd lie in wait on some roof to get a shot at her. She couldn't resist saying something now.

"I wish you men would make up your minds. I couldn't go into one market because it was too busy. One of those people could have easily slipped a blade between my ribs in the crush without one of the guards noticing. And it wasn't that crowded." She folded her arms across her chest and looked toward the quiet market.

"It was too crowded and you know it. Today, it would be just too easy for someone to let an arrow fly from a hidden alley or rooftop by the time we knew anything was wrong, you could already be hurt or worse." He leveled one of his unbending looks at her. She knew he wasn't about to let her deny the truth of that.

"Maybe the too-crowded market was dangerous but I'm not about to agree with your judgment about today. This isn't about me." She shook her head, knowing that was a dead-end discussion and tried another tack. "I had my personal wall of protection. You didn't see it."

"Your personal wall?" Rygar gave her a doubting look.

"My two guards. Every time I approached a stall, they moved behind and to the side of me. I couldn't even take a step back without bumping into one of them." She shot another glare at them. Just the thought of that made her want to scream.

"And you didn't find any cloth while you were there?" he asked.

She turned her head and narrowed her eyes at him. Was he trying to make her angrier? His expression was genuinely curious as if he really didn't know why she wouldn't have found anything during her very brief foray into the market. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"I had only visited three stalls and had finally found some decent cloth when those two had to drag me back to the main group. After that, I was lucky if I could see past the men around me." Dari glanced toward the gate. She knew they'd be leaving as soon as the rest of the men returned from their errands.

"Your safety and health are important to us." His lips lowered to just above hers. "Now stop whining and give me a kiss. You know that I'm not going to risk your life for anything, much less a bit of cloth."

Dari gasped but before she could yell at him, his mouth closed over hers. His tongue slid between her lips. She leaned into him, relaxing and savoring the kiss. It had been too long since he'd kissed her with real passion. She stroked her tongue against his and twined her arms around his neck.

"I've missed holding you, making love with you," he murmured between kisses dropped on her lips and cheeks.

"I'm sure we could have found a way to make love without it hurting me too much." She'd been tempted to try a few of her own ideas in the past few days. Only the fact that they were surrounded by other people had held her back.

"I wanted to try a few possible positions but even the climax would have caused you pain." He combed his fingers through her curly gold hair.

"It might have just been worth it. I've been feeling a little neglected." She nuzzled his hair away from his neck and drew his scent into her lungs.

"We'll have to take care of that soon," Rygar whispered. His hot breath fanned over the shell of her ear.

Dari didn't have time to respond. The last of the men returned and they left the world. According to the men, it should only be a few days until they reached the Taivain. She was looking forward to that. The privacy of a room and also the comfort of a bed would be great. She'd really like to stay in one place for a while. Especially since they thought she was in danger. Maybe she'd be able to walk somewhere alone on their home world. She'd never thought she'd long for that simple pleasure. Within the walls of the Taivain even they should accept that she would be safe.

The men stopped for the night on Elianea, the world before Ajiari pack's home world. They'd have to travel to Vassair tomorrow and then overland for a few days to their Taivain. She sat with a few of the women who'd chosen to stay with the Zarain as the men set up camp. It's not like there was much to do since there were no campaign tents. It was something she'd watched many times. She'd have liked to help but everything stopped any time she got near the men.

Rygar walked over to her after the fire had been built and sentries had been posted. He extended his hand. She looked up at him and noted the warmth in his eyes. A quick sniff and she caught his scent on the wind. Wild, musky, aroused.

She put her hand into his. Even on a walk, she knew they'd have no real privacy. She'd resigned herself to waiting a little longer but Rygar obviously had other ideas. She wasn't going to miss this opportunity to kiss and touch him. Even if he stopped before they made love, it would be worth the frustration.

He pulled her to her feet and led her away from the camp. She looked up at him and caught him glancing at her. She smiled and moved closer to him, her thigh brushing against his as they walked.

His hand released hers but almost immediately his arm curved around her waist. She leaned against his shoulder, wanting to get even closer. Considerable less clothing would be wonderful. She knew it wouldn't happen. He was still in that overprotective state that he'd been in since she'd been attacked.

"Where are we going?" Dari asked.

"Not far. Just a nice place where we can be a little more private," the words emerged in low exciting rumble.

The deep timbre of his voice almost reminded her of a purr. She absolutely loved it. The sound seemed to vibrate through her, centering low in her abdomen and pussy. It made her want to grab him and find a place where they could make love.

He stopped in a small grassy area. Dappled light streamed through the leafy canopy above them. Thick bushes gave the small clearing a private, secluded feel. She saw a leather pad spread over some of the grass.

Dari frowned but wasn't worried, just confused. "What..."

"I wanted some time with you alone. Holding you at night and not touching you has been making me insane. You cuddle against me at night. Do you know what the feel of your ass rubbing against my cock does to me?" Rygar urged her to stand in front of him and pulled her hips flush against his. The hard ridge of his cock pressed against her stomach.

Her mouth fell open. They weren't that far from the camp. Anyone could come along and find them. He couldn't mean here, now.

"We can't." She shook her head slowly, not sure if she was misunderstanding him.

"We can. Let me show you." He picked her up and carried her to the pallet. He sat and then relaxed back, drawing her over him as he lay on his back.

"There are people..." she began.

He drew her down for a kiss and she couldn't resist responding to the warm press of his lips. She slipped her hand beneath his shirt. She needed to feel his warm skin against her fingers even if it was for a short time. She'd stop him but she'd enjoy being held for just a little while longer.

She pushed his shirt up, running her fingers over his flat stomach and up his ribs to his chest. Her fingers found the hard discs of his nipples. She plucked at the small hard buds.

His eyes met hers and he drew his hands over her back. Sliding back around her waist, his fingers began working on the fastenings to her shirt. He pushed the fabric away from her breasts to his gaze and touch.

"I'm just as eager to play as you are," he said with a wicked smile. His hands stroked over her ribs to the rise of her breasts.

She licked her lips and cast a look toward the bushes. There could be someone there, close enough to hear and see, but she wanted him to touch her. Nervousness and anticipation coiled inside her.

His hands cupped over the mounds of her breasts. The pressure and warmth of his palms against the hard tips of her nipples seared through her. It seemed more intense

than ever before. She gasped and felt the coiling desire low in her belly. Her muscles loosened and a warm, slick juice coated her pussy.

"How much do you want me?" Rygar asked.

"So much. I'm aching to have you but..." She stopped as his fingers gently touched her lips.

"Think only of me and what you feel. Nothing else exists right now." He drew his fingertips back and forth across her flesh.

She nodded but she couldn't forget entirely about the fact that someone could easily walk into this glade. The idea didn't reduce her arousal, it heightened it. He'd protect her from any danger. The thought of someone watching caused a pulsing ache in her belly. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation.

He drew her down and his lips closed over one aching breast, drawing the hardened nipple into his mouth. Her head tilted back and a moan rolled from her lips. She loved the feel of his mouth on her. The way he feasted on her as if he couldn't get enough.

All the while his hands stroked up to her ribs and down to her thighs. That touch was as arousing, if not more so, than the drawing pull of his mouth at her breast. Every time his hands swept down, she'd draw in a slow breath, her mind centering on the feel of his hands. His palms brushed her hipbone and she waited for those blunt fingertips to trail inward. Her cunt clenched with the need to feel his touch.

She shifted her hips restlessly. His hands tightened on her hips, holding her still. Her eyes met his as he allowed her to draw away from him for a moment.

"Touch me, Rygar," she ordered.

His hands flexed at her hips. "I am touching you."

"You know where I need to be touched. Why are you teasing?" Dari dropped a kiss on his lips, determined to make him see how much she needed him if he'd somehow missed it. His tongue tangled with hers. She felt a wave of desire from him and smiled in satisfaction. His hands rocked her hips against his as they kissed.

Slowly, Dari, I don't want to hurt you. He couldn't seem to stop kissing her long enough to actually speak.

Not that she minded. The thoughts and feelings pouring through that connection only made her feel more like she was a part of him.

You're not going to hurt me. Touch me. You need me almost as much as I need you. She brushed her fingers across his cheek. It was the truth. She hadn't felt so much as a twinge of pain so far.

"You have to tell me. If it hurts even a little, stop me," he said. His lips brushed hers with every word.

She nodded. It would have to hurt a lot to make her stop him. She knew that no matter how much he wanted her, he wouldn't hurt her. He wouldn't have started if he wasn't certain that she could do this without pain.

Rebecca Airies

He pushed the shirt off her shoulders, dropping it at his side. His hands glided slowly over her ribs and chest. She trembled at the light touch but it wasn't what she needed. She began slowly rotating her hips against his.

"That's not slowly," Rygar growled. His hands grasped her hips. His eyes narrowed and his lips formed a straight line. He looked almost like the typical stern man.

She grabbed one of his hands and drew it down to her pussy. Pressing his palm against the cloth-covered mound, she moved against him. She wished she was wearing a skirt. His fingers curled against the damp fabric, pushing between the lips of her pussy and rubbing her clit. She moaned and savored his touch, expecting him to pull back at any moment.

The ridge of his cock pressed against her, almost where she needed it. She tore at the laces of her pants, wanting them off so that she could take him inside her.

He chuckled. His hands brushed hers away from the laces. Her lips pulled back in a snarl as she thought he was going to delay again. She didn't think she could take any more teasing.

He untangled the laces, loosening them and pushing the fabric down as far as it would go in their present positions. Without pausing, he worked on his own pants. She rose, frustrated as the pants seemed to bunch and tangle at her knees. Off balance, she tumbled onto her hip. Pulling off her boots, she kicked free of the clinging fabric.

He was chuckling as she knelt astride him. His hand guided the thick head of his cock to her slit. The rounded head nudged into her. She threw her head back and closed her eyes as she slowly sank onto his shaft. The skin wrapped around his shaft felt tight, stretched, but the prickling sensation arcing through her was pure pleasure. He curled his arm around her shoulder, drawing her down to him. She shivered as the change in position caused sharp pleasure to burst through her.

He kissed her and used a hand at her hip to guide her movements against him into a slow, smooth rocking motion. At first the sensation thrilled her but soon the unhurried pace frustrated her. The need inside her coiled tight but the gentle rock of his hips into hers only served to frustrate her. A fine sweat coated her skin and she braced her hands on his shoulders.

Dari strained against his restraining hands. Desire built but she couldn't reach the peak. Her inner muscles clenched as she tried to drive her hips against his. His fingers tightened, holding her still.

The clenching muscles at his jaw offered the only sign that the slow pace affected him. "Slowly, gently."

There was nothing gentle about the feelings tearing through her body. She couldn't do this the slow way, not and keep her sanity. The arousal built with each stroke. She knew she'd have to take over at least until he felt as desperate as she did.

Leaning down, she nipped his neck as she slowly moved her hips in a circle. It was the only direction she could move without his hands tightening. The sound of him drawing a ragged breath thrilled her. She wanted to ruin his control.

She sucked and licked at the small red mark she'd made on his throat. Her hands swept up his chest. She flicked her nails across the flat disc of his nipple. His hips arched up, lifting her. She tensed her legs, holding still as his hips slowly lowered. She circled her hips and slowly pressed down. She felt his hands shake.

Taking advantage of that, she rose and sank onto his hard shaft again. She couldn't restrain a moan as sensation streaked through her. Her hands braced against his chest. As the heat built, she quickened the pace. He no longer held her back. His hands urged her hips in a faster rhythm. Each time she lowered her hips, his arched to meet hers in a grinding, pounding rhythm.

Fire raced up through her, exploding in fierce intense climax. Her fingers curled and her nails scraped over his chest. He pulled her head down, capturing her lips and her scream as she came. He rocked her against him. His groan was muffled against her lips as he came. The second climax rolled over her, leaving her shaking. She collapsed onto his chest.

She lifted her mouth away from his, a little reluctant to lose his touch. In truth, she'd like nothing more than to lounge against him and savor the feel of the wind against her body.

As the passion cooled, she remembered the nearby camp and the possibility of men wandering the area. The thought sent a jolt through her. If he hadn't had a hold on her, she would have jumped up and grabbed for her clothes.

He held her easily as she tried to get up. A huge smile spread across his face as he looked up at her.

"Your face is so red I can hardly believe this is the same woman who tried to rip off her clothes." He traced her lips with his tongue. His laughter started softly but then shook his body. He held her close, hugging her to him until the last chuckle faded.

She could feel the heat in her skin and knew she was blushing brightly. "They could have heard us. Someone could have come upon us as they walked."

"No one was in the area." His hand cupped her buttocks, rocking her against him.

"How do you know, they could have taken a walk just as we did." Dari lifted her head and stared into his eyes. He'd sounded much too certain for that to be a simple assumption.

"Because they know we're here and that I wanted some privacy," he explained.

"What?" She levered up suddenly and the words came out at a near-shout. She almost couldn't believe what she heard. "Tell me that was a joke."

He shook his head. "No, everyone knows that we're newly mated and of our recent difficulties. They know we needed some time alone together."

Rebecca Airies

Nudity and sex weren't hidden in a pack but Dari couldn't stop a wave of embarrassment that hit her. She knew it wasn't because the others knew what she and Rygar had been doing. If that had been the case, her face would still be glowing red from the first encounter. No, it was her reaction to being discovered. That hadn't shocked or appalled her. It had aroused her.

"Don't worry about it. No one will say anything."

She wasn't worried about anyone saying anything. The only ones likely to comment were the few human females. The easy attitude might seem strange to them.

"Let's get you dressed and get back." Rygar kissed her, nipping at her lips, once before he drew back. "I am getting hungry even if you aren't, my pretty exhibitionist."

She stood as he came to his feet right in front of her. In moments, he was fastening his pants.

"I don't have to dress. I could go back just like this. None of the other Zarain would mind."

"You'd probably do it too but you're mine. If it was necessary, that's one thing, but it's not," he said with a growl in his voice. "Now stop trying to make me jealous and get dressed."

She pulled on her shirt but turned back to him. "There's no need to be jealous. You know I'm yours, just as you're mine."

He hugged her but released her so she could finish dressing. "Does that mean you're going to stop threatening to leave?"

She tilted her head and looked up at him through her lashes. "What does my saying you're mine as much as I'm yours have to do with me deciding to stay with you for the rest of my life? There's so much I don't know about you and your pack."

He frowned. "You are going to stay with me. Mates don't run away just because they don't like the way something's done."

"Mates don't normally make someone miserable. I won't stay in a place where I'm miserable." She folded her arms across her chest.

This wasn't something she took lightly. She didn't want to leave him and she hoped he realized that. Only if it got to the point where she was certain that they'd both be absolutely miserable would she even consider it. She knew they'd have good times and bad. She was willing to work through them as long as there was good to be found.

"You know that I'll do my best to make you happy." He tangled his fingers in the tight curls of her hair. "You won't find it easy to walk away from me."

She closed her eyes. Even if everything was horrible now, it wouldn't be easy. She felt pulled to him, wanted to be with him. The way he treated her always made her feel cherished, wanted.

"Come here. No more talking about leaving. It upsets you. We'll go back to the camp and we'll talk." He watched as she pulled on her pants and fastened them.

Dari smiled as she finished. Talking about leaving did upset her but she could tell that it also bothered him. She walked over and curled her arm around his waist. She wasn't going to think about leaving him, not unless she had to.

"Talk about what?" she asked as they walked through the forest.

"Do you have any family?" His head tilted and he slid a look toward her. "Someone who'll miss you?"

"I have..." She swallowed loudly. A wave of sadness and guilt rushed over her as she thought about Jaina. "I had a sister, Jaina."

"Had? She's dead?" Rygar's head lifted and he stared at her.

She bit her lip. "I don't know if she's dead. We were in a small city on a world. She disappeared. I was in a different part of the market. She was just gone."

"How? Where was this pack of yours?" He frowned, his hand stroking over her in soothing motion. He stopped, drawing her to a stop beside him.

"I think I've mentioned we didn't always have males. That was before the Achan and his men joined us. We think she was taken by other shifter males. We know they were in the city." She met his eyes.

"Why do you feel guilty?" He cupped her cheek.

"She was younger than me. I promised my mother I'd take care of her. I failed. I should have been with her." She shook her head. She had been in another part of the market getting some supplies but she couldn't help thinking that if she'd been there, she would have been able to change things.

"And you were alone after your sister was taken?" His head tilted.

"She was my only family but the pack became my family. They stood with me." She'd never felt more lonely than after her sister had disappeared. For *ronas*, she'd felt lost and desperate, especially when they couldn't find a trace of Jaina. She didn't know what would have happened if Caidi and the other women hadn't been there. They'd helped her to cope when she'd finally had to accept that they wouldn't be able to find Jaina. The other women had become her anchor, her family.

He looked at her but didn't say anything. He nodded and began to lead the way back to the camp.

Chapter Five

The next morning, they stepped through the gate on Vassair, Ajiari pack's home world. She noticed the Zarain men standing in the gatehouse and guessed that they monitored who came and went here. She hadn't really expected that. From what they'd said, their Taivain wasn't very close to the gate.

As they walked out of the gatehouse, she saw a market spread out in front of her. She hadn't had any idea that there would be a market here. Not when they seemed so concerned about enemies finding them.

Rygar came to stand beside her. "I'm glad we're almost home. I want to show you that our way of life isn't as bad as you imagine it is."

She slid a sidelong glance toward him. She wasn't going to touch that comment. It would only start another argument. "Is this place secure enough for me to have a look at the fabric?"

"Let me check with the two guards at the gate. They'll know if anyone unknown has come through the gate. If everyone here is just the normal visitors, you can walk through the market." Rygar's eyes swept the market once.

He stepped back into the gatehouse but Dari wasn't alone. There were at least two men near her. The market wasn't overly crowded but there were a good number of people browsing the stalls. She looked over the nearby wares. Fruit held prominent place in one of the nearby covered stalls. Most of the carts near the gatehouse sold food or pans and other supplies that might be needed by travelers.

Rygar came out of the gatehouse with a smile on his face. She took hope from that. She wanted to shop for some cloth and just be able to walk through the market, to feel a little freedom.

"You can go look at the stalls. I'll be talking with Logan but there will be a guard with you," he said with a smile.

Dari opened her mouth to protest.

"We've lost a woman here just recently and she didn't run away. We have our reasons for our watchfulness here." He pulled her close and dropped a swift kiss on her lips.

It was there and gone before she could respond. She snapped her mouth closed. She wanted to ask what had happened but he walked away from her only a moment later. A man stepped up beside her as soon as Rygar stepped away from her. It was Sian, one of the men who'd been with Rygar in that prison.

"Are you ready to go?" Sian asked.

She nodded, deciding to get going before Rygar changed his mind. Heading into the market, she began looking over the tables farther away from the gatehouse. She found a row of stalls selling cloth near one corner of the market square. She inspected the wares on sale.

Stopping at a stall, she began to go through the cloth set out on the table. She moved to another stall but didn't have much hope for that one as she approached it. She had no idea of the quality of the cloth but there didn't seem to be much choice available. Brown, black and blue abounded on the cart but it wasn't what Dari wanted or usually liked. She fingered the fabric and was surprised by the feel. It felt good, like quality cloth should. She picked it up and looked at the weaving. It was nice, tight weave, good color, no obvious flaws. She'd have picked up some cloth if they'd had had anything besides the dark colors on display. She smiled at the vendor and turned to walk away from the table.

"You don't see what you like, lady?" the vendor asked in a very friendly tone as he came out from behind the stalls.

Dari tilted her head as she looked at him. She could tell he intended to haggle about prices and from the look in his eyes, he was almost certain he'd make a sale to her. She wasn't worried about his determination. She had enough experience to know when she'd gotten a good deal and when she'd been taken.

"You don't have much selection. I'm going over to one of the other stalls to have a look." She took a step toward the next stall.

She wasn't surprised when the short man rushed over to stop her from leaving. Sian took a step forward, his expression grim. The shorter man paled and stumbled back, his hands out in front of him.

"You don't need to go there, lady. I've got more cloth in the cart at the back of my stall. Those dark colors sell so well that I usually don't have any use for the others. You won't find better cloth in the market than what I sell." He gestured back toward his stall.

"It's the same quality as what you have on display?" she asked with a raised brow.

"Even better," the merchant assured her with a smile.

The wily salesman was probably only saying that because he planned to increase the price for the cloth. She stepped back over to the stall and waited as the man lifted the covering tarp off the cart. He pulled a bright selection of cloth out and carried it over to the stall.

She fingered the cloth and picked up an edge of the bright green bolt in front of her. The quality was good and she loved the color. She moved on to the red and rich goldyellow fabric.

The man named his price. She tried haggling him down to a lower price but he remained firm. She told him thanks but she'd look elsewhere. The price he'd named was much too high. If he really wanted to sell that fabric he'd lessen it. She'd learned that sometimes a merchant had to think he'd lost a customer before he'd bargain.

"You wanted some of that cloth, didn't you? You came here to buy cloth." Sian looked at her as if she'd done something really strange.

"He was asking too much for it. I could get nearly two lengths of cloth for what he wants for one. That green, the red and the yellow are nice pieces of cloth but they're not that nice." Dari smiled and walked over to another stall.

They checked two more stalls. She glanced over and saw a Zarain man at the stall, buying the red, green and yellow cloth. She sighed and slid a glance at the man at her side. He didn't even look a little guilty.

"You wanted that cloth," Sian said with a shrug. "Rygar told me that if you found something you like, I was to make sure you got it."

"You overpaid." She put a hand on her hip and glared at him.

"That's about the price we usually pay for cloth, I think." He looked as if he couldn't understand her problem.

"Then you usually overpay. Don't you men bargain at all? Sometimes, you have to be prepared to walk away to get the best deal. He wanted to sell that cloth. He'd have found us and offered us a better deal." She felt like yelling at him. She'd been looking forward to bargaining with that merchant.

"Do you want to see any more of the market? There are some jewelry stalls in a section just off this main square." Sian gestured to a street that connected to the main market area.

She drew in a deep breath. She wasn't ready to stand and wait until the men finished doing what they needed to do. Looking at jewelry sounded nice.

She walked beside Sian through the market. She could tell that he was really relaxed and didn't think that they'd find any danger here. He didn't look at everyone who came near her with suspicion as her guards had in the other markets.

The area he took her to was filled with stalls of jewelry from the most basic leather string necklace to ornate bands. She looked at the worked metal, careful not to show partiality to anything. She didn't know if Rygar's instructions included jewelry too.

They were just turning away when a woman standing behind one of the stalls stepped forward. "If you don't see anything you like, I have more in my home just behind this market."

Dari wanted to look at some more of the wares but didn't know if it would be a good idea. She looked over at Sian. He nodded.

"She'd like to see more of your wares," Sian told the woman.

The woman smiled and turned to a younger woman sitting at the back of the stall. After a few words, the older woman turned back and gestured for them to follow her. Dari and Sian followed her out of the market and onto a nearly deserted side street.

As they turned a corner, Sian stumbled forward and almost fell on top of her. She spun as she instinctively leapt to put some distance between them. She heard the older woman's indrawn breath and rapid footsteps. Dari didn't pay her any attention. She

focused on the dark-haired man in front of her. A moment later, she heard a door slam. He stood a good body length away from her with a scarred, short, thick metal club in his hand. Her hand automatically went to her side, feeling for the knife sheath she normally wore there. Finding nothing, her hands clenched as she kept her eyes on the man. She wanted a weapon of some kind. The man looked as if he was too familiar with that cudgel in his hand. He stepped forward, the club moving in a slight swaying motion. She didn't focus on that mesmerizing movement.

"He didn't take long to choose another woman, did he?" the man asked. "He'll pay for what he's done and so will you."

Dari had no idea what he was talking about and didn't care at the moment. She'd get the details later after she was safe. She wasn't going to try talking to someone who could very well be insane. The first thing she had to do was either get a weapon of her own or get that one out of his hands.

She glanced at Sian. She hoped he was just unconscious.

Rygar! She tried calling to him in her mind but had no idea if he'd heard her. He always initiated the conversations between them. She didn't even know if she could talk to him on her own yet. Where was her overprotective mate when she needed him?

She kept backing away from the man, not wanting him to refocus his attention on the man near his feet. Sian would be defenseless against any further attacks as he was now. The man seemed totally unconcerned with Sian. He didn't even glance down to see if he was regaining consciousness. Dari had the feeling he was hired muscle. He appeared to just want to get the job done and move on.

He brought the small club up to about chest level, ready for attack. Her muscles loosened and she felt a calmness fall over her. She was still scared but every bit of her attention was locked on the coming fight.

The man's hand rose and the club slashed toward her upper body. Dari jumped back, dodging the blow. She circled to the right. She watched his body, let it tell her which way he was going to move.

"Bitch, just hold still and this will be over in a few moments. If you keep giving me trouble, I'll mess you up so bad no man will look at you," the man grated in an angry hiss.

Dari laughed. What kind of fool would stand still and let someone beat them with a club? She wasn't going to make this man's job easy. He'd have to work to beat her.

The man swung his weapon again. This time the club struck the wall as she dived out of the way. It clanked and rang as it struck the stone. She looked for an opportunity to take the offensive. She didn't want to take too many blows from that weapon and knew that if he kept swinging he would eventually hit her.

He drew his arm back and she rushed him. Her hand clasped his wrist as his arm descended. Fear and anger gave her an extra burst of strength. She kept pushing him back until he was stopped by a stone wall. She had a sure grip on his right arm but his left was free and he punched at her. The first blow slammed into her unprotected side. She grunted but kept his right hand pinned between them as she did her best to block the worst of the blows.

She drew in a ragged breath. The man was strong and nearly broke free from her grip as he twisted, kicked and struggled. She didn't know how long she could hold on to him. Even though she was a Zarain, she had to use every bit of strength to keep him pinned to the wall.

Her grip on the wrist holding the club tightened. She twisted, trying to force him to drop the weapon. Once she did that, she was certain she'd be able to handle him. They'd be more evenly matched.

He strained, trying to keep his fingers wrapped around the weapon. A harsh groan ripped from his throat. She felt his muscles tense. Although she barely realized it, a low growl rumbled from her. She wouldn't let him win. With a last upward twist, she heard a snap from the man's arm. The metal bar fell. She stepped back enough to let it drop to the ground and kicked it to the side. It made a skittering clatter as it bounced over the street.

She jumped back, releasing the man but kept her body between him and his weapon. Hopefully, now that he didn't have a clear advantage, he'd leave. His icy blue eyes narrowed as he glared at her. She could see the fury burning in his eyes.

"You're going to die now. No woman is ever going to be able to say she beat me." His large body assumed a fighter's stance and he took a step toward her.

Dari held back a groan. Male pride. He was going to stay and fight because of male pride. Free but beaten was better than captured or killed any day in her opinion. She moved in gliding steps, countering his moves.

"If you don't get out of here, you're the one who's going to die," she warned. She really didn't want to be forced to kill him because he wouldn't back away from the fight. She would if it came to it but she didn't want to do it.

He laughed, scorn evident in the sound and the sneer on his lips. "I'll admit your strength surprised me but you won't be the one walking away from this."

Dari wished for a weapon and seriously considered going after that short club but she didn't want to chance giving him an opportunity at her back. Besides, she'd never really used anything like that club. She'd just have to beat him with bare hands. With any luck, before he could push her into a situation where it was her life or his, some of the other Zarain should arrive. She'd just begun to realize how long they'd been gone.

The huge man swung his fist at her head. Dari jerked her head back just in time. She felt the wind off that swipe as it sailed past her nose. Her heart jerked in her chest. Fear sent a burst of energy through her. Automatically, she put a little more distance between them. If that had landed, she'd have at least been knocked off her feet. She pushed the thought out of her mind.

She retaliated. Her booted foot slammed into his stomach and his breath exploded from him. She didn't wait, slipping in quickly to punch him in the face. He stumbled

but didn't fall. His hands rose to protect his face from another blow. Her closed fist drove against his ribs before she danced back out of reach.

He came back swinging. His fists drove forward. Dari jumped back once and then again as his long strides cut the distance between them too quickly. She scrambled to keep out of range of those huge fists.

She knew that soon she'd find a wall at her back. She had to do something before that happened. She dived in under one of those swinging arms. Her fist slashed in a low vicious arc, straight for his groin. He didn't even have time to realize her target before her clenched fingers hit their mark. He drew in a startled choking breath. He stumbled forward and she jumped to the side, unsure of how effective the blow would be on him. He dropped to his knees with a groan. Dari pounced. She leaped behind him, her arm slipping around his neck. She was determined to do whatever it took to remove the threat even if it meant killing him. She pulled back, keeping him off balance as he began to fight her hold. His hands clawed at her arm but she held on to him. At first, she barely registered it when he went totally still. And then she finally saw what was right in front of her. Four men stood there, boots braced apart, hands on their swords. They looked vaguely stunned.

Rygar and Logan stood side by side. Marin stood at Rygar's side and a man she didn't recognize knelt at Sian's side. She eased up on the pressure on the man's throat but kept him off balance.

"You want this one alive or dead, Achan Logan? I have my preferences, because he hasn't exactly been cordial but I will of course defer to your wishes." She winked at Rygar, enjoying having him off balance and unsure for once.

"Alive but we'll take over holding him now. You looked a little too tempted to end it permanently there for a moment," Logan said.

Marin walked forward. His hand slashed down and struck the man in the side of the head. The man's sudden limp weight nearly dragged her to the ground. She released him and stepped back.

Rygar started forward and suddenly his arms were around her. He lifted her off her feet. Tremors shook his muscular body. Her hands settled on his shoulders and she held on to him, a little bit stunned by the emotion she could see and feel from him. As hard as she'd tried to reach him, she could suddenly feel the emotion and hear his shaken thoughts without trouble. It felt right but she did wonder why she hadn't been able to do it on her own.

I could have lost you. His forehead touched hers as he held her a little closer.

She shook her head and cupped his cheek with her palm. I'm not that easy to hurt, Rygar. I've taken care of myself for a long time. I would have felt better if I had a knife but I was fairly certain I could handle him.

He shook his head at her but she felt some of the tension ease out of his shoulders. She savored the feel of his hard body against her. She had a lot of questions to ask especially since she'd started remembering what the man had said as he'd grabbed her. Someone was trying to hurt either Rygar or a man who looked very much like him.

Rygar stepped back and ran his eyes from her head to toe. "Are you hurt? Did he hit you?"

Dari's brows rose. She'd just been in a fight. Most fights involved contact between both opponents. He was utterly serious in that question. And he looked like he wanted to hurt her attacker. The man was in ultra-protective mode.

"He hit me a few times in the side." She shrugged. Right now, she didn't feel anything more than a little soreness and she'd have been surprised if that wasn't there.

"Your side? Your ribs. Did he hurt them?" Rygar's hands cupped gently over her ribs.

"They're fine. No real pain, just a little discomfort." She put her hand over his on the side that had taken the blows, pressing just a little to show him that she wasn't hurt.

"We'll find out why this man attacked you," Rygar assured her.

"Well, I can tell you it wasn't because I was his primary target." She folded her arms across her chest and waited for the question or the denial. She knew they didn't believe this had anything to do with their pack.

"What do you mean?" Logan asked. He stepped forward as his men carried the attacker out of the alley.

"The man said something like he found a new woman quickly and that he would pay as well. So, Rygar, have you been with someone recently or is it someone who looks very like you?" She took satisfaction in the surprised looks on their faces. She looked pointedly over at Logan. He was the only one she knew who looked anything like Rygar.

"It's not me." Logan shook his head.

"So, it's you." Dari raised her brows. In her experience, male Zarain didn't encourage females. They might have sex with them but they didn't lead them to believe it could be anything permanent if the woman wasn't the man's mate.

"Not me either. I have a twin. He recently found his mate but there's been some trouble." Rygar pulled her against his side and looked down at her with a smile on his face.

Dari blinked. Twin. Two men who looked like Rygar. She shook her head. She couldn't think about that now. She needed to find out more about what had happened. She suspected that it was at least partly responsible for their overprotective annoying attitude.

"What kind of trouble?" She put her arm around his waist and leaned into him.

Rygar's head tilted toward her and his voice lowered as they walked back to the main area. "He found his mate on a world near this one. The family was very against the woman having a shifter mate. They tried to stop him before he left with her and chased after them when Gaden did get his woman off the world."

"Hers wouldn't be the only family to get angry when a shifter suddenly carries off their daughter without more than a few words." Dari shrugged. Usually the family eventually came to terms with it. She'd seen it happen a few times since the males had joined Oroyai pack.

"This was different. And there's been more trouble while I was gone," he explained.

Dari looked up at him and saw the clenched jaw. She could see the tension in his body and could swear she caught a bit of his thoughts and emotions. Anger was definitely there but also disapproval. He didn't want to talk about this here.

"I'll stop asking questions now but I want answers later. Don't think I'm going to forget." She poked one of her fingers into his ribs and walked slowly beside him.

"You'll get your answers. Let's get out of the market and on our way. Just to be certain there's not another person waiting to attack." Rygar quickened his pace. Logan was helping a now-conscious Sian to walk. They made their way back to the main market and then out of the city. She looked around for any of the others but didn't see them. They'd probably already been contacted. At least about the change in plan if not told all the details.

They left the city and moved off the road, waiting in the forest on the west side of the city. A few of the men were already waiting for them but she knew some of them were missing. Rygar led her over to where the men had settled. He spread the leather underlining of a pallet on the ground. She smiled and sat. He dropped down beside her on the ground. He seemed determined not to let her out of his sight or touch.

"Now that we're out of the city, tell me about the trouble." She turned on the mat to face him. "What happened after you left?"

"There were several attacks on Zarain men and Nina, Gaden's mate, disappeared." Rygar brushed his hand along the side of her face, pushing a few strands that escaped her braid behind her ear. His eyes roved over her face and she felt such determination from him that she knew that he was thinking that he could have lost her.

"I'm here and I'm not going anywhere without you. How did she disappear? Is she still missing? What about the link thing and the dreams? Can't he just talk to her like you do to me?" Dari asked, very confused.

"She's still missing. She was taken on a normal visit to this market. So maybe you can see that we're not being protective of you for no reason," Logan said. He stood a few paces away from them.

"But how? And what about the rest of my questions?" She looked up at the Achan.

"They attacked her guards and knocked her unconscious, before anyone could get to them. They were gone, taking her with them. We tracked them to a river but lost the trail there. Gaden says she's not on this planet but we don't know where she is." Logan's hands clenched at his sides. He looked fierce and dominant and very much like he wanted to rip someone apart.

"As Logan said, Gaden has talked to her but there's a problem. She doesn't remember anything. She thinks Gaden is either a dream or a demon tormenting her."

Rygar's mouth twisted and he shook his head. "Not knowing where she's been taken is pushing him to his limits."

"Not remember? Was she hit on the head?" She put her hand on his thigh.

"Gaden doesn't know but her memory loss isn't like anything anyone here has ever heard of. She doesn't remember anything. Not Gaden, not her childhood, not even the city where she was born and reared." Rygar frowned and drew her closer.

Dari stiffened. The words "doesn't remember anything" echoed in her head. They sparked a memory about a woman who had disappeared and had no memory of any of her life. She tried to remember everything she could about that long-ago conversation but the details eluded her. She didn't know how it had been done but she'd bet there weren't many people who could make a person forget their entire life.

"Is something wrong, *taneen*?" Rygar asked.

"One of my friends told me about a woman, a friend of hers, who'd been found in a city. She had no memory of friends she'd grown up with or her life before she woke up in that city," she explained.

"It's good that the woman was found and was again with people who knew her." Logan nodded.

Dari could only stare at him in disbelief for a moment. He acted as if she'd just been making conversation. Couldn't he see what she was trying to tell him? If this had been done to someone else, there might be a way to find Gaden's woman. She clenched her hands and kept them locked firmly to her side. There was no real connection between them but she couldn't help thinking that there had to be. Total loss of memory almost never happened.

"The woman had been born a shifter."

"Nina hasn't been hurt. So we're fairly sure that none of our enemies did this. It had to have been arranged by her family." Rygar frowned down at her.

Dari narrowed her eyes but held back. She didn't have enough information about what had happened to the Feiral woman her friend had mentioned. She didn't even have the name of the planet where the woman had been found. In a way, she didn't really blame Rygar and Achan Logan for their doubts. There was so much she didn't know about this situation. The fact that the incident she'd told them about had happened years ago didn't help. She couldn't help thinking about the fact that memory loss was such a rare thing to happen. The knowledge of how to do it had to be carefully guarded.

"We keep leaving cities before I can get to a messenger. I want to write a letter to Acine Caidi and Achan Raven to let them know where I am." She looked steadily at Rygar. She was going to write more than that but until she got some solid answers she wasn't going to say anything more about it. "I suppose you've checked her family."

"You can write the letter as soon as we get to the Taivain. We checked her family. She's not there," Logan said almost before she'd finished speaking.

"Not that she's with them. That they arranged her disappearance. Maybe taking her away from a shifter's worth not seeing her, at least for a while. They wouldn't know that the search would never stop with any shifter." Dari leaned forward, intently watching his expression.

She saw the doubt on Rygar's face. "It could be a possibility but it's not likely."

She shrugged. There could be so much more to the situation than she knew. Some unknown person just taking a woman and somehow erasing her memory just didn't sound right but maybe it had happened before.

Chapter Six

Rygar held on to Dari as he guided the mican up the path to the Taivain. As much as it relieved him to know the danger wasn't aimed at her, he still felt the need to keep her close. She was in danger and a target. Not only because he and Gaden looked alike but because she was associated with him and with the Achan. There had been attacks on both of them since Gaden had brought Nina to the Taivain. They knew that Nina's family was behind it but had just dealt with the men while trying to work for some sort of agreement with her family. None of the messages they'd sent had ever gotten a reply. For Nina and Gaden, they had wanted to try for at least a token relationship with her family.

He felt the tension in Dari's body as they approached the Taivain. She sat forward as they approached the walled fortress. Beneath his fingers, her muscles tightened and he could see the throbbing beat of her pulse at her neck. She was anxious and excited.

He felt a bit of excitement hum through his own body but he knew it wasn't for the same reason. The thought of having her alone in the comfort of his bed without interruptions had been racing through his mind. It had sometimes made the ride very uncomfortable. She must have caught one of his thoughts because she turned a little and looked at him. A smile curved her deep pink lips. He thought he caught a glimpse of amusement flashing through her eyes but he couldn't be sure.

She hooked one leg over the saddle and turned, totally at ease. He tensed his arms, lifting to catch her if she lost her balance, but she settled easily. Her arm curved around him and she leaned against him, her head resting against his chest. She looked up at him and her brown eyes were shielded by her long lashes. He couldn't read any emotion there.

"Is your brother here or is he still out looking for his mate?" Dari asked.

"He's here," Logan said as he rode beside them. "He'd like to be out searching but we have no new information and don't know where to continue the search. Doing nothing is hard for him."

Rygar hadn't really appreciated how hard it was for his brother until he'd found Dari. If she disappeared, he'd want to destroy anything that stood in the way of finding her. He couldn't even think about it without anger boiling and the Zarain stirring inside him.

Her hand stroked over his chest. "I'm right here. Now why don't you tell me about the other attacks you mentioned?"

"There's not much to tell. One of them happened in the city around the gatehouse. The other two happened here. All three times, we traced the attacks back to Nina's family. One of the times happened after Nina had been taken." Rygar shrugged.

"And they're still trying." She bit her lip and appeared to be thinking about it. "That's why you're almost certain that her family isn't behind her disappearance."

That was most of the reason. The family would probably stop sending people if they knew Nina wasn't here any longer. There wouldn't be a reason to continue.

"I know you can take care of yourself. After seeing you in the city, I can't deny it. I do have a lot of questions about your life but I can't ignore what I saw. I still have to make sure you're safe, especially when there are people actively attacking us." Rygar leaned down and brushed his lips across her forehead in a soft caress.

Because he was so intensely focused on her, he felt the surge of emotion go through her. She smiled up at him. Her arm tightened around him. Her reaction wasn't what he'd expected. He'd thought she'd argue again or become angry.

"I'm not going to argue now, because I know why you feel I'm in danger. Before, you didn't bother to explain. You just threw out orders and it felt like you were trying to lock me in a cage. Once this is finished, I expect a little more freedom and definitely no guards in most cases." She put her hand on his arm and looked into his eyes.

He searched her eyes and saw only calm acceptance.

"What do you think of the Taivain?" he asked.

She didn't look at the building but kept her eyes on him. "It's what I expected. It looks solid, defensible."

"Is that all you have to say about it?" Rygar tilted his head. He didn't try to hide the laughter lurking in his voice.

"It's a dark gray-walled fortress. It's not exactly a work of art. What do you want me to say about it?" She tilted her head and looked at him as if he was crazy.

"Maybe that it's home and you're glad to be here." He drew his hand up her thigh and his eyes caught hers.

She still hadn't really accepted that she belonged with him. He occasionally caught her looking at him, her eyes considering, weighing. He wondered sometimes if she was thinking about leaving.

"I haven't even stepped inside it yet but I am looking forward to a few things. Eventually it will be home." She shot him a teasing glance from beneath her lashes and leaned into his body.

He could feel the sensual turn of her mood. He'd have liked her immediate acceptance but that "eventually" satisfied him for the moment. She hadn't been talking about leaving nearly as much. Not that he'd just let her go if she did try but he wanted her to want to stay with him, to be happy here.

"What are you looking forward to?" He leaned down close enough to brush his lips over the shell of her ear.

"Hot food, a long warm bath, a soft bed and privacy." As she said the last word, her palm slipped up his thigh and stroked his cloth-covered cock.

Rebecca Airies

He stiffened and nearly fell off the mican. He could only be thankful that the ground was relatively level and the animal's pace slow and easy. Hot arousal slammed through him. He couldn't agree more with one of her desires. They definitely needed privacy. He wanted to continue the teasing little game she'd started and he was determined they'd both enjoy it.

She drew her hand away but trailed it over his ribs, her fingers tickling through the fabric.

"Dari..." He looked down at her and tried to capture her hand.

She pulled it away from him and laughed softly. Rather than draw attention to their tussle, he let his hand fall to the reins. She wouldn't be able to resist coming in for another try. He'd get her then. She leaned close and nipped at his neck before drawing back in almost the same motion.

"You're playing a dangerous game, little Dari. I'm going to make you pay for this." He narrowed his eyes as he took in her cheerful expression.

"Do you think you can?" She leaned close, whispering, "I think you want me underneath you, your cock driving into my pussy as much as I want you."

Heat arced through him and it took every bit of control he had not to stop and drag her off the mican. He'd settle for a relatively private spot with a soft patch of grass if it meant he could have her now. Her aggressive play was exciting the animal within almost as much as it aroused him.

He leaned down and nuzzled the hair away from her ear. He nipped the tender flesh, reveling in her gasp and the strong scent of her arousal. She squirmed but couldn't go anywhere, trapped in his lap as they finally reached the walls.

"I'm going to strip those clothes off you and taste every bit of your body. I want to know every part of you and hear you scream as I do it." He traced the shape of her ear with his tongue before drawing her earlobe between his teeth.

"Think you can last that long?" Her hand stroked his cock again. "This feels awfully hard and ready, almost as ready as I am. I'm hot and wet. Don't you want to find out just how wet?"

He drew in a sharp breath. He wanted that so badly. He wanted to see the slick moisture, to taste it and feel it surround him as he drove into her pussy. But he focused on getting somewhere private where he could enjoy it. He had a strong urge to tease her, to play until they were both wild.

"Keep it up and you just might have trouble walking before I get enough of you," he warned.

She certainly surprised him. He'd never thought that she would have touched his cock so openly. She didn't even seem concerned that someone would see her.

Her fingers cupped over his cock. He captured them before she could try anything else. In this mood, he didn't know what she'd do and the fact excited him. He wanted to

see just how far she'd go but not when he couldn't return the favor. Before she could try with her other hand, he grabbed and held it in the same hand as her captured wrist.

They rode through the gates and he'd never been more relieved than he was now. The ride to the stables seemed to take an eternity. Just the slight brush of her leg over the ridge of his cock from the mican's rolling gait pushed his limits. Finally, they reached the stables and men came out to take the animals. Rygar dismounted, taking Dari with him. He wasn't letting her out of his sight.

Logan, I need a little time with Dari. Expect us when you see us. Rygar took the brief moment to inform his brother only because he didn't want to be interrupted.

His brother laughed and nodded. Rygar didn't waste another moment. He lifted Dari off her feet and carried her toward the main building of the Taivain. She drew in a startled breath and pushed at his hands.

"I can walk. I don't need to be carried," she said, looking around, a blush heating her cheeks.

"I'm too impatient for you, Dari. If you're at my side, others will want to talk to you." He let her see and feel the burning heat she'd ignited.

She drew in a sharp breath and her lips curved into a satisfied smirk. Her arms came around his neck and she held on to him as he carried her up the steps to the main doors of the Taivain. He didn't return the greetings called to him but carried her straight to the stairs. She lifted her legs, wrapping them around his hips as he climbed the steps. Every step rubbed their bodies together. The delicious friction threatened to push him right over the edge. She moaned and the soft sound thrilled him. He wanted her wild and as out of control as he felt. She moved against him, her thighs tightening as she ground her hips in small circles.

Rygar stumbled as he cleared the last stair. His breath came in ragged gasps as he struggled against the desire to press her to the wall and take her right there. The temptress knew exactly what she was doing. He stopped and lowered his lips to her shoulder. Through the fabric of her shirt, he closed his teeth on the muscle there. He held on until she went still.

"Rygar, please..." Her voice roughened on the plea.

He released her shoulder and began walking down the hall again. Finally, he pushed open the door to his rooms and hurriedly entered. His mouth slanted across hers as he shouldered the door closed. Her sweet taste filled his mouth for a few moments as he lost himself in the kiss.

Tearing his mouth away from hers, he took a deep breath. By memory, he carried her to the bed and put her there before he stepped away to light a lamp. Turning back, he found her trying to pull her shirt off. He brushed her hands away from the fastenings and took over the task. His fingers fumbled and he heard cloth rip. He needed to see her, to touch her. When he threw the last garment away, he looked down at her, savoring the golden beauty sprawled on his bed. He took off his shirt and boots but made no move to remove his pants. He needed the control the tight fabric gave him.

Rebecca Airies

Her golden hair spilled across the deep purple-gray blanket in a wild mass of curls. Her skin seemed even more golden in the soft flickering light. His gazed locked for a few moments on the dark tips of those rounded breasts. He swept his gaze lower to the gentle curves of her hips and the golden hair between her thighs. As he watched, she widened her thighs, bringing her knees up, inviting him without words. He licked his lips as he noticed the moisture glistening on those soft curls. His cock strained against the confining cloth. He had to taste her. He climbed between her thighs. The scent of her arousal filled his senses. Lifting her legs onto his shoulders, he settled on his stomach between her thighs.

She drew in a sharp breath and he felt her muscles quiver and tighten momentarily. He parted the plump folds with his fingers and drew his tongue up from the opening of her pussy to the hard nub of her clit.

She moaned and her hips lifted. He drew his fingers over the plump lips, his fingers brushing through the curling hair. She shivered. Her responsiveness excited him, made him want to see just how wild he could make her. He wanted her to scream and writhe and to watch her explode and then make her blood race with arousal again.

He tongued the hard nub. Her hips twisted and her fingers laced into his hair, tugging him even closer. He smiled against her. He swirled his tongue around the hard bud. The muscles of her legs tightened. His cock ached to feel her inner walls clenching and gripping him as he drove into her. He traced a wandering path lower, lapping at the juices spilling from her.

"You taste so good. I could lie between your thighs and feast all day." He lifted his head long enough to meet her eyes before lowering it back to the pink flesh of her pussy.

"Gods, Rygar, I need..." She bucked as he took her clit between his lips.

He sucked on her clit, stroking his tongue across the hood. Her fingers pulled him closer and moans fell from her lips as she strained against him. The soft sounds only spurred him on to more. He knew she was close to coming. He drew once more on the tight knot of flesh and scraped his teeth as he slowly moved lower. Her body shook and she cried out as the pleasure hit her.

She looked down at his bent head, her breath coming in fast, shallow pants. He licked at the cream flowing from her, stabbing his tongue into her spasming pussy. Finally, the tremors faded. He flicked his thumb over her clit as he drove his tongue into her tight entrance.

Her thighs widened and she pushed her hips up against him. The feel of his tongue driving into her only made her want more. She could still feel the ripples of that intense orgasm pulsing through her body. Even after that wave of pleasure she needed to feel his thick shaft driving into her, the weight of his body.

"Rygar, come to me." She slid her hands over his shoulders.

She felt his tongue stroke into her pussy. A sensation shivered through her body, centering low in her core. Her hips shifted restlessly and her tongue slicked over her lips. More. Just a little more. Her nails scraped over his back.

"You're so responsive. Your body seems to come to life at the smallest touch," he said. His breath feathered through the hair of her pussy.

His thumb flicked over her clit. She shivered. Sharp heat streaked over her body. Her toes curled as he licked his way up to her clit.

"I want you inside me." She desperately reached for him as her voice broke.

He looked up at her and she saw the stark need on his face. His body surged up the bed. His fingers worked at the fastenings of his pants. Soft curses fell from his lips as the laces knotted for moment. As she watched, the cloth parted and his shaft rose. She reached for him, her hands closing around his cock. Satisfaction rolled through her as he pulled in a hissing breath. She stroked that hot, smooth flesh for a moment before he pulled her hands away from him.

He flipped her onto her stomach. Surprised, she rose to her elbows and looked over her shoulder at him. He lifted her hips and moved behind her. She felt the rounded head of his cock brush against the curve of her buttocks. His hand smoothed over her hips.

"I have to have you but I don't think I can hold on long enough to bring you satisfaction if you touch me." The words seemed torn from his lips.

Seeing his need and urgency only increased her own. The head of his cock nudged into her slick entrance. She bit her lip as her tissues clasped around his shaft. The tingling sensation felt too good.

Rygar's hips slowly rolled forward and his shaft slid deep into her pussy. She pushed back against him. His hips pressed against her buttocks. Drawing in a gasping breath, she savored the feeling of his thick shaft.

He drew back and slowly drove into her. His hand slid around and cupped her pussy. She felt one of his fingers settle over her clit. His hips thrust against hers, pushing her into his finger. She shuddered and met each thrust.

The hot sensation tightened as did almost every muscle in her body. She shivered and moaned. His fingers stroked over the hard nub. She felt slick liquid gush out around his cock as he stroked into her. His pace quickened and the strokes became more forceful.

"Rygar..." she moaned as his shaft drove deep.

"Come for me." He leaned down and nipped at her shoulder.

She wanted to come. The need was screaming through her body. Her arms shook and she almost tumbled forward. She drew in gasping breaths, her fingers gripping the bedding. His hips drove against her. She rocked forward. Pleasure streaked through her, exploding over her until it felt like even the tips of her fingers tingled. He continued pumping against her. Just as the last wave faded, he stiffened, groaning her name. She felt the first splash of his seed as the *re'kai* hit. Her body trembled and she cried out as the orgasm soared over her body. She collapsed to the bed, her cheek pressed against the soft fabric of the blanket.

"I needed that." She smiled as she felt his lips brush over her shoulder. "And we don't even have to worry that someone will walk in on us."

"You provoked that. If you'd pushed me any more, I would have had you against the nearest wall and anyone who saw us could just enjoy the show." Rygar nipped at her back, his teeth scraping over her skin.

"I enjoyed it too." She smiled, thoroughly contented. If she could have, she'd have snuggled into the blanket and tried for a nap but she was still on her knees.

He pulled out of her slick pussy and she couldn't stifle a groan as shards of pleasure danced through her. As sated as she felt, she still experienced a stirring of desire. She knew with only a few touches her body would be burning for him. He moved higher on the bed and pulled her against him.

"I could tell you enjoyed it. You've got a wicked smirk when you're plotting and teasing. Absolutely gorgeous. I wanted to kiss it off your lips and give you something to really smile about." He dropped kisses on her jaw and snuggled against her neck.

Dari wanted to lie there, wrapped in his arms for the rest of the day. She'd certainly like to spend more time getting to know his body. She'd had little time up to this point to savor and touch him as she wanted. They'd hardly had any time alone on the journey here. But she knew they should get up and leave the room. Rygar had carried her into the Taivain without so much as a word.

She rolled toward the edge of the bed but just as she reached it his hand clasped her shoulder. He turned her back to face him, one of his large hands on her arm. Frowning down at her, his weight rested on his elbow as he loomed over her.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked. She heard the low growl in his voice and knew he wasn't happy.

"We should go. The others..." She licked her lips.

"Will expect us probably a little closer to the meal. Now come over here. I'm not about to lose any time now that I have you alone." He lifted her against his chest and fell back. "Don't you have something that you want to do more than go meet the people here?"

She levered up into a sitting position and looked down at him. His bare chest gleamed in the soft light. Her calves brushed against the fabric of his pants. Oh yes, she had something she wanted to do to and with him. First, she needed to get him out of those pants.

Her hand trailed over his chest. "You're a little overdressed. I want to see all of you. It's been too long since I've seen all of this." "You only had to ask. I would have gladly taken off my clothes for you at any time. Although it might have been a little uncomfortable to ride like that," he told her in a teasing tone. His lips turned up in a smile and his eyes sparkled.

"If anyone's going to be riding soon, it's going to be me." She leaned down and traced her tongue around the flat disc of his nipple.

His hands clasped around her hips and he moved her against him as his hips rose. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the sweet, hot sensation. After a moment, she opened her eyes and stiffened. She couldn't lose control now. If she did, he'd take over completely.

"No." She narrowed her eyes on him and used her nails lightly on his chest.

His hands stilled as he looked up at her, his head tilted to the side. "No what? None of this?" He moved her against him again.

She moaned. "None of that... For now. I want you out of those pants. I want to see and feel your legs, not cloth."

"Tell me what you want to do when you can see all of me." His hand glided over her thigh, pausing to cup the curve of one butt cheek.

"I want to touch you." She nipped the hard muscle just above the flat brown disc.

She felt him tense. He drew in a hissing breath. His body moved beneath her, his hips lifting just slightly. She felt his cock brush against her buttock.

"How do you want to touch me?" His fingers glided over her stomach and teased the peak of one breast.

"I want to stroke my hands over your cock until you're desperate to come. I want to taste you, to feel your hard length against my tongue. I want to know that you want me as I want you." She flicked at the hard bead of his nipple with her tongue.

He smiled, all satisfied male desire at her blatant desire for him.

His hands slowly relaxed on her legs. She moved off him. He rolled out of bed long enough to strip out of his pants. In only moments, he was back.

"Then do what you want to me." His hands fell away and relaxed on the mattress.

Chapter Seven

Dari finished the letter to Achan Raven and Acine Caidi. She'd asked Rygar and Achan Logan about their travels and the worlds they'd visited. They hadn't been to any of the worlds near Carait and she doubted they'd be able to find it. They did know of Avalin. So she sent the message there with a request that it be sent on to Carait. She stood and stretched.

"Now it's time for you to see the Taivain and meet everyone." Rygar curled an arm around her waist.

"You're the one who insisted that I write the message first. I was all set to go meet everyone and see this place but you wouldn't hear of it." She smiled, leaning her head against his shoulder.

"I wanted to get that out of the way. You've been asking to send a message since we were rescued. Now we can go on a tour or maybe find a quiet place and have a little more fun," he offered as his hand slid across her buttocks, tracing the cleft between the full globes.

She laughed softly and wriggled in his arms. She certainly wouldn't mind finding somewhere quiet and secluded but she didn't think it was going to happen. She could hear the people walking outside the small library he'd brought her to. She hadn't noticed anyone in the hallway when they'd come to the room but almost since the moment they'd closed the door, she'd caught the murmur of conversation and the sounds of footsteps on the floor.

"It sounds like a wonderful idea but judging from the sounds outside the door, I don't think it's going to happen. I have feeling someone's going to start knocking if we don't open the door soon." She turned into him and couldn't resist the urge to slip her hand under his shirt. Her fingers slid over his warm skin up to his chest.

"If Logan comes looking for us, he wouldn't knock but you're probably right. There's been too much activity out in the hall. We should go make an appearance." Rygar's arms pulled her close but he made no move to leave the room.

"We should," she agreed but only held him a little tighter.

The door opened and Logan stepped into the room. His eyes took in the sealed note and them holding each other.

"I see you're finished. You can show her around and introduce her to some of the other women. It's time for you to let some of the others in our Taivain meet her."

Rygar only laughed at his brother's teasing words. Dari tightened her arms around him for a moment, reluctant to let go but when she felt his arms fall away, she stepped back. Rygar's arm again curved around her waist as he headed for the door. "I'm going to enjoy interrupting your private time when you find a mate," Rygar warned, his lowered brows and frown not hiding the teasing light in his silver eyes.

"I'll have the sense to go somewhere with a lock on the door and use it." Logan held the door open. A wide smile broke across his face as he waited for them to walk past him.

"We'll have to wait and see about that but I think I'm going to have a lot of fun." Rygar led Dari out into the hallway.

"What? You're going to neglect me so you can stalk your brother just to interrupt him? I can think of better things we can do with that time." She couldn't resist teasing him.

"You shouldn't take his side. I'll make sure I don't leave you wanting and give him problems." Rygar frowned at her but she could see that there was no true anger in his eyes.

"I'm not on his side. I'm on ours. You should remember he's the Achan. He'll get interrupted a lot. Everything goes through him. Problems right after he's gone to bed at night or before dawn, he'll find out almost as soon as it happens." She met Rygar's eyes and chuckled softly.

"Just waiting and watching doesn't have the same satisfaction as arranging an interruption." He shook his head.

"Because you're more impatient than she is obviously." Logan laughed. "Come on. The other women have been asking about her. You can't keep her to yourself forever."

Rygar grumbled beneath his breath but moved forward, out of the room and into the hallway. She walked easily at his side, enjoying the feel of his warm palm against her back. She liked the feeling of belonging.

Dari did get a partial tour eventually but there were so many people to meet that it took a while for her to see even part of it. Finally, Rygar brought her to a large hall. She saw a few people she hadn't met yet but Rygar made no move to stop to meet them. They'd missed one meal while they were making love. Enticing aromas swirled around them. She felt hunger stir, reminding her it had been some time since she'd eaten.

There was still so much of this Taivain she hadn't seen. He led her up to one of the tables. He urged her into a seat and took the one beside her. She saw him edge the chair a little closer to her. A little thrill zipped through her as she realized he felt the need to touch her, to be near her just as she did him. She put her hand on his thigh, gently stroking her fingers over the muscular column. His warm palm settled over hers, stopping the motion, but he made no move to remove it. She turned her head to look at him and found him smiling at her.

The hall filled quickly. She looked around as the people took their seats. Logan came in and beside him walked a man who looked exactly like Rygar. This must be Gaden. His face showed the signs of stress and strain. They strode across the room and took the seats to Rygar's left.

"Dari, this is my brother Gaden. Gaden, this is my mate, Dari," Rygar introduced them.

Dari leaned forward to get a better look at him. "It's good to finally meet you, Gaden."

Gaden smiled. "I'm glad my brother found you. Welcome to the family."

"I wouldn't say he found me. It was more of a chance meeting," Dari said and tossed a teasing glance at Rygar. "And I knew he was my mate before he did."

"You say that because you're stubborn and like to have things your way." Rygar lifted her hand and nipped her fingers.

"Then she's a good match for you because you like to do things your way too." Logan shook his head.

"Logan told me what happened to you on the journey here. I'm sorry you were hurt by those seeking to hurt me." Gaden's quiet tone rang with sincerity.

"You couldn't have known about it. You're not responsible for the actions of others." Dari shook her head. She'd never blamed him when she found out why she'd been attacked. The blame lay with those who couldn't accept that their daughter was with a shifter.

"Have you made any progress on finding your mate?" Rygar asked.

"She won't believe that my contact with her is anything more than a dream. When I push she becomes so agitated that she wakes herself." Gaden ran his fingers through his hair and heaved a long sigh.

"You have to make her see that you're real, that she's tied to you. She can't hide from the truth forever," Logan's fingers drummed on the table.

"I can't get through to her. She doesn't even remember meeting me. Sometimes I think something I've said has sparked a memory but then she closes down." Gaden's hand thumped against the table.

"Stop trying to make her remember. Why don't you just let her think it's a dream and see if you can find out where she is? If thinking that you might be real agitates her let her be calm enough to give you all the information she can. Use the time with her to strengthen your bond because you're going to need it when you find her." Dari bit her lip. She really didn't know if he'd want to listen to her opinion but it seemed like he was making things harder for himself.

"I promised her I wouldn't lie to her. Her family did and she hated it." Gaden looked over at her and she could see the frustration in her eyes.

That explained why he was trying to make her believe him when he probably wanted to use any tactic that worked to get his mate back with him. Dari grimaced. She knew he wouldn't break his promise but there had to be some way around it. Some way to tell her that wouldn't immediately put her on the defensive.

"Have you tried simply telling her it's not a dream at the beginning and letting the subject drop? You'd keep your word not to lie to her." Dari looked over at Gaden and

she saw that some the last seats on the table had been taken. "If I'm annoying you and you've tried everything, just tell me to back off. I don't really know much about it but I want to help if I can."

"I know you want to help. No, I haven't tried just telling her once, because she usually starts yelling and arguing. Most of the time before I know it I'm just as angry as she is, because she's denying all connection to me," Gaden admitted.

"Try thinking of it from her view. She doesn't remember anything of her past. She only knows what she's told by those she's with and she has no reason not to trust them. Then you..." She squeezed Rygar's hand as she let her voice trail off. She didn't know what he did other than try to convince her she was his. They still had problems but she was suddenly glad that this hadn't happened to them.

"Then I come to her in her dreams. She doesn't know me and I start saying that she belongs to me." Gaden heaved a tired sigh.

"You'll find her but first she's got to start talking. To get to that you're going to have to take away some of the pressure. Part of her just might recognize you as her mate but those feelings would probably only cause more confusion," she said slowly. She could only imagine being on a strange world and not even knowing her name much less her past. The woman had to wonder every day about the dreams and why they felt so different from her other dreams.

Dari couldn't get the thoughts out of her head. All through the meal, she wondered about who would do that to someone they loved. Living like that would almost be a kind of torture. Without knowing who they really were, a person would have a hard time trusting anyone.

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Rygar stopped in the doorway. Dari stood at one of the tables with Rona and Eina. Dari was slowly making friends among the other women. She laughed with the two women as they set the tables with plates and mugs. He was tempted to go over there and kiss her, especially since he wouldn't be here for the meal.

He turned and left without saying a word to her. One kiss wouldn't be enough, not when the feel of her body against his immediately sent thoughts of taking her to a secluded room through his head. He took the steps out of the Taivain and headed toward the gates where Sian and Marin waited. There had been signs of someone in the area. Logan had told him to find the man. Rygar, Sian and Marin would go on foot and hunt the man. He'd eluded previous searchers. Rygar was determined to find him this time.

Heading into the forest, they moved silently toward the last place sign had been found and began tracking. The idea of an unknown person lurking near the Taivain wasn't reassuring. The sign could be that of a simple traveler who'd stopped to rest but Rygar didn't think so. A simple traveler wouldn't hide his presence and move from place to place with little to mark his passing. Whoever had been roaming the area wanted to hide his presence. Whatever his aim, it probably wasn't friendly. Rygar paused to examine the slightly broken branch of a low bush and a partial boot print. The man was good but had stayed around too long.

Rygar and the two men with him kept at their task, finally getting close enough to pick up the intruder's scent. Rygar felt a thrill of satisfaction. He knew he'd find the man today.

Mercenary or assassin, Rygar didn't care. His only concern was finding the man.

Moving silently, Rygar, Sian and Marin closed the distance between them and the intruder. Stopping, Rygar signaled to Marin and Sian to fan out and flank the man. He didn't want the man to even think he had a chance to outrun them.

Rygar caught the flash of movement through the bushes. He crept forward, wanting to get a better look at the man. Pushing the branches to the side, he cautiously peered through the gap. His breath burst from his body as something slammed into his back. He clenched his teeth together and didn't make a sound. Spinning, he raised his hands defensively. The next blow hit his forearm and slid off. Pain lanced through his arm where the metal rod had struck. Rygar lunged forward, grabbing for the bar. Where had this man come from? He didn't waste any more time thinking about it.

The man stumbled back, his arm flailing and pulling the rod out of reach. Rygar kept moving forward, intent on stopping the man before he managed another blow. His opponent didn't stay defensive for long. The man swung the bar as he danced to the side. Rygar moved in counterpoint, his eyes tracking the swing of the weapon.

The man lunged forward, the bar swinging high. Rygar was forced to jerk back to avoid the blow aimed at his head. Rygar growled, his lips pulling back from his teeth. Frustration and determination roared through him. He wouldn't be defeated by a blackhaired cur who attacked him from behind. His muscles coiled and he waited for an opportunity. He saw the man's hand pull back and raise. As the black-haired man's arm moved in a vicious blow for his head, Rygar jumped forward, his hand clasping around the man's wrist. His other hand grasped the man's shirt. He hefted the man off his feet and threw him to the ground before his opponent had a chance to do more than pull in a gasping breath. Before he hit, Rygar pounced.

Once his back touched the ground, the dark-haired man exploded. His hand swung, his body bucked as he kicked and yelled. Rygar drove his fist upward in a short, savage arc, slamming into his opponent's chin. The man went limp, his eyes rolling up into his head. Rygar flipped the man onto his stomach and bound the man's hands tightly behind his back and secured his feet. He didn't want the man wandering if he woke while they dealt with the other man.

Rygar looked out to the spot where he'd seen movement. He saw Sian binding the other man as Marin went through the pack the man had been carrying. Marin pulled a pouch out of the stuffed pack. Opening the thin flat packet, he withdrew folded sheets of parchment. A soft whistle sounded as Marin looked at them.

"What have you found?" Rygar walked out of the bushes.

"Some fairly good likenesses of Gaden and the Achan." Marin waved the papers gently.

Which explained why the man had attacked him. He wouldn't have known Gaden had a twin.

"Let's get them back to the Taivain. Maybe they'll tell us a bit about the people who sent them." Rygar looked over his shoulder and saw the man he'd fought wriggling.

"You know who it is and so does Gaden." Sian's voice drew Rygar's attention.

"I'm not expecting any surprises but I would like to know the specifics. Which one of her family is behind these attacks? So far we haven't found anyone who actually met the people who hired them. They'd been sent, part of a merc group, and ordered by their leader."

"Are you hurt?" Marin asked. "I saw that metal bar hit you."

Rygar felt a bit of pain across his back but he knew it was just bruises and soreness. Nothing had been broken. "Nothing to go see the physic about."

Rygar walked over and released the feet of the man who'd attacked him. He absolutely refused to carry the man back to the Taivain. Anger pulsed through him. The attacks on him and Dari did infuriate him but the fact that the people were still attacking after they'd taken Nina showed only hate for the one they blamed. They seemed to care nothing for Nina's happiness.

They marched the two men back to the Taivain. As they passed through the gates, he heard the murmur of voices but no one approached them. He did see one man run ahead and knew that Logan would meet them before they reached the guardhouse at the left corner of the far wall. Prisoners were housed there because there were always warriors there.

Logan met them as they were crossing the empty training field. He looked over the two men and silently nodded. He walked with them to the guardhouse. Delivering the men into the hands of two guards, Rygar stood and watched as the two men were led down the stairs to the cells below.

"Not bad. I send you after one man and you bring me two." Logan leaned a shoulder against the wall and looked at the two drawings.

"Well, they didn't hide from us, left a trail right to them. That dark-haired man did try a bit of a sneak attack." Rygar rolled his shoulders. He could feel the stiffness and a bit of pain setting into the muscles.

Logan's eyes followed the slow movement and Rygar's grimace. "Are you hurt?"

"Just some sore muscles. A long soak and a good massage will take care of the aches," Rygar said. The thought of Dari's hands moving over his back sent his thoughts to more than a massage. His body hardened with arousal.

Logan laughed. "Why don't you go see if you can get some sympathy from Dari? I'll take care of questioning these two men and talk to you later."

Rebecca Airies

Rygar did want to be there when the men were questioned but he wasn't going to miss the opportunity to be with Dari. He nodded, accepting the dismissal and turned to leave. An eager smile curved his lips and his step lightened. He headed for the nearest door, determined to find Dari.

He found her in the dining hall, sitting and talking with some of the other women. She laughed softly at something one of the women said. That husky sound sent a rush of heat slamming through him. He strode over to her.

She looked up, spotting him as he neared. A wide smile curved her lips. The other women noticed him and must have seen something in his face because they all left a moment later with only a few words of farewell.

"You scared away my friends," Dari teased.

"They apparently know a man in need when they see one. Come with me. I need your help." He took her hand and drew her to her feet.

She tilted her head, looking at him as if trying to decide if he was teasing or serious. Her eyes roved over his face. "Is something wrong?"

"I need you to come with me. While I was out hunting, a man..." He curled an arm around her waist but didn't get a chance to finish.

"Are you hurt? Do you need to see the physic?" Her hand pressed against his chest and she ran her fingers across the muscled expanse, searching for a wound.

"I don't need to see the physic. I just need a little tender care from my mate. Do you think you can handle that?" he asked. He felt his smile widen. Her reaction thrilled him.

"I can handle it. If you need help, I'll give it to you." Her arms slipped around his waist. "Now would you like me to help you here or should I take you some place a little more private?"

"We need to find some place private." He held her close and then stepped back but held her hand, wanting the contact between them.

She stepped forward, tugging him along with her. "Well, come on. I want to see what that man did to you."

His eyebrows flew up. Her tone had firmed and her expression had turned fierce. He'd never seen her look so intensely protective. At that moment, he had no doubt that she'd do whatever it took to protect him. He let her pull him out of the room and up the hallway to the stairs. It took only moments to get to their rooms.

She shut the door behind them and crossed her arms over her chest. "Undress. I want to see what that man did to you."

Rygar just stripped off his shirt without arguing. He liked the assertive, fierce woman in front of him. He wanted to see just how intense she could get. And what she would do with the power.

She walked around him slowly. Her breath drew in sharply as she disappeared behind him. Her fingers touched his back, tracing a diagonal line. He guessed the rod had left a red mark or it was already bruising.

"What did he hit you with? You have a red line across your back. You need to get this seen by the physic." She didn't give him any time to answer her question. Moving around him, a growl rumbled from her as she saw the mark on his arm.

"I don't need the physic, just a nice massage from you. Do you think you can work all of the stiffness and soreness out of my back?" Rygar pulled her in front of him when she started to move away from him. He loved her concern but he didn't want her to go for the physic when all he really needed was standing right there in front of him.

"I can work the stiffness out of the muscles but you're going to bruise there. It's going to hurt regardless of what I do." She looked up at him, a worried frown on her face.

"It won't hurt that much. I need the feel of your hands on me, caring for me." His lips brushed over her forehead. He needed to feel her moving beneath him or over him, her body on fire with desire.

"Lie down on the bed and I'll find some oil. Maybe I can at least work a little of the stiffness out but you have to tell me if it hurts too much." She looked at him uncertainly.

As she went off to look in the closet for some oil, he sprawled across the bed on his stomach and waited. He heard a soft scuff and looked over his shoulder. Dari walked across the room, a small brown bottle in her hand. She stopped at the end of the bed and slipped off her shoes. A moment later, she crawled onto the bed. She knelt beside him, her hands brushing over his shoulders.

"You might find it easier if you straddled me," he offered.

He'd like her to strip off her clothes but couldn't think of a way to get her out of them when she was supposed to be giving him a massage to ease his muscles. He knew she wouldn't believe that that would make him feel better.

"No, I'm not going to do that until I find out if he did more damage than the one mark on your back and on your arm." Her voice sounded firm and she probably had that stubborn look on her face again.

He put his head on his arms and decided to let her get to work. When she realized it was nothing serious, he could tempt her into playing with him. He closed his eyes as he felt her fingertips brush over his back. Her hands slid across his skin, eased by the oil.

"That's not flower-scented, is it?" he asked, suddenly aware that she'd had a few choices of scents in the closet.

"Would it matter? This is to make you feel better." Her soft voice carried more than a little humor.

He raised his head and looked over his shoulder. Her mouth was curved in a smile. The smile didn't worry him, the humor in her tone did.

"I'd mind. That smell can last for days even after repeated baths." He frowned at her. Some of those oils were strong.

"Oh, don't worry. It's got a nutty scent." She rolled her eyes and held out her hand to him. "See."

He inhaled and the scent of *darramon* nuts filled his senses. He relaxed and put his head back on his arms. The scent was one of his favorites. He settled in to enjoy the feel of her hands. Her hands moved up to his shoulders, smoothing over them first before she began working on the muscles at his neck and shoulders. She began to move her hands down his back in small circles. He felt her hesitate as her hands approached the spot where the bar had struck him. Her fingers touched him gently. He had no doubt she was watching him closely for any sign of pain.

"You're not going to hurt me, Dari. It's just a little sore. It will feel better after you work at the muscles a little." He rolled his shoulders, showing her that he wasn't lying.

She began to slide her hands over his back, barely using any pressure at all. Gradually, she began to use more pressure, working at the tight muscles. He hadn't lied to her. It didn't really hurt but the muscles were tight. She continued working at his back.

"How is that feeling? Is there any pain?" She kept up the massage on his back.

"There's no pain, not the type you're talking about. Keep working on the muscles." He didn't lift his head. He knew his voice was muffled but he was sure she could understand him.

She continued moving her hands over his back, working the tension out of the muscles there. He couldn't deny that the massage felt good but he wanted to feel more than her fingers. The reaction of his body was understandable and predictable and it happened every time she was near him. His cock had hardened and pressed against the bed. He didn't know how much longer he could wait.

When her hands reached the base of his spine, he rolled onto his back. She knelt on the bed, staring at him. She seemed stunned for a moment. He enjoyed the sight and took advantage of her inattention to begin working on the buttons of her shirt. He managed all but two before she blinked and her fingers closed over his. He laughed and finished unbuttoning the shirt.

"You were just in a battle and you were hit. You should be resting, maybe relaxing in the baths." She tugged his hands away from the waistband of her skirt.

"We'll take a bath together later tonight. I want to feel your hands on me doing more than massaging but first I want you to be as excited and hungry as I am." He tugged her hands as she rose brushing his lips across hers.

Her hands braced against his chest but she didn't push away from him. Her eyes searched his face. Whatever she saw, it must have satisfied the questions she had, she relaxed and her lips opened over his.

He unfastened the last buttons of her skirt. He pushed the fabric down around her knees. She wriggled out of it.

"Come here, straddle me as if you're going to ride me," Rygar ordered softly.

"Am I going to ride you?" she asked, a smile curving her lips and a teasing lilt to her voice.

He could smell the scent of her arousal. If he drew his hand down her body, he knew he'd find her pussy wet and slick with her desire. He drew his hand down her side, touching the curve of her waist and hip. She responded so quickly to his touch and it made him feel unbeatable and like the best lover.

"I haven't decided if you're going to ride me or if we're going to play with another position." He skimmed his fingers over one nipple and watched it tighten. He licked his lips. He wanted to taste those reddened peaks.

She moved over him, one hand braced on his chest as she swung her leg over his hips. Her buttocks brushed against the head of his cock as she settled onto him. He drew in a sharp breath as fire seemed to lance straight through him. His hands clamped around her hips. He adjusted her position until his cock was nestled against the cleft between her butt cheeks. He knew the feel of her moving was going to drive him crazy but he couldn't resist the urge.

"Interesting position. Now are we going to do something or are you going to lie there, holding my hips? I have some definite ideas about what we could be doing." Her eyes ran down his chest.

He saw her fingers flex and felt her thigh muscles tense.

"We're definitely going to do something." He tugged at the nipple of her right breast. "Lean forward."

She arched a brow and licked her lips. The wet sheen on the plump pink flesh made him want to taste them but he resisted the urge. He had his mind set on getting his mouth on those nipples. She leaned forward, a hand braced beside his head for balance.

He raised his head and traced the shape of her areola with his tongue. She shivered, her eyes closing. He closed his lips over the hard peak, sucking it into his mouth. He felt hot moisture against his stomach.

"You like that?" His mouth lifted and pressed kisses to the soft valley between her breasts. "Let me see how much you like it."

He slipped his hand between them and down to the juncture of her thighs. His fingers brushed over the curly golden hair and found the slick, hot cream there. He pressed between the folds and found the hard bead of her clit. With only a light pressure, he began stroking that sensitive bundle of nerves. Soon, she began squirming, her hips rocking against his fingers.

"Rygar..." she moaned.

Her brown eyes almost seemed molten as she stared down at him. Her thighs tightened around his hips. He couldn't keep the satisfied smile from curving his lips. He loved seeing her get wild for him. The red flush on her skin, the quickened breaths thrilled him. He hauled her down and kissed her. Her hand cupped the side of his face as her tongue tangled with his. Her hair fell around them in a shining gold veil. She continued moving against his hand, her hips rolling sinuously.

He drew his hand out from between them. She tore her lips away, a soft groan of protest breaking the silence between them. He would have reassured her but she rose to her knees and reached between them. The feel of her fingers closing around his cock tore the breath from his chest. A moment later, the hot moisture of her desire coated the sensitive head as she slowly lowered onto his shaft. He gripped her waist, guiding her slowly until her soft sheath clasped around his full length.

"You're so wet. It feels so good when your sweet cunt grips my cock. Are you ready for more?" he asked. His hands tightened and he rocked her gently.

Her inner muscles clenched as she pressed a hand to his chest and sat up. Her look was fierce as she rolled her hips. He watched her face as she moved on him. His hips rose meeting her slow, downward strokes.

"Gods, woman, you're making me insane. Faster," he gasped. His hands tightened on her hips, as his hips drove up to meet her.

She laughed and her golden curls moved around her shoulders with each undulation of her body. He felt his balls tighten. He didn't know how long he could hold back. Determination hardened his resolve. She was going to come before he did.

He slipped his hand between them through the tight curls. Slick moisture coated his fingers. He stroked her clit, enjoying the way her body jerked and tensed. She drew in a shuddering breath, her hips pressing her clit against his fingers. Her inner muscles rippled, gripping his cock, almost seeming to pull him deeper into her tight heat.

She cried out softly and he felt the beginning of her climax in the contracting muscles within her pussy. She ground against him, her body trembling. That move tore away the last of his control. Fiery waves rolled over his skin and a groan ripped from his throat. He arched. His semen pumped into her as searing pleasure exploded through his body. She gasped softly as the pleasure of the *re'kai* left her trembling, sprawled on his chest. A satisfied smile curved his lips. His arms tightened around her waist, holding her close. He wanted to savor being with her for a while longer. Life would intrude. That was certain, but until it did, he was going to enjoy this time.

"We received word today that your former Achan and Acine are traveling this way. We'll meet them at a place off world and lead them here. They probably wouldn't be able to find it on their own." He brushed her hair back over her shoulder and savored the pink flush of her skin.

"They'll probably be able to find it, but can I go with you to meet them?" She drew her hand over his chest.

"I was planning to take you with me to meet them but I wouldn't mind you trying to convince me." He laughed and pulled her head closer for a kiss.

Chapter Eight

Dari smiled as they walked through the city. Anticipation curled through her. She was eager to see Acine Caidi again but they still had many worlds to go before they reached Avalin. Rygar and four warriors stayed near her as they stopped to get something to eat and find a safe comfortable inn to rest for the night.

"Stay close, Dari," Rygar ordered.

She looked down at her arm and wondered just where she was supposed to go. He hadn't let her farther than arm's reach the entire day. She knew he had reason for his caution but it still irritated her. They still hadn't found out who was behind the attacks with any certainty. The men had strong suspicions that it was the woman's family but no real proof. There was also the ongoing search for Gaden's mate and the people who took her.

"I'm right beside you." She reached over and squeezed his hand. She wasn't going to cause him more worry by wandering away from him or the others.

"And you're going to stay with me. No one's going to take you away from me." Rygar's voice had turned fierce.

She turned her head and looked around him. She felt her eyes widen as she realized that he meant more than this moment. She hadn't thought that he might be unsure of what she felt for him. He'd always been so certain that they belonged together, so positive. The man had told her more times than she could remember that she was his. He'd never seemed to have the slightest doubt. But she hadn't given assurance that she wanted to stay with him. In fact, she had threatened to leave.

"I'm not going anywhere. They'd have to drag me away and I'd always come back to you." She leaned into him, the urge to be close to him irresistible. She'd like to be much closer to reassure him with more than words.

He looked down at her and released her arm to curl his arm around her waist. She relaxed against him and cupped her hand over his buttocks. She felt him stiffen, his steps falter. Looking up at him, she caught his eyes as he stared down at her.

"It seems I'm not the only one who's been a bit unsure of the future. I'll have to make sure you know just how I feel."

He blinked and a cocky grin spread across his face. "I'll want to know just how deeply you're committed to me. You might have to prove it again and again."

She laughed. That was something she was more than willing to do. Leaning into him, she walked at his side. They found an inn and Rygar secured a room for them. She saw the glitter in his eyes and smelled his desire. He guided her up the stairs with only a word to the other men.

He opened the door and practically pushed her inside the room. She watched as he locked the door and then headed for the bed, ignoring everything else in the sparsely decorated room. Shedding his clothes faster than she'd ever seen, he climbed onto the bed. It was a little narrow and his feet stuck off the end of it but he sprawled across the plain brown blanket. A wide smile spread across his face. She didn't think he could have looked more comfortable if he'd been on their soft large bed back at the Taivain.

"Now are you going to show me just what you feel? I'm waiting over here and feeling a bit lonely." He spread his arms wide across the bed, easily touching the edges.

She smiled, leaning against the wall as she unbuttoned her shirt. "I'll take care of you. You just relax and enjoy. Tonight, I'm going to show you that you're my man and you're not getting away from me."

His eyes tracked the progress of her hands as she worked on the last of the carved buttons. Shrugging, she let the dark blue shirt fall to the floor. Her fingers moved to the waistband of her skirt. She freed the buttons down the side of her black skirt. It dropped in a puddle around her feet. She toed off her shoes and walked slowly to the bed. Her hips swaying with each step, she slowly ran her eyes over his gorgeous golden body.

"Now, my mate, you just stay still and let me do the work. I've got definite plans to show you how I feel," she ordered as she trailed her hand up his thigh. She leaned down and brushed her lips across his in a fleeting caress. His mouth opened beneath hers. She knew he expected her to deepen the kiss and lifted away from him. Her hands on his shoulders, pressing lightly, kept him from following. She could feel the tension and his need.

Laughing, she knelt on the bed at his side. "Patience. I've got so much to show you. You don't want to rush it, do you?"

"I'm going to rush you if you don't start doing and stop talking. I want more than empty promises." A distinct growl rumbled in his voice.

She leaned down and nipped his shoulder. "All talk. Now you've gone and insulted me. You're going to have to take the consequences."

His eyes narrowed and his smile showed a lot of teeth. "Show me."

Dari slowly reached down and cupped his balls. He drew in a hissing breath, his body stiffening. She wouldn't let him taunt her into moving faster. She wanted to make him crazy, to show him how much he meant to her. He wouldn't doubt that he was important to her after tonight.

She leaned down and licked the skin just above his dark nipple. The muscle jumped and she chuckled appreciatively. She wanted to see more than that and would before the night was over. His cock twitched brushing her arm. She licked her lips, more than tempted to close them over that dark rounded head. Looking up, she caught his eyes as her fingers circled the thick shaft of his cock.

"I see you like what I'm doing now. Any other complaints I should take care of before I really get started?" She let her mouth hover over the dark disc. The hot, moist air of her breath would send tingling sensation through him, she knew from experience.

His hand cupped the back of her head. "No teasing. Let me feel your mouth on me."

"I'm not playing. I just want to make sure you enjoy everything I'm doing," she whispered, grazing her teeth over the hard little nub before she licked it.

Her mouth closed over it and she gave it her undivided attention. His moans spurred her on, encouraging her. She sucked and nipped at it before trailing kisses across his chest to the other hard flat nub.

"Feel how much I like it." His hand closed around hers guiding it up and down his shaft in slow strokes.

His cock became even harder as her fingers stroked the hot skin. She trailed kisses down his stomach, nipping and laving at certain spots. She could feel his urgency and had every intention of increasing it. His fingers tightened in her hair but he didn't put any pressure or guide her head. She placed a kiss on his hip, drawing her tongue over his thigh as she pulled her hand away from his cock.

Her tongue lapped at the bead of pre-cum, circling the head of his cock. Rygar stiffened as fire slammed through his body. He fought the urge to drive his hips upward, to push into her hot, wet mouth. He wanted to savor the feeling of her mouth on him. She'd said she wanted to show him what she felt. He didn't think he could last long but he was going to enjoy every moment of her attention.

Her fingers stroked down his inner thigh at the same moment that her mouth closed over the head of his cock. Her tongue swirled around the rounded tip. She sucked lightly. His hips arched and he moaned. The drawing pull of her mouth on his shaft sent searing sensation up his spine.

"Take more." His voice sounded hoarse, almost unrecognizable even to him as he forced the words from a throat that felt too tight.

She seemed determined to drive him insane. Her tongue flicked over the sensitive skin near the top of the shaft. She drew back, swirling her tongue over the reddened head as her fingers lightly held him. Her eyes met his and he saw satisfaction there. Her tongue swirled and lapped. A little longer, he told himself. He needed to feel her mouth on his cock. More than the tip. His fingers flexed at the back of her head. The urge to drive into her tight pussy almost overwhelmed him.

"Are you going to keep teasing me? I thought you were going to show me what you feel," he rasped, drawing in a ragged breath.

She smiled and licked her lips. "You don't like it? Tell me what you want."

"I want your mouth on my cock. All of it," he told her and watched the pleased smile spread across her face.

Her lips lowered to his shaft. She licked the head before taking it between her lips. She sucked him into her mouth. He felt the muscles at the back of her throat close as she took his shaft deeper. She pulled back and drew in a deep breath.

"Easy, slowly. It feels so good." Rygar's fingers stroked softly through her hair. He could tell she hadn't done this much but her eager response thrilled him.

She sucked at the head, her tongue stroking before her mouth slowly slid down his shaft again. She drew him deep. Her throat tightened again and she pulled back a little but tried again taking him a little deeper. He gritted his teeth as his hips rose off the bed. She hummed softly and the vibration nearly sent him reeling. His balls pulled tight. *Rioche*, his body burned with need. The feel of her mouth and tongue drove him close to coming in her mouth. Cupping her face, he gently urged her back. Her mouth left his cock with a distinct pop.

She looked up at him a question in her eyes.

"I want to be inside you. Do you want me?" He looked down at her. He could smell her arousal, feel it just beyond the throbbing urgency of his own need.

"You know I do." Her hand lifted, covering one of his.

"Turn around and get on your hands and knees," he urged.

She smiled and pulled back. "Anything you want."

He drew in a hissing breath. "Woman, an offer like that is going to get you into some interesting positions."

Her eyes burned with sultry heat and she slowly licked her lips. "I'm sure I'll enjoy them."

She turned away from him, dropping to her hands and knees on the lumpy mattress. Rygar eyed the gorgeous curve of her butt and moved up behind her. He smoothed his hands up over the globes, around her hips. One hand slid over her stomach and to the soft springy hair covering her pussy. His fingers slipped between the swollen lips.

"You're wet, slick with your juices." He pressed his hips against her buttocks, sliding his cock against the plump folds as he flicked at the hard nub of her clit.

Her hips rolled and her breath caught. The sound of her excitement thrilled him but he wanted more. He wanted her wild, ready to attack him to get what she needed. He didn't dare slide into her heat. A few rolls of those hips and he'd lose what little control he had left. He stroked the hard little clit. She moaned and her hips wriggled.

"There's only one problem with this position." He brushed a kiss over her shoulder as he drew his fingers back to probe at her slick opening.

"W-what?" she stammered, her breath coming in sharp pants.

"I can't see these, can't take them into my mouth." He cupped one of her breasts, his fingers tugging at the nipple.

She moaned and he felt a gush of liquid as he slid two of his fingers into her pussy. Her hips pushed back against his. Her inner muscles tightened around his fingers and

she trembled. He pulled them free and drew back just enough to position his cock at her aching slit. Slowly, he pushed into her tight sheath, straining for control. He wanted to drive into her until they both found their pleasure but first he needed to know she'd be with him all the way.

His fingers brushed her clit. She pressed back into him, her muscles tightening. The urge to fuck her grew and he didn't try to resist any longer. He pulled back, his cock slowly withdrawing. She hummed softly and wriggled demandingly. He gripped her hips as he drove into her. She moaned and he felt her tensing, shivers rippling through her body. A soft cry spilled from her lips as she trembled. Her inner muscles clenched, pulling at his cock. The feel of her pussy tightening as she came flung him into his own climax. He thrust against her. Her buttocks smacked softly against his hips and belly. A sizzling bolt of lightning streaked through his body. He stiffened and came, his body shaking as his seed spurted into her. She shook and came again as the *re'kai* took her.

* * * * *

Dari came slowly awake with the vague feeling that something was wrong. She blinked into the darkness. The mattress didn't feel quite right and it took her a moment to remember that they weren't at the Taivain. She reached out and felt on the bed beside her for Rygar's muscled form. She thought maybe he'd rolled over or something and she'd woken. Her eyes snapped wide when she couldn't feel even an arm. She sat up and looked around the room.

Rygar wasn't in the room. She stood and grabbed her skirt and shirt from the foot of the bed. She hurriedly slipped on her shirt and skirt, securing only enough buttons to keep them from falling off. Satisfied that she was covered, she started for the door.

A noise outside the door raised her suspicions. It hadn't been the sound of quiet conversation or even the sound of a loud drunk trying to find his room. No this was hushed whispers and a distinct thud. She opened the door slightly to peer out into the hallway. She saw a muscular shoulder slam into the hall right beside the door. The arm bore some familiar-looking tattoos. She gasped.

"Get him! Before he comes out of it," a male voice whispered just beyond the door.

Dari's eyes widened. She couldn't just let this happen. She threw open the door. A white powder flew into her face, blinding her. She stumbled back. Her eyes burned and when she took a breath, her throat tightened and felt dry and stung. She rubbed at her eyes trying to get rid of the burning powder. Her eyes streamed with tears but it didn't seem to help clear her vision.

The sounds of struggle reached her ears. She wanted to help but she could barely see blurry shapes and no definition. If she went out there swinging, she was more likely to hit a wall than any person, much less the person who'd thrown that powder into her face.

Abruptly the sounds of struggle stopped. She heard a distinct thump. She put her hands up as a blurry figure moved into her sight. She saw the shape moving but

couldn't really tell how far away it was. It didn't look close and she waited. Her fists clenched. When it got close enough, she was going to take the man down. A fist slammed into her jaw and she barely had the time to acknowledge she'd been wrong. Blackness swirled in front of her eyes. She fought to stay conscious, fought the dizziness, pain and lightheadedness swarming through her.

"We need to hurry and get this one down with the others. He's just what we need," a male voice said.

"He's strong. He threw both of us off him. This man shouldn't be a disappointment. He should last a few rounds before he's killed," another man offered.

Dari didn't have time to wonder about what the man meant. She lost the battle to stay conscious and couldn't think.

* * * * *

Dari woke to pain. Her eyes felt gritty and dry and her head pounded. Pain throbbed along the right side of her jaw but that was the least of her worries. She lay on the wood floor. She recognized the bedroom at the inn but there was still no sign of Rygar.

He would have come back to the room if he'd been able to do it. She remembered the man's shoulder that she'd seen before she'd flung the door open wide. That could have been him. A wave of guilt poured over her. She didn't know what had made him go out into the hall but she should have found a way to help him. The powder had blinded her but she'd failed him. He'd needed help and she hadn't been there for him. Just like Jaina.

Her hand fisted at her side. It wouldn't happen again. She wasn't losing him. From the bits of the conversation she'd heard, she was almost certain she knew where they were taking him. There was only one place where men were pitted against each other in battles against their will. At least, she hoped there was only one place.

Why had he left the room? And where were the other four warriors? Why hadn't they helped? She stood, slipping into her shoes and grabbed the bag with their clothing. She looked around the room to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything and noticed Rygar's two knives on the small table beside the bed. She looked on the floor just beside the bed. His sword was gone. He'd obviously thought he'd find trouble when he left the room. She grabbed the knives. She might need them. Had he heard something last night and taken his sword when he went to investigate? She moved along the hall. Most of the doors were partly open. She pushed the first door fully open. She saw a woman sprawled partly across a bed, a dark bruise covering her cheek and temple.

Dari frowned, inhaling. She didn't pick up even a hint of Zarain scent in the room. Moving to the next door, she pushed it open a little wider. There was no one in the room but she picked up a familiar Zarain scent. A dagger lay on one of the small tables and his pack lay on its side, the contents spilling out onto the floor. She stepped back and moved to the next room. A woman was just sitting up on the bed and looking

around the room. Dari moved a single step into it. Inhaling, she caught the scent of another Zarain. She continued down the hall. There were no men in any of the rooms. She found the last of the rooms used by the Zarain males. The bed had been destroyed in one of them, the frame cracked, table knocked onto its side. Unless one or two of the men had gotten up early and left the room, it seemed that all the men had been taken. She wouldn't leave until she was sure.

Chapter Nine

Dari had searched the city for hours but hadn't found a trace of any of the Zarain men. She'd tried to get into touch with Rygar through their link. Her head ached from her efforts but he just wasn't there. She'd try a dream tonight but she wasn't sure she could connect with him. That was one thing she'd never tried. She just hoped it was something that came naturally.

She headed for the gatehouse. She wanted to get as far as possible before she stopped for the night. It wasn't going to be easy just getting there. She knew Rygar would probably object to her entire plan. That wasn't going to make any difference to what she intended to do. He should know by now that she wouldn't just meekly wait for someone to come and get her. She was going to do everything she could to help him. It would be days, possibly weeks, before anyone from the Taivain could get close enough to help.

Throughout the day, she tried to contact Rygar but never even felt that she connected with him. After having to wait in long lines at every gate she used, she only managed to go through five gates that day. She was also a little uncomfortable with the attention she'd gotten at times. It hadn't been because she was a woman. There had been other women traveling but they'd been in groups. She'd have liked to get out of the city but the fact that she was alone would make her too vulnerable. The walls and doors of a room offered some security. She found an inn and rented a room, eating a quick bowl of soup before she went up to try to get some rest. Waking up to find Rygar gone had shaken her. Locking and barring the door, she moved a table in front of it as an added barrier. She wouldn't be able to sleep through that being shoved out of the way if anyone tried to get into the room.

She settled onto the bed, thinking of Rygar, thinking of dreaming with him. As she slowly went to sleep, she had no idea if she'd succeed but she hoped she'd get through to him this way.

Dari found herself floating in a gray void. Fear trickled through her. The gray around her shimmered. She blinked, realizing that this must be the dreaming, not a nightmare as she'd thought at first. But the times she'd been here with Rygar, it had never looked like this. So there must be a way to give it a more inviting look. Maybe like their room at the Taivain.

The gray rippled, changing, forming creamy walls and a large bed. A purple blanket covered the long bed. Two comfortable chairs formed a quiet conversation area near the fireplace.

She settled into one of the chairs, running her fingers over the nubby fabric. Now she just had to wait and see if Rygar actually appeared. She was thrilled that she'd actually succeeded in getting here but she needed to talk to him. She needed to find out if she was right, if he'd been taken as a warrior for the arena.

"Dari!" Rygar's voice came from just behind her. He sounded worried. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. What about you? I haven't been able to touch your mind since I woke. I've been so worried." Dari bounded to her feet and ran over to him, throwing her arms around him.

"I'm alive, which is the most important thing. You haven't been able to connect with me, because I haven't woken yet. I've been frantic, wondering if they'd killed you." His arms closed around her, hugging her tight.

She smiled, feeling suddenly more secure. "What happened? Why did you go out of the room?"

"Dren called to me on the mind path. He was being attacked. I went out to help him. I threw one man away from him but another tossed something into my eyes." Rygar grimaced.

"You couldn't see and it hurt to breathe, right? I got the same powder in my face. It was embarrassingly easy for the men to knock me out after that." She shook her head remembering just how little work the man had done.

"They didn't knock me out. I felt some kind of wet cloth cover my face and then nothing. You stay there. Logan will come for you just as soon as I contact him." Rygar held her away from him, looking down at her. She could tell he was absolutely serious.

"No, I'm not waiting. You can yell at me the next time you see me but I'm going to follow you. I'm going to find you. I'm not going to just stay in some room at an inn safe while you're in danger and alone out there," she said. She pushed out of his arms. Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him. She couldn't believe he was asking that of her. He knew about Jaina and her life. He wanted her to wait as if she was some sheltered little female who couldn't survive outside the Taivain.

"This isn't optional. I'm giving you an order as your mate." Rygar growled, his teeth bared, leaning forward until they were eye to eye.

She glared back. "I told you I didn't always follow orders. You ignored me. I'm going to find you. When you're in front of me and free, I'll start considering your opinion. Until then, I'm following my own judgment."

"Dari..." he began.

"No, you can yell, confine me to the Taivain afterward, whatever you think you have to do but I'm not leaving you alone," she told him flatly. This wasn't negotiable to her.

"You could get hurt, killed. Wait for Logan." He released her and began pacing.

"Too late. I've already left and am traveling." She kept her face in a calm mask. In spite of her need to help she wanted to reassure him.

"Dari, I have no doubt that if you got here you could help but it's you traveling through the worlds alone that scares me. There are so many men out there who see a lone woman as easy prey." His voice rose and his hands fisted. She could practically see the tension in him.

"Rygar, I know the danger. I'm willing to face it. Remember I can take care of myself. I'm not going to be anyone's easy prey." She walked over to him and put her hand on his arm.

"It's too great a risk. If I were anywhere near you, I'd tie you down to keep you safe." He thrust a hand through his hair.

"I'll be fine and you're not near me. If you were, I wouldn't have to do this. I'm not reckless. I don't chase danger but I will do what I can to help when necessary," she said softly, slowly stroking his arm.

She actually heard his teeth grind.

"Do not get hurt." His eyes closed for a moment and he seemed to come to a decision.

"I'll take care of myself and I'll find you." She hugged him. "Don't worry."

"Don't worry. I couldn't find a nice normal mate," he muttered under his breath. "I get a woman who thinks nothing of facing danger and seems to love it."

Her hands landed on her hips and she glared at him. "I am nice and I am normal. I know at least twenty other women who'd do the same thing including Caidi, the Acine of Oroyai pack. You're just too accustomed to weak women."

"Settle down. I was just frustrated. I never thought my mate would run into danger. It's not an easy thing to think about." He lifted one of her hands off her hips and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Settle down!" She heard a growl in her voice and leaned close to him. "I do not run into danger. It's not my fault your women are too sheltered. I just do what I have to do."

"You know I want you and I wouldn't change anything about you. Most of the time I don't want to change anything about you. It's just I hate to have you in danger." He held on to her as she tried to pull away from him.

She narrowed her eyes and stood stiffly in his arms. Sighing, she slowly relaxed. The man was naturally possessive and protective. She was following him alone. He was bound to be tense and grumpy. "I know you can't change the way you are but I can't change who I am either."

He grimaced. "Most of the time, I wouldn't want you to but right now..."

Rygar's head pounded and throbbed with pain. He'd been desperate to wake up but now he almost wished for the peace of that void. He tried to raise his hands to his head and only then felt the ache in his shoulders. A metal chain dug into his back as he tried to bring his arms up. He relaxed slowly and the metal clinked as it fell back to the

wooden floor. He could feel movement, a slow rocking, and hear the crunch of dirt and stone beneath wheels as well. Dim light filtered through gaps in a canvas awning.

He swallowed and his throat ached and felt so dry. He'd definitely been taken. Who had done it was still in question but he'd deal with that later. Now he needed to get in touch with Logan. Maybe once Logan was actually on the way, he could talk Dari into waiting for Logan, letting him take the risks.

Logan. Rygar tried to connect with his brother.

Rygar, where have you been? I've been trying to contact you for the past day! Logan's voice burst through the silence.

Rygar could hear his brother's frustration.

I've been taken but it's not me I'm worried about, Rygar sighed, it's Dari.

Has she been taken too? Logan asked. Who took you?

I'm not sure but I suspect I've been taken by the same people who took me to that arena. Dari hasn't been taken. She was hit and left. Rygar felt the anger rise in him. They'd hurt her. He wanted to kill them for that.

Just tell me where she is, I'll go get her. Don't worry, Logan assured him.

That's the problem. She's not waiting and I don't know where she is right now. She's determined to help. Rygar twisted his hands, testing the tightness of the steel around his wrists. He could turn his hand relatively easily but he couldn't slip free of it.

Help! What does she... Well, it does fit with what we've seen of her. At least we know she can defend herself. Logan's tone started off sharp but then softened. We'll catch up to her.

I hope you do. Worrying about her is ripping into me. The stubborn woman won't listen to reason and thinks she can handle anything that comes after her. Rygar fisted his hand. He loved Dari but life with her was anything but normal. Most of the time he loved that.

Are the other men with you? Logan asked.

Yes, in the wagon with me along with a couple of men I don't know. Rygar could smell them as well as sense them.

Get me a location for her if you can and for you. We'll start with the arena but it's not the only one that takes warriors and uses them for sport. Logan's voice sounded reassuring.

I'll try. She's not exactly at her most cooperative right now. Just get to her before she tries to take apart the whole arena by herself. Rygar could easily see her doing something just like that.

I'll do my best but you know that's not a bad idea. Logan's humor carried easily on the mental path.

Letting her do that is a horrible idea. Rygar didn't hold back the growl building in his throat.

Not Dari. Destroying that arena is a good idea. It would send a message. Too many shifters end up in there, Logan explained.

They'll just rebuild, maybe in another place if they think someone might come and stop them again.

I know but while they're rebuilding no one will be fighting and possibly dying in their games, Logan said fiercely.

You figure out how you're going to do that. I'll see if I can get Dari to listen. Rygar looked up at the canvas as it billowed slightly in a gust of wind. He didn't have much hope of succeeding there. She'd been adamant when he'd talked to her.

I'll talk to you later, Rygar. Contact me as soon as you have any news. Logan's terse order was classic.

The connection faded and Rygar moved onto his stomach. He tensed his arms, straining. Metal dug into his wrists. He gritted his teeth ignoring the pain. The chain stretched taut. He felt blood wet his wrist. The links held. He relaxed. The chain wasn't going to break.

"Are you okay, Rygar? I smell blood." Dren's voice was whisper soft.

"The manacles cut into my wrists." Rygar turned onto his side. Nothing to do now but wait for an opportunity to escape and make these men pay for what they'd done.

Chapter Ten

Dari looked up at the high walls of the arena. She knew that the bag she carried made her stick out a bit but she hadn't wanted to waste time if Rygar wasn't here. She could hear the roar of the crowd. The games had started. Was this where they'd taken Rygar? Was he meant to satisfy the bloodlust of these bored citizens again? She hadn't felt any shifters in the area but could still be too far away from them yet. She sighed. The only way to get closer now was to go into the stadium.

She headed for the entrance. Taking a deep breath as she neared the entrance, she squared her shoulders. She really didn't look forward to going into that crowded stadium. Suddenly she felt the presence of one shifter coming down the street.

"Ah, there you are, Dari. Your brothers have been looking everywhere for you." The voice sounded just before a hand landed on her shoulder.

She tensed and turned to look over her shoulder. Sian stood there smiling. She wasn't going to resist. She'd known Logan would have rushed to get to her and not just to relieve Rygar's worry. The male need to protect would have urged him to hurry. She just didn't know how they'd gotten here so fast. She hadn't exactly taken her time.

"Well, we can't keep my brothers waiting if they've been looking for me. I'm sure they have plenty to say to me." She turned and smiled at Sian. It wasn't his fault and she wasn't going to take her anger out on him.

He looked surprised and she took satisfaction in that. His hand released her shoulder and gestured for her to move in front of him. She laughed softly and walked forward. Untrusting male. She wasn't going to try to dash off. He should know that. She just wanted Rygar free. She would love to actually help free him but she knew it wasn't going to happen. Helping would keep her from worrying. She hated sitting and waiting. It was a thousand times worse than facing an enemy.

Sian led her through the city. As they went, two more men joined them. She wasn't surprised when they left the city. Logan wouldn't stay anywhere close to an area he considered an enemy stronghold.

The men stopped only to get the mican they'd left next to a small river. Dari mounted the extra mican they'd brought. As they rode, the men positioned their animals around hers, guarding her from danger. She rolled her eyes. These men were armed and on their guard. Only a fool would attack them now.

It was almost sunset when they arrived at the Zarain camp. Dari would swear that all work stopped when the lookout noticed the mican approaching. She saw Logan come to stand near an opening on one of the tents. As they rode closer, she tried to read his expression. She expected anger or disapproval but his face was a set mask, giving nothing away. She dismounted slowly. Taking a deep breath, she trudged over him. She didn't expect this to be easy or pleasant. In fact, Logan was probably very angry.

Logan raised an eyebrow and stared down at her. A corner of his mouth quirked up into a small smile. "Surprised to see us?"

"A little. I didn't expect to see anyone for a day or two. I knew you'd have to organize things," she admitted.

"We came ahead. The necessary equipment will be brought to us. We were in something of a rush. Rygar was worried about you." Logan folded his arms across his chest.

"He's a little overprotective. Other than some stares, I had no problem on the journey. He's the one who was taken." She looked around the camp. Just from the large tents and the sheer number of men, she wouldn't have said that they were rushed at all. This wasn't a bare essentials camp.

"Meaning we needn't have rushed. What were you planning to do?" Logan asked.

"Nothing too serious at first. When Sian found me I was just going to see if Rygar was there." She shifted a little uncomfortably under his unwavering stare.

"Come on. You can sit down and tell me why you were so adamant about not waiting. Rygar and the other men weren't going to be hurt. They had definite plans for them." Logan half turned and stepped to the side, gesturing for her to walk in front of him. Dari was thoroughly confused. This wasn't what she'd expected at all. She'd expected yelling or at least growls of displeasure. He seemed rather sedate. As far as she knew, he wasn't playing games or hiding his emotions. She'd thought that the least that would happen was he'd put a guard on her until they freed Rygar.

She walked over to the center of the camp and settled on a small pad. Logan came over and settled on another pad not too far away from her. She turned to face him.

"Now why didn't you wait?" His head tilted and he looked genuinely curious.

"Would you have waited? If you weren't the Achan and you were in my position?" she asked, her head cocked to the side. She knew the answer. He wouldn't have hesitated. She just wondered if he'd admit it.

"I probably wouldn't have waited but it's different for me. I'm a man." Logan shrugged and seemed unconcerned.

She growled, didn't try to hold it back. Glaring at him, she folded her arms across her chest. "That's the most idiotic thing I've ever heard. Do you think male Zarain are the only ones who have instincts?"

"No, I know female Zarain have instincts but they're not the same as a man needing to protect his woman," Logan said.

"They're not? What's a mother going to do if her baby's threatened? We have the same instincts. We're just not called to use it that much because we usually have you big, strong males around ready to rush in and save the day." Her voice hardened and she glared at him, incensed.

Logan's lips pursed as he apparently gave it some thought. "Yes, mothers protect their children. I'll give you that."

"I'll protect those I care for in any way I can. I'm not going to stand by when I might be able to help in some way. No matter who disagrees with me." Her hand sliced through the air. That wasn't going to changer no matter what punishment he decided to give her.

"That's clear. What would you have done to help him?" Logan asked.

"Oh, please, I could have gone almost anywhere without question. I'm a woman and I was alone. There aren't that many men who would have thought I'd have posed any threat," she scoffed, shaking her head. Most men saw females as weak and stupid and treated them accordingly. Logan didn't see her as weak but he certainly didn't see her as capable.

"No, they wouldn't have seen you as a threat. They'd have seen you as a victim. Easy prey because you were alone." Logan's voice had a clear snap to it.

"I'm not -" she began.

Logan growled and stood. "That is not the point. You are not alone here. You have a responsibility not only to the pack but to your mate."

"I was going to help."

"I know what you were trying to do but you didn't think of anything other than what you wanted, what you felt. Rygar was frantic with worry about you and he couldn't do anything about it. We had to rush, chasing after you." Logan paced. "Your attempt could have gotten not only you but someone else killed."

She licked her lips. She honestly hadn't thought about someone else getting hurt. "I didn't think about anything beyond getting to Rygar, that's true."

"You have a responsibility to your pack too. Sometimes, the most helpful thing you can do is do nothing. You have to think of the example you're setting especially when you have others who look up to you." Logan turned and stopped, leveling an intense stare at her.

"I'm not in a leadership position. I don't have people looking up to me." She shook her head. She'd just joined this pack. She hardly knew anyone, much less had made the kind of impression where anyone would look up to her.

"Don't bet on it. The women know about how you took down that man and they've heard about how you weren't at all concerned about being thrown into that prison."

"I knew I had a pack and that if you, the Zarain I felt as I was led through the city, didn't help they'd eventually find me. If I didn't escape on my own first." Dari knew he wasn't lying. As much as she tried to seem unconcerned what he was saying was getting through to her.

She had to admit she'd gone a little wild since the men had joined and Oroyai pack had been formally formed. She might not have been traveling and doing everything she wanted to do but that hadn't stopped her from much. She hadn't had any real responsibility since that happened. Not on the level she'd had before. It had been wonderful not to have to worry about being attacked or raided. All of that had fallen to the men. Now that she thought about it, she realized she'd been feeling a little unsettled and out of place for a while, as if she didn't quite belong.

"You trusted them, relied on them and your knowledge of the Zarain that time. You didn't this time. Want to tell me why?" Logan took a deep breath and his voice returned to almost normal.

"Because I only reacted. He's too important to me. I don't want to lose him." She bit her lips. She hadn't trusted him or the others even though she knew Logan would immediately come to his aid.

"Important how? If you're going to use your feelings for him as an excuse I want to know exactly what you feel. Is it guilt because you weren't able to help him or is there more to it?" Logan folded his arms across his chest and smirked.

The arrogant man probably knew exactly how she felt about his brother. She was half tempted to tell him if he wanted to punish her to just do it and stop the interrogation. She wasn't quite that irritated or out of her mind.

"I love him," she said, amazed that she got it out without stuttering or hesitating. She'd known what she felt but the thought of talking about it had been enough to make her heart race. She'd been a little afraid that if she told Rygar, she'd lose him.

"And that excuses your behavior?"

Dari was a breath away from saying, "Yes, it excused everything," but held back. She knew it didn't. "No, I still endangered others. If it was only me it would, but the risk to others makes that not good enough."

"Pack's also about understanding and forgiveness. I know about your sister and I know of your fear. It doesn't mean you're going to get off easily. You'll have guards here and when you get back, a month of confinement to the Taivain, plus whatever punishment your mate gives you," Logan said.

Dari nodded, not arguing about it. Not this time.

"Your tent's right over there. Our meal will be a while. Why don't you go rest until it's ready."

* * * * *

Rygar lifted the sword and faced his opponent. The noisy crowd seemed to fade as his focus tightened on the man facing him.

He absolutely hated this. He could have lived the rest of his life without having to fight and possibly kill for the enjoyment of these people.

The man opposite him lifted his sword in a small salute. The blade sliced through the air. Rygar raised his sword and met the slashing strike. The metal rang as the blades clashed. Rygar danced back, cursing under his breath as the man leapt forward,

swinging wildly. Rygar didn't want to kill the man but he might not have any choice. He blocked the blows and began to move forward, determined to take the offensive.

Rygar's sword slammed against the metal of his opponent's blade, driving him back. His opponent didn't have the opportunity to do more than block and keep some distance between them. Rygar's next blow hit low on his opponent's sword. The blade flew from the man's fingers to hit the hard-packed earth at the center of the arena. The man stumbled back but the foolish idiot made no move to surrender.

The man's eyes darted to the sword. Rygar shook his head and put his body between the man and the fallen weapon. The stupid boy was going to make a try for his blade. It hadn't even been that hard to disarm him because he had no real skills. There was no satisfaction in beating someone with only the most basic skills. Just a city boy trying to be a warrior. The man sneered as he crouched, circling, looking for an opportunity.

It was at that moment that he noticed the silence in the arena. Not a shout could be heard and that was unusual. There was always oohing and ahhing. Not to mention the shouts to finish it. He looked up and saw the entire top row of the arena filled with warriors. Far more than he'd ever expected.

Rygar, watch out! Logan's voice burst into his mind, sharp and urgent.

Rygar's eyes snapped down in time to see the man rushing him. Rygar tossed his sword aside to avoid skewering the idiot. The man's shoulder slammed into Rygar's stomach, driving the breath from his lungs and his body backwards. Rygar's hands clamped onto his opponent and he swung him around as they both fell. Rygar landed on top of the smaller man. Rygar levered up and before the man could catch his breath slammed his fist into the younger male's chin, twice. The man's eyes rolled back and his body went limp.

Rygar stumbled to his feet and picked up his sword, dragging in harsh breaths. He searched the warriors, looking for his brother. He spotted Sian sitting on the wall that separated the arena from those watching the fight. Sian dropped down into the arena and headed toward the doors into the housing cells. Rygar followed, wanting to get everyone out of there before anything went further. He knew Dari was safe. He'd talked to her a few times since Logan had caught up with her. It didn't take long to get the four Zarain and three human warriors out of the cell. Everyone was more than ready to leave. Rygar smiled as they left, knowing that this was the last time this room would hold men. The entire arena would be demolished before they left the area.

After getting out of the arena, Rygar went to find his brother. He didn't have much trouble. The sound of raised voices in the near-silence drew him and he quickly recognized Logan's. His brother had found the leaders of the city and maybe even the people responsible for the games. Rygar walked into the cloth-covered portion of the stands.

"Looking a little worse for the experience, brother," Logan said with a short glance over at him.

"Fighting for the sport of others tends to be wearing." Rygar folded his arms across his chest and stared at the men sitting in cushioned chairs.

The people within this tent had all the comforts they could want. Bowls of food had been placed within easy reach. He saw a woman lounging on cushions near the feet of one of the men. From the collar at her throat, she wasn't there by choice. Rygar went over and released her. She looked up at him for a moment and then ran from the tent.

"You've got your people out. Leave." A short man stood, his hand on his hip. His flowing shirt and pants hung around his thin frame.

Logan's smile turned chilling, pointed teeth flashing. The pale-skinned man gasped, took a step back and fell into his chair. Logan stepped forward and his eyes swept the group of people gathered under the awning.

"Do you see all the men around the top of the arena? There are hundreds more outside these walls. Men from three groups of warriors whose men have been taken and used in these games. That's not going to happen again." Logan gestured to the warriors standing to the sides of the covered area and then beyond to the walls.

"We won't take any more of your men. Just show us how to recognize them." The man clutched at the arms of his chair and seemed to be trying to disappear into its plush cushions.

The man didn't appear to recognize that this wasn't simply a rescue mission. It had gone past the warning stage. No empty promises would suffice at this point.

"You won't be doing this again to anyone. Not for a long time," Logan vowed.

"Your threats are meaningless. Leave." The man's tone rose but he cringed in his seat.

"Those aren't threats." Rygar took immense satisfaction in the suspicion and anxiety rolling off the man and his friends.

Logan stepped out of the covered area and raised his hand and closed his fist, moving it in a circle. The men at the top of the arena began urging the people down the steps and out of the stands. It didn't take long for the people to understand. They began filing out of the arena.

"What do you think you're doing? You have no right." The man's anger finally seemed to overcome his fear. He jumped out of his seat.

"I have every right. You practically invited me to do this. I'm tired of having to pull my men out of here." Logan's hard voice carried a distinct growl.

"Your little games finally angered the wrong people," Rygar told the man. "I'd advise you and your friends to get up, because your arena is coming down."

"You can't do that!"

"How many men have died or been maimed in your games? Your mistake was thinking that the men you took had no one to care if they disappeared or died." Rygar waited as those under the awning stood and began shuffling out. Most of them clearly wanted no part of the argument. "You won't be able to do it. This building has stood for years." The thin man's mouth twisted and his fists balled at his sides.

"We've been taking down fortified buildings for years. This won't be a problem," Rygar offered with a smile.

"There's never been a problem before. No one seemed to care. There are so many of you warriors walking around, nobody misses the few that we take. We've done this for years. Why now?" The man threw his hands up. His eyes moved over the emptying benches.

"You were lucky. You should have known your scheme couldn't last. If you feel like doing it again in the future, use your own people." Rygar resisted the impulse to toss the man into the arena and show him just what he'd forced other men to endure. In the end, destroying this place would be a far worse punishment than any beating even if it wasn't as immediately satisfying.

The thin man shot him a furious look and stalked down the stairs. He shoved a woman who had the misfortune to be in front of him. She nearly tumbled over the barrier and into the fighting pit. She yelped as her hip caught the edge of the wall and momentum carried her forward. Her hands shot out, one missed and skidded off the narrow wall but the other caught and braced her weight, catching her before she fell. It was the only thing that saved her from going over the edge. Rygar stepped forward but the woman jumped to her feet. For a moment, she looked as if she was going to attack the man. The she seemed to get control. Her shoulders shifted and her hand smoothed down her skirt. She straightened and her muscles relaxed before she followed the man down the stairs and to the exit.

"As soon as the last person is cleared, I'll send in the men to weaken the interior cells. Then we'll get started on the walls. Did you want to go see your Dari?" Logan asked.

"I want to see the demolition started and then I'll go to her." Rygar looked around the clearing arena. He wanted to make sure it was starting. Being here twice, he wanted to make sure it didn't happen again.

The last of the people filed out of the arena. Then a systematic search was performed to make sure no one was hidden anywhere. Rygar went into the large cell with several other men. He carried an ax and helped dismantle the wooden partitions first. The structural stone columns would be weakened then pulled down with ropes and chains. He left when he saw the first chunk of rock fall off one of the round pillars.

He left the fighting pit and began walking out of the arena. Now that he'd seen the beginning of the destruction, he needed to see Dari. The woman had given him some bad moments lately. He'd never felt such relief as he had when Logan had informed him they'd found Dari. Finally she was safe. Keeping her that way was sure to be a lifetime project.

The camp had been moved closer to the city. The sheer number of warriors provided the security and safety needed. He walked into the camp, making his way through the tents, hunting for Dari.

"Rygar!" Dari's shout surprised him.

His head snapped around as he spun on his heel. He spotted her running toward him. She leapt. Her arms wrapped around his neck and her legs around his hips. Rygar barely had time to brace for the impact. His arms curved around her. She felt so good against him. His head lowered and he drew her scent into him. He had missed her so much.

"You worried me so much," Rygar said, not wanting to release her just yet.

"I didn't mean to. I just felt like I had to do something. I didn't even really take time to think things through." She stroked her fingers over his back.

"I know that Logan has given you punishment for what you did. How are you liking your two shadows?" He gestured to the two men who had been following her. She hadn't liked having guards before so he wondered how she was dealing with it now.

"Your brother probably thinks those two men following me will drive me insane but having those two men with me isn't so bad. Aside from that, they'd be with me anyway since we're so close to the city." She smiled and stretched up to brush a kiss over his lips.

"So the punishment isn't working?" Rygar couldn't help responding to the smile and her light mood.

"I didn't say that. I just said that it wasn't as bad as he thought it was. Don't try getting me in trouble because it'll only get you into trouble with me," she warned. Her lips pulled into a straight line and she gave him what she probably thought was a stern look.

"Ah, you're threatening me. Let's go to our tent and you can see if you can convince me to see things your way." Rygar put her on her feet and curved an arm around her shoulders.

"I think I can convince you." She tilted her head and looked up at him.

He heard the laughter in her voice and smelled her rising desire. Dari led him to their tent. She opened the flap, slipping through it. Rygar followed, securing it closed behind them. He didn't want to be disturbed. All he needed was to have her alone for as long as possible.

He looked up and found her taking off her shirt. "Stop. It's been too long since I've had you in my arms. I want to peel you out of those clothes and make slow love to you."

"I've missed you. I don't think I can do slow now. I need you too badly." She slipped out of her shoes and walked over to him. She slid her hands up his chest over the soft fabric of his shirt to his shoulders.

Rygar slowly undid the buttons on her shirt, pushing the fabric wide, baring her breasts. He licked his lips. The sight of those pink-tipped breasts lured him. He wanted to touch those small mounds, taste the nipples. For the moment, he kept his hands moving downward to the buttons on her skirt.

She wriggled her hips as the fabric loosened and fell around her ankles. Stepping out of it, she went to work on his clothes. He held still as she worked on his shirt, finally tossing it to the far side of the tent. He drew in a hissing breath. Her touch sent sharp, sweet heat streaking through him. Suddenly, he wasn't sure he could make love to her slowly. Just from that single touch, he wanted to press her into the bedding. When she started on the ties of his pants, her knuckles brushed the swollen ridge of his cock. He knew then that he wouldn't be able to take her slowly. He'd wanted to savor being close to her again but it had been too long and he'd feared for her safety too much.

The laces of his pants ripped as he pulled at them. He barely noticed that. He was just thrilled when the constriction over his shaft loosened and he could strip off his boots and pants. Finally naked, he wrapped his arms around her and carried her over to the pallet.

He needed to hear how she felt from her lips, not secondhand, not from her thoughts. His lips slanted over hers. Her tongue met his and drove into his mouth. Her mouth hungrily sucked at his as he lowered her to the cushion of blankets. Her thighs widened in invitation.

He moved between them without hesitation. Her hips arched as he lowered his body to hers. She moaned against his mouth. Her hands stroked over his back, urging him to move. He wasn't about to deny her. His cock ached with the need to feel her sweet pussy wrapped around it. He rolled his hips forward and found her wet and slick for him.

"You scared me so badly. I had nightmares about you being attacked while you were trying to get to me." He held her for a moment, his body pressing against hers. He needed the contact. Just holding her made him feel better.

"I'm sorry." She placed kisses on his cheek, her fingers running through his hair.

"I can't lose you," he whispered, his hips rocking against hers.

Her breath caught and she clutched at him. "You won't lose me."

He withdrew and stroked slowly back into her, his movements tightly controlled. His hands swept down his back and she cupped his buttocks, trying to increase the force of his strokes.

"I love you," he said, leaning down he nipped her lips as he fucked her. He kept control with effort. She had to tell him soon.

Her breath hitched and her hips rose to meet his. She looked a bit stunned as she met his eyes.

"Gods, Rygar, I love you," she breathed. Her lips met his and she kissed him.

Her emotions poured over him and she was obviously holding nothing back. Relief rushed through him, taking the last bit of his restraint. He drove into her desperately, his balls drawing tight, aching. The tension ripped through him, demanding release. He ground his hips against hers with every stroke, needing her to find pleasure first. She stiffened and gasped, tremors shaking her body as she came. He felt the pleasure through their link and let his own release take him a moment later. Tearing heat ripped through him, his hips pressing against his as his seed spurted into her womb. She shivered again, moaning his name as the *re'kai* took her. Her face pressed into his neck.

He rested against her, most of his weight on his forearms. He became aware of her hands slowly stroking over his shoulders. She was watching him and he could tell just by her expression that she needed to talk.

"You look sad." He drew his thumb over her lips. He consciously didn't try to pick up anything more than her surface feelings. He wanted her to tell him what was wrong.

"I didn't mean to scare you when I followed. When they took you, all I could think of was that I could easily lose you to their stupid games," she said. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

Rygar withdrew, moving to his side. He pulled her close, his arms wrapping around her. He could feel the panic pulsing through her. Her arms clutched at him. He wanted to tell her that he wasn't going anywhere but she knew there were no guarantees in life. She wouldn't believe him and he wanted to give her more than an empty promise.

"I'm not looking for trouble. You're my mate. There are going to be times of trouble but I'll to do everything I can to stay with you." He stroked his hand down her back.

She looked up at him.

"You're not alone here. You have a family. Gaden and Logan are your family now. They care about you too." Rygar wanted her to see that she had a home, people now who'd always be with her.

"Gaden seems okay. I'd like to help him find his mate if I can. Logan, on the other hand, is much too serious and bossy but he has been understanding and nice." Her head tilted and her lips pursed. She really seemed to be thinking about the subject.

"Bossy kind of goes with being an Achan. He has a sense of humor but I don't think you've seen it yet." He brushed her hair away from her neck and nibbled on the exposed flesh. He could feel she was a little uncertain. She was trying. That was what was important. Eventually she'd see that she had a family here.

"If he's bossy because he's the Achan, what's your excuse?" Dari leaned back a little and met his eyes.

He could see the teasing light in her eyes. He was happy her mood had lightened a little.

"Now that's just natural. How else can I be the man you need?" he whispered just before he nipped her earlobe.

"Do I need a bossy man? I would have sworn I needed someone a bit more beta and not an alpha who likes to give orders." She tilted her head to the side a bit, giving him more access.

He closed his teeth over the muscle where her shoulder met her neck. Her body went totally still and her breath quivered. He loved that and how the scent of her arousal immediately rose hot and heady around them.

"Then I guess you were wrong, because that scent assures me that you want me just as I am." He licked the reddened spot his teeth had just made.

"What can I say? You're a great lover." She grinned.

"I'm glad that you think so. I try very hard. I'm hard for you already." He took her hand and put it on his cock. Her fingers curled around it, stroking his shaft.

"I see you are. Do you want to see how hard you can get?" she asked.

He closed his eyes as her fingers tightened a bit. He loved the feel of her warm fingers. He felt his cock jump in her hold. She smiled and licked her lips.

"I'd love to but later tonight. We both need to eat and I do have some duties." He reluctantly loosened his hold. Just talking about it reminded him that there really wasn't time for another round.

She sighed. "I just got you back."

"And we'll have all night. Don't pout," Rygar said with a chuckle as he reluctantly released her. Truthfully, he wanted to stay here just as much as she did.

She put a hand on his thigh and slowly shook her head. "Set aside for food and duty."

"Don't give me that pitiful look. You're trying to tempt me." He grasped her hand and lifted it away from his thigh before she got her hands on his cock again.

"Yes, I am and you're not cooperating at all." She sat up and rolled to her feet. A toss of her head sent her hair flying. "You just ruined your sexy lover reputation."

He laughed as he got to his feet. "Don't worry, *taneen*. I'll reclaim it later tonight."

"It's going to take more than one night. You messed up." She stood and put on her clothes.

"I think I'll have that title again before dawn." He put on his shirt and bent to pull on his boots.

Chapter Eleven

Dari stood leaning back against a wall. The stone felt cold but she was enjoying the sight in front of her too much to mind. A good portion of the arena had been taken down already. The sight of those broken light brown walls satisfied her. She knew that many more men than Rygar and the other Zarain had been held in those walls, fighting until they either escaped or died.

A large trench had been dug completely around the columned building and under the foundation. It had taken a while to get through the cobbles on the streets but the Zarain had persisted. One part of the round wall had already collapsed allowing a clear view into the interior. Now they prepared to knock down the last walls standing. The men were testing the swinging ram positioned in front of one of the solid sections of wall.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" Rygar asked as he strolled over to her.

He slid his palm over her arm. Until moments ago, he'd been helping with the demolition and a light sheen of sweat coated his bare arms. Of course, he looked gorgeous even with the smudge of dirt across one tanned cheekbone. Some of his hair had come loose from the thong securing it.

"How long is it going to take to get the whole thing down?" She looked around the area, still expecting trouble.

When she'd heard what they planned, she'd had her doubts. Not about taking the arena down. That she wholeheartedly supported. She'd doubted that it could be done without someone getting hurt. She'd been sure that the people would resist the demolition of their building. Surprisingly, there had been very little resistance. Aside from a few grumbles, there hadn't even been any arguments about it.

"It will take a few more days but we should be headed home soon." He settled next to her against the wall, his eyes always on her.

"I'll be glad when it's gone. At least for a while, none of our people will be used in their games." She glanced away from him in time to see one of the pillars crash to the ground. She winced at the loud sound of stone meeting stone.

"For a while." Rygar nodded.

She knew he, like a lot of the other men, wanted to end it permanently, but they wouldn't kill a man who wouldn't fight them. No matter how many of the guards they killed, until the men behind it were stopped the games would continue. Taking their anger out on the city would hurt those who had never even entered that stadium. Some other way would have to be found to put a final end to it. There would probably be more situations like this before it started to get better.

"What's got that frown on your face? Do you feel sorry for them?" Rygar traced the line of her lips. She could feel his concern.

"Sorry for them? No, they're fairly lucky that it was the Zarain who did this. I know of at least three groups of people who would have sacked the city, leaving it in ruins as well. They should have known trouble would come their way." She leaned into him. There would have been innocent deaths if anyone else had done it.

"So what is bothering you?" he asked.

"I was just thinking that it's going to be a long time if ever before this little pastime of theirs is stopped." She inhaled, taking comfort in his warmth and his arousing scent.

"After enough opposition, they'll move it. At least they'll be more careful about who they choose for a while." His arm slipped behind her and tugged her closer to him.

Two more columns tumbled to the ground. She jumped. He chuckled.

"Why don't you go back to camp and get some rest?" He leaned down and brushed a kiss over her lips.

Dari looked at the building. She wanted to be here but her nerves were too tight. It would be a relief to get away from the noise of crashing stone.

* * * * *

Dari watched the last wall fall. Relief rolled through her. It was finished. The entire building, from underground rooms to the stone walls, had been reduced to a pile of blocks. They might rebuild but it would take them some time.

Rygar tugged her hand, turning her away from the settling dust. He smiled and led her toward camp. It was time to go home. With as long as it took to destroy that building, Achan Raven and Acine Caidi just might be there by the time they arrived back at Ajiari pack. Dari wouldn't have gone back to the Taivain even if it was an option. She wanted to see this finished.

Despite her fears, they arrived two days before Achan Raven and Acine Caidi. Dari had enough time to rest a little and get really nervous before her friend arrived. All the worry disappeared the moment Acine Caidi stepped through the doors of the Taivain.

Dari looked beyond her golden-haired friend expecting to see Achan Raven behind her but she couldn't see the big warrior. He usually wasn't too far behind the Acine. The man liked to stay close.

"He's talking to your mate and your new Achan. They sent me inside after the introductions," Caidi said with a smile. She walked forward and hugged her. "We were worried about you."

Dari returned the hug, glad to see her friend again. "It's good to see you. You wouldn't believe the trouble I had getting a message to you."

"Your note said you were taken to a large prison where people were using Zarain as entertainment. How did that happen? You were with Teril and the other males. No one should have been able to even get you out of the city without them knowing of it." Caidi's eyebrow rose.

Dari smiled but she heard the steel in Caidi's voice. "I don't know how I was taken without the men noticing my absence. The last thing I really remember of that day is standing in front of a stall looking down at some blades. I was still in the market but I had wandered a bit away from the men. I was only looking at the goods. I could still feel them. Then nothing more of that day."

"What's the next thing you remember?" Caidi asked, her arms folding across her chest and her foot tapping.

"Waking up in a cramped cell and then being marched through the city to the large arena they'd housed the men in." Dari frowned as she tried to remember if there was something else.

"Did you wake up clearheaded?" Caidi's head tilted to the side.

"No, my head hurt and I was a little foggy. I was drugged but I don't know how." Dari turned and led her friend into the dining area.

Her mind still turning her memories of before and after the drugging, she led Caidi to one of the long tables. That worried her. The drug was obviously effective and easily administered.

"How do you like your new pack? Are you happy here?" Caidi slid onto one of the padded seats at the gleaming golden wood table.

"It's taken a little while but it's home." Dari strolled over to the table near the wall to get two mugs and a pitcher of wine.

"From what I've heard it wasn't an easy adjustment," Caidi offered, sitting totally relaxed, in her chair.

Dari poured the wine and handed Caidi a glass. Caidi was right. It hadn't been an easy adjustment. Only recently had she taken that last step to accepting that she belonged here. Dari settled onto a seat before answering, needing the time to get her thoughts in order.

"No, it wasn't easy. It wasn't that these men and their ways are all that different from Oroyai pack's males but they seemed much more restrictive. Of course I didn't know about all of the trouble they'd had almost until I arrived here." Dari took a deep breath.

"That wasn't what I was talking about. I meant the trouble you made for yourself." Caidi's eyes narrowed and her tone hardened.

"Yeah, I made some trouble for myself. Rygar's getting taken sort of focused my feelings and the result wasn't easy to handle. I wasn't going to lose him." Dari grimaced as she turned the cup in her hands.

"Lose him? Because he was captured by humans?" Caidi frowned. She clearly didn't understand what Dari meant.

"It was more than just him disappearing. In my mind, he could die. I'd never see him again," Dari explained slowly.

Caidi tilted her head and her eyes widened. "You mean like happened with Jaina. Your sister disappeared from a market in a town where we'd felt the presence of other shifters. You know she probably wasn't taken by slavers or someone who only wanted to kill her. She's alive somewhere, Dari. They wouldn't have hidden her body."

"I know she was probably found by a pack and taken with them but she was the last of my family and I lost her. After that, all I had was the pack." Dari pushed the cup of wine out of reach, untouched. Playing with it wasn't distracting her and she was too likely to turn it over if she kept messing with it.

"Then you and Rygar met." Caidi reached across the table and touched her hand.

Dari smiled wryly. "Yes, the change kind of shocked me and almost before I had time to realize what I felt for him, he'd been taken away from me. I went a little wild."

"And you're not having a problem with the punishment for it, as light as it is?" Caid asked, her head tilted.

"I'm doing all right now. Toward the end of it, that might be a different story." Dari laughed lightly and acknowledged that Caidi was right. The punishment was a little light. She wasn't having much trouble with the restriction to the Taivain. She wasn't about to tell Achan Logan that though. "How is everything back at Oroyai pack?"

"Everything is normal. No new trouble except for your disappearance." Caidi looked at her, her eyes running over Dari's face. "You said all of the trouble they'd had. There was more than Zarain men being taken to fight for sport?"

Dari nodded. "They had good reason for their protectiveness even if it did annoy me."

"We still do." Rygar's voice sounded from across the room.

Dari turned and smiled at him but she felt a slight unease and she knew it wasn't hers. Rygar was nervous about something but his movements didn't show it. He strode across the room and sat down beside Dari. His arm curved around her shoulders in a blatantly possessive gesture.

She turned her head and looked at him. His eyes were locked on her. What was wrong? He knew she loved him. She'd told him, showed him. He couldn't be uncertain about that. There wasn't any threat to their relationship that she could see.

"My brother Gaden's mate has been taken and her family continues to attack people from our pack," Rygar said as Achan Raven sat down across from them.

"I assume since she's still missing that you're sure it wasn't her family who took her." Achan Raven nodded to Dari.

Dari smiled back but gasped as Rygar lifted her onto his lap. She saw a smile cross her former Achan's face. Her heart pounded at the unexpected shift in position. Her hand pressed to his chest and she leaned back a little. She just stared at him, not understanding what was behind the sudden move.

"She's still missing and we know it's not her immediate family," Logan explained as he took the seat from which Rygar had just lifted her. "Is there a reason Dari's not sitting in a chair?"

"She needs to be held right now." Rygar's cheek brushed hers and his arms tightened around her.

Dari didn't try to pull out of his arms. It was Rygar who needed the contact. She was more than happy to give him what he needed. She didn't know what had caused the possessive urgency she felt from him but she intended to find out later.

"What's keeping your brother from asking her where she is and going to get her?" Achan Raven leaned forward, his elbows braced on the table.

"She doesn't know Gaden now, doesn't remember him or her life with her parents." Logan relaxed in the chair totally at ease. "And she doesn't know what planet she's on."

"So he has to gain her trust first," Raven observed. "After that happens, you should be able to find her. If you need any help, just call on us."

Later as they sat at the table eating, she still couldn't understand what was making him so nervous. She could feel his unease and he stayed close to her throughout the night. It was strange. He hadn't even stayed that close to her when he'd first claimed her. She had no idea what was bothering him but whatever it was hadn't faded a bit all night. She wanted to soothe him but she didn't even know where to begin. He wouldn't tell her what was bothering him, not here.

"It's time to go to bed, Dari." Rygar tugged at her hand.

Dari had intended to stay and talk to Caidi for a little while longer. Their visits wouldn't be frequent and both of them knew it. She opened her mouth to tell him just that but caught a determined light in his eyes. She closed her mouth.

"Acine Caidi, Achan Raven, I'll talk with both of you tomorrow. Have a good night." Dari smiled at her friend before turning to Rygar. "I'm ready if you are." She squeezed his hand just to let him know she wasn't going anywhere.

Rygar led her out of the room. His hand stayed clasped to hers all the way to their room. He released her only when he opened the door to their bedroom. She stepped inside, pacing over to the fireplace. No fire blazed in the hearth but its bulk offered a bit of support as she wondered what was wrong with him. The bed was definitely offlimits. She didn't want to be distracted by sex. Once on that red and black blanket, she knew that both of them might just forget talking about what was wrong. This was too important.

"What's wrong, Rygar? You've been anxious all night long. Don't try to tell me it's nothing, because I didn't believe that the first time and I still don't believe it." She folded her arms across her chest.

If he tried to ignore her questions now after leading her here, she'd do something drastic. Their room was secure, familiar. He should feel comfortable here, not anxious.

"Did you enjoy seeing your former Acine and Achan?" Rygar asked calmly as he closed and barred the door.

Dari blinked but she knew that question was far from innocent. "What does that have to do with anything, Rygar? What's been bothering you all night long?"

"I need to know a few things and until I know them it's going to make me a little uneasy." He shrugged and walked over to her. His fingers curled around her hips pulling her closer to him.

Dari felt the ridge of his shaft press against her lower stomach but he made no move to kiss her or bring her any closer to him. The intensity burned in his silver eyes, proof even without the connection between them. She looked at him, her head tilted. Whatever was bothering him must be very serious. She wanted to tell him everything would be all right but knew that wouldn't work. Her silver-haired *chalon* was stubborn.

"What do you need to know?" she asked, unwilling to draw this out and cause him more worry.

"Did you enjoy seeing Achan Raven and Acine Caidi?" His eyes locked on her face and didn't waver.

"Of course I enjoyed seeing them. I've known Caidi my entire life and I respect Achan Raven." She frowned. She didn't understand his question or why it was so important to him. But it was important. She could feel the tension radiating from him.

"You seemed very close to the Acine." He lifted a hand and cupped her cheek.

"We had a lot of experiences together while the pack didn't have any males. I told you that. We became close like you do with other warriors." She shrugged.

"Are you going to miss it?" He curved an arm around her shoulders.

"Well, I'm going to miss Caidi and my friends and being able to talk to them at a moment's notice. Wait... That's what this is about?" Her eyes widened. "Are you jealous of my relationship with Acine Caidi?"

"Well, not jealous really, a little concerned, a little envious. I want you to be happy. From the way you talk about your Acine Caidi, she sometimes seemed larger than life. Your closeness to her was obvious." He smiled and his thumb brushed across the base of her neck.

"I am happy with you. I'll miss my friends but I have a new home now. I'm pretty sure I can convince you to take me to see them at some point." She feathered her lips over his, her teeth closing over his full lower lip briefly. After a deliberate pause and fighting the smile pulling at her lips, she added, "When you get over your jealousy."

His eyes narrowed but she saw his lips twitch. "Not jealous."

"No? Looked like it to me," she teased, laughing lightly. Her arms slipped around his waist, holding him tightly.

"No. I thought that for the same reasons I told you and because I wondered if you'd miss the excitement and familiarity." He gave her an arrogant frown.

"Yes, I'll miss my friends but excitement... Rygar, have you been paying attention to what's been happening for the last few months?" She leaned back and just stared at him.

How could he ask if she'd miss the excitement? There had hardly been a moment of peace for them and danger still hovered over the pack. If she wanted excitement, all that she could handle was right here.

"I know that we've been through a rough period and there will be more trouble to come when we found out who took Gaden's mate but for the most part our life will be routine." He smiled and pulled her close again.

"Do you think I didn't have a routine life before I met you? My life isn't much different now than it was in Oroyai pack." Dari shook her head, her voice light. Getting taken from that market had been the most exciting thing that had happened in *ronas*.

"Dari, your happiness means so much to me." He tipped her head back so that he could see her eyes. "For you..."

She stopped him, putting her fingers over his lips. What did she have to do to prove that she didn't need any more than what she had with him? They had so much together. Sometimes, she wondered if she'd wake up and find it was all a dream.

"Rygar, I'm happy with you. I'm going to miss my friends but life's far more exciting with you and I'm not talking about the attacks and missing mates." She rose on her tiptoes.

"Gods, woman, if you wanted, I'd go make a home with Oroyai pack." He hugged her fiercely.

"Our home and family is here. Oroyai pack was my home but I've found the man I love, a family, and am making a place for myself. That you'd offer makes me so happy I want to cry but this is where we both belong." She rose and kissed him hungrily.

About the Author

Rebecca Airies has always loved to read. Futuristic, the classics, mystery or horror, the genre doesn't matter as long as the stories capture her interest and take her on an adventure. She soon discovered a love for writing and characters just waiting to tell their stories. Since that time, writing has become an obsession.

Rebecca lives in the heart of Texas. She loves the outdoors, growing things and working on crafts when she's not lost in the worlds of her characters. Please feel free to write and tell her what you think; she'd love to hear from you.

Rebecca welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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