



Mating Rituals

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Dedication

To all my friends and family, thanks for your continual support, and a special thanks to Sandra Kay for her wonderful advice to enrich my stories.

Chapter One

Unable to stand still for even an iton, Marohka Taunton scanned the room for the one man who possessed the information she needed. She wove past elegantly clad bodies on her way across the ballroom. The whispers about her ugly purple dress didn't faze her. Her dress was hideous.

Spirit flowed, and glasses tinkled with a rhythmic chime. Spurts of laughter added high notes to the popular tunes of Lustralia. Young women danced with their prospective husbands. Rich silk rustled with a soft swish.

Marohka wanted nothing to do with the custom of picking out a mate. More important things required her attention.

Adjusting her angle of attack, she worked her way across the room to Almon Pepin. He stood near the staircase. His classic black suit and slicked-back hair held little charm against the beauty of the royal ballroom glowing with decorations.

The two suns of Lustralia sent rainbows of color through the prism glass dome. Light sparked along the crystal columns. A floor hugging fog created an illusion of the guests floating on an invisible cushion of air. Low fires burned in urns around the room filling the air with a spicy aroma of spring flowers.

Reaching her prey, she stood toe to toe with her target and stared him dead in the eye. She raised her voice over the exuberant crowd. "Why haven't I received my reports?"

"Marohka." Almon acted surprised to see her. "I really like your dress."

Disgusted, she shook her head. How could he be so obtuse? His broad smile hit a sensitive spot in her chest, and aversion swam in her stomach. Even after working with him for the past five years, she still distrusted his smile.

"You look like you're not having much fun."

"I'm not." She narrowed her eyes. "I expected those Trisar reports by early afternoon."

"Yes, well, the mine is having communication problems." His voice held a condescending tone. "I sent the reports to your dorm room only a few zitons ago."

"Did you review them? What's the current output?"

Almon rubbed his finger down the side of his mustache, a nervous habit he liked to repeat whenever she started pushing him for answers.

"Just a quick glance. I knew you'd want to study them first, so I decided to wait." His gaze darted around the room. "Look, we're at a party. Let's review the Trisar deal tomorrow."

A low growl sounded in her throat. Almon might want to avoid the issue, but she required solid results.

“No.” She knotted her hands into fists at her side. “Something is going on at that site, and I mean to find out exactly what.”

Almon didn’t answer.

She clenched her teeth together.

He waved at someone across the room. “We’ll talk later. I see someone I want to talk to.”

Marohka studied him for an iton. He appeared distracted. A strange occurrence for him, he usually liked to nose his way into whatever project she was working on. She swept her tricolored curls back and turned.

Bigger problems than Almon demanding her attention, she scanned the crowd. Her nerve endings tingled. Exhilarating warmth spread through her limbs. Some sixth sense told her a man held her in his sight.

* * * *

Stihl Fermesium leaned back against the crystal pillar. At the ball for barely a few itons, he already wished for the evening to be over.

Crossing his arms over his black suit, he studied the sea of people milling around the hall. The desire to move or socialize with anyone other than the few men near him held little appeal. Tonight, on the solitary mission of finding a mate, only one person occupied his thoughts. He smiled to himself.

An unwelcome surprise for Marohka Taunton, she’d be more than willing to wait. Because she didn’t even know he existed, and she lacked an interest in a mate, a lover, or a man in general.

He scanned the ballroom trying to locate her in the crowd. The clear dome ceiling drew his attention to the sparkling Sky Bridge, which connected the living quarters of the unmated Royal women to the ballroom. He wondered for a moment if she might still be in her room. He shook his head. She couldn’t bail on the event.

The bright ornate tinsel scattered along the rafters forced his attention away from the unique design of the bridge. He examined instead the large clear bubbles floating from the ceiling intermixed with huge wreaths of paper flowers. The room looked like a huge out of control game of hoop ball, with neither team having a clear victory.

“Who devised this setting?” Stihl wondered aloud.

“Oh, you know women. They like the idea of being swept away by some noble hero.” One of Stihl’s ex-classmates answered. He twirled the multipalette ruffles of his shirt.

Stihl noticed the people, like the ballroom, were dressed in an elaborate display of what attracted the most attention. The men, sporting a variety of colored formal wear, wore ruffled shirts, high ankle shoes, and shiny taapit hats with feathers and pins.

The women, not to be outdone, stood around in long dresses in every shade of the season. Feathers and ribbons graced their intricate hairstyles of towering heights. Stihl wondered how some of them balanced the load on their head.

From what he could see, the bright colorful banners hanging from every pillar, post, and railing weren't needed for the room to be awesome. He stared at the twin staircases, which rose elegantly above the dance floor. The railing carved from the rare oak tree and the ornate lava steps embellished with gold and rubies created a beautiful piece of art.

"Hey, Stihl, glad to see you're in town," Tados said in way of greeting.

Stihl turned to the man, who'd just joined the group. "Yeah, well, only until tomorrow. I'm doing this 'finding a mate thing,' and then I'll be heading back to Central City."

"Got one yet?" Tados waved at the women around them.

A man in a plum suit with ankle high pants answered for Stihl. "Yes, and you'll never guess who." He pointed to Marohka.

Standing a good distance from them, she appeared to be in a heated conversation with a beautiful blonde. The back of her dress flared out from her shoulders with layers upon layers of shimmering purple cloth.

"The girl in the ugly grape dress?"

Stihl nodded.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"No, Stihl just lacks color sight," the plum-suit guy teased.

Tados stared at Marohka, a puzzled frown on his face.

Stihl shrugged off the comment. Marohka hid her true assets under a disguise. Everyone misread the signs and believed her to be unattractive. He checked and knew better than anyone the attributes of the lady.

Tados's frown turned into a bright smile. "No, Stihl is brilliant as usual."

The men laughed at the comment.

"Brilliant?" Another sniggered. "You must be blind too, Tados."

"No, Marohka works for the mining company who has the Trisar contract." Tados nudged the guy beside him. "That's Stihl's current project, isn't it?"

"Yes, but . . ." Stihl resented the suggestion, but a quick comeback failed him.

He wanted people to be unaware of the truth, not so much for himself, but more for her sake. Marohka didn't need to know he had to find a mate to secure his inheritance from his grandfather. She possessed other qualities like her intelligence, which justified him selecting her as his wife.

"Why marry a girl for simply one deal?" the plum suit man asked. "After all, once the deal is closed, he'll still be stuck with her."

"Yes, but"—Stihl's gaze slid along the length of her ugly gown—"the lady has a certain style. No one else could pull off wearing such an awful color. She practically glows with charm."

Marohka turned. Stihl, along with the other men, caught the frown gracing her face. The tight line of her mouth robbed her face of all its beauty. Her hair jetting out in all directions added to the picture of her being a monster to live with.

"Brother, you're either brilliant or blind." Tados slapped Stihl on the back. "Whichever it is, you'll receive a wild ride with that one."

The other men laughed at the intended pun.

Stihl held his smile in place and decided to make his friends pay for their comments. "Now, guys, I bet after a few months with me, you boys won't even recognize her as the same girl."

Tados's voice held a note of humor. "You'd be giving away your cash."

Stihl shrugged his shoulders. "It's only money."

Excited by the idea of taking his money, the men around him yanked out their remote note cards. Each entered an amount into the small plastic device. They passed their cards to Stihl. He slid his note card over theirs and confirmed their wager. Now both parties had a record of the currency involved.

The large amount entered on his note card created a smile on Stihl's face. Marohka might be useful in more ways than he initially thought.

* * * *

Several zitons later, Marohka continued to struggle with the issues plaguing the Trisar mine. If she didn't find the answers soon, her father's company, Taunton Minerals, would suffer a large financial setback, one the company couldn't afford. She needed to travel to the mine and straighten things out.

"If not for this stupid Mating Ball, I could be reviewing those reports right now," Marohka grumbled, searching through her brain for some type of answer.

Frustrated, she surveyed the highly overdressed people in the ballroom. "Find a mate. Blend. Produce an offspring." She hated the idea of taking a mate. No matter what the rules said.

Laughter echoed. Couples danced in a circle on the smooth polished floor. Soft music played in the background. The one party of the year every unmated Royal girl attended, everyone loved the event. Except her.

If some man chose her, she'd lose everything; her life's work as a mineralogist, her ability to help her father and find an energy source for her country. She lacked the time to play around with a man.

The music stopped.

"All right, ladies, please line up for the final event of the evening—The Ladies Parade," a voice boomed from the speakers. "Give your partner a smile and a curtsy, and then ascend the stairs to the stage area."

"Right," Marohka reasoned, "like I need any man."

Harold, the father presenter, liked to follow the old habit of bowing to one's partner. The custom to him added romance and grandeur to the evening. She could've told him differently, but with him being an old stick from a bygone era and a hopeless romantic, he wouldn't have listened.

"Now, gentlemen, here are the rules. Although, you might know them, I'll restate them again so no problems will occur because you forgot what you're supposed to do." Harold paused a moment and scanned the crowd. "So listen carefully."

Marohka and the other girls started up both sides of the twin staircases. Harold stood at the top of the landing, dressed in his usual green plaid suit. His cheeks colored with his excitement.

"Each one of these lovely ladies will be carrying a small placard with a number printed on it." Harold showed them a sample card. "The number is not how many mates she desires." The crowd broke into the expected laughter. Harold grinned.

She wished her sign displayed a zero. Even one man was more than she needed. All evening, she'd avoided them. If a man approached, she offered him a rude comment and walked away to prove her lack of interest in catching a mate.

"If you're attracted to a certain lady and want to meet her in the mating arena, take note of her number. If you write down the wrong number, you'll be matched with a different girl, which would result in an unwelcome surprise." Harold released a small cough of humor.

"You can choose three women. In the end, however, you'll only be mated with one."

A good-natured roar of disappointment exploded from the men in the hall. Marohka rolled her eyes at the typical male response.

Harold sighed. "Sorry, boys, that's the rule. The Council of Elders will determine which girl on your list will become your mate. Then it's up to you to pass the next challenges. The first duel is at three sharp in the battling arena. Be sure to check the schedule. If you miss your fight time, you'll be out of the running and will have to wait until next year."

Turning to the girls standing beside him, Harold added. “Ladies, don’t worry. An escort will be sent to your room to make sure you arrive on time.”

As the oldest unmated girl, Marohka stood at the front of the line. Her future suspended on the edge of success. She’d led the other girls down the red carpet, along the edge of the dance floor, through the ballroom, and then back up the twin staircase on the other side of the room many times. She drew in a deep breath, preparing for her final steps to freedom.

Harold glanced at her and nodded. “At the top of the list from the Taunton family is our special princess, Marohka. A smart girl, she’ll offer any man a stimulating adventure, where life will never be boring. She works hard and . . .”

Stepping forward, she cut off Harold’s words by moving off the stage and out of the spotlight. She detested the Royal Presenter selling her to these men. With her job of finding qualtrilium and keeping her father’s company afloat, she had all the challenges she needed in life.

Lustralia’s law might require Royal girls to be present at the charade. But with this being her final year of mandatory attendance, victory stood in sight. All she had to do was navigate the man-infested waters between here and the staircase on the other side of the room. Freedom waited.

She reached the bottom of the staircase. Her path led her past a legion of men. From tall, dark, and handsome to fair-haired wonders, an array of eligible men lined her route. Dressed in fine, silk coats and tight fitted pants, they represented hundreds of Royal families across the great land. All showed excellent breeding and genteel manners. Any one of them would make a good mate to the girls behind her, but none tempted her to lose her freedom.

Staring straight ahead, she avoided eye contact with every man she passed. Moving along the edge of the dance floor, she wove her way back and forth across the assigned path. Her steps, jerky and clumsy, she hid her natural smooth gait. No man, in his right mind, craved an ungraceful wife. At least, she hoped not.

With the stairs a few steps ahead, she tasted victory and allowed herself a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

A masculine voice in front of her chuckled. “It’s not over yet, princess.”

Marohka paused to inspect the stranger. The laughter reflected in his warm brown eyes—surprised, the intelligent focus—intrigued, and the dark spark of interest—captivated.

A foreign response slithered through her chest. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. Her heartbeat rang in her ears. Her hands turned clammy. Awareness of the man claimed her senses.

His face, framed by dark brown hair, showed rough lines of strength and fortitude. A crooked nose, a square jaw, and a chiseled chin marked his unique personality. Added together, the sum indicated the man rarely backed down from a fight. He’d stand up for his beliefs and defeat his opponents. His lopsided grin with a dimple at the corner of his mouth teased her.

A silly feature on such a stern face. The little mark claimed her heart and spoke of a rare sense of humor, a trait absent in most men.

A tingle ran down her spine. Her toes curled. Either as an appealing partner or a worthy adversary, the man presented a dangerous combination. Right then, without question, Marohka decided never to cross paths with him again.

“It is for me,” she responded to his comment. She lifted her chin a little higher and repaired the chip in her armor with a sassy comeback. “But you’re welcome to any of the girls behind me. I’m sure they’ll enjoy your charm.”

Marohka lifted her skirt and swept up the stairs. The sound of his laughter spoiled her intended snub.

* * * *

The smile on his face widened. Marohka would defiantly add spice to his life. Of course, knowing his father, he’d probably chosen her because of her unreceptive attitude.

Typical.

His father, a council elder, liked to place obstacles in Stihl’s way or nag him with suggestions on how to improve his life. Even if Marohka resisted him, with a little charm she’d fall into his pocket. Then he’d be one step closer to getting what he wanted.

With her exit, he seized the opportunity to escape and stepped away from the stairs to head for the door. With his father submitting his selection, Stihl was free to leave.

Once Stihl stepped outside the doors, he glanced at the bloodred ball of fire highlighting the horizon. Dark streaks shot up around it like flames. Corolla, the first sun of the planet Vectar, produced a spectacular display when it fell from the sky. Then only the illumination from the second sun, Damion, lit the planet. One of Vectar’s two suns offered light thirty zitons a day.

The buildings surrounding the courtyard of copper and glass reflected the red-gold sunset of Corolla. All light met back at the focal point of the square, the statue of the mother of Lustralia. The beauty of the lady lay at the heart of all Royal traditions.

Stihl paused, and a flash of color caught his eye. At six-eight with shocking neon blue hair, Cyd couldn’t be missed. Waving, Stihl walked forward.

Many times, Stihl had relied on his best friend and business partner Cyd to match his blows in a fight or spot him some money. He’d always come through. The same couldn’t be said for some of the other members of Stihl’s family.

“Hey, Cyd. Let’s get out of here. I’m done.” Stihl slapped his friend on the back. “Luckily, I only had to attend this ball once.”

“Bad?”

“You might say it’s sort of like a tavern fight. The crowd stands around the edge until they build up their nerve or gain an advantage. Then they grab someone and join in on the fun.” Stihl wrapped his hands around his neck and rocked his head.

“What about Marohka?”

Stihl smiled. He’d observed her movements all evening. She’d shied away from most of the men and hardly talked to the girls. But even with her ugly dress, she radiated an energy which drew his attention. “Interesting, she has a wild current running through her as wide as a river. Most of the men in the room avoided her, unable to see her beauty.”

Cyd frowned.

Stihl grinned at his friend’s reaction. “Now where to?”

Cyd walked toward the Individual Public Transportation stop. “I located the trainer listed on Marohka’s data sheet. He agreed to meet you at the workout center soon.”

“How soon?” Stihl undid the top button of his shirt. “I want to change. These clothes are killing me.”

“In about a ziton,” Cyd answered.

“Good, let’s catch the next car.”

They stepped onto the boarding platform. A red IPT car pulled to a stop. The automated doors opened to reveal the padded red interior of a four-person car. Cyd sat down on the bench-seat facing forward, while Stihl settled on the opposite side.

Cyd cleared his throat. He slid his personal note-card through the car’s meter.

“Um,” his friend, working up the courage to voice his concerns, continued, “I know you’re required to claim this girl, but . . .”

Stihl scanned his note-card and entered their depot stop number. He shook his head, guessing Cyd’s problem. “Don’t worry. Marohka won’t hurt me.”

“Right, both your brothers said the same thing before their challenge. If I remember correctly, Tankton came out with a broken arm, and Joha received a black eye.” Cyd knotted his hands into fists. “Royal women are scary—if not downright dangerous.”

“Yes, that’s why they changed the rules. Now only men with Royal blood are allowed to marry Royal women.” Stihl shifted back onto his seat. The IPT car sped along the high beams, which ran over the plazas and walkways below. “Seeing you’re from Periva, you’re out of the mix.”

“Yes, but you, Lukes, let hundreds of Perivan men die before the council figured it out. Perivan men can’t telepathically link with their wives. It’s part of what caused the riff between the two countries.”

Unease rang in Cyd's voice. "Those women killed their husbands because they couldn't ease their wives' fears and provide them the fulfillment that they craved."

"Yeah, but," Stihl enjoyed a burst of humor before continuing, "Can you think of a better way to go?"

Cyd's gaze shifted from the large clear dome of the IPT car to stare at Stihl. "You idiot, she could kill you."

With a laugh, Stihl lifted his hands into a fighter's stance. "Not a chance. Royal blood runs through my veins. I'm safe."

"That's no guarantee. Tankton's been injured by his wife a number of times." Cyd added, "She almost killed him once."

"Yes, but Tankton's a wimp."

"Maybe so." Cyd offered Stihl a weak smile. "But tomorrow's fight is simply the first of many. From what we've learned about Marohka, she won't give in easily."

"Look, *Mother*, don't worry. Dad says it's normal for royal women to fear commitment. The strong warrior gene in their blood makes them untrusting of men. That's why the council forces them to attend the royal ball to encourage them to find a mate."

Cyd shrugged. "If you say so. What time is your fight?"

"Don't know. Dad is trying to arrange for our match to be one of the first on the docket. He's aware of our meeting tomorrow night, and he won't let me miss my duel with Marohka. He'll call."

Cyd shifted in his seat. "I guess we don't have a choice. We'd better head to the gym so you can figure out how to beat Marohka in the first challenge. Then, at least, you'll be one step closer to your inheritance."

"Relax." Stihl anticipated no problems. "I'll have this thing wrapped up in no time, and we'll be on our way to Central City." He snapped his fingers. "Piece of cake."

* * * *

Marohka stood beside her bed packing while she decided what to do. With the dawn of a new day, she longed to be on her way. The morning transporter to Central City departed in a couple of zitons. With a little luck, she'd be at the Trisar camp by early afternoon.

Of course, if it hadn't been for the silly dance last night, she would've already been there. But no, she followed the rules and did her civil duty. Now, nothing stood in her way.

The reports she'd gotten from Almon last night were useless. They'd provided no solution. The core samples in Central City would help her discover the truth. She'd examine the dirt collected and see first hand the minerals listed in the soil. Then she'd head to the mine and discover the real answers.

The soft, even breathing of her roommate, Crystal, broke the silence in the room, but Marohka continued to pack her bag. An iridescent glow from her light-beam lit the way from her bed to her clothing unit. Back and forth, she paced, while her mind battled with endless questions. The first reports from the mine predicted a profitable operation. Yet, it wasn't. Why?

On her visit a few months ago, everything appeared to be on track. What had changed since then? With the alarming rate of loses accumulating and her father covering all the excavation cost for the operation, she should've left days ago.

"If he'd only not listened to my advice," Marohka muttered under her breath. "But no I had to go and open my mouth."

All the signs she read indicated the site would produce the largest deposit of qualtrilium in the history of Lustralia. A good reason to lock in with a share the profit contract, instead of the cost plus deal which her father normally signed.

What do you know? her self-doubt argued.

Marohka remembered the impression she'd received when she'd visited the mine. Qualtrilium surrounded her. There had to be some other problem.

A knock sounded on the door. The noise jerked Marohka out of her funk. Crystal must have a challenge from someone to meet her in the mating ring. After last night, every man in the country probably wanted her. She'd flirted with any man who ventured in her path. Luckily, she longed for a mate.

Poor misguided girl.

Marohka stepped to the door, dressed in her thin micro fiber suit.

"Yes?"

"Marohka Taunton?" asked the pastel-pink haired matron on the other side.

"Yes?"

With no smile or greeting, the woman stuck out her knotted hand and shoved a large violet package toward Marohka. "Inside is the bio sheet on your prospective mate. Your match will be at three ziton. Your escort will be here fifteen itons earlier to guide you to the arena. Please be ready."

Her errand done, the ugly gnome of a woman turned on her heels and marched back down the hall.

"So much for leaving town," Marohka said to the empty hallway. She fought the urge to slam the door shut and instead relished the tiny click when the latch reconnected. A raging fire burned in the pit of her stomach.

How could the ugly hands of fate delay her again? She walked to the small kitchen in a corner of the

room and threw the offensive packet on the counter. It skidded across the surface, knocked over several small bottles of spices, and landed at the foot of her dead rosewood plant. She didn't need this type of aggravation.

Foolishly, she'd thought she'd never be summoned to a challenge. Now, someone wanted her as his mate. But who? She hadn't talked to anyone last night.

Hoping some caffleck might help clear her head, Marohka placed a mug under the dispenser. Dark drops sparkled in her cup. She milked the hose for the right amount, and then pressed each button to select the amount of milk, water, flavoring, and supplements to add. After sliding her cup under each spout, she worked to recall who she'd met the prior evening. No one glanced at her twice. Who could it be?

"Can you get out of the way? I want some caffleck too."

Startled by a voice from behind her, Marohka turned to see Crystal. "Wow, great hair. The frozen curl solution is just what your hair needed." Marohka shifted out of the way.

Crystal fingered her curlers. "Who was at the door?"

Marohka glared at the dreaded packet. "I received a challenge."

"That's amazing." Crystal poured herself a cup of caffleck and chuckled. "I guess your rude, endearing charm and ugly dress worked their magic on some unsuspecting victim."

Not amused by the comment, Marohka ripped open the edge of the envelope to burn off some of her frustration. "Exactly. The man has to be a loser."

She scanned through the data, but didn't recognize his name. From his address, she determined he wasn't a resident of Royal City, but that didn't mean they hadn't met. She traveled to Central City regularly.

"What's his name?" Crystal asked on her way to the lily. "I might have met him last night."

"Stihl Fermesium."

"Elder man Fermesium's son?" Crystal said in amazement. She stood at the lily door poking at the bubbles in her hair.

"I don't know, maybe."

"If it is, you've scored big time. They're a wealthy family," Crystal purred. The green gel from her hair spilled around her fingers.

"Great, you take him." Marohka sipped her drink.

"Oh, get off it. You want a mate just like the rest of us. Don't tell me you don't," Crystal argued. "You've dreamed about having a family of your own, haven't you?"

Working the lotion into her hair, Crystal continued. “I know the Elders keep harping about us needing more qualtrilium, and that we require a new power source. But, you don’t have to be the one to find it.”

Her friend spoke the truth. The fate of Lustralia didn’t rest in her hands alone. But Morohka’s discovery rate ranked the best in the country, not counting how it helped her father’s business.

“Yes, but, even if I met a man—and started a family, it’s no guarantee I’d be happy. I enjoy my job, and I’ve worked hard to gain a good reputation. I’m not willing to throw it all away,” she stated firmly. “Not now, not on a stranger.”

“Who says you have to?” With long spiral curls styled up and around her face, Crystal debated the point. “The girls here think of you as a hero because of the work you do, but why can’t you have both? Some women do.” She tugged on a curl. “Granted, we don’t know any, but there are some.”

“Yeah, well.” Marohka buried that fantasy a long time ago. After the first few mating balls when no man selected her, she decided to seek a career instead. For years now, she’d done whatever it took to discourage any potential mate.

Young and witty, Crystal didn’t understand the pain of rejection. She’d only been through the process once before. Marohka understood the agony and longed to change the future for all royal girls by giving them an option other than having a husband and family. She refused to have her dreams derailed by some man who suddenly decided he needed a mate.

“To be honest, I don’t want to take a chance. With my luck, I’ll get stuck with some caveman who lives in the outback and raises turkins. No thank you. I’ll stay single.”

“I don’t know, Marohka. It might be the perfect life for you. Think of all the time you could spend playing with your precious rocks.”

In a way, living in a cave might be appealing, if the walls didn’t close in on her.

Chapter Two

Palms sweaty—heart steady—battle ready—Marohka reviewed her strategy for the fight. A crowd sat watching her from the observation deck. One of the elders read the rules over the loud speaker. “The person who pins his or her opponent for ten itons . . .”

Her gaze darted to the man standing in the middle of the mating arena. Orange padded walls framed Stihl’s body. Sizewise, he stood over four leg-lengths’ tall, giving him a half of leg advantage. Weightwise, he out matched her by at least a hundred pounds. Yet, neither his size nor his weight worried her. She’d beaten bigger men before at the gym where she worked out.

Bigger, but soft, she amended.

Under his skintight workout suit, she recognized a strong athletic man who worked out regularly. Her stomach churned at his muscle mass. The odds of her winning against a seasoned opponent ground to zero.

A blinding force of reality struck her—she could lose.

Unwilling to accept the possibility, she struggled with a way to win. She had two options, trick him with a fast maneuver or draw blood. Per the rules, any blood spilled disqualified him. Then, if she were lucky, the match over, and she’d be free forever.

She smiled at the reassuring thought. A strangely sweet odor hit her senses. With a quick glance at her target, she caught sight of his mischievous grin. A dimple flashed from the corner of his mouth.

Recognition dawned. Her opponent, none other than the guy by the staircase last night, winked at her. A fleeting notion sped through her head. *Does she really want to win?*

“Marohka Taunton meet your future mate, Stihl Fermesium,” the formal voice rang from the speakers.

With a nod of greeting, Marohka placed herself under tight control. Every muscle on alert, she waited for the contest to begin. She clenched her teeth to hide the spark of fear vibrating through her nervous system.

“Now after being introduced and read the rules, let’s see a fair fight.”

“Looks like you were wrong. It’s not over.” Stihl grinned.

She shifted into her fighting stance. Knees bent, one foot a step behind the other. She pictured ways to defeat him. “It soon will be,” she grumbled.

To catch him off guard, Marohka quickly kicked her back leg forward. Her foot landed in his solar plexus. A grunt sounded through the arena. Stihl didn’t waiver. The rock wall of his stomach threw her off balance. She wobbled on one leg. Her arms waved through the air. An iron clamp gripped her ankle. Her front leg halted. For an iton, she regained her balance. Then with a quick jerk of his wrist, her world tilted. Colors flashed past her vision. The ceiling suddenly sped into view. Like a

cloud, she hung suspended in air. An iton later, the hard surface of the mat hit her back.

On impact, she twisted and attempted to roll over. Strong hands gripped her shoulders and wrestled her back to the mat. Anger sped through her, and she glared at his face. Small flecks of amber swam in the brown pools of his eyes. She registered the added force of his gaze. Then she knotted her hands into fists to strike an attack. With a quick shift of his weight, he pinned her hands between them.

“It’s a good bet you won’t win,” he whispered with confidence.

The count rang through the speaker.

“Two . . .”

Her muscles strained. She struggled against the granite wall of his chest. He didn’t budge. Her back was pressed firmly to the mat. Marohka hoped to heave him to one side or the other to gain a tactical advantage.

“Four . . .”

Each thrust she rammed at him, he countered with his overpowering strength. Unable to heave his weight off her chest, panic bubbled through her mind, boiling rapidly as each technique she used to unseat him failed.

“Six . . .”

Energy failing . . . muscles jerking . . . defeat—imminent.

Unwilling to face the shame of surrendering, she continued to fight. She wanted to scream, to yell until her voice vibrated off the walls. Her sense of honor rejected the idea of capitulation. *Battle requires clear thinking and not allowing your enemy any edge.*

A low groan sounded in her throat. Her muscles stiffened, and her mind registered her lost. The fear she’d held at bay throughout the fight exploded through her system.

“Eight . . .”

Defeated, with no strength left, she closed her eyes and quit struggling.

Her hands, without direction from her mind, lost their desire to push him away. Instead, she tuned into his racing pulse. The steady beat directly under her hand, mirrored hers.

Her traitorous body, covered by the heavy pressure of him, dissolved into each hard contour of his. The clothes between them seemed as thin as air. Her mind struggled with the soft melting sensation in her stomach. A tingle of awareness raced through her breasts. A different kind of picture formed in her head.

“Ten.”

Marohka opened her eyes to stare directly into Stihl's brown ones. In a split iton, his thoughts raced through her head. He wanted to take possession of her soul. "You're mine."

Her gaze grew harder with conviction, yet his iron will held.

She voiced her resistance. "No."

He smiled at her denial.

"No, you can't have me." She shoved him away, but already moving to stand, he rose to his feet and reached out a hand. She avoided the contact. Rising, she stepped back. The voice over the speakers rang with her defeat.

"Marohka Taunton, you've lost the first challenge. You now owe Prince Fermesium a kiss."

The match ended when she kissed him. The doors to the arena remained locked until she did. He, on the other hand, had to wait until she initiated the kiss before he could touch her. Not trusting him, she retreat another step.

Again she became aware of the strange aroma. The smell growing steadily stronger during the battle blew from the air vents and cascaded the sweet scent around the room. Now, the unpleasant odor rocked her senses and made her a little sick and light-headed. Or maybe losing had caused the problem. Whatever the reason, she needed to buy some time.

Having seen enough fights to know how to stall the proceedings, she circled her opponent and looked for flaws. His feet, she noted, created a solid base on which to stand. His muscular calves and thick thighs led her to his tight butt, round and firm—encased in black skin-hugging shorts. His body robbed her of her next breath.

The more she studied his body, the more she understood why she lost. Few men achieved such defined muscle tone. None of the unmated girls in the Royal living area could've beaten him. Fewer would've wanted to try.

Then why choose her? Not young and naïve like most of the other girls, Marahka couldn't understand his reasoning. The simple desire to claim her as his mate didn't fit the profile she'd read. What other reasons could he have for picking her?

The information listed him as a successful investment dealer. That alone meant he ranked at the top of the list of eligible men in the country. He could choose any woman without being bound by royal tradition. And if he required someone with royal blood, why her? Why now?

* * * *

"Marohka?"

She remained silent.

Tired of her standing behind him, Stihl turned around. Her face reflected the questions only he could answer.

Her cheeks still flushed from their battle. Wild wisps of strawberry, gold, and light brown hair danced around her face. The long, multicolor braid, unraveled and in disarray, hung over her right shoulder. Her breathing steady, she stood stiff in the middle of the arena, her green gaze staring off into space.

“Marohka?”

Suspicious eyes met his. Reflected in their depths was the wrong conclusion for him selecting her as his mate. His victory in the dueling arena gained him her distrust. Smiling, he noticed, produced no result. She didn’t budge or alter her stare. To smooth her ruffled feathers, he urged her closer. He held out his hands and whispered in a soft tone. “Come here, starlight.”

She held her ground.

“It’ll be all right,” he coaxed.

With a piercing glare, she shook her head as if casting off her worries. She shrugged and brushed her hair back. With grim determination, she stepped forward to perform her duty.

Her low growl warned. “Don’t touch me.”

He dropped his hands to his side.

Her lips barely moved with her hushed spoken words. “I’ll give you the required kiss, and then I’m out of here.”

He didn’t answer. Stiff with unwanted defeat, she drew closer until she stood toe-to-toe with him. The message in her eyes revealed the declaration of war. Battle lines drawn, this marked the beginning of more skirmishes in the future.

Her hands on his shoulders, she lifted her lips to his. Her troubled green gaze showed him her plan of giving him only a token kiss. But once her lips touched his, he changed the rules and captured her mouth. His hands found her waistline and drew her closer to his heat.

With his first taste, he realized this woman was different.

Her sweet, moist mouth offered a unique flavor which ate at his senses. He dove deeper past the barrier of her lips. She moaned, and a knife of desire speared through his loins. He marveled at the benefits of marriage.

* * * *

Unable to think, fight, or move, Marohka’s nose rebelled against the stifling scent circling the room. Each breath robbed her of her strength.

Afraid of falling, she tightened her hands around Stihl's shoulders like a lifeline and tried to focus. Her mind darted out of control, spinning dizzily. Lost to everything but the numbing sensation ricocheting through her veins, the "ahs" from crowd and the door clicking open barely register.

Her world narrowed to staying erect. Weakness invaded her limbs, and darkness clouded her mind. Peace seduced her, and she sank into oblivion.

* * * *

"What happened?" the girl standing in the middle of room asked.

Unwilling to deal with their probing question, Marohka glanced at the girls crowding around her bed. Her bloodthirsty friends stared at her with hungry glee, ready to stab her with their eager tongues.

Her soon-to-be ex-roommate Crystal allowed them into their room after Stihl left. Now, they stood over her pecking at her flesh, rehashing each gory detail of the match. Couldn't they forget the whole mess? Her head was pounding, and her body was drained. She closed her eyes.

Maybe, if they think I'm tired, they'll go away.

Crystal, ever helpful, answered instead. "She fainted. You know, passed out. It happens all the time, at least once or twice a year in a challenge. Of course, if I'd just won Prince Stihl Fermesium as my mate, I would've fainted too. The man has the most divine muscles."

"Really? I don't believe I've ever seen him."

She opened her eyes to argue about him not being her mate yet.

"Marohka didn't stand a chance. He pinned her in like two itons. The way his muscles rippled along his back and shoulders, every girl in the crowd perspired with desire." Crystal waved her hand in front of her face like remembering his body made her hot. "No wonder she fainted. He must be deadly up close."

Marohka fought not to scream. *Take him. I don't want the added hassle in my life.* She bit her tongue, unwilling to embarrass herself more.

"When the match was over, she gave him the required kiss. Then she just melted in his arms. So gallant," Crystal purred.

Right, like the man had a choice? I collapsed in his arm.

"He swept her off her feet. Then he asked if he could carry her to her room. With the blue-haired giant behind them, no one dared tried to stop him. It was all so incredibly romantic." Crystal sighed.

Give me a break, Marohka begged silently from her bed.

"No, that wasn't anything," Susie, a girl from two doors down, added. "You should've seen the way

he handled our floor monitor. He marched right past Mrs. Whipkey, didn't even listen when she complained about him being on our floor. He simply said, 'I'm Marohka's mate,' and asked her to open the door. Speechless, Mrs. Whipkey gawked at him and followed his demands." Susie grinned.

"Really?" one of the younger girls replied, thrilled by the image.

Marohka wondered if she could die from humiliation.

Susie continued. "Yes. And then, when he told her the blue-haired giant would stand guard outside Marohka's door, she didn't even protest. Just nodded and went back to her room."

"You girls can leave, too," Marohka suggested.

"That part was the best." Crystal nodded her head. "But I still haven't figured out why he posted the man outside our door. What does he expect to happen?"

An insistent beep sounded before anyone answered. An ear communication device located on the bedside shelf rang several times. Marohka recognized the tone on her ECD, sat up, and slipped the unit over her ear. Once in place, she hit the button on the small ear component. "Yes?"

Everyone in the room became quiet.

"Marohka, are you all right?" the voice asked with concern.

"Yes, Mother, I'm fine."

A few girls sighed, then started moving toward the door. Glad to see them leave, she concentrated on the call.

"Your father said you fainted, so I wanted to call and make sure you were all right," her mother said softly in her ear.

Before Marohka could comment, her mother added, "He also brought home Prince Fermesium. They're talking in your father's office right now, discussing your future."

"Oh no, can Father turn him down?" Marohka lacked the time to deal with an eager mate. She had to travel to the Trisar Mine.

"Well, you know your father won't rush into anything." A short pause, then her mother continued. "But, it appears the man's finances are in order. So, although your father doesn't want to approve him, he can't turn him down either, which, when you think about it, is for the best."

She cut off her mother's tirade. "Mom!"

"No, Marhoka, you need to settle down. Both of your sisters have mates. Your father has kept you tied up long enough. With your help, the company was been successful. But with Vin playing in his lab, he's allowed you too much freedom. You require a mate."

Marohka pushed aside the fact that her special ability is what placed the company in its current trouble. But then, her mother wouldn't be privy to that information.

"But, Mom, I want a career. I'm doing a valuable service for Lustralia by finding the resources the county demands." She yanked the band from the end of her braid and ran her fingers through her long hair. "There's no reason for me to tie myself to a mate. I'm capable of taking care of myself."

"Now, Marohka, everyone appreciates your skill, but that's no reason to give up on true happiness."

"But, I'm so close. Trisar might be the largest qualtrilium ore deposit ever found. We can't abandon the mine now. Just think about what it could mean to our country's economic growth, not counting Dad's company." Marohka wished for the millionth time that her mother shared her desire to pursue a career instead of settling for just having a family.

"That may be true, but you're not a young woman. With this being your final year to attend the mating ball, it's your last chance to find a mate."

Trapped, Marohka searched for a solution. Not everyone shared her mother's view of a happy-ever-after.

"I know you liked working with your father." Her mother's voice rang with authority. "And your work is important. But I want you to be happy with a wonderful husband."

Her mother's sacrifice of losing her own dream of being a jeweler by marrying inflamed Marohka's passion. She wouldn't fall into the same trap of having to choose between her career and a man.

"But it's not what I want."

"Of course it is. You've simply let go of the idea of having a mate, because you've been so busy working with your father. I understand the thrill of doing a job well, but there are other pleasures."

Reluctant to listen to the same speech again, she focused instead on the giant outside her door. If Stihl was already asking for her father's approval, he'd probably press for a quick courtship too. Or worse, he'd ask her to move in with him right away.

Her father, as usual, cut her choices to nil. If she ran, she'd bring shame on her family's name. If she didn't, she'd be stuck dealing with Stihl. She disliked both options.

While her mother spouted the joys of having a mate, a plan formed in her mind.

Her mother's voice grew softer. "Don't worry, Marohka. Your father will make sure this man is financially able to support you. He'll check all his references. Vin wants you to be happy. After you spend a few weeks with Prince Fermesium, you'll see how wonderful having a mate can be."

To end the discussion, Marohka agreed with her mother. "You're right, Mother. I'm sure Dad will research the guy so he'll work out to be a wonderful mate for me. And I appreciate it. But right now, I really need to get a few things done." She rushed on. "I'll call you later. Bye."

After hitting the button to end the call, she hit the switch again to rush her plan into action.

* * * *

Villainous joy surrounded the poet. Words flowed with the ink.

Bride, bride, break away.

Run from the happy groom.

Escape is hers.

He lost her today.

What a great advantage for me.

The poet lifted the pen, leaned back, and enjoyed the breather Marohka had just provided. Now he had more time to develop a plan to get rid of the happy couple.

* * * *

“What did you say?” Stihl jerked his head up from the Trisar paperwork lying across the large metal table. His work case sat beside him with other projects waiting.

Surely, he’d heard Cyd wrong. Their plan for Cyd to bring Marohka to the train so they could travel to Central City had seemed perfect. The train left in a few itons.

“I lost her.” Cyd stood by the door to Stihl’s cabin.

Other passengers rushed along the gangway on their way to their own seats. Their excited voices, along with the aroma of cooked meat from the dining car, filtered into the room. Stihl’s stomach grumbled, and he hit the table with his hand. The slap, combined with the slamming of the cabin door, rattled through his system.

No, this can’t be happening.

“How? You were supposed to be right outside her dorm room.”

“I was. She left her room for lunch, so I walked with her to the serving room.” Cyd settled onto the cushion across from Stihl. The red bench seat squeaked with Cyd’s weight. “No men are allowed in there, so I sat by the door watching her progress through the lunch line. She strolled behind a wall to receive her food and never came back out.”

Cyd scratched his head, frustration showing on his face. Stihl’s churning stomach shared his friend’s agitated emotion.

“I banged on the door, but they wouldn’t let me in, so I ran to the front entrance hoping to catch her there—but by then, she’d disappeared.” Cyd unbuttoned his coat. “That was over two zitons

ago. I checked everywhere I could think of. Even contacted her father and yours, but no luck.”

Cyd threw his coat onto the seat. “Your father also said the Morrison brothers are making a trip to the family property. They’re surveying the ranch and Rock Ridge Mine.”

“Great, more pressure.” Stihl’s mind turned to his worries regarding the family mine. “Did he tell them we’re not ready to make a decision yet?”

“Yes, but they insisted on scouting around the area for the best place to start the strip mining.”

Stihl hit the table, again. “Shoot, now we’re forced to travel out to the ranch after we finish our business at the Trisar Mine. We don’t want them getting a little over anxious with their plans.”

His luck had abandoned him today.

With the Trisar package due in two days, his meeting with Lord Kaleva tonight, and his dad adding pressure with the Morrison brothers, the burn of juggling too many fires churned through Stihl’s stomach.

Having Cyd escort Marohka to the train should’ve been a minor bump to his busy day.

“There’s no time to search for her now.” Stihl refused to let her disappearance cost him the plans he’d made with his last investor. If he did, it might jeopardize the Trisar deal. He needed this deal to fund the success of his family’s mining operation and reject his father’s plan of strip mining the ranch. Marohka, it appeared, had other plans too.

Upset with her, Stihl felt the muscles in his shoulders tighten. He’d suspected she’d try something. Had even mistakenly thought he’d covered the problem, but she outflanked him. With a deep breath, he turned to stare out the large picture window at the end of the table. The transporter was ready to depart, and onlookers waved their farewells. The train’s engines vibrated under his feet.

He couldn’t blame Cyd. He’d tried everything to secure Marohka. The girl just liked to be difficult.

“It’s not your fault. With the Trisar deal on my mind, I forgot about the hive she lives in. It’s honeycombed with secret passages.” Stihl shrugged, a nagging sense of failure building in his chest. “I should’ve had all the exits covered, but I didn’t plan for her to act so quickly. If I ever catch her, I won’t underestimate her again.”

Cyd smiled, relief apparent in his eyes. “Well, you’ve got to admit, she’s clever. I wasn’t able to find a single trace of where she disappeared to.”

“Yeah, but I bet she had help.” Stihl wondered how best to proceed. “Dad will find her. After all, how many unmated Royals are there running around in the streets?” He glanced out the window. “With a wimple on her head, she’ll be easy to spot.”

“But what if she trashes the thing?” Cyd asked.

“She won’t. It’s a tradition for unmated royal girls to wear one.”

Cyd's eyebrows lifted. "Yeah, but?"

Stihl remembered what he read in her report. She followed Lustralia rituals faithfully by attending the mating ball every season for the last eight years. Her apartment was located in the housing provided for unmated Royal women. The pictures in the file showed her wearing the wimple in public. No, the gray areas of tradition were the only place where she'd extended her liberties.

"She could leave it off, but the hat gives her protection from unwanted male attention." Stihl shrugged. "As for me, she sees me as a minor annoyance, not her mate."

"Then why did she run out on you?" Cyd brushed his hair back. "What was she afraid of?"

"I don't know." Stihl remembered Marohka's determination to not lose the duel. She even resented him beating her, but he hadn't revealed his plans for the future. "Maybe, she hoped to avoid having to move in with me."

"Is that why you wanted me to bring her to the train station?" Cyd glanced out the window. "I thought you just planned to say good-bye."

"No, I wanted to take her back with us."

"But the law states she only has to see you occasionally during the thawing period."

Stihl stacked up his paperwork. "Yes, but most couples today live together after the girl's father gives his approval." He placed his work case on the table. "I don't have time for a long distance courtship like my brothers did. Dad wants proof of us bonding, before he'll back me at the next family meeting."

Cyd shook his head. "Do you think she suspected what you were up to?"

"Who knows?" Stihl stashed away his paperwork. "We might as well grab some food."

"Could you already be telepathically linked?"

Stihl turned to his friend. The humorous glint in Cyd's eyes sparked ideas of Marohka reading his mind. "There's no way."

"Any visions of her?"

"Of Marohka?"

Cyd nodded.

"Yes, but none I'm willing to share." Stihl smiled. A few heated fantasies flashed in his head over the last few zitions about her lying warm and willing under him.

"How about," Cyd prodded, "where she might be hiding?"

“Not that I recall.” Stihl’s mind, packed full of nothing but Marohka and getting to Central City, sped through his to-do list.

Both served a purpose. With her in hand, he would gain his father’s support and be one step closer to receiving his inheritance. He also needed to return to Central City to talk to Lord Kaleva. The man’s involvement would contribute more to the profit of the Trisar deal.

“It won’t hurt to try, Stihl. Your father says he knows where your mother is every ziton of the day. And even your brother, Joha, says he sees flashes of places his wife is going. Who knows? If you concentrate on her, maybe we’ll learn something.”

Stihl gave his friend a doubtful glance, leaned his head back against the headrest, and closed his eyes.

Marohka.

He pictured her in his head the way she looked during their match. She reminded him of a tabby cat. If riled, she’d be untamed and wild. Then once satisfied, she’d be cuddly and submissive. Both captivated his desires.

The tight braid she’d forced her hair into hadn’t been able to contain it. Somewhere during their fight, her hair had broken free and had tumbled down around her shoulders like an autumn spray of leaves. A wild mixture of colors had sparkled from light brown to strawberry blonde. Her green tiger-eyes had never relaxed their surveillance. Not even after she’d lost the match did her focus waiver.

With her soft beneath him, he’d fought the urge to stroke her luscious body until she purred with desire and curled her legs around his waist. Stihl smiled at the idea of running his hands along her enticing curves. His mind shifted to a picture of a transporter pulling into a station. He opened his eyes and glared out the window.

The train, running parallel to the loading gateway, pulled into the last stop before the four-ziton trip to Central City. “This isn’t working.”

“What did you see?”

He glancing at his friend then turned back to the window. “I saw us entering the station.” He stared at the crowd. “Which means if it’s a clue, she’s either out there waiting to board or already on the train.”

“Why don’t I go look for her?” Cyd jumped to his feet. “She could be on the train, and we wouldn’t even know it.”

Stihl grabbed his friend’s arm before Cyd stepped to the door. “No, let’s wait. I don’t want her slipping away if we happen to be right. We’ll search for her after the train leaves the station. That way she has no means of escape.”

Sighing, Cyd sat back down. The frustration of the moment held both men silent.

“You know, the vision might not apply to this train. It might simply be a reflection of our arrival at the station.” Stihl thought the chances of them both taking the same transporter out of town couldn’t be very high.

“Hmmm.”

“Cyd, there’s no point in getting up our hopes.” He noticed his friend’s preoccupation with someone outside the window and scanned the crowd. “What do you see?”

“Look at the lady in the green cloak. The way she moves reminds me of—” His words stopped. “I’m not sure. I can’t catch sight of her face but—there, did you see that?” His voice rang with excitement, and he pointed to the lady in crowd.

Stihl studied the woman. From their current angle, other passengers blocked his view of her form. Shrouded in her coat with a hood covering her head, it could be anyone. “She looks about Marohka’s size and—” He stopped. The woman’s head shifted slight to the right. “There’s something about . . .”

Both men waited until the lady in question turned and glanced around with a frown at the crowd. A green wimple framed the edge of her face surrounded by a hood, which covered her head.

Stihl grinned. “Gotcha.”

Chapter Three

Thick colorful coats formed a padded cocoon around Marohka. She'd taken every precaution imaginable to avoid discovery. The closer she stepped toward the transporter, the stronger the tingling sensation running along her spine grew. Someone, somewhere, traced her steps.

Slowly, so as not to draw any notice, she checked over her right shoulder, scanned the crowd, and searched for a man with blue hair. Instead, she caught the innocent smile of a small boy. Uneasy, she nodded and turned. She lacked the patience to face that particular fear today. Edging closer to the train, she waited her turn to board.

Her mind sped over the list of things she needed to do once she arrived in Central City. First, she had to confirm the reports coming out about the Trisar's mine at one of the outpost offices. Then she'd arrange for alba-oxen to carry her to the mine. If all went well, she'd be deep in Lustralia's outback by late afternoon.

Surrounded by excited people, Marohka noticed the charged energy dancing in the air. Notes of joyful laughter sang, cleft by cries of delight. Both blended to create a cheerful song of bliss. Caught up in the festive mood and with her feet firmly planted on the train, Marohka's spirits lifted.

Each activity fed the passengers' eagerness to get under way. Walking down the aisle, people worked their way to their assigned seats. Only the slight vibration under her feet indicated the departure from the station. Then with a silent whoosh and a dipping sensation, which rushed through the pit of her stomach, the train surged forward on a gush of power.

Marohka sighed. With this being the last stop for Royal City, some of her fears fell away. She'd managed to outsmart Stihl and stood one step closer toward achieving her goal.

The smiling T-rep punched her ticket before passing her on his way through the cabin. A smile bloomed on her face. Nothing could stop her now. The path in front of her cleared. Marohka edged her way farther along the aisle, until a large man dressed in black blocked her way.

"Hello, Princess. Glad you could join me."

Marohka glanced up. Stihl stood in her path. Trapped, she quickly peeked over her shoulder for an exit route. The blue-haired giant she'd escaped earlier stood a few steps away. Her heart fell.

No place to flee.

"How did you find me?" she demanded in a loud voice.

Stihl caught her hand. Whether to restrain her or comfort her, she couldn't tell. "Why don't we head to our cabin? We're in the next car."

Ready to argue, the slight pressure of his hand stopped her words of anger. He smiled at the people near them. Curious eyes bore into her, waiting for her reaction. Cornered by her good manners, she nodded and followed him along the aisle.

She tugged on her hand and whispered. “Let go. There’s no way I can escape.”

Stihl didn’t alter his pace or release her hand. Her anger grew. How dare he track her down like a criminal? She’d done nothing wrong. All right, maybe she’d escaped his guard, but she owed him nothing.

At the door of his cabin, she marched past him without acknowledging his presence. Bold red cushions and white walls greeted her. The bright color was an unwelcome surprise. Most of the cabins were decorated in ground tones of brown and tan. The tall cushions on both walls fed into long bench seats. *A sleeper car.* Her anxiety grew.

She walked to the far end of the bench seat, wrapped her cloak around her waist, and settled onto the cushion. The past few zitons flashed through her head. After escaping the center, she’d managed to hop on a transit rail and travel across town to catch the train to Central City. Along the way, someone had stolen her luggage, and the black cloud of doubt had dogged her steps, but she hadn’t turned back. Yet, after everything, he’d still found her. Nothing was working out like she’d planned.

“A coward,” sang through her thoughts like a tribal chant. Even if she blamed him for the whole horrible mess, she still couldn’t ease her guilt over her actions of skipping out.

I have to face him head-on. Her decision renewed her energy, and she turned.

Stihl stood next to the door, talking to his friend. The sight of his bulging muscles increased her pulse. Dressed in tight black pants, he wore a short-sleeve shirt that revealed the long tan column of his neck. A sprinkle of his dark chest hair glowed against his tan skin. He looked like a display model for a fantasy lover. A tingle of awareness ran through her, but she refused to give credence to her illusion.

“That should do it.” He slapped the large man on the back. The blue-haired giant left, and Stihl turned. “Would you like me to take your coat? I’ll hang it in the closet for safe keeping.”

Because of the temperature in the room, she didn’t require a coat, but she hesitated to give it up. Her cloak offered a thin layer of protection.

Confused by his pleasant tone, she searched his face for any sign of resentment or anger. Surprise, his expression held none. She balked at the evidence, and doubts about his motives clouded her mind. What was the man up to?

The fear coursing through her blood forced her to her feet. She shoved the hood from her head, loosened the tie, and undid the snaps on the front of her cloak. Her wrinkled clothes wouldn’t place her in the running for Stihl’s fantasy lover. She opened her coat. His eyes narrowed, and heat entered his gaze. A shiver raced down her spine.

“Why don’t we cut the niceties?” Marohka clutched the lapel of her coat. “Why did you follow me?”

Stihl stepped closer. Avoiding him, she pivoted on her heels. His firm hands lifted the weight of her coat from her shoulders. Marohka remembered those hands. A flash of their gentle strength sent a twinge of awareness over her skin, and the memory of their kiss after the mating duel sped through

her mind.

“Who said I was following you?”

Stihl’s breath caressed her ear. Marohka shied away from the seductive warmth. Her next words sounded harsher with her attempt to squash the trembling nerves in her stomach. “Then how did you find out I’d be on this transporter?”

“I didn’t,” he said, crowding her with his presence. “Imagine my surprise when I saw you out the window boarding the train.”

She stepped forward to escape him and turned. “You want me to believe you haven’t been pursuing me?”

Marohka crossed her arms over the bag lying on her chest. It held the only items she had left for the trip. “What kind of idiot do you think I am?”

“I don’t think you’re an idiot at all.” Stihl threw her coat over his arm. “As a matter of fact, I believe you’re a very smart lady, which is why we should discuss our future together.” He paused. “Would you like me to store your body-pack in the closet too?”

She slipped the straps off her shoulders and handed him the bag. “Thanks.” Watching him closely, she fumbled with her gloves and stuffed them into the pocket of her pants.

“Look, whether you believe it or not, I’m not the enemy. I can help you.” After storing her things, he stepped to the bench opposite her and sat. “We can help each other.”

Unwilling to buy into the nice guy act, Marohka retook her seat. “And how, may I ask, do you plan on helping me?”

“Isn’t the award for best mineralogist up for grabs? If my sources are right, you’ll win.”

She worked very hard to receive the highest recovery rating. The prize should be hers. But how did the award have any bearing on their relationship?

“I deserve to win.”

“No doubt about it. But”—Stihl paused—“if someone on the council of elders said you don’t deserve it. Well then.” He studied his hands. “I’d say you wouldn’t have much of a chance.”

Not liking the implied threat, Marohka voiced her fury. “Are you telling me your father would black ball me because I’m . . . what . . . not living with you?”

Stihl slid back in his seat and smiled.

Whatever the man’s strategy, he exudes the confidence to win. She shrugged. If she lost the award, so what. She’d lost before. But his father could ruin her career.

“Let’s just say my father will do anything to make me happy.”

“So what do you want?” Marohka barked in a tight voice. “Because if you think I’m blending with you, you’re mistaken.”

“No, I’m only after a little cooperation. Promise to stay with me. We’ll get to know each other and see what develops.”

She didn’t answer, and Stihl continued. “No other strings.”

“And tell me why I should believe you.” Marohka knotted her hands in her lap. After his veiled threat, she had no reason to trust his promises.

“You have my word.”

Marohka stared at the snaps on his shirt. The idea of living with him held no appeal, but she hated the idea of being constantly on the run too. *Bad or worst?*

“Look, what are you afraid of? Most people think I’m a good person.” Stihl smiled.

Could she trust his handsome grin? “Yes, and forcing a person to do what you want them to is a trait of a good person. If that’s what your friends believe, I have no desire to know them.” Marohka released some of her resentment by fighting back. “What happens if I refuse?”

* * * *

Fascinated by her inner strength, Stihl could see her struggling with her emotions. Even tired from running about town trying to escape him, she still held herself under tight control. The outrage she felt over his strong-arm tactics sent quivers through her muscles. Her hands shook, and she flexed her fingers into her palms, creating bone-crushing fists which longed to strike out.

A wise man probably would’ve been afraid, but he didn’t fear her wrath. From the moment he started poking into her life, he’d discovered amazing things about her. She worked hard, followed Royal tradition, and traveled to the outback of Lustralia, but most of all, she reacted differently to him than other women did. They fell over themselves to please him, were easy to win, and easy to forget. Marohka demanded more.

His normal style of handling women didn’t include using threats and lies. His natural charm usually won him their favor, but she refused to give him a chance. The lie about his father’s power pushed her into a corner, but without any other option, he needed whatever edge he could get. Otherwise, Marohka might slip through his fingers and not comply with his plan.

Pressing his advantage, Stihl responded. “You won’t. We both know I can make things very difficult for not only you, but for your family too. Your father has a good reputation and has gained certain privileges with other honors pending.”

Marohka’s voice dropped in volume. The color in her cheeks rose to a blushing pink. Green sparks of anger glowed from her eyes. “Meaning what?”

“You wouldn’t want to be the cause of him losing his standing in the community. After all, the council of elders approves all types of permits and awards.” He paused, ready to play his final trump. He couldn’t let her anger affect him, not when he stood so close to having her safely in his grasp. “Sometimes, there are unexpected delays.”

This warning hit home. Her gaze dropped to the floor. Victory, though small, helped smooth out some of his earlier frustration at her disappearance. With her living with him, they could blend and settle down into a normal routine. Then he’d handle his business at the mine.

“All right,” Marohka conceded. Her green eyes met his. She brushed back the tentacles of red-brown hair fluttering around her face with a quick impatient gesture. “I won’t run away, but that’s it. Don’t expect anything else.”

With no desire to gloat, he changed the subject. “I hope you’re hungry. Cyd has gone after some food. He should be back any iton now.”

He sat forward, taking in the tight line of her jaw and the defeated position of her body. She looked exhausted. Once they’d eaten, he’d suggest they rest. The two benches formed a bed where they could stretch out. His loins tightened at the idea of her sleeping beside him.

Hitting a few levers on the wall, he prepared the table for the arrival of the food. “After lunch, we can nap if you’d like. I woke up early for our match, and I have a busy day planned. With only thirty zitons in a day, I need to regroup whenever I get a chance.”

Marohka shrugged, showing an uncaring attitude as to what he might want to do.

Setting up the table, Stihl worked to clear the air between them with meaningless chatter. The dark circles under her eyes informed him she couldn’t handle much more. He’d pushed her far enough for the moment.

“I failed to introduce you to Cyd. The big guy, the man you saw earlier, he’s my leave-it-to man. He’s also my best friend. We spend most of our time together.” With the table in place, he continued the one-sided exchange. “He’s from Periva. My parents were traveling there on business and found him on the auction block.”

He studied her reaction at this news. “I was a ten-year-old terror at the time, so my parents decided a friend would help calm me down. Also, they were afraid Cyd would become a slave if he stayed in Periva, so they brought him back as a playmate for me.”

“Is he your slave?”

“No, he was free the moment he reached Lustralia. But at the young age of twelve, my parents cared for him, and he became a part of my family.” He paused, thinking of the day Cyd had arrived. “We, however, had a bit of a problem at the beginning. My parents only knew a few words of Pervian—*no, yes, and where’s the lily.*”

Stihl smiled. The memory of Cyd and he roaming the outback woods around their mountain home

raced through his mind. In Lustralia, few children had so much land to play on. Every iton they had spent exploring, climbing rocks, riding alba-oxen or backpacking. Many nights, they had slept on the shore by the lake. Fresh air, woodsy scents, the warm summer sunlight on his back, the ranch had represented their playground and refuge, until his father had decided to relocate them to where a respectable family should live.

Their childhood promise to live in the mountains drove Stihl even now. “When I started my business, I signed him on as my second set of hands.”

Over the last few years, Cyd’s skills had kept them on track for achieving their joint dream.

“But don’t let him fool you. Cyd does what he wants, when he wants, no matter what.”

In a way, Cyd and Marohka were probably a lot alike. She might agree to live with him, but she’d fight him every chance she got. But then, he hated to lose too.

* * * *

Cyd balanced a tray in one hand and turned the doorknob to the cabin with the other. He stepped into the room unannounced. Silence vibrated off the walls.

“Great, the table is up.” His words filled the void.

Tension radiated from a stiff Marohka. Her hands lay folded in her lap, and she stared out the window at the blurred scenery flashing by. Stihl sat on the opposite bench.

With them sitting as far as possible from each other, nothing exciting could’ve happened between them. They appeared farther apart than the length of the country.

Despite his usual winning grace, Stihl hadn’t won the lady’s heart. Not if the current resentment burning from Marohka was any indicator. Their journey offered no rest. Instead, a bumpy road lay in front of them.

“I put the table up so we could eat the moment you returned. I’m starving.” Stihl reached out to help, but Cyd ignored him, setting the food down on the table unassisted.

Marohka shifted, edging closer to the end of the bench. She didn’t even peek at the meal. Alarmed, Cyd slowly backed up to block her escape.

She won’t get by me this time.

“What did you get?” Stihl uncovered the dishes.

The tempting scent of spicy peppers, curried tofu, and sweet-ripened fruit sent a rumble of hunger through Cyd’s stomach.

“A little of everything, tofu steak layers, beans and rice, an assortment of fruit, and ice cream berry swirl made by the way with real cream.” Cyd wanted to convince Marohka into staying put. “You

better dig in before this Luke here eats everything by himself.”

Marohka’s gaze avoided the feast. Instead, she stood, her focus directed on a spot behind him.

Hoping to hamper her attempt at escape, Cyd shifted back a few steps until his back hit the cold metal of the door. She ignored him and stepped forward. He glanced at Stihl for guidance. Intent on his task of examining the food, he paid no attention to Marohka’s movements.

“That’s very kind of you.” She walked to the lily door. “But I’m not really hungry. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll just freshen up.”

She stopped and leered up at him. Anger burned in the depths of her sea green eyes. Without another word, she disappeared into the lily.

Cyd wondered what Stihl had done to endear himself. Painful retribution lay in his friend’s future, of that, Cyd had no doubt. “Was it something I said?”

“No, she’s tired. After staying up too late last night and with all the excitement today, the match, her escape, and the disappointment of me finding her, she’s barely sliding by on low.” Stihl pick up a tofu layer. “Let’s go ahead and eat.”

Cyd selected a cup and spooned out some beans. “Did you question her about what she’s been doing for the last couple of zitons?”

“There’s no point. With the bedraggled way she looks, she couldn’t have had much fun.” Stihl shrugged, unconcerned. “She’s with me now, which when you think about it, is the only thing that really matters.”

“Right, but how long will she stick around?” Cyd asked, not sure if Stihl knew the situation might be short-lived.

“As long as I want her to,” Stihl stated and took a bite of beans and rice.

“Yes, and you’re delusional,” Cyd teased, picking up his tofu layer. The lady could escape faster than Stihl could imagine. Cyd knew first hand.

“No, she is not going anywhere.”

Cyd raised an eyebrow. “All right, care to explain?”

Stihl swallowed another bite and shook his head.

“Right.” Cyd wondered what stranglehold Stihl applied to force Marohka to stay put. From her reaction, it didn’t involve his charm.

They both ate in silence for a few itons.

“Look, once we’re through eating,” Cyd said, “I’ll disappear. Then maybe, you can make her rest.”

“My plan exactly.” Stihl studied his plate. “Can you give Dad a call and let him know we found Marohka?”

“Sure, I’ll have him call off the hunt.” Cyd popped a final piece of fruit in his mouth, swallowed, and then added, “Also, Joha called. He needs an advance on his portion check.”

“Again?” Stihl snapped. “He’s already a number of payments ahead.”

Cyd shrugged. Joha mishandled money. “Yes, but he says he’s had some unexpected expenses.”

“Right.” Stihl frowned and worried his thumb over his chin. “Give him half of what he normally gets and take the money out of our reserve fund. We’re pushing the limit until the next payment comes through for the qualtrillium.”

“We could withdraw some from our other investments,” Cyd suggested, knowing his friend’s weakness for rescuing his brothers. They liked to play on Stihl’s generosity.

“No.” Stihl shook his head. “Joha needs to learn there’s not an endless supply of money.”

“All right, I’ll tell him.” Cyd turned toward the door. He balanced the leftover food on the tray and stressed his next point.

“No funny stuff, Stihl. From what I’ve gathered about Marohka, she’s on the edge. If she wasn’t exhausted, I would’ve found you in a bloody heap on the floor when I returned.” He paused at the door. “If you plan to win her, you’d better go slow.”

“Yes, Mother Cyd.” Stihl hit the levers to close up the table. “I’ll be careful.”

* * * *

The soft knock on the door woke Stihl a few zitons later.

Cyd’s signal ran through Stihl’s mind. They must be close to arriving in Central City. According to their schedule, Cyd would be back in fifteen itons.

Stihl’s arms tightened around Marohka. She’d lost her battle of sleeping on the other side of the bed. She lay nestled against him with her head on his shoulder. Wisps of hair fluttered against his cheek, warm soft breasts covered by a silky blouse caressed his chest, and a long, cotton-clad leg fell between his.

The idea of moving away from her wasn’t very appealing. He wanted to enjoy the moment. She wouldn’t be as pliable after having taken a nap. He’d seen flashes of her inner-fire before he’d convinced her to rest. Sleeping with him hadn’t fallen in her *acceptable behavior* category.

Exhausted, she’d finally agreed to lie on the bed after he had arranged a few cushions down the center. Now with her strength renewed, he wasn’t sure what to expect. If she woke up plastered against him, how would she react?

He'd wager she wouldn't enjoy the unexpected surprise. He decided to seize the moment. Moving slowly, he rolled onto his side until she lay beneath him. With her still asleep, he softly laid his lips against hers to silence her scream and soothe her resistance.

He caught the soft sigh that whispered through her lips and tasted her unique flavor. The gentle awakening he'd planned died quickly under the demanding heat rushing through his system. He had to have more.

A playground of delights, her lips enticed him to enjoy more of the smooth texture and explore her mouth for hidden treasures. He'd kissed other women, but none who tasted so sweet. Every stroke of his tongue fed his desire to know her better and discover all her secrets.

* * * *

Marohka's dreams flashed images of Stihl through her head. His warm lips covered hers. The moist flavor of his mouth greeted hers. She welcomed the long stroke of his tongue and enjoyed the sinful sensations sliding through her system.

The hard line of his body snuggled against her chest. Her fingers wove their way through the soft texture of his hair. Strong and firm above her, he surrounded her with his heat. Hot, wet kisses ate at her lips. His desire fed the consuming need buried deep in her soul. Her hips bucked beneath him, begging for more.

A whistle blew. People shuffled about on the platform waiting for the train to come to a stop. A baby cried out at being disturbed. Passengers got ready to depart.

Marohka's world revolved around Stihl. He alone demanded her full attention.

* * * *

Stihl lifted his lips and stared down into her face. Her eyelids fluttered open. The soft, misty fog of desire he'd created within her turned into a thunderstorm of dark anger. Her eyes flashed with sparks of lightning.

He smiled.

Marohka's hand flew with such speed. He saw a blur, and then a right hook connected with his jaw. He rolled to the left and landed on the floor.

Unprepared for her quick maneuver, he lay spread-eagle on the floor. Stars glowed before his eyes. By the time they dissipated, she stood next to him gathering her gear from the closet.

Stihl sat and leaned his back against the bed. "Marohka, I'm allowed to kiss you."

With her back toward him, she didn't stop her search through the closet. "Who says?"

A knock sounded on the door. Stihl lifted his hips off the floor and sat on the side of the bed.

“That’s Cyd. We’re probably arriving at the station.” Stihl rubbed his jaw one last time and bent to slip on his shoes. “You enjoyed our kiss.”

“Right, you keep telling yourself whatever lie you need to.” She continued to dig through their gear.

Stihl stood. The woman had the panache to throw a man out of his own bed. Taking hold of her upper arm, he yanked her around. “I’m your mate. I’m allowed to touch you.”

The hard resolve in her green gaze stunned him for an iton before his own stubbornness kicked in.

“Only if I let you,” Marohka grumbled.

He stared at her soft skin. The best way to calm a nervous animal was to apply a gentle touch. He’d learned that lesson the hard way back on the ranch. He slid his other hand slowly along her arm, cupped her cheek, and caressed it. Leery eyes stared at him, waiting for him to step across the line.

She licked her lips. His focus shifted to her mouth, to explore, to capture, to claim.

The tension built between them. He read the uncertainty of her heart in her unwavering glare. She wanted him to kiss her, but she wasn’t ready to admit to the attraction between them.

The rasp sound of the doorknob turning broke the spell. With a slight swing of her head, his hand fell from her cheek. He released her arm, and she shifted back to the side of the bed.

“Good, I see you Lukes are ready to go.” Cyd stepped into the cabin. “The train is in the station.”

She sat on the bed to slide on her shoes. Stihl grumbled to Cyd, “Your timing, as usual, is rotten.”

The wide grin on Cyd’s face coerced a laugh from Stihl. Some of the tension knotting his stomach muscles eased.

Cyd retrieved their belongings from the closet. “Here, Stihl, you can help Marohka with her coat.”

Marohka stood, and the small space in the cabin forced her against his side. Her arm brushed his. She might not like him touching her, but with her so close, he couldn’t resist.

Stihl laid his hand on her back. Her trembling fingers tugged the wimple into place over her head.

“Cyd can carry our luggage, and I’ll carry your backpack.”

“I’ll carry my own bag.” She stepped away from his hand and lifted her bag with a smile.

Stihl didn’t argue.

Snubbing him, she turned away and slid on her coat. He waited until she secured it then shrugged on his own coat. “It will be crowded once we leave the cabin. This is the last stop on the line before the transporter turns around for its return trip to Royal City. Stay close. I’ve reserved an IPT car, which should be waiting outside the terminal for us.” Stihl touched Marohka’s arm, ignoring the look of

disgust she sent his way.

Cyd lifted their luggage. "I guess we better do this."

Chapter Four

Marohka stared stiffly out the window of the IPT car and ignored the man by her side.

The copper and silver structures lining the streets of Central City glowed with the light from the two suns of Lustralia. Some of the taller buildings had climbing stones up the sides of their steep walls. A few climbers, enjoying the city's favorite hobby, hung high above the crowds, stretching for the next hand or foothold. Safety lines fell like ribbons around them. Huge granite blocks sat in plazas with thorny cacti and towering palm trees. The desert patches displayed shiny stones of blue and purple.

Central City, the last city before the wilderness country of Lustralia, offered a spectacular view of the rugged snow-capped mountains in the distance. The pulsating beat of the city danced through the window at Marohka. The town's wild rhythm and her own unsettled emotions sent her blood jumping through her veins.

Should she allow herself to be attracted to Stihl? Let him get close? How could she stop him? He sat close beside her in the car, crowding her against the window. His arm stretched possessively around her shoulders. She fought to tame her unruly thoughts of being his willing mate.

Sports, a lecture, a subject, she fished for some topic to divert her mind off Stihl.

"The history of Central City." Dr. Spears's voice echoed through her head. She focused on his boring lectures, which she'd sat through during her last term at school. "As the original landing site of the Royal Clan, the elders selected the area because of the central spot on the continent. They hoped the location would give them protection from hostile enemies."

Dr. Spears had played with his pointing pole, rubbing it back and forth in his hand. Marohka remembered she'd used his habit to keep herself awake.

"The settlers were seeking peace, having come from a warring planet. They wanted to avoid the same types of problems here, so they set up a diverse community. They welcomed others from different areas. This gave the people from Periva the right to move in. They flooded the area with new ideas and culture growth."

With a shake of his head, Dr. Spears had added, "But the Royal Elders disliked the new city. They longed for a cultural area for themselves, one in which they didn't have to share with outsiders. So they relocated their settlement to the coast and established Royal City."

Marohka stared out the window and wondered about the reasons for the elders moving the city.

"In their new town, they took control and planned every detail. Buildings could be no more than four stories. Each section of the city had its allowable activity. No mixing of design from one area to another. Parks and open land were required every few miles."

Central City, Marohka noted, imposed none of those rules. A bar could sit next to a high-rise, a ballpark by a mall. All types of designs graced the streets. She loved the diversity, the freedom, the excitement.

“We’ll be arriving at our decker home in a few minutes.” Stihl glided his hand along her shoulder.

Marohka stiffened. His words and caress jerked her back to the present. Holding her hand, guiding her through the crowd, assisting her as she stepped into the car, he’d shadowed her every move since they’d left the train. He hadn’t let her do a single thing for herself. She felt like an invalid.

The car drew into a covered station. A large plaza stood next to it. Colorful robes, white turbans, leather jackets, all types of attire graced the bodies walking around carrying shopping totes. Red, blue, and blond-haired children played on small multi-tier rockets. A solar-powered jet lifted them to the top. Long tubes spiraled around and through the center of the display, which sent the children on a wild ride to the sandy playground below.

“This building has a mall and offices connected to it, so you never have to leave the area. It’s all right here.” Stihl captured her hand upon disembarking.

Marohka waited until Cyd cleared the door with the luggage before she tugged her hand free. “I don’t need any help.”

He smiled. She strolled past him and entered the lobby. He stopped her by laying a hand on her waist. “I wasn’t helping. I was touching.” He drew her up against his chest. “You keep forgetting we’re a couple.”

Her anger demanded she shout at him, but in a controlled whisper, she fought his rights. “We haven’t blended. And with your current rate of charm, it won’t happen any time soon.”

His eyes twinkled. Marohka wanted badly to knock the humor out of him with a punch to the gut. But before she could respond, he shocked her with a light kiss on the cheek.

“We’ll see.” His arm still around her waist, he led her toward the lift. “We’d better get moving. Cyd’s waiting.”

With him so close, the urge to ram her elbow in his stomach almost became a reality. Until as if reading her mind, he shifted his hand over her arm. He kept her from doing any damage. In the lift, Marohka stood very still. Even though she wanted to step away from him, he held her close to his side. The heat radiating from him smothered her with his presence.

Tantalizing thoughts teased her mind. Her heart raced. Every touch awoke nerve endings, which sizzled over her skin. She couldn’t breathe or relax. His hand caressed her waist, his breath ruffled her hair, and his chest crowded her shoulder. She shifted on her feet, and her arm brushed his bicep. The desire to wrestle him to the ground battled with the need to run away.

The lift doors opened. She drew in a quick breath and reaffirmed her resolve to stay. He directed her down the hall and released her to open the door to his home. He allowed Cyd to cross the threshold first.

“Cyd’s room is on the right, ours on the left. The door on the far wall leads to the service room.” Stihl ushered her into his home. “This is our place in the city.”

Marohka walked slightly past the foyer. In front of her in the middle of the room sat two Z-frame couches with plush, black-striped cushions. A small table stood between them. Another larger black table graced the back wall with two metal chairs on each side. The brushed metal walls held no artwork, the tables no pictures, no flowers, no frills—cold home with no personality, a functional house at best.

“Here is our computer system.” Stihl pointed to an alcove to the left. “You should be able to access anything you need.”

Marohka turned to examine the setup.

Cyd stepped out of Stihl’s room. “I put your bags on the bed, Marohka. Stihl, yours are in the dressing room.”

He strolled past her and paused at the entrance to his room. “I’ll see you Lukes later. I’m kinda tired after our trip.”

“In here is our room.” Stihl placed a hand on the small of her back and led her to his room. “Located behind the curtain is the dressing area. If you walk through it, you’ll find the lily pad.”

Marohka studied the gray metal walls. A king-size bed sat at the north end of the room. A black-and-white-striped comforter covered the surface. Each corner tucked into an ornate black iron podium. Copper nightstands framed the bed.

Her muscles tightened. She pictured some of the things Stihl might want her to do in bed. Surely, he didn’t expect her to sleep with him, not this soon? Before commenting, her gaze caught a scene on the far wall. The display captured her attention. Spellbound, she stared.

“That’s the view from the back porch of my family’s home in the mountains.” Stihl’s voice added a low, soothing quality to the scene. “I like having the scene as a reminder of what I’m missing by living in the city.”

She surveyed the details of the huge picture. Small animals scurried in the underbrush, disappearing in and out of sight. Large colorful birds, spreading their wings, flying effortlessly, graced the sky. Trees whispered in the wind. Leaves danced in sunlight. Both cast shadows on the ground. The landscape glowed with life. The mountains stood in peaceful solitude.

“Every thirty seconds, the picture updates to follow the changing light of suns. On a clear night, you can even see the distant stars.”

“It’s gorgeous.” The image tugged at her heart. “The mural puts you right there like you’re viewing it in person.”

“That’s the way I wanted it to feel. With an interior apartment with no windows, I decided a wall mural would enhance the place.

“Why don’t I take your coat?” Stihl toyed with her collar. His fingers brushed her neck.

Marohka jerked in reaction to his touch, drawn out of the tranquil countryside. She quickly recovered, undid the snaps, and let Stihl lift her coat from her shoulders. He carried her cloak behind the curtain. She turned, yanked the wimple off her head, and threw it beside her bag on the bed.

She needed to calm down, after all the changes that had occurred during the course of the day. With slow steady breaths, she released the clips holding her hair on top of her head.

“I have some work to do and a meeting around eighteen hundred . . .” Stihl stepped up behind her, and she glanced at him over her shoulder. His hand stroked the long braid running down the center of her back. “I forgot about your dowry.”

“No, my penance for not having a mate.”

“Well, the council has approved our joining so I believe we can have your hair cut.”

He lifted her hair in his hand and tested the weight. “With its length, we should receive a good price.”

Stunned, Marohka stepped forward. The tug of her hair stopped her progress, and she turned. Stihl didn’t release her braid. “You want me to cut my hair?”

“It’ll be easier to take care of”—his hands worked the band off the end of her hair while his gaze stayed glued to her chest—“if it’s shorter.”

“Stihl.” Marohka glanced down, fascinated at his large hands untwining her braid. “I like my hair the way it is.”

Mesmerized by his actions, she drew no air into her lungs. Then his knuckles brushed her nipple. Her breasts tingled with awareness. A low moan escaped from her lips.

With his hands on each side of her head, he freed her hair from its confining weave. His fingers combed through the multicolor strands and caressed her scalp with the mild tugging of his strokes. Her wavy hair rained wildly down around her shoulders. She longed for him to continue.

“I believe I’d like it about shoulder length.” He lifted her hair so the ends brushed softly against her shoulders. “If you want, you’ll still be able to wear it up.”

He stood in front of her, his hard muscular body crowding hers. No argument formed in her head. Then his gaze drifted to her mouth, and his brown eyes grew smoky. Butterflies fluttered into flight in the pit of her stomach. She couldn’t breathe, much less think. Her skin burned for his touch.

“Also, I . . . we have plans for tonight.” Stihl’s concentration, locked on her lips, didn’t waver. “First dinner with friends, and then I think Lisha said something about the theater.”

“Lisha?”

Stihl ignored her gasped question. “I’ll arrange for a hair appointment and order you some formal

clothes for the evening.” With one final stroke, he released her hair and his hands dropped. “If you want to pamper yourself, you can relax in a bath. I’ll be in the other room.”

Not waiting for her answer, he walked across the room and closed the door on his way out. Marohka gulped in a large breath of air. Oxygen hit her brain, and she popped out of her trance. Irritation hit her at the audacity of the man. With typical male arrogance, he’d demanded she cut her hair and hadn’t even listened to any other options.

“Wonderful.” She brushed back the tresses with a defiant hand, and a mischievous grin bloomed on her face. “Fine, I’ll cut it the way I’ve always wanted.”

From the moment she’d seen him on the train, he’d been getting everything his way, but not this time. He needed to learn she had a mind of her own. With his hands all over her, she’d been unable to process a coherent thought. But now, with him in the other room, she could start making some definite plans.

Today, she admitted, she hadn’t scored any points. In truth, she’d lost a sizable piece of ground. But she wouldn’t surrender just yet. She’d go to dinner. Not because he demanded her to, but because she needed to eat and she enjoyed the theater. No harm in having a little fun, but tomorrow, things would be different.

“Now, with him out of my way, I can get some things done.” She tugged her ECD out of her bag, placed it on her ear, and hit the connect button. “Seven, four, three, eight, seven.”

She waited for her messages.

“Marohka.” The tension in her father’s voice rang through her head. “I know you’re headed for the Trisar Mine because Almon told me you received the reports last night. I have confidence you’ll figure out the problem, but there’s a new twist.”

After a long pause, he continued. “Giulio is selling the mine, which means our contract will be up for renegotiations. This might relieve us from the current financial drain, but it could also mean we lose the mine and any potential profit.”

She clenched her hands into knots.

“Just thought you’d want to know.” His voice softened. “Be careful, baby. I’m sorry. I couldn’t detain Stihl. Love you.”

Great, which means we have no way of recovering the losses we’ve already incurred.

Half listening to the next message, she checked the time on the clock beside the bed. She needed to review those core samples at the local branch office. A useless feat with Stihl stationed outside the bedroom door. Even if she did disregard her stupid deal with Stihl and run away, it wouldn’t eliminate her problems.

The trouble at the mine still required her attention. The reports Almon sent her only confirmed that production was off and that the direction of the drilling was wrong. The dirt samples would tell her

how far they'd gotten off course. She had to make a trip to the mine. But how could she convince Stihl to accompany her?

The rest of the messages on her ECD played in her ear. She picked up her bag and headed for the lily. Why was Giulio, the old worm, pulling this stunt now?

Plagued with problems from the very beginning, the mine offered nothing but trouble. First with delays in getting the required permits, then with equipment problems, and now with the drilling, she didn't need Giulio adding his investment problems to the mix.

The foxy miner landed something new on his shovel. With his nose for mining, he probably found a new site to purchase.

In the lily, the soothing sound of rippling water caught her attention. In the corner sat a three-leg-length-tall waterfall. Water trickled down over large granite rocks and ended in a large black pool. Purple plants grew in planters on the wall. Yellow and orange flowers danced in a trough around the water's edge. Smooth shiny stone lay glued together at her feet like an island oasis.

A clean white bath sheet sat folded on a large black rock positioned next to the pool. Marohka eyed the cool clear water with longing. A bath might be just what she needed to relax.

The men in her life weren't giving her a break or appreciating her efforts. Her father, Stihl, and Giulio, they were all testing her resolve.

With the door locked, she undressed. Winding her wild mane up into a knot, she caught Stihl's unique scent in her hair. Visions of his hands running through the fine texture had her quickly deciding to place Stihl at the top of her list of worries. The way the man turned her insides to jelly could cause her some real problems.

She sank slowly into the soothing warmth of the water, closed her eyes, and let her mind settle. First, she had to find a way out of this crazy arrangement with Stihl. The rules stated if she didn't blend with him for the next six months, then she could claim they were unsuitable. The council would overturn the mating bond, and she'd be free. Even if he did set her on fire with anger and a little lust, she needed to stay focused on her objectives. She couldn't become involved.

Sighing, she drifted farther into the pool and relaxed. Why, she wondered, couldn't the tasks in front of her be easy? Stihl, her father, Giulio, they all wanted her to give them answers and bow to their demands, but at least they didn't treat her like a pretty bird.

She smiled and picked up the scented soap. *They must think I have a brain.*

* * * *

Stihl sat staring at his computer screen, searching for a special dress to accent Marohka's sexy body.

Cyd hit the controls to flip between screens from women's casual wear to women's formal attire. Most of the dresses were fluffy and modest with a leg-lengths' worth of skin-covering fabric. They reminded Stihl of the one she'd worn to the Mating Ball. Not the style for her luscious curves. With

this being his first chance to show her off, he envisioned his friends and acquaintances envious of his choice.

A dress caught his attention. “Zoom in on that one.”

Cyd shifted the pointer. “This one?”

“Wouldn’t Marohka look phenomenal in it?”

“She’ll get arrested in a dress like that. Every man in town will be drooling over her.” Cyd placed his hand on Stihl’s shoulder. “Are you dimcoco? Why ask her to wear such a dress?”

“Buy it.” Stihl chuckled. “I want Marohka to enjoy her gorgeous body and discover the joy of wearing beautiful clothes. Most women love dressing up. Why shouldn’t she experience the same thrill?”

“Yes, but a skimpy dress like that could be dangerous to your mental health.”

Stihl’s mouth widened into a large grin.

Cyd shrugged and clicked the buy button. “They recommend you buy the shoes too.” Cyd changed the screen to show him the picture.

“Sure, why not.” Stihl eyed the spiked heels.

“Buddy, you have issues.” Cyd continued the process of buying the items.

Stihl stood and walked to the couch. His thoughts turned to the pending contract. “Yes, and the first one is to try to sell our investment plan to Lord Kaleva.”

Cyd closed out the sale on Marohka’s gown and shoes.

Stihl drew in a deep breath, and his tone turned serious. “Hopefully, after our meeting this afternoon and dinner tonight, he’ll want in on the deal. Then you can work out the details, and we’ll be ready to hit Giulio with the best agreement ever.”

“What should I do with Marohka while you’re off at your meeting?” Cyd turned off the computer.

“I’ve made a hair appointment for her at a shop downstairs at eighteen twenty-two. They’ll cut off her braid, box it up, and send it to a buyer. Make sure you get a receipt.”

“What did she say when you asked her to cut her hair?” Cyd ran his hands through his own shoulder-length blue hair.

“I didn’t give her a choice. As my mate, I don’t want her looking like an old woman.”

Cyd stood and walked to the couch across from Stihl.

“Also, if she starts searching for the silly thing she wore on her head.” Stihl waved his hands above his hair.

“The wimple?”

“Yes, tell her she doesn’t need the ugly thing.” Stihl had no qualms about trashing the thing after finding it on the bed.

“But isn’t she required to wear it?” Cyd said with a confused frown on his face.

“Only until she has a mate, and I, my friend, am her mate.” Stihl smiled. She might fight him, but soon or later he’d win. Already, she was responding to him.

“She won’t like me escorting her around.” Cyd shook his head. “Why don’t I do this meeting with Lord Kaleva? Then you can spend more time with Marohka, and I’ll be out of your way.”

“Nice try, but I’ve already established a relationship with Lord Kaleva. If we change the arrangement now, we could blow the plan.” Nervous, Stihl ran his sweaty palms along his thighs.

“We need the sale to finance our mining operation. If we don’t gather more money together . . .” Stihl stroked his hands back down his jeans, letting the sentence trail off. “Dad is already pushing for the Morrison brothers to start strip mining. I won’t let them do that.”

“All right, you have a point, but I’m still stuck with dealing with Marohka.”

“You can handle her,” Stihl said, reassuring his friend.

“Yeah, right, remember I saw the two of you fight. If you hadn’t been prepared for her attack, she would’ve beaten your butt,” Cyd reminded him, “and you know it.”

“Don’t worry. You’re not the enemy. I am. She’ll be gentle with you.”

Cyd checked his time-marker. “How soon are you leaving?”

“Soon. I want to arrive early. Then maybe I can determine if Kaleva is in a good mood. I’m hoping to determine how much pressure to apply.” Stihl stood. “I guess I’d better say good-bye to Marohka.”

“What has she been doing for the last two zitons?”

“I don’t know, probably plotting my demise. She’s still not come out of the lily.”

“Any ideas about her trying to escape?”

“No, I think I can only read her thoughts if she’s under stress or upset.” Stihl left the room, walked through the closet and knocked on the lily door.

He waited. “Marohka, will you open the door?”

He jiggled the handle. "I need to leave, and I want to see you before I go."

"I'm fine." Her muffled voice drifted through the divider. "I'll see you when you get back."

"Open up." Not asking this time, he demanded she obey.

Stihl waited and listened. No sound. She couldn't have disappeared.

After a few moments, he tried again. "Marohka, come out. I want to tell you about the clothes I've bought you."

This time the lock clicked. The doorknob turned. He stepped slightly forward. The next instant, a bare foot landed on his solar plexus. He flew through the air and landed in a heap on the floor.

Marohka stood above him, wrapped in a white towel-sheet that displayed gleaming shoulders and long, sexy legs. Out of breath, he gazed up at the yards of smooth silky skin. He lifted his hand and grabbed for her leg.

She stepped back. "I don't need anything from you."

The door to the lily slammed shut, and the lock snapped home. Stihl spread out on the floor and staring at the door wondered what to do. The lady fought him at every turn. Her aggressive attitude should irritate.

And it probably would, if he viewed her uncooperative behavior as credible. But he didn't believe it. A clever front usually hid much deeper feelings. She had to be really squirming inside, or she wouldn't fight so hard. Instead, she'd be enjoying herself.

He smiled at the idea of her explosive energy centered on him. Her enthusiasm would more than make up for the few bruises he'd endured in the meantime. A delicacy for his senses, she tempted him with her soft luscious curves and then fought him with her strong unyielding will. Fire and ice, sweet and spicy, she'd be a delectable feast.

The best part, he decided, would be feeding her insatiable appetite. Her hunger to bond would eventually work in his favor by forcing her over to his camp. He could see no other reason for fighting the mating process.

Smiling, he struggled up off the floor and knocked again. "You can't hide behind a door forever. Sooner or later, you'll have to face me."

"Drop dead," echoed through the portal.

Stihl's patience evaporated. "I'm not the coward. It's you who won't open the door."

Not waiting for an answer, he turned on his heels, grabbed his coat, and stormed into the living room. "Remind me to get a keycard for that lock." Stihl fumed and slammed his way out of the house.

* * * *

Marohka entered the room.

“I guess he left,” she said and bit her lips.

“Yes, he’s gone.”

She nodded and returned to the bedroom.

Cyd wondered if he should clear out too.

* * * *

“Hey, Dad.” Tankton stepped into room. “Mom said Stihl has found his mate.”

The silent solitude of his sanctuary broken, King Zarro Fermesium groaned to himself, then scanned the warm leather-bound books lining his study. His oldest son walked to his grandmother’s hand-carved oak cabinet. The window above displayed one of Lustralia’s bright spring days. The music of birds drifted into the room.

“Yes, they’re probably in Central City by now. Is that your reason for interrupting me?”

The tinkling of crystal sounded when the lid of one of the decanters left its mooring. A generous splash of spirits fell into Tankton’s glass. A few drops landed on the fine finish of the wood. A dark dank smell hit Zarro’s senses. He frowned.

“Oh, were you working?” Tankton took a long swallow and set down his glass. “I thought you were just hiding in here as usual.”

Tankton refilled his glass. More spots landed on the pristine cabinet. Zarro waited for his son to clean up the mess. Instead, he turned. Zarro stared at the drops, and then glared at an almost exact copy of himself. The same brown eyes, square jaw, wide mouth, but in his son’s face, Zarro read a lack of drive and ambition.

“Why is he taking her out there?” Tankton lifted his glass and walked across the room to settle in a high-back chair.

“Aren’t you going to clean up your mess?” Zarro used a stern tone to convey his dislike at being disturbed.

“Sure, don’t want to leave a mess.” Tankton turned, muttering loudly under his breath. “What would the help say?”

Zarro set his pen down with controlled precision. “Stihl has business he needs to attend to. Unlike your writing, he can’t set his own hours. He’s required to meet with people when they’re available.”

“Oh, yes, Stihl’s important meeting.” Tankton sank heavily into the leather wingback chair across from Zarro’s desk. “Trying to raise money for the Trisar deal, right?”

“He needs the money to help finance the mining operation on our property.”

Tankton swirled the liquid in his glass. A few drops found their way onto the arm of the chair. Zarro felt the burn of the liquid on his skin and in his mind. His son cared for nothing but himself.

“Which if you think about it, doesn’t make a whole lot of sense,” Tankton stated. “We can make more money going the strip mining route.”

“We’ve been over this. Stihl is responsible for deciding what we do, and he refuses to have the property strip mined.” Zarro didn’t care to argue the point, like mocking the wind—pointless.

“Not if you don’t relinquish the property.” Tankton tipped back his glass then continued. “With Gran dead, you’re left with the decision as to when Stihl should receive the land. Why not wait until all the qualtrilium ore is out of it?”

Tankton’s old resentment at not being named heir of the land resonated from the heart of the discussion.

“That wasn’t the agreement.”

“Oh, yes, your strings.” Tankton spoke into his glass. “The way you control us all.”

“Wait, your grandfather was the one who required Stihl to take a mate before he’d gain control.”

“Right.” Tankton marked his mistake with a toast of his glass. “That’s why you’ve waited until now to enforce the rule, so you could choose his mate. A more unwilling bride couldn’t be found.”

Slurred words continued to come from Tankton’s mouth. “You even pumped bonding serum into the match.”

“Who says?” Bonding serum, a chemical mist used in extreme cases, helped couples to mate. The council had decided that with Marohka’s age, she’d need the extra help. But Zarro wanted to stifle any rumors about the event to protect the council’s position in the matter.

“Come on, Dad, why would Marohka faint otherwise?” Tankton said with a smug grin. “It was added insurance, wasn’t it?”

“You’re drunk.” Zarro resented his son’s accusations. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, well, not everyone can be perfect like you.” Tankton stood, refilled his glass, and returned to his seat. “Stihl should have the right to do whatever he wants without you interfering.”

Zarro raised an eyebrow. “What’s this, brotherly love?”

Tankton raised his glass in a mock toast. “Maybe.”

“Well, it won’t wash. The only reason you’re sitting in that chair drinking my liquor is because you want something. You don’t care about Stihl.” Zarro stared at his son, anger blooming in his chest. “More money is your primary objective, the faster, the better. You don’t care about the environmental impact. That, by the way, is the reason my father left the land to Stihl.”

Zarro controlled his temper. “You know Stihl is required to blend with Marohka. Otherwise, he doesn’t receive the right to make the final decision about the strip mine proposal.” Glaring at Tankton, Zarro stressed his next words. His tolerance on the subject finished. “I will.”

“Right, but we still have to wait a month.” Tankton stood and finished his drink. “Like you can’t make a decision before then.”

“Stihl deserves a chance.” Zarro ended the conversation. He waved his hand in dismissal to keep his son moving and picked up his pen.

“Never mind that the rest of us have to put our lives on hold. We don’t matter.”

Zarro ignored Tankton’s muttering. His son stumbled from the room.

Chapter Five

“Cyd, look at this.” Marohka held up the dress. “You can see right through it.”

“I don’t know anything about women’s clothing.” Cyd’s muscles bunched with the weight of the packages in his arms. “But Stihl really liked it.”

“I can see why.” She examined the emerald gown closer. No sleeves, not even thin straps on the shoulders, and long strips of gauzy material created the skimpy skirt. Only the main part of the dress provided any substance, which made it more like an elaborate bodysuit than a formal gown.

“It’s a nice shade of green. Kinda matches your eyes.” Cyd deposited the bags on the bed. “Somewhere in all this mess, there’s matching shoes.”

“Cyd, I’ll freeze to death if I wear this.” Marohka couldn’t imagine herself in such a revealing item.

“With your coat on over it, you’ll be fine.” Cyd sorted through the boxes. “Just go slip it on. Your hair took a little longer than it should have so you’re running a little late. Stihl will be here any iton.”

Marohka laid the dress over her arm, took the shoes he handed her and walked toward the lily. She’d try on the skimpy garment, but she’d never leave wearing it.

Before slipping off her clothes, she ran her hands through her short curls. Without the weight of the heavy braid, her hair fell into a natural wave. The stylist applied a follicle treatment. And now, her hair was permanently curly. Stihl, of course, might not like it short, but she didn’t care. Cute and sassy, her hair displayed the style she’d always wanted.

Unzipping the dress, she stepped into the leg holes. With its design, she’d have to undress every time she used the lily.

After zipping up the gown, she glanced at the full-length mirror. The dress fit like a second skin. Lightweight and airy, the shimmering green colors of the skirt danced around her legs and ankles. The silky breeze against her skin created the picture of her being a fairy in a dreamland.

She placed the matching shoes on the floor and slipped them on. Her extra height added to the illusion of her being a magical creature from a mystical land. With her short curly hair bouncing about her head and the skirt skipping about her feet, she felt young and carefree for the first time in years.

A knock slammed her back to reality. She strode to the door and hesitated for a moment before she opened it. *Is Cyd standing on the other side?*

“Glad to see you can open the door without a military maneuver.” Stihl walked through the door.

She stepped back. “I . . .”

His eyes widened in shock. The stunned expression on Stihl’s face surprised her, and she paused.

“Your hair is not exactly like I wanted it.” He toyed with a few curls. “But the dress is gorgeous.”

His fingers ran down her arm. He captured her hand and led her into a turn. The material of her skirt again flew out in a wide arch. He stared at her like a piece of priceless art. “You look beautiful. Your hair is perfect.”

After she finished the turn, his other hand caught her around her waist and drew her close.

Marohka placed her hand on his chest to hold him off. “I should warn you. I’ve had it with you touching me whenever you like. Whether you think I’m yours or not is irrelevant. If I don’t like something, I take corrective action. Because if it doesn’t fall into—”

“An acceptable behavior category then you won’t do it,” he finished.

She disliked him knowing her words or her thoughts.

“So I’m not allowed to touch you?” Stihl laid his other hand on her waist.

“Let’s just say you need to limit yourself.”

Stihl tugged her closer. “Meaning what?”

“If our relationship is going to work at all, I need to take things slower. I have to agree for you to touch me, and it has to stop when I say.” Marohka stepped back a little. “I’ll try to give you a warning.”

“So you want me to follow your rules?”

“Yes.”

“Then why don’t I let you touch me.” Stihl lifted her hands. After kissing each finger, he laid her hands on his chest. “Now you can go at your own pace.”

The hard muscles under his shirt caressed Marohka’s palms. His strength, so firm and unyielding, fascinated her senses. With him guiding her hands over his chest, she absorbed his rich, woody scent.

She allowed her hands to travel along his shoulders until they touched the back of his neck. His silky soft hair teased her fingertips. Pausing, she gazed into his sexy brown eyes and caught the gleam of desire stirring in their depths. Did she have the strength to resist?

Stihl smiled. “What if I won’t play by your rules?”

“Then, I’ll make you pay.”

A slight spark flashed in the depths of his eyes, revealing his advantage and his dismissal of her threat. He lowered his head. “Really?”

“Stihl,” Marohka whispered, and her eyelids grew heavy. He drew closer. “You’ve been warned.”

* * * *

Itons later, alone in the lily, Stihl remembered Marohka’s threat. He’d just begun to discover her lips when she pulled away. Desire demanded he draw her closer, but her hands in his hair jerked him back.

He rubbed his head and smiled. She’d punish him if he broke her rules. But the added threat excited him. His woman was one enticing lady. Soft as a kitten purring against his chest one minute, her claws bared the next. A dangerous combination he found strangely appealing.

Most women were more than willing to give him whatever he wanted. A little attention and a few trinkets, he received what he desired. Maybe, his gift to Marohka would soften her up.

He dug through his pocket and placed the items on the counter. Then once he’d hung his discarded pants on the cleaning unit’s hangers, he pushed the button to start the machine.

After putting on his formal black pants, he slipped on the sleeveless black satin shirt. After tucking in his shirt, he shoved her gift back in his pocket, slid on his jacket, and checked his reflection in the mirror. The jacket sleeves rolled up on his forearms. The lining matched the material of his shirt. The all-black outfit displayed the current style. He grinned.

Man, I look good.

After strolling into the closet to find his shoes, he walked into the bedroom to see Marohka leaning back on the bed on her elbows. The thin fabric of her skirt couldn’t conceal the long length of her legs, which lay crossed.

With her head thrown back, her short hair dripped down her back like a sea-maiden from one of his wet dreams. The smooth curve of her neck led to the creamy white skin of her shoulders. Her breasts thrusting forward demanded his attention. He wanted to hold them in his hands, lick them, and taste their silky flavor.

Her gaze caught his, and she rolled to her feet. “Are you ready?”

“Not quite.” Stihl walked forward. “Give me your hand.”

Marohka studied him a moment, then complied. He held her hand while he drew the gift from his pocket.

“I thought this would go nicely with your dress.”

Gift case in hand, she questioned. “What is it?”

Stihl didn’t answer. She lifted the lid and saw the contents nestled within. A gold chain lay on a bed of purple silk. An emerald pendant surrounded by diamonds.

“Oh, my, it’s beautiful.” She closed the lid and quickly shoved the box back. Her face turned a pretty shade of pink. “It’s way too expensive. I could lose it.”

Smiling, he took the box, released the necklace from its supports, and threw the case on the bed. “Then I’ll get you another one. Turn around. I’ll put it on for you.”

She studied the delicate necklace in his hands, her desire to refuse written on her face. “Please, Marohka, don’t argue.”

“But . . .” She turned. “I don’t know what to say. No one has ever given me such an incredible present.”

He slipped it around her neck and connected the latch. The gift flustered her, which surprised him. He’d figured she’d throw his present back, not politely refuse it. After she turned, he read the excitement dancing across her face. A large smile graced her lips. Her cheeks held a rosy glow. If for no other reason than to see the stars in her eyes, the gift warranted the price. Since they’d met, he’d not seen her so happy.

“Mind if I examine the necklace in the mirror?” she asked with enthusiasm. “I want to see how it looks with the dress.”

“Beautiful.” Unable to resist her innocent appeal, he bent and kissed her cheek. “Go ahead, we have time.”

* * * *

“Stihl, I must say the children enjoyed their visit to your ranch. They’ve been talking about all the different animals now for weeks.” Lady Lisha sipped her wine.

In their private dining area, Marohka glanced around at the elaborate cloth hangings. She barely listened to the exchange of the pleasantries of the other people at the table. The pictures displayed elegant ladies and gentlemen dancing at a fancy society ball. The large table suspended from the ceiling by a black twisted rope sat in the middle of the space. Red strips of material interwoven in the cord ran over the table. White flower petals added accents to the table. Blown glasses of crimson and gold graced each place setting.

“Yes, they’ve ask for a dog everyday since then.” Lord Kaleva picked up his glass of wine.

“I’m glad they had a good time. You’ll have to come back out for another visit,” Stihl said in a welcoming tone.

“Maybe if your dog has a litter we can get one of the puppies?” Lady Lisha asked with a smile.

Stihl stiffened beside Marohka.

“I’m afraid Dusty won’t be having any more puppies.” Stihl clenched his hand around his dinnerware. “She swallowed something she shouldn’t have.”

Lady Lisha started to say more. But before she spoke, her husband laid his hand over hers. A silent warning issued.

Lord Kaleva changed the subject. “Marohka, Stihl tells me you’re in the mining business. Are you helping him with the package he’s doing for Trisar?”

Stihl had mentioned working on a mining project, but he’d neglected to mention the name of the site. Although it wasn’t hard to guess why he deleted the point, considering her father handled the main contract for Trisar.

Not free to worry about the new information, she shoved the problem to the back of her mind. “No, Stihl doesn’t need my help.”

Stihl lifted her hand and kissed it before releasing her. “I enjoy her other talents.”

Lord Kaleva chuckled. “I bet you do.” The waiter poured more wine into his glass.

“You know, Stihl.” Lady Lisha shifted in her seat. “Women are capable of multitasking. I worked with Kaleva before we married and still work with him now.”

Shocked, Marohka stared. She’d never met a woman who’d continued to work after she’d taken a mate. “Do you have children?”

“Yes, three.” Lady Lisha smiled.

Seeking Lord Kaleva’s reaction, Marohka turned. “And you don’t mind her working?”

Lord Kaleva smiled at his wife. “Actually, I enjoy it. This way we spend time together both at home and at work. It keeps us in touch with what the other is doing.”

“The children have their studies and are happy with their own activities,” Lady Lisha offered in way of an explanation.

Shaking her head, Marohka wondered about continuing to work.

“Marohka is an accomplished mineralogist.” Stihl captured her hand again. “I’d hate for her to lose her unique talents, but she has to work in some remote sites. I wouldn’t want her to be on her own.”

“But, I . . .” Marohka started.

“We’ll explore our options later.” He squeezed her hand. “Tomorrow, we are traveling out of town so I can present my proposal to the Trisar owner.”

He turned to the other two. “And, Lady Lisha, I’m always singing your praises. Ask Lord Kaleva. I tell him all the time that, if it weren’t for you, he wouldn’t be where he is today.”

“Yes, Stihl is a very observant man.” Lord Kaleva leaned back while the waiter served his dinner. “He knows all the right buttons to push.”

If asked later what they talked about for the rest of the evening, Marohka couldn't have said, her mind busy contemplating other things. With them traveling to the Trisar Mine the next day, some of her problems were solved. But a number of new problems occurred to her.

The way Stihl treated Lady Lisha surprised Marohka. He laughed and teased them both. The easy way they talked to each other helped her to relax. Usually, when she dined with friends, the women held one conversation while the men another. She had no experience conversing with men. Even though she worked with men, they weren't friendly. Nor did they tease her. Every exchange centered on strictly business, nothing more.

Before they parted, Marohka turned to the older couple. "It's been very nice meeting you."

"Yes, and we'll see you later at the opera," Lady Lisha said while her husband helped her with her coat. "I want to run home and check on the children first. Otherwise, we could've shared a car."

"Yes, we hoped to arrive before the opening act," Lord Kaleva added.

"Then we'll see you later." Stihl guided Marohka to another IPT car.

Marhoka stepped into the two-seater and settled onto the blue plush double chair. Stihl scanned their note-cards and entered their destination then settled on the bench.

Unable to stop herself, she asked the question plaguing her all evening. "Were you serious when you said you'd let me keep working?"

"I haven't asked you to quit, have I?" He slipped his arm along the back of her seat, and the car air-spined along the wire.

"But I just assumed I'd have to. Are you telling me I don't?"

"Like I said, I don't want you heading off to some remote place by yourself." His fingers played with the curls at the back of her head.

"You mean like the site we're heading to tomorrow."

He caressed the length of her neck. She shivered. "I'm guessing it's the Trisar camp."

"Yes." His hand slid over her shoulder, and he drew her closer. "Giulio is selling off some of his shares."

To keep from landing in his lap, Marohka laid her hand on his chest. "I know. Is that why you chose me, so I could help you with your deal?"

"No, the Trisar Mine has nothing to do with us."

Marohka peered into his dark brown eyes. The rough texture of his thick coat toyed with the sensitive skin of her palm, but the padding cushioned the beat of his heart. She missed the steady

rhythm. “Then why me?”

He bent his head and nibbled on the side of her neck. “I . . .”—a little nip—“loved the purple dress”—another nip—“you were wearing,” then a longer nibble behind her ear—“the night . . .”

She tried to pull away. “Don’t tease, Stihl. Why did you pick me? Plenty of other girls at the ball would’ve loved to have been your mate.” Marohka longed for the truth. “Why me?”

Stihl smiled and brushed a strand of strawberry-blonde hair away from her face. “In a way, I guess you’re right. While I was researching Trisar, I kept coming across your name. I discovered a bright, intelligent woman who was also single. Curious, I decided to check you out.”

“Check me out? What is that supposed to mean?”

“I found out where you lived, what type of work you did, and what gym you belong to. The gym offered the perfect place to watch you. So I arranged to observe your workout one afternoon.” Stihl held her close, and her arms grew tired from holding him at a distance. The space between them shortened.

“That’s how you knew how to beat me,” Marohka exclaimed. “You saw me practice with my coach.”

“No rule against it.”

His stare shifted to her lips.

“That’s not really fair. You should’ve . . .”

He covered her lips before she finished.

* * * *

The sweet flavor of her ignited a fire inside him. He wanted more and tugged her hands from his chest to guide them up around his neck. Lifting her on his lap, he fought the barrier of their jackets. The longing to touch her warm silky skin and explore all her hidden points of pleasure had him drawing pictures in his mind of her warm and naked beneath him, responding to his every caress.

He couldn’t fathom why she was so addictive. One of her kisses felt like a drop of water in a burning desert. It didn’t quench his thirst. He trailed his hand over her stomach and found the opening in her coat. A vision flickered in his head, her belly round with a child, his child. Surprise rushed through him, and he broke off the kiss. He stared at her for an iton. “You’ll make a beautiful mother.”

Her eyes widened. Confusion swam in their depths. “I don’t think so. I’m not the motherly type.”

The car stopped. The automatic door opened for them to exit. Stihl helped her from the car. Upon turning, he caught sight of the three-story waterfall flowing down the front of the building. Small streams danced through the stone plaza. Ribbons of flowers in red, yellow, and orange marked each

path to the entrance. The soft romantic glow of rose moonstone reflected from under the water, lit the area with soft warmth. People milled around them, talking in small groups. Stihl stepped down one of the less populated paths on their way to the large glass doors.

After a few steps, Marohka stopped. He halted beside her and stared into her troubled eyes.

“You don’t know the first thing about me, Stihl. I’ve been around kids, and they don’t like me.”

“How do you know?” He drew her again into his arms. He couldn’t imagine a woman not wanting children.

Silent agony vibrated from her. He shifted closer, but she stood rigid in the circle of his arms. Her cheeks flushed from the cold, a frown marred her face.

“Well, they scream and cry and fight my very touch. I think that’s a pretty good indication they don’t like me.” Moisture sparkled in her eyes.

Uncertain if they were tears of regret or her inability of admitting to a weakness, he didn’t buy her explanation either way. “Marohka, children would love you. You’re a caring person.”

She shook her head. “How do you know?”

“Know what?”

“That I’m a caring person. We’ve only been together for a few zitons.”

“Well, you’ve been able to tolerate me.” Stihl contemplated how to continue. “You’ve decked me twice, and it’s always been in private so as not to injure my ego.” He hugged her close to keep her from backing away, then whispered, “Now, how much more caring could you be?”

“I could deck you here, if you want.” Her muscles relaxed. The teasing tone of her voice reassured him. His attempt at humor performed the needed magic.

“No, I’ll wait until we get home.”

Her laughter rumbled against his chest.

“And our baby wouldn’t dare cry.”

Marohka lifted her head. “Why not?”

Stihl stared at her and wrapped his arms tighter around her until his fingers grazed the underside of her breasts. “How could a baby cry with such beautiful breasts to feed from?”

Her eyes narrowed. Stihl acted quickly and covered her mouth with his to swallow her sharp retort. A battle of wills, a clash of tongues, every lunge matched with an answering parry. He seduced her mouth until she rested quietly in his arms. The soft moan, which escaped her lips, marked her surrender. He raised his head and stared at her full red lips. Her eyelids fluttered open. A mist of

doubt clouded their depths.

“I know you want me, Marohka. Why do you keep fighting me?”

She added distance between them at his question. “Stihl, I don’t even know you.”

“Time isn’t the issue.” Frustration rumbled through his stomach. Why was she holding him at bay?

“Maybe not, but I’m not willing to let this go any further.” She stepped out of his arms. “I can’t.”

Searching for a reason to hold her, he reluctantly released her and reminded himself that Lustralia traditions dictated Royal women wait until they found a mate before becoming involved with a man. Not surprising, Marohka distrusted the idea of him getting too close. She probably felt how much he needed her.

His stride a little wider, Stihl closed his hand around her arm and led her to the theater’s entrance. *It’s a good thing it’s cold out here.*

* * * *

The lobby of the Opera Hall was packed with a crowd of people covered in silk, satin, and cashmere. Diamonds, emeralds, and pearls graced the ladies fingers, necks, and hair.

Marohka wasn’t impressed. She’d observed this side of the wealthy before. On loan or out on consignment, most of the jewelry didn’t belong to the wearer. Few people could afford the real thing.

She worked her way across the room, making slow progress. The people, standing and talking in the lobby, filled the area with a low hum. Glancing around, she caught sight of Stihl by the wine counter. He’d said to meet her by the windows after she finished in the lily. He must have gotten delayed by the dark-haired man standing next to him. The stranger looked vaguely familiar to her, but she couldn’t place his identity.

As she shuffled her feet in his direction, she noticed every person she passed held a wineglass in his or her hand. With a step to the left, she avoided a collision with one man, but brushed against another. She turned and smiled. The man’s lecherous gaze shocked her.

“I’m sorry.” The words died on her lips.

The man’s glare raked over her like a hungry beast. Unable to move because of the crowd, he caught her by the arm and pressed his hips against hers. “No problem, sweetie, you can bump into me anytime.”

“I don’t think . . .” Marohka ready to drive her knee home into the ball brothers, paused when a tug on her other arm diverted her attention. She turned to see Stihl glared at the other man.

“I suggest you let the lady go.”

“Hey, I saw her first,” the man argued, leaning down to give her a sloppy kiss, one she managed to take on the cheek.

Stihl yanked on her arm, jerking her away from the stranger. “No. You release her, or I’ll pulverize your body to match your brain.” His stern tone demanded compliance.

The two men eyed each other like rabid dogs. Then suddenly, admitting defeat, the stranger released her and slurred his reply. “With a woman like her, you better watch her more closely. Otherwise, someone might steal her away.”

“I . . .”

Stihl jerked on her arm and set off through the crowd. She followed in his wake, staying with him until they stopped on the other side of the room. He stepped behind a tall planter and hid them from the crowd. His hand drew her to a halt and whipped her around. “Marohka, what were you thinking?”

Confused by the whole exchange, she knotted her hands into fists as her temper flared. “What do you mean? I simply bumped into the man. He’s the one who grabbed me.”

“Are you blind? Couldn’t you see he was drunk?” Stihl’s fingers dug into her arm.

“I didn’t see him at all. I just told you I bumped into him.” She swung at him and hit his shoulder. “Now, let me go, you’re hurting me.”

Stihl released her arm and crowded her against the planter. His arms on either side of her pinned her in place. “Stay away from him.” His dark eyes narrowed.

“Gladly,” she spat back with equal venom and shoved him away. “Now, back off.”

His nostrils flared. The sharp scent of battle perfumed the air. If he refused to comply, she wondered how she’d force the issue. He finally shifted away, and she released the breath she’d been holding.

Still stiff with anger, he warned her to tread softly. “I don’t share, Marohka.”

Unwilling to follow his advice, she resented his predatory attitude. She could take care of herself. “I didn’t ask you to.”

Then as quickly as his anger ignited, it died. With a change of moods, he laughed and tugged her to his chest. “I guess I can’t blame you for the man being a jerk.”

“You were trying to,” Marohka pointed out and wormed her way out of his embrace. He might be able to forget the whole incident, but she didn’t forgive that easily.

She walked out from behind the planter and glanced around.

“I don’t like other men touching you,” he whispered under his breath from behind her back.

Marohka ignored the comment and focused on Lord Kaleva and Lady Lisha weaving toward them.

“We thought we would bring both of you a drink.” Lord Kaleva handed them each a glass.

Not caring much for wine, Marohka took the glass more because she wanted something to do with her hands than because she was thirsty.

“Now a toast?” Lady Lisha raised her drink.

“How about to the happy couple?” Lord Kaleva toasted them. “Here’s to many happy years ahead.”

Unable to avoid taking a drink, Marohka raised her glass. The wine on the tip of her tongue tasted bitter. She forced down a small sip, just enough to wet her lips.

“Thank you.” Stihl lowered his glass. “And how are the kids?”

Lady Lisha answered. While the others talked, Marohka shifted back behind Stihl and poured some of her wine into the planter. The bell sounded for the start of the show. Startled, she tipped the glass a little more.

“We’re upstairs so we better go. We’ll see you both later at the intermission.” Lord Kaleva led his wife away.

Marohka stepped around Stihl. “I guess we should make our way inside, too.”

He retrieved her glass from her hand and set it on the rim of the planter, then escorted her into the auditorium. “We don’t have the best view. We’re near the back on the lower level.”

He guided her to their seats, which consisted of a double chair with no armrest between them. She sat on the far edge of the cushion. The noise level in the theatre made it difficult to talk, so Marohka glanced around at the crowd. In the lobby, the temperature was set at a comfortable level. The auditorium’s air system sent a cool breeze down over the crowd. Stihl’s body radiated an alluring heat. She wanted to snuggle up next to him, but she ignored the temptation.

The lights dimmed. The crowd quieted. Marohka crossed her legs, attempting to maintain her body heat. Without her coat to keep her warm, she wished she hadn’t let Stihl check it after they entered the theater.

For once, Stihl kept his distance. Not touching her, he sat on his side of the settee. The curtain rose. She peeked over at him before glancing at the stage. He appeared to be interested in the start of the show.

The music swelled to a crescendo. An answering beat pounded at her temples. The stage blurred. Her gaze couldn’t penetrate the layer of fog. She blinked several times, but her vision remained cloudy.

As the volume increased, the drum inside her head raised its tempo to beat out the competition. The

blinding pain forced her hand out. She groped for Stihl. Her hand found his inner thigh. “Stihl . . .”

Unable to bear any more, she struggled to her feet. *I have to get out of here.*

Rushing past him, she stumbled for the exit. At the door of the lobby, someone caught her by the arm and spun her around. Dizzy, her world tilted. Blinded, she grabbed for the man in front of her and fell into his arms. Stihl caught her against his chest. Her head fell back over his arm.

“Marohka, what’s wrong with you?”

Chapter Six

“Cynd, we have a problem,” Stihl said into his ECD. With Marohka in his arms, he dropped into the hard seat of the IPT car.

“What happened? Marohka skipped out on you again?” Cynd answered with a laugh.

“No.” Stihl shook with fear. “I think she’s been poisoned.”

He stroked her hair where she lay on his lap. “Her tongue has several green spots like Dusty’s. Call Harrigun. Get him over there right away with the antidote.”

“Right, how long until you arrive?”

“We’re on our way. We’ll be there in a few itons,” Stihl grumbled, “if this car would travel a little faster.”

“Harrigun will be here by the time you arrive,” Cynd ended.

A cold sweat dripped down Stihl’s back. He debated whether to take her to a medical facility. He didn’t believe they’d be able to diagnose her problem. When his dog, Dusty, got sick, they figured out what happened after he died. Better prepared this time, Stihl felt confident he could arrange the right kind of help.

A warning? Or did someone miss the mark, and he should be the one out cold?

He scanned Marohka, and a strange emotion bloomed inside him and poured through his cells. He wanted to identify the gut-wrenching pain.

Anger.

Yes, but it didn’t explain the ache around his heart. Outside of beating someone senseless in some barroom brawl or fighting with his father, he rarely experienced this type of deep twisting reaction. And he disliked the feeling.

Why would someone wanted to hurt her?

Stihl knotted his hands.

Protective.

Maybe, a part of what he was feeling was that he should’ve shielded her from any type of attack. The fear which had consumed him when she’d fainted in his arms still rumbled through his nerves like sharp knives. He’d admit blending with Marohka offered a certain level of excitement. And she might prove to be useful for his new adventure, but any deeper feelings like fear or grief were unrealistic.

A means to an end, a useful partner, a possession, nothing more could exist. Nothing more was

feasible. He lacked the time for the love and commitment routine.

The twitch of her hand against his forced him to question his callous thoughts. A beautiful person with feeling and desires he'd only just begun to understand, she'd won his respect. Devoted, she'd fought to protect her family and also to maintain her career.

As his responsibility, he sought to secure her safety and convince her, their marriage could work. But . . .

The car stopped in front of his building. He stood with her in his arms and then strolled through the lobby. Right now, with her in danger, he'd have to worry about his emotional attachment for her later. The lift doors opened. He stepped inside and pushed the button for his floor. The lift jerked to a start. His arms tightened. She moaned and struggled for her next breath.

"Could the floors be any farther apart?" Stihl growled an iton before the doors opened to his floor.

Hurrying down the hall, Stihl saw Cyd standing by the open door.

"Where's Harrigun?"

"I'm here. Why do you think she's been poisoned?" Harrigun walked out of the service room.

Stihl gently laid Marohka on the couch and quickly backed out of Harrigun's way. "I saw green spots on her tongue."

He squatted beside Marohka and opened her mouth. "Yes, I can see them." He tugged an amber-colored bottle from his pocket and placed several drops into her mouth. "Tell me what happened."

"I'm not really sure." Stihl rubbed his hand along the back of his neck. "We ate dinner and then drank a little wine at the theater. She seemed fine until the lights went out. Then she suddenly jumped up and ran out of the theater. I followed her, and she collapsed in my arms when we reached the lobby."

"Has she responded at all since she fainted?" Cyd asked.

"No, she hasn't regained consciousness since she passed out. She's barely been able to breathe." Stihl struggled along with her each time her chest rose and fell with effort. "I rushed her here for you to check her, Harrigun. You can't let her die."

He suddenly realized his potential mistake. "Should I have taken her to the medical center?"

Harrigun smiled and looked up. "No. From what I can tell, she didn't consume much of the poison. Other than a few small spots in her mouth, there are no other major indications of distress."

"Then she'll be all right?"

"Yes, her breathing is already improving." Harrigun stood and patted Stihl on the back. "No harm done. If she'd consumed more—well, then we could've had a problem."

Stihl shrugged off his coat and threw it over the arm of the couch. He settled on the low table in front of Marohka. Her eyes closed, her skin pale, she appeared almost dead. Running his hand lightly over the pulse in her wrist, he reassured himself of her place among the living.

“The bad part is the antidote will take a while to work through her system. She’ll be out for the rest of the evening.”

Cyd laughed. “That’s probably a good thing. Otherwise, Stihl might be the one at the medical center.”

“A feisty one? Did she put up a good fight in the mating arena?” Harrigun sank onto the other couch next to Cyd.

“You better betcha.” Cyd chuckled. “This Luke here wouldn’t have stood a chance if he hadn’t received help from her trainer.”

Stihl stared at her, struggling to find answers for what had happened. “Why would anyone drug her? She doesn’t even know anyone in town.”

“Maybe she wasn’t the target,” Harrigun said.

Stihl shuffled through his jumbled thoughts. To calm his nerves, he lifted Marohka’s hand and laid it in the center of his. “That might be true, but what were they hoping to achieve? Me dead? And if so, for what purpose?”

“Well, there’s the Trisar business. Maybe someone doesn’t want you to close the deal,” Cyd offered.

Stihl tried to wrap his brain around the idea. “No, I can’t see that as a reason for wanting Marohka or me dead.”

“What about a jealous lover?” Harrigun asked. “There might be a man who wanted her for himself.”

“Then they missed their target,” Cyd said.

Stihl observed the pale color of her face. “No, if someone loved her. They wouldn’t have taken this type of chance.”

The couch squeaked. Harrigun shifted his position. “What about your inheritance? Could someone be after that?”

Stihl really disliked the idea. He glared at the two men on the other couch.

“He’s got a point.” Cyd’s eyes narrowed. “If something happened to her, your father would revoke your rights to the land. So it won’t matter if he killed you or Marohka, he’d still eliminate the problem either way. You wouldn’t receive your family’s property or the rights to mine.”

“If you’re right, she could still be in danger?” Stihl stroked her hand and worried about what to do.

“It’s hard to say, but it’s a serious concern.” Cyd glanced at Marohka. “We’ll need to be very careful and keep our eyes open.”

“Where did you get the drinks at the theatre?” Harrigun asked.

“Lord Kaleva and Lady Lisha brought them over to us. I can’t be certain where he bought them. The bar, a waiter . . . anyone could’ve tampered with them before he delivered them.” Stihl paused a moment in thought. “Also, they weren’t at the party where Dusty died. How would they know to use the same poison? You told me it was rare.”

“I didn’t say they did it. I was just trying to narrow the field. Was anyone else there that you knew?” Harrigun asked.

Stihl reviewed the events of the evening. He hadn’t noticed anyone but Marohka. “Not that I recall seeing.”

Harrigun shifted to the edge of the couch and rose to his feet. “Then we’re still at a loss as to who could be behind this attack.”

“Maybe your father could help.” Cyd stood too.

“No, he’ll only want us to move in with him, and I can’t live with Tankton.” Stihl added for Harrigun’s benefit, “My brother and his family are currently staying with my parents.”

“Tankton says he’s trying to save money for a big investment deal he’s got going,” Cyd said.

“Right,” Stihl added.

Cyd drifted toward the door. “We’ll just have to be vigilant and not let Marohka out of our sight.”

“I’ll file the reports on the incident with the authorities so there’ll be a record of the problem.” Harrigun handed a bottle to Cyd. “Here’s some more antidote in case you need it. She should be fine, but if she has any problems, give me a call.”

“Thanks, Harrigun. I appreciate your coming.” Stihl rose. “I think I’d better get her to bed.”

The two men watched Stihl lift Marohka into his arms. “You did say she’d be out for the night?”

Both men smiled.

“I’m sorry to say whatever you had planned for the evening will have to wait. There’s not an antidote to the antidote.” Harrigun’s words rang with laughter.

Stihl admired her beautiful face and released a small chuckle. “Well, at least I can undress her without a fight.”

He shut the bedroom door behind him with his foot and walked to the large bed. After laying her

down, he slid her coat off her shoulders. Her short hair circled her head like a renegade's crown. He wondered where she found the energy and strength to constantly oppose him.

Her rebellious nature fought him every step of the way. First, with how she should've cut her hair and then with her not opening the lily door. It didn't take a royal council member to tell him she'd be a challenge. He smiled. She'd also be an interesting mate to have.

Tonight, he'd come too close to losing her forever. The idea of never having her pricked at his heart. Could she forgive him for letting someone close enough to threaten her life?

Unable to keep from touching her, he brushed a curl away from her face. Her wild hair wove its silky softness around his fingers, fighting him like she did. Nothing about her came easy. She wouldn't surrender. Each victory, he'd have to earn.

Even the idea of him playing with her hair would annoy her. He toyed with her bangs a few more moments, then shifted to her feet, and undid the straps of her shoes. His fingers glided over her ankles, and he examined her delicate feet. Was she ticklish? He caressed the ridge of her arch, but she gave him no reaction.

On his leisurely path up her leg, the smooth satiny skin slid beneath his hand. No hair grew in his path. For some reason, Royal women lacked hair on certain parts of their body. He didn't grasp why. He just appreciated the fact.

The thin fabric of the skirt blocked his touch. Stihl slid his hands below her hips and gently rolled her over onto her side. The zipper of her dress teased him all evening. Now, he parted the material with a gentle tug. With the creamy skin of her back exposed, he shoved the fastener to its home at the base of her spine.

Rolling Marohka back over, Stihl slid the dress down her legs. Once free from her legs, he threw the dress across the room and stared at her naked body. The sight of her beauty heightened his awareness, and his pants grew tighter. He reminded himself this wasn't about his lust. She couldn't respond, and he wouldn't take her without her participation. He wanted her on fire when they shared their bodies, not out cold.

The smart thing to do would be to cover her and go for a climb on the side of one of Central City's buildings, a slow descent down the stones to curb his desire and wear him out.

Spellbound, he forced his fingers to undo the buttons on his shirt. The soft slope of her breasts, the curve of her waist, the tricolor hair between her legs, she held him prisoner with her beauty. His gaze landed on her breasts. He examined the full globes and rosy peaks. He wanted to close his lips around them.

In his fantasy, he envisioned her warm, silky skin a breath away from his mouth. He directed the picture in his head so his tongue licked the tip of her breast. It hardened into a tight bud against his lips. The perceived taste of her luscious skin played over his taste buds, and he imagined drawing her nipple into his mouth. His mind offered his other hand free rein to knead her other breast.

She moaned.

Stihl's eyes sprang open. To his surprise, her nipples peaked in response to his imaginary kisses. Yet, she wasn't awake. The connection between them sizzled in the air.

With unsteady hands, he tugged his shirt from his pants and discarded it. Were they linked? Could they share each other's desire without physical contact? Could he enter her thoughts? Would he be able to learn if she blamed him for tonight's events? The idea intrigued him.

Maybe if he enticed her into enjoying his touch by seducing her mind, it'd help her adjust to the physical side of their relationship. She lacked experience, but this might be a way to show she had nothing to fear. He undressed, slid into bed, and closed his eyes. With his hands resting on his chest, he centered his thoughts on Marohka. He focused on drawing her into his dreams.

She had admitted his touch bothered her, so he moved slowly. In his mind, his hands slid softly over her delectable curves. Making his strokes light, he drew her closer and closer until she rested quietly next to him. Her hand on his chest, her head on his shoulder, her breast pressed against his side, and a leg slid along his thigh.

Each breath she inhaled appeared quiet and peaceful. A dreamy soft haze surrounded her in his musing. He drew the pictures in his mind and released his hand to take a leisurely path down the center of her back to the base of her spine. With each caress, he shifted her farther up onto his body until she lay across his chest.

Her thoughts blended with his. He viewed the scene through her perspective. Her hands flowed over the ridge of his shoulders. Her legs straddled his waist. She rose off his chest. In her eyes, he read desire. The same hunger ate at his loins. Directing his part of their joint fantasy, he cupped the back of her head and guided her mouth down to his. He tasted the flavor of her lips.

"Stihl . . ." The breathy whisper reminded him of her being with him in his head, but in the physical sense, they weren't even touching. He slid his hand across the sheet and laid his over hers. Energy shot up his arm. A sharp wave of searing need washed through his senses.

* * * *

Marohka trembled with longing. The hot, wet hunger of Stihl's kisses left her stunned. The physical connection to him appeared to be real. Yet, the pictures running through her mind had to be a dream. No man could want her that much.

In her fantasy, she broke free of responsibility and responded to his touch. Her mouth tasted the moist male flavor of him with each deep stroke of her tongue. Her breasts snuggled against his chest. His warm body caressed her stomach, hips, and thighs with heat. The beat of his heart matched hers.

She couldn't get enough. Her hands raced over his chest and shoulders with hurried, teasing strokes. Each line of his hard contour fed her appetite for more. Her senses soared with a need to become a part of this man, to have him buried inside her. The same desire glowed in his deep brown eyes. His gaze seared a path down the center of her body. She wondered if qualtrilium would melt under their heat.

The scene shifted. Stihl's mouth moved to her breast. His lips tugged at her nipple. A deep raging hunger threatened her control. Overwhelmed, she redirected the action in her dream by taking Stihl's face in her hands.

The dark, velvety softness of his eyes sucked her into a vortex of doubt. Fear clouded her mind, and the picture shifted. A fierce storm howled out a warning. A small object pulsing in her hands caused the vision in her head to change again. This time, Stihl stood in front of her with his hands cupped and dark red blood dripping between his fingers.

Marohka looked closer. In the center of his hands rested her heart, bruised and bleeding, its rhythmic tempo stopped.

* * * *

A number of zitions later, Marohka struggled to turn over, but a heavy burden held her in place. Fear pounded through her chest. She fought against her dark dreams.

She opened one eye and focused in on her surroundings. A woodsy scent floated through the air. A blank wall stood across from the bed where she lay. On a nightstand, a clock recorded the early morning time. Neither explained where she was.

Lifting and turning her head, she peered over her shoulder and found the source of the problem. A thick muscular arm lay across her back with a warm hand clamped to her left hip. Unruly brown hair circled the head which rested on the pillow next to hers.

Disoriented, it took an iton before she clued in to the person holding her down. With recognition, came the shock of finding herself naked in bed with Stihl. Her mind scrabbled for an explanation.

Was the wine from last night the reason behind her lying in bed with Stihl this morning?

Pictures rolled through her mind, and she recalled the events from the night before. They'd been at the theatre. Then somehow, they were in Stihl's bedroom. Her memory flashed the imagines of Stihl undressing her, the heat in his eyes when he caught sight of her naked. She'd wanted to cover herself, but for some reason, her hands wouldn't move. Paralyzed, she'd endured his warm gentle touch on her skin until her blood had boiled with desire.

Her heart accelerated in reaction to her thoughts. The searing intensity of his lips sent a moan of desire from her lips. The melting sensation in the pit of her stomach seduced her mind into wondering what had happened between them. He could've taken her. She wouldn't have fought him.

"Did he?" she whispered.

No, a voice screamed in her head.

Using all her effort to free herself, Marohka shifted her legs to the edge of the bed. Slowly, so as not to wake him, she let his arm and the blankets skim across her back. She dropped onto the floor and

out of bed. Once free, she leaned against the wall and stared at Stihl. She brushed multi-colored strands of hair out of her eyes with disgust.

Had he taken her without her consent? She didn't feel any different, but would she, if she wasn't conscious? Her mind grappled with the thought, trying to come to terms with the idea. Stihl hadn't done anything to indicate he'd take such liberties. Even though by Lustralia law, he had the right.

She stared at the muscles in his back. An image flickered, but wouldn't focus in her mind. She shook her head and glanced at her hands. The budding design on the back of her left hand sent panic skittering through her system.

How could he? He started the blending process.

Anger lit a fire. She jumped to her feet, stalked around the bed and stared down at his resting form. Her fists clenched at her sides. She shook with rage, and plans of how to extract the greatest amount of revenge sped through her head. The marks he'd developed on her hand meant her chance for freedom now lay in ruins. Her logical mind raced with options. Claw marks across his back, a blow to the head, a few well-aimed punches. She wanted to do something to cause him pain.

Her hands tingling with readiness, she leaned forward to grab him around the neck. A glimpse of his left hand alleviated her panic. No stain graced it. Recognition dawned. *She* hadn't marked him. Relief rushed through her system. The bonding process wasn't complete until they both shared their symbol and their bodies with the other. She still stood a chance of escaping.

The dark design on the back of her right hand stood out. The transfer of her symbol hadn't begun. He might've started his part of the process, but only she could complete it.

After a few deep breaths, Marohka regained control of her anger and stepped backward. The battle wasn't lost. She could still argue they weren't suited for each other.

Her gaze skated over the muscles in his back, the curve of his butt hidden under the blankets to his wide feet. He possessed the body of a warrior, strong and powerful. A tingling sensation started in her breasts. She recalled lying on top of him, the firm muscles of chest caressing her nipples. Incredibly appealing, his body called to hers.

Her hand sprang forward to brush back his hair that fell over his eyes. She paused in route, suspended by the call of duty to her job. What about the Trisar Mine?

Now would be a great time to go to the Central City office and check out the core samples. With Stihl asleep, it might be her only chance to run her errand. To avoid temptation, she turned and headed for the dressing area. In a few itons, she changed into her new clothes and stepped out of the bedroom. The door slid quietly closed.

She glanced at the front door. Cyd warned her about their security system. It would sound if not disengaged before the door opened. He hadn't divulged the code, probably because he distrusted her.

Sitting at the computer in the living room, she searched for Stihl's bank account log. She found it,

wrote down his account number and the amount of the purchases he'd gotten for her yesterday. After a quick transfer of funds, she paid her debt.

After sending a few VIMs to coworkers, she drafted a virtual interpersonal message to her father. He and her mother would want to know she was all right.

"Of course," she muttered, "I could call them."

Not with all the questions they'd ask. By writing them, she could tell them what she wanted and delete what she didn't.

Once her computer tasks were done, she logged off and turned. A call for caffleck drew her to the service area. She milked a few drops of brown liquid into her cup. The rich aroma cleared her foggy head. She wondered how she could escape the apartment for a few ziton.

"Well, good morning," Cyd said from behind her. "How are you feeling?"

Marohka turned and found the answer to her problem. With a smile, she brushed her hair back. "I'm fine."

"I see you've found the supply of caffleck. I thought you and Stihl would sleep the day away." Cyd picked up a cup.

She stepped to the doorway and left her cup on the counter. "I don't require a lot of sleep, especially when I need to get things done."

"Like what? We did all Stihl's errands yesterday." Cyd pushed a few buttons on the caffleck machine. "Did he come up with something else?"

"No, but . . . I have a few things to do before I leave town. I thought maybe, if I promised to be back in a ziton, you'd disarm the alarm system for me."

"Why don't you ask Stihl?"

"He's asleep."

"No way. I can't let you leave without Stihl's approval." Cyd shook his head. "I've already lost you once."

Marohka stared at the floor and weighed her options. She hated her choices. "What if you went with me?"

He frowned.

She rushed to reassure him. "It won't take us long. He'll never even miss us."

"It's not a good idea."

“Are you telling me I’m a prisoner?” She walked back into the living room. “I can’t leave unless Stihl agrees to it.”

Cyd followed, his cup positioned in his hand. “You’re not a prisoner. Stihl is trying to keep you safe.”

She stepped to the door and glanced at Cyd. She had to force him into complying with her plan. If he wanted to play rough then she’d raised the stakes. With her hand on the doorknob, she made her stand. “Fine, I’ll just open the door anyway and take off.”

“Wait, what about your agreement with Stihl not to skip out?” Cyd stepped forward.

“I’ll come back. But in the meantime, you’ll have to deal with a sleep-deprived man who is sure to be angry because you didn’t stay with me.”

The undecided frown on his face forced her to push harder.

“What’s it going to be? I head out and you chase me in your pajamas? Which, I bet, doesn’t hold your ID card?” Marohka slid her hand in her pocket drew out a thin piece of plastic. She waved it in the air. “Or do I wait, and you accompany me?”

“Be reasonable, Marohka,” Cyd said, taking several steps forward. “Stihl will slit my throat if he wakes up and you’re gone.”

She turned the doorknob. Cyd stopped.

“Come any closer, and I’m out of here.”

Cyd slammed a fist into the pocket of his robe. “What’s so important?”

“I need some information about the Trisar Mine from my office here in Central City. It’ll only take a few itons.”

Cyd frowned and then relented. “If I go with you, will you promise to behave and not run away?”

“I told you. I’ve already given my word.” She released the door handle. “Don’t make it any tougher than it has to be. I’ll get my coat and wait right here until you’re dressed. Then we’ll leave.”

Cyd stepped to his door and paused. A scowl marred his face. “Stihl’s not going to like it.”

“If you’re with me, I don’t think he’ll mind. It’s me he doesn’t trust.”

Cyd shook his head and brushed his blue hair back over his shoulder. “Funny, he said close to the same thing about you.”

He walked into his room. Marohka waited an iton, then rushed to her bedroom door and opened it quietly.

Cyd was right. Stihl wouldn't like her leaving. Not necessarily because he objected to her working, but more because he hated for her to be out of his sight, much less out of his bed. Marohka glanced at the man in question. She couldn't figure him out at all, gentle and patient one iton, yet stubborn and demanding the next. What did he want?

She had to do this. So, theoretically, if he didn't mind her working, then he shouldn't object to her going to the office. *A reasonable assumption.* She gathered her coat and walked back out to the living room. They wouldn't be gone long. He'd probably sleep the whole time, anyway.

When Cyd reentered the room, she glanced at him. Dressed in casual black slacks, a blue shirt a shade lighter than his hair, he looked prepared to accept his fate. He threw his jacket over his arm and started for the door. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." She slipped on her gloves and coat while she waited for him to disarm the security system and open the door.

"Then let's get this over with." He strolled down the hall.

Chapter Seven

“We need to go down to the dirt depository.” Marohka pointed to the lift to Cyd’s right. “It’s a few floors underground.”

After stepping through the door of the depository, she spotted a man sitting behind the counter. Irritated at finding him in her quiet haven, she gritted her teeth. The dirt archives lacked visitors by anyone other than file runners, and they only stayed long enough to store away the samples.

Almon represented the last man she wanted to see. *What was he doing here?* His job required him to be in the Royal City office, not here, not in Central City. She resented his audacity at going through their core samples without approval. Rows of soil bins lined the back wall. He stood behind the counter. His black pencil-thin mustache and slim whipcord form didn’t inspire the image he wanted it too. A stud, he wasn’t.

“Almon, what’s up?”

Without answering, he hit a few more buttons on the screen, which lay imbedded in the granite worktop, before looking up. His lecherous gaze found his target and sped over her, pausing at strategic points along their journey.

“I think I saw you last night at the theater.” He nodded his approval at her new haircut. “I’m here on a small vacation. But being near the office, I thought I’d drop by and check on a few projects.”

He stood and waved his hand at the counter, his gestures indicating he’d grant her access into his private sanctuary. “What about you, Marohka? Why are you here instead of playing with your new mate?”

She burned with the desire to pulverize the man. Instead, she sent him an evil glare. In no way could he compare to Stihl, but she found herself noting their differences. Almon, dark and sinister, repulsed her in every way. While Stihl, larger and stronger, appeared solid and steady. She told herself not to trust either man.

“I have business to do.”

“Then I guess you’ll want to check on something in these vats.” Almon sat back down and started hitting keys, which disconnected the brain link. “I’ll logout and be out of your way in an iton.”

Marohka glanced at Cyd and waited for Almon to leave. “I’m sure Mr. Taunton will give your projects to someone else while you’re on leave. There’s no need for you to worry about them.”

Almon stood and unplugged his headgear from the terminal. “You’re probably right. But I couldn’t let your father down. We’ve been working together for years, in fact even before you started working for the company. He counts on me to keep anything from slipping through the cracks.”

He walked around the desk and stepped closer. Without budging, she rejected his right of any more space in her domain. “I’m sure Mr. Taunton appreciates your loyalty.”

He stopped next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. “And you, Marohka, what do you appreciate?”

Revolted by his touch, she knocked his hand away with the back of hers. She didn’t mask her feelings. “I’d like men to keep their hands to themselves.”

A sly little grin lit Almon’s mouth. “Oh, yes, I forgot the ice queen doesn’t like to be touched. I bet your mate will really enjoy melting your cold attitude. Or have you frozen him out too?”

Marohka flexed her hands into fists and all but spat her next words. “I think you’d better leave.”

“Right.” He licked his lips and stepped closer. “Yeah, if it doesn’t work out with Stihl—that’s his name, isn’t it? I’d be willing to help you defrost.”

Livid, she demanded, “Get out!”

Cyd’s large hand landed on Almon’s shoulder. “I think, Luke, you’d better leave.”

Almon whipped around. His eyes narrowed into a glare as he judged his chances to better his opponent. With a shrug, he gained his release. “I’m Almon Pepin. I work with Marohka.”

Stepping away from the two men, she stepped to the other side of the counter and opened a drawer for an extra headset.

“I’m Cyd Fermesium. My job is to protect Stihl’s interest, which includes Marohka.”

Almon let out a nervous laugh. “From what?”

She settled into the chair and set up the mental link with the computer. “From anyone who might want to bother me.”

“Stihl doesn’t like anyone near Marohka.” Cyd stepped back for Almon to leave.

“Cyd escorts me everywhere I go.” She hit a few keys. Her password sped through to the main-brain computer. She found the Trisar files and requested access. “It helps save Stihl a lot of undue stress. In the end, it’s best for everyone. It keeps him from hurting anyone who might upset me.”

She remembered the encounter from the night before. “Stihl can get a little rough if he feels I’m being threatened. Cyd is much more easygoing. Aren’t you, Cyd?”

“I like to think so. It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Pepin.”

Almon hesitated and then turned to her with his last parting arrow. “I guess, now that you have a mate, you won’t be working here anymore.”

Marohka felt the prick, but rejected the urge to react. Her gaze stayed focused on her screen. “Bye, Almon.”

Paging through the files, she found the graphs and charts she wanted. The vat number for the samples stood behind her on the wall. Standing, she turned and searched through the rows of bins for the correct sample.

"I take it you don't like Almon." Cyd pulled up a seat on the other side of the counter.

"How can you say that? The man causes my heart to flutter every time I see him." She ran her finger over the bin numbers. "I was very nice to him under the circumstances."

"Yes, the man is lucky I stepped in. If I'd given you a few more itons, you would've pummeled him." Cyd grinned.

The idea lightened her mood. "He's a trusted employee of my father's. I do my best to stay out of his way, provided of course, he stays out of mine."

She sighed with disgust. "Unfortunately, he doesn't. In fact, if he'd gotten his way I'd probably be his mate. Luckily, the council wouldn't approve it."

"That Luke?" Cyd stared out the open doorway. "He's got to be dimcoco if he thought he could beat you at the first challenge. Stihl struggled, and *he* knew what to expect."

Cyd leaned back in his chair. "Did Almon think you'd take it easy on him?"

"I don't know what goes through that man's head."

Finding the right bin, she retrieved the latest samples out of the storage carton.

"Maybe, now, he'll get on with his life and leave me alone." She placed the dirt in the scanner. Data appeared on the screen, changing with the questions running through her mind.

"Chances are I won't see him again anyway. He'll be heading back to Royal City, and I'll be off to the Trisar Mine. Our paths shouldn't cross." She paged through the results. "This can't be right."

"What?"

"Quartz shouldn't be found at this level. The samples confirm the drilling has veered off course but not the reason why? Either an uplift has happened in the area and changed the depth of the deposit, or the samples are contaminated." She studied the soil.

"How do you mess up dirt?"

"It happens." She stood, cleaned off the counter, and carried the bin back to its assigned place. "Either in shipping or a mistake in the filing, I won't know for sure until I arrive at the mine."

She rammed the data card in her coat pocket and shut down the system. "I'm done."

"I'm ready when you are." He rose from his chair.

“Do we have time for me to stop at one of the shops on the way back? I want to buy a heavier coat for our trip into the mountains.”

Cyd checked his time-marker. “We should have time to buy you a coat, if you don’t take forever to decide which one.”

“Great, I know exactly the one I want. It was in the display window of a shop near where we got my hair cut.”

* * * *

“Marohka is such a royal snob,” Almon muttered under his breath and strolled out of the building to the nearby people mover and stepped on.

The lights off the metal building fell on the smartly dressed men and women marching along the path. In a hurry to get to their next appointment, they rushed past him. Unconcerned about the crowd’s hustling movements, Almon played with his mustache, twisting each end tightly. He fought to control his emotions over the chance meeting with Marohka.

At one time, he’d thought having her as his mate was the only way he could achieve his goal. He recalled her first mating ball, a fairy tale night. He’d been handsome and charming and won her with little effort. She’d been shy and receptive to his advances.

The simple dress she’d worn graced her figure. The elegant lines barely revealed her luscious body, causing most of the men to overlook her, but she’d been his choice. He liked that she didn’t attract a lot of attention. He wanted her to shine in his glow.

That night, he’d felt as if his future lay in the palm of his hand. Marohka’s destiny to be his mate, her father’s company his to run, money and glory were within his reach. With everything in place, he’d have it all. Then the Royal Council struck their blow.

“We’re sorry to say your mother’s side of the family doesn’t possess enough Royal blood to let you be Marohka’s mate,” the elder offered with a note of sympathy. “She might hurt you. She needs a strong telepathic link.”

Almon remembered the painful words, and his stomach clinched in reaction to the memory. Marohka could never better him in anything. But at the time, he didn’t argue.

“But I love her,” he’d said instead.

His words must have touched the councilman’s heart. He then revealed the true reason for the council’s decision. “I’m sorry, but she has already been selected. Even if you had enough Royal blood, she can’t be your mate.” The man lightly patted Almon’s hand. “There are plenty of other girls. Don’t let one rejection spoil your hope for a mate.”

After some digging, he’d discovered who had possessed the clout to reserve Marohka. Now, he planned to use the information for his own benefit. Not only to break up her and Stihl, but also to get back a little flesh for all the times she looked down her nose at him.

“Not yet,” Almon cautioned himself and smiled at the ruthless way he planned to even the score.

By putting her mineralogy skills into question, he’d gain attention for himself. She’d fall from favor, and he’d step in and take over the Trisar Mine. He’d show the Council of Elders how he could find all the precious ore the country required. Not to mention a much-needed power source.

Then after he gained control of her father’s company, he’d be on top of the world. She’d be out of a job and her record of success buried in ashes. Everyone would finally understand the ruse of her taking credit for his skill for all these years. As a national hero, no one would ever doubt his Royal blood again. The final spike would come when he told her about Stihl’s deceit.

He smiled at his clever plan and stroked the corners of his mustache. She’d suffer the same way he had. Loving someone without them returning your desire hurt. Now all he had to do was play his cards right, and he would extract the most revenge from the hand he’d been given.

The smile beaming across his face caught a number of people’s attention. A slim redhead walking toward him returned his smile with interest. She paused in her step.

* * * *

Brrring.

The noise registered in Stihl’s muddled brain. He resisted the urge to grab his ECD and placed a pillow over his head instead. The device showed no mercy. The persistent ring pinged through his dreams.

The pillow, hitting the far wall, offered little relief from his pinned up anger at the offensive object. He struggled to sit up, attached the unit to his ear, and grumbled a rough greeting. “This better be good.”

His father’s voice hit him like a splash of cold water. “Son, what’s the matter with you? Did I wake you?”

With a sigh, Stihl lifted his chest and leaned back against the headboard. He glimpsed the empty bed beside him and remembered he should’ve had company. “Yes, Dad, Marohka and I stayed out late. I was trying to catch up.”

He remembered the prior night’s events, and his pulse increased. Maybe if his father said what he wanted, Stihl might coax Marohka back to bed.

“Cyd told me you found her.”

“We reconnected with each other on the train to Central City. She is staying here with me. We went out last night so I could introduce her to some of my friends and my final investor.” Stihl scanned the room. He hoped Lord Kalva bought into the deal.

Where was she?

“I’m glad to hear things are working out. In a way, that’s why I called. Your brothers are getting restless about the mine. They think strip mining is more cost-effective than the current method.” His dad paused for an iton. “I’m examining the cost of extracting the qualtrilium so I can compare the profit margins.”

All business, his dad left out his own opinion on the subject. “You do have those figures, don’t you?”

Stihl threw back the covers, left the bed, and headed for the other room. “Yes, but I don’t see why you need them. Now that I’m with Marohka, the property and the mine are under my jurisdiction. I have final say as to what happens at the mine.”

Naked and a little angry about having to do this task, Stihl grabbed a robe. “Give me an iton. I need to log onto the computer.”

He strolled into the living room and glanced around. Not seeing Marohka, he wondered if she locked herself in the lily again. The idea of her leaving crossed his mind, but then he remembered her promise.

“That’s fine. How long do you plan on being in Central City?”

Irritated, Stihl signed into the computer and answered. “I’m not sure yet. I want to make a side trip to the Trisar site before traveling on to our mountain place. But I haven’t set up a timetable yet.”

“Shouldn’t you and Marohka adjust to living together first? She might dislike living out in the wild country,” his dad said with authority.

“Well, she’d better get used to it, because that’s where I’m planning to live. Now, what numbers are you looking for?” He retrieved the information his father wanted and answered his questions.

Stihl wondered why Marohka didn’t appear, or at least Cyd. He should be awake.

“Son, you might want to rethink your position on the mine. We can make a lot more money with the strip mine proposal.”

Stihl’s anger sparked. How many times did they have to go over this? “That may be true. But what type of damage will we do to the land by then? The cost of recovery will be more than the profit gained. Grandfather left me in charge, and you’ve named your price for my taking over,” Stihl argued. “You can’t change your mind, because I’m not changing my mine. No strip mining.”

“You’re right.” His father’s tone turned stern. “But first you have to impregnate Marohka. Has that happened yet?”

Stihl rubbed his hand against his chest. “No.”

“Then I suggest you get busy. Both your brothers are impatient. They, as you know, can always use the extra money.” His dad ended with, “I’ll hold them off for a while longer. But you should accept

the fact that you might lose.”

Angry, Stihl tore the ECD from his ear and threw the device across the room. How could his father, sell out his grandfather’s dream? His grandfather carved a life out of that rocky piece of land. For years, he’d lived there, working the livestock and searching for qualtrilium. If not for their grandfather’s luck, his family would still be living there.

Now, they wanted to throw it all away. Take and give nothing back. Didn’t they know their land was a priceless gift, one few families in Lustralia possessed? They owned property. Their job was to protect the resource with honor and integrity for the future of all Lustralians.

Disgusted with his brothers, he knew their answer. They didn’t care. Never had. Money ruled.

His computer displayed his VIMs. He stared at the screen and read a note from Lord Kalva. He didn’t mention the Trisar deal. Instead, he asked about their early departure. Stihl responded and lied about Marohka having a headache.

Checking the rest of his mail, he opened a note from his bank which informed him of a transfer of funds. Anger shot him to his feet when he realized the sender.

“Marohka!” he shouted and stomped back to the bedroom. Not finding her, he walked to the lily.

With the door open and no one inside, he searched the rest of the house. No Marohka. No Cyd. No note.

Stihl sat on the couch, fuming. As mornings went, this one stunk. His father’s call with his veiled threats, Lord Kalva’s lack of commitment, and Marohka missing. He needed to get things under control.

Starting with Marohka.

Angry and worried, he walked over to retrieve his ECD and picked it up off the floor. An electronic beep sounded from the door. The lock released. He turned. Cyd ushered Marohka through the doorway. She caught sight of him and paused for a fraction of an iton. Displeasure lit her face.

“Glad to see you’ve finally decided to come home.” He stepped forward.

The bitter taste of waiting for her to return exhausted his patience for excuses. She must have coerced Cyd into taking her out. If he needed to run out, he wouldn’t have taken her. That meant Marohka instigated their little adventure.

“We thought since you were asleep, we’d run a few small errands.” Cyd helped her with her purchases and coat. “We’ve only been gone a little over a ziton. After the late night you had, you couldn’t have been up more than a few itons.”

“Wrong, I got a call a while ago.” Stihl remained calm, masking the anger he felt.

“From whom?” Cyd threw his coat over the back of the couch.

Stihl studied his blue-haired friend. Cyd slumped down onto the couch. His casual attitude ruffled Stihl's already jagged nerves.

"Dad. He called to discuss some business." Stihl turned to see Marohka enter their bedroom and shut the door.

"What type?" Cyd leaned forward, his hands flexing into fists.

"The usual, he's trying to get me to change my mind. Like that's going to happen." Stihl dismissed the subject. "Right now, I want to know where you've been."

"Marohka needed to run into her office for some information on the Trisar Mine." Cyd stretched back on the couch. "I thought it might be a good idea, seeing as we're heading out there today." He shoved a pillow under his head. "Even met another man who fancied himself as Marohka's husband, but she couldn't stand the sight of him."

"Just like all men," Stihl said.

Cyd nodded his head around a yawn. "On the way back, we stopped by one of the shops down at the plaza. Marohka wanted to pick up a heavier coat for our trip." A worried frown marred Cyd's face. "By the way, she wouldn't let me pay for it."

"What is it with this girl?" Stihl slapped the arm of the couch. "No matter what I do she's determined to be difficult."

Cyd stood back up. "I think you know what the problem is. She's doing everything in her power to make sure you don't want her as your mate." Cyd pointed to the bedroom. "You need to show her differently. I'm headed to my room where I plan to sleep for a few more zitons."

Stihl didn't budge.

"If you shut your door, I shouldn't be able to hear a thing." Cyd's bedroom door closed, and music filtered through the walls before Stihl stepped forward.

With a deep breath, he locked the bedroom door behind him then turned to see Marohka walk in from the dressing area. She stopped when she caught sight of him.

"Stihl, we weren't gone long." She widened her stance and stood ready to fight. "There's no reason to be upset. After all, I'm not a prisoner. Yesterday, you let me run errands with Cyd. So I figured it'd be all right if I ran a few today. What's the big deal?"

Stihl advanced. Without retreating, she shifted into a defensive pose. A stubborn glint sparked in her eyes.

My lady had guts, no cowering for her. Changing tactics, he lifted his hand and gently brushed a strawberry-blonde strand of hair away from her face. He cupped her cheek. "You could've left a note. I was worried."

The sound of soft mellow music drifting through the walls filled the silence. Marohka's expression turned from wary to apologetic. Her lips softened. Then she licked them nervously. Drawn to her mouth by the movement, he wanted to sip the moisture from them, to discover the warm sweet taste just beyond the center. His loins swelled. She lit a fire within him so easily.

"We thought you wouldn't wake up until after we returned," she whispered and licked her lips again.

He stepped closer and wrapped her face in both his hands. Her eyes closed. Needing no other encouragement, he covered the distance to her lips. Slowly, with infinite care, he nibbled on the edge, not giving in to his plundering desire, but gently building her need for more.

The feeling of cloth against his wrists instead of skin interrupted his pursuit. Confused, he glanced at the point of contact. The gloves covering her hands puzzled him, and he shifted back and clasped her wrists. "Why are you wearing gloves?"

Her eyes flickered with an unidentifiable emotion.

"My hands are cold." Marohka's ready words and rigid shoulders ignited a suspicious idea to flash through his head.

Not understanding her reaction, he cautiously observed her response. Her green eyes turned stormy. Her mouth formed a straight line. "What's the big deal about me wearing gloves?"

He released her right hand and worked the glove off her left.

"Would you stop it?" Marohka argued, stepping back and slapping at his arm.

The glove slid off. Stihl caught sight of the reason for her distress. He held her wrist tightly, making it impossible for her to gain her freedom. "How long were you hoping to hide this from me?" Stihl demanded. He turned his wrist over checking his left hand for marks. "You might not have marked me, but, whether you like it or not, the blending process has begun."

She struggled, attempting to shove him away. "It doesn't mean anything. We both have to exchange marks for the blending process to be complete. Now, let me go."

His "no way" answer hit a nerve, and she glared at him. A picture of her knee hitting his groin flashed through his head.

Reacting quickly, he used an evasive maneuver by jerking her up against his chest. "What's the game, Marohka?"

"I don't play games."

She continued to fight and wouldn't stay still. He tightened his grip. "Let's see." Stihl circled the narrow curve of her waist, thinking. "Now, I get it. You paid me back for the clothes I bought you yesterday. Then, you wouldn't let Cyd pay for your new coat today. Are you hedging your bet? Hoping the council will let you out of our marriage because I'm not providing for you?"

“I don’t need you buying me clothes,” Marohka growled.

She wiggled in his arms, vying for her freedom. Her full breasts brushed his chest. “Marohka, be still,” he said sternly, “unless, you want to end up flat on your back on that bed.”

His warning must have registered because she stopped fighting. “Look,” he continued, “I know blending is not on your agenda, but get used to the idea. You’re my mate. Like it or not, we’re going to blend.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Marohka snapped. “Release me.”

Stubborn opposition swam in the sea green depths of her eyes. He didn’t have time to figure out exactly why she fought their blending, but an idea formed in his mind. “I might be willing to release you—if you perform the touché ceremony.”

She jerked back. “That outdated ritual hasn’t been performed for years. I don’t even know how to do it.”

“It’s not difficult. From what I’ve read, there are only two rules. One, I can’t touch you.” He studied the narrow slant of her eyes to gauge her reaction. “A rule, I’m sure you will appreciate.”

He loosened his hold but didn’t release her waist. “The second rule is a little harder. You *have* to touch me, caress, massage, stroke, run your hands all over my body. It’s the cost for me not touching you.”

He showed her what he meant by sliding his hands up and down her back. “If after ten itons you haven’t touched me, I’m then free to touch you. Sound simple?”

“I don’t think so.”

“No?” Stihl, with his arms still wrapped around her, lifted her off the ground.

“Put me down!” she shouted and tried to break free.

He held her tight against his chest until he stood next to the bed, where he set her on her feet. “I’m tired, Marohka, and my patience is a little short. I’m willing to play fair. If I let you touch me, I’m agreeing not to touch you. If you don’t comply”—he nodded at the bed—“then we’ll lie down, and I’ll teach you the simple pleasures of having a man make love to you.”

Her hands on his shoulders, she glared at his face. He returned her stare, eye to eye. Her labored breath brushed against his face.

“I thought the rule was I have to agree for you to touch me.”

“I’m giving you a choice. You decide which way you want it.”

She tried to shove him away. “What about our trip to the Trisar Mine? Shouldn’t we leave?”

“Not until around thirteen ziton.” He lifted her off the ground.

“Wait! If I agree, what part of you do I have to touch?”

His mind leaped with possibilities, but he curbed his response. “You’re free to touch me any place you want. The book I read mentioned a few activities to help make the process easier.”

He paused and set her back on her feet. “Let’s see. The book did mention one lady who gave her mate a bath, then proceeded to give him a body massage.”

“A bath?” She shook her head. “I don’t think so. What else?”

“Well, it mentioned other items you could use to pleasure me.” He caught the sudden interest in her eyes. “Items other than your hands that is, like your lips and tongue or other body parts to stroke and excite me.”

Her shocked glare forced him to tighten his hold. “The ritual is designed to make you more comfortable around me. Remember, you said you needed to get used to touching me. Well, here’s your chance.”

Marohka shook her head. A blush graced her cheeks.

Stihl caressed her back. “We can start with a simple body massage. I’ll guide you through it.”

The doubt in her eyes didn’t stop him from carrying through with his plan. He held her wrists and guided her hands slowly down the front of his chest and stomach. Her fingers slid over his belt, and he stopped. “Now, untie my robe.”

She drew in a deep breath. “Remember, you’re not allowed to touch me. If I’m willing to do this, you have to abide by the rules.”

He dropped his hands to his sides. “I will, if you will.”

She worked the knot loose. Her teeth bit into her lips. Her serious green gaze skirted around his and fell instead on his chin. She pulled the tie apart. The folds of his robe slowly slid open. She stepped back.

Her voice, high and unsteady, echoed her nervousness. “Do you want to lie on the bed or the floor?”

“The bed.” He slid off his robe. Marohka’s eyes lit on every object in the room other than him, screaming of her uncertainty, but she stood her ground.

“Do you have any lotion?”

“It’s in the lily. Do you want me to get it?” He smiled when she turned and left the room.

Not easy for either of them, her challenge lay in overcoming her fears, his to control his desire. He shoved the rumpled blankets out of the way and lay facedown on the bed with a pillow cupped under his head and chest. A back rub after last night would be a welcomed adventure.

The idea of her fingers sliding over him lured him into closing his eyes. If he maintained his patience and enjoyed her massage, it might pave the way to something deeper growing between them.

Chapter Eight

Marohka doubted the theory that giving Stihl a massage would help with her reaction to him, but she hoped she'd become less sensitive to his touch.

Standing in the lily, she worked to calm her nerves. In her massage class, she'd practiced giving back rubs. The teacher stressed how their mates would find pleasure in the method. Everyone had to pass the art of a good massage. If done correctly, she'd help him to relax, and then hopefully, he'd fall asleep. With the problem over, she could leave him and rest herself.

Heartened by the thought, she retrieved the lotion and walked back into the bedroom. She gulped down a quick breath before moving to his prone form on the bed. Her gaze traveled the length of his rock-hard body. Broad shoulders, muscular back, trim waist were all golden brown, his firm buttocks white. His powerful thighs marked again by the suns, carried it down to his thick calves and his strong ankles. After admiring his feet, she glanced up to catch him staring.

She swallowed her fears. *I can't back out now.*

"Did you find the lotion?"

Marohka raised the bottle and stepped closer. "Would you like me to start at your feet and work up or from the shoulders down?"

"Why don't you start at the shoulders?" He laid his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

She settled next to him and tried to keep her mind on the task. The perfect line of his body drew her gaze. She noticed the curve of his butt and the long length of his legs. Distracted by the alluring sight of his rear, she tugged a blanket over his hips. Her teacher said to focus on only one area at a time, and that's how she planned to survive the ordeal.

To warm the lotion, she poured it onto her palms and rubbed her hands together. A tropical scent filled the air. She envisioned a sandy beach with waves crashing on the shore. She dropped her hands on the firm muscles along the ridge of his shoulders. She rode the tide and kneaded his stress away.

With each stroke, his sighs of pleasure boosted her confidence. She ran her thumb from the line of his neck to the edge of his shoulders, forcing his tension to release its hold. After a few itons, his stiffness relaxed.

His warm, slick skin flowed beneath her fingers. The granite strength below the surface tugged at her emotions, dragging her out to great depths like the undertow in the sea. The sensual pleasure of touching him tugged at her thoughts. Visions of him plummeted through her mind, drowning her with need. Little tingles of awareness popped up on her skin. The room grew warm.

Unable to block these probing images, she worked slowly down his back and rubbed the heel of her hand over his shoulder blade. She varied her strokes, first soft and feathery, then strong and forceful.

She played a soothing song with her hands and matched the rhythm of the music floating in from the other room. Gently, she lulled him into a peaceful sleep. His breathing calmed. She massaged a small knot under his skin, and he didn't move. Yet, she knew it had to be sore.

With him unaware of her, she melted into a cozy mood of peace. For a while, she enjoyed the smooth texture of his skin without the threat of him turning over and seeing the pleasure she gained by stroking his leg. His body fascinated her with its strong, rippling muscles and soft, silky skin. The contrast excited her senses.

The same was true of his attitude. In the mating ring, he'd proven he could best her in a fight. Yet, he hadn't overpowered her with his advances. Instead, he'd treated her gently. Why? Stories about other men ran through her head. Many weren't as patient as Stihl. Most either coaxed or seduced their mate to bond before the end of the first evening.

Of course, last night, he'd started the blending process. She remembered his touch, but he hadn't rushed. His mind stroked and held hers. He'd even gained access to some of her deeper thoughts, but he hadn't stolen her virginity. Of that, she was certain.

Marohka ran her hand across the calf muscles of his leg. *So strong.*

No way, could she have forgotten if they'd made love. She'd be lucky not to lose herself completely when they finally bonded. The idea drove her hands away from his leg. He didn't protest, so she stood and left the room.

No point in arousing temptation.

* * * *

The poet's fist hit the table. The poem wasn't working, and neither was his plan to rid the people in the way of achieving his dream.

"The bride is not dead.

The groom isn't crying.

All will be lost.

Better, start solving

The current perplexing problem."

The words won't flow. Crushing the paper, another object landed in the trash.

* * * *

Vin Taunton walked to his wife and kissed her on the cheek where she stood by the counter. For the moment, he delayed telling her about his decision to sell their company. "Kaysay, I received a VIP from Marohka."

She worked her way around the kitchen, but remained quiet with her troubled eyes avoiding his. A sore subject between them, he understood her reasons for her disliking their daughter working for him.

But in truth, Marohka was the only reason the company hadn't gone under long ago. Her skills had turned it into a profitable endeavor. He'd always preferred to work at the university's lab, leaving the company in her hands.

Kaysay placed the final dish on the table, which sat suspended in the center of the small eating area. Music played softly in the background. Colors danced around the room from the rings gracing her fingers. Flavorful aromas scented the air.

The table set. She claimed her seat and spread her dinner-cloth over her lap, then responded. "Where is she?"

He sat opposite her. "It seems Stihl caught up with her on her way to Central City. She's staying with him now." He took the plate she handed to him. "They're headed out to the Trisar Mine." He couldn't hold back the grin at his daughter's cleverness. "Makes me wonder how she arranged it."

Marohka had also assured him she'd take care of the problem at the mine. His daughter wouldn't let him down. He filled his plate from the dishes on the table.

Kaysay picked up her fork and paused before eating. "Vin, you can't expect her to still run your company. She's a girl. No, she's a woman. Her place is with her mate, not doing a job for you."

"Why?" Vin caught her hand and kissed it. "You've been working for me for years designing jewelry. You've been able to do both. Why can't she?"

Kaysay smiled at his praise. "But most people, in fact even Marohka, don't see it as a job. They think of it more as a hobby, something I do to pass the time. In my daughter's eyes, I care for the house, cater to your every wish, and change my grandchildren's nappies. It's not the kind of life she wants."

"That's not true." His wife and daughter, so much alike in both beauty and temperament, didn't give each other enough credit. "Marohka thinks you're very talented. Whenever she unearths a stone of high quality, she always suggests you design the setting for it."

"All right, but give her a little space." Kaysay laid her hand on his arm. "She's on an adventure of discovery to see what she's been missing. Stihl has to be her number one priority. Even if you don't want to, you have to set her free."

Kaysay shook her head and whispered, "I'm losing her too."

Hurt swam in the depths of her eyes. His Kaysay would never know how much pain he'd suffer by letting Stihl claim his baby girl, or that it was part of the reason he'd decided to sell the company.

Without Marohka, his world would change. Maybe not in a day, or even a year, but her grit supported the backbone of their company, was the glue which held it all together. He'd never be

able to run the business without her help. Still, he longed for Marohka to find true happiness. That's why he'd let Stihl claim her as his mate.

"She's . . . the last one to leave."

When she placed her hand on his cheek, Vin knew Kaysay shared his feelings of loss. "I know. Now, they're all truly gone."

He tugged her close and kissed her lips. After an iton, he released her, but Kaysay held on and deepened the kiss. Need filled the empty space of Marohka's leaving. The tingle of sexual desire forced him to tighten his arms.

He released her lips, and she groaned in protest. "Maybe we should go out tonight. I have something I want to tell you." His eyebrows lifted to suggest other things.

"You heard from the Council of Elders?"

"No, they haven't decided on the appointment yet."

"Then what is it?" Kaysay squeezed his shoulders and climbed onto his lap. Her mind probed his.

Vin surveyed her loving face and slid his hands around her waist. He could never keep a secret from his wife for long. "I've decided if the university appointment comes through, I'm selling my father's company." He waited.

Her face flashed her emotions from shock to disbelief then to joy. "That's wonderful."

Her arms circled his neck. For a moment, Vin hugged her close before he covered her lips with his. This woman still set him on fire, no matter the number of years they'd been together. She knew his faults and loved him anyway. The pictures of failure he'd envisioned in the past faded from his mind. Other scenes flashed instead.

Kaysay shifted back with a wicked grin. "What if I don't want to wait?"

"A little tussle in the middle of the day." Vin lifted his wife off his lap and stood. "Might be just what we need."

When his hands touched her again, a blaze of sexual heat sizzled through his brain, followed by a flash of terror. Her hands landed on his chest.

Unprepared, he flew through the air and hit the wall. With him sprawled across the floor, she quickly straddled his waist. He tried to control her actions. Not by capturing her hands, which raced across his chest and tore at the fabric of his shirt—No, her mind was the prize he sought to conquer.

Pictures of Kaysay in bed alone, of meals with her sitting by herself, sped through his head. Loneliness, a dark, evil figure, stepped up next to her. The demon, ready to pounce, held her under its spell.

“Kaysay, just because I’m changing jobs doesn’t mean you’ll spend more time alone. It should give us more time together.”

The dark figure flickered. Vin grabbed her and, using a quick maneuver learned from years of similar encounters, rolled her to the floor. They landed beneath the table. She squirmed and fought his touch, igniting his desire. She used all her strength to throw him off and unseat him from his position.

“You won’t win.” His thoughts overtook hers, sending a very different vision into her head.

Her mind viewed the changes in the scene, and she moaned. “Vin, I need you.”

The words resounded in his soul, and he covered her lips with his while he seduced her mind with erotic ideas.

* * * *

A small group of campers traveled noisily down the outback trail on their way to the bottom of the canyon before Hank walked over to check Cyd’s mount. The wind whispered through the needles on the trees, kissing Marohka’s cheeks and blowing her multicolored hair around her head.

Positioned next to her mount, she gazed across the wide expanse of land at the crystal-clear sky, which acted like a backdrop to the multicolored strata of rock. The canyon, with its tall walls etched by an eternity of time, glittered in the sunlight. Breathtaking beauty sparkled around her, disturbed only by the men’s conversation.

“On each alba-ox is a med-pack for emergencies. This time of year is always a little dangerous—mating season, you know.” Hank, the six leg-length yeti, grinned.

“You boys, of course, won’t have any trouble, seeing as you were raised out here,” Hank continued, “but you never know. The alba-oxen are restless and been acting up a bit for the last couple of zitons. There’s probably a lady in need in the area.”

“Is the trail good?” Cyd stored their bags on the extra alba-ox.

“Steady. With no rain, there haven’t been any washouts.” Hank added, “If the weather holds, you should make it to the mining camp before dark.”

Marohka ignored the men and examined the rest of the outpost. On the edge of civilization, these buildings marked the start of the wilderness area of Lustralia. Few people knew the joy of viewing the outback from the cliff trail. Most considered the adventure a high-risk sport.

The trail, which was only accessible by the huge four-legged alba-oxen who possessed the ability to free fall or semi-fly to the bottom of the canyon, could be dangerous. If the animal stepped off the weathered path, the rider’s chances of making it down safely were iffy.

“Also, thanks for taking this delivery.” Hank’s voice floated on the wind. “It’ll save me a trip.”

“No problem,” Cyd answered. “Can you give me the cabin code?”

The dangerous part of the trails excited most travelers. What they really disliked were the alba-oxen. Hairy and smelly, they weren’t elegant or beautiful creatures. Domesticated for the task of transporting travelers across the outback, they provided a much-needed service.

Marohka, on the other hand, liked the stinky beasts because they carried her away from the city. Once out in the wild country, the choker hold of responsibility loosened its hold on her throat, and she could finally breathe. She released a long sigh and strolled to the railing. Rock, gravel, and dust crunched beneath her feet.

In the distance, large deep caverns marked the landscape like wrinkles on an old man’s face. Character and history lay in each line, each one telling its own story. Marohka longed for the peace she’d find on the trail.

“Marohka, are you ready to go?” Stihl’s voice hit her from behind.

Turning, she caught sight of him strolling in her direction. For the last ziton, she’d been struggling not to notice his sexy form. Cranky and difficult, he’d done nothing but bark orders and rush both Cyd and herself. Even if he was upset because she’d fallen asleep on the couch after his massage, it wasn’t an excuse for being so grumpy. She hadn’t done it on purpose.

“I’m ready,” Marohka said.

His powerful legs closed the distance between them, and her mind replayed the scene of him lying on the bed beneath her hands. The vision reminded Marohka of why she’d been avoiding him. Every time he stepped near her, images of his naked body, strong and warm and oh-so inviting, flashed in her head. She ached to touch him to see if the same silky skin lay just beneath the cloth of his shirt. A man, so heavenly to caress, seemed beyond the realm of possibilities.

“Marohka?”

Stihl repeated her name. She shook her head and realized with shock that she’d been staring at his chest and hadn’t answered his questions. “Yes?”

“If you’re ready, I’ll help you into your saddle.” Stihl’s hand circled her arm, and he led her to her mount. “Cyd will lead the way with the extra alba-oxen following him. Then you’ll go, and I’ll bring up the rear. Hopefully, we’ll make good time and be at the mining camp in a few zitons.”

Stopping next to her alba-ox, Stihl lowered his voice and added, “After the trip, I’ll pay you back for your earlier massage by rubbing any sore muscles you might have.”

Not a request, but a promise, determination lit his eyes. His patience tested to its limits, his intentions of having her in the near future was evident in his attitude.

Unwilling to show how intimidated she was by his remark, Marohka laid her hand on his shoulder and placed her foot in his cupped hands. “Seems only fair. Then I’ll be able to relax and get a good night’s sleep.”

His muscles bunched, and he lifted her into the saddle. He guided her foot into the stirrup, and his hand slid around her ankle. "Sleep isn't exactly what I had in mind."

Heat traveled up Marohka's leg and settled in the pit of her stomach. "After the trip, it'll be all you have energy for." Marohka gathered up the reins.

"I wouldn't bet on it." Stihl's eyes twinkled with a challenge before he turned and walked to his own mount.

She'd managed to avoid him for a while, but the chances of her continuing to delay him, weren't very high. By Lustralia's laws, they were married, which gave him every right to bond.

How much time did she have?

* * * *

In line behind Cyd a ziton later, Marohka rode her alba-ox along the path, eating the dust rising from the trail.

Her thoughts kept returning to the massage she'd given Stihl. A mere touch from him created a hunger inside her that called to her basic needs.

A quick glimpse at him, and desire ate at her senses. The problem stemmed from her career. If she chose to blend with him, would he allow her to continue to work? Or had he said that just to secure their relationship? Unwilling to risk it, Marohka wondered if she could continue to avoid him. She felt honor bound to uphold the deal she'd made.

But the option of not making love to him wasn't feasible either, not after today's session. She lacked the strength to resist. If he turned up the heat, she'd melt under his charm. Her only hope was to delay their blending.

The steady rhythm of the alba-ox and the gentle breeze on her face helped her come to terms with the situation. Maybe she could enjoy Stihl and maintain her independence, too.

No law said she had to blend with him to enjoy his body. Why not take what he offered and simply not give him access to her heart. The task might require a certain amount of determination, but what other choice did she have.

The rough terrain drew her attention. Steep cliffs, colorful rocks, and budding trees helped to settle her worried mind. A powerful force created such a spectacular landscape, that her problem appeared small and unimportant in relation to such wonders.

She kept her mount close to the extra alba-oxen. Every so often, she glanced back to make sure Stihl traveled behind her on the path. The narrow trail didn't allow them to ride side by side. With the roar of the wind and the sound of the alba-oxen's steps on the rough ground, they couldn't talk much either.

The alba-oxen in front of her stumbled over the trail. Its wings opened. After a few little gliding jumps, the animal settled back onto the path. Her steed jerked on the reins and danced through a rough spot on the trail. She tightened her grip. "Cyd, what's got the animals spooked?"

"Hank says there might be a female in the area," Cyd called over his shoulder. "She's hiding somewhere out here, but I can't imagine where."

She surveyed the sheer drops on both sides of the path. A wrong step in either direction meant the canyon floor would be the final destination. A large animal had nowhere to hide on the trail. But if the males were picking up her scent from the wind, the female alba-oxen might be miles away.

"Marohka, pull back a little from the extra mount. It'll give your mount a little more room," Stihl called.

She wrapped her hands around her reins, and she tugged until her mount returned to its gentle canter. After a few itons, she commented, "I think they're settling down now. It's probably just something in the air."

Right after the words left her mouth, her alba-ox danced over the trail, took a small hop, and dove off the cliff, throwing her forward. The reins fell from her hands. Frantic to regain her balance, she groped the hair on the animal's neck. Her heart raced with her fear of falling from the saddle. The alba-ox working to regain its footing and placed a few jerky steps on the rough rocks on the side of the cliff.

Marohka wiggled in her saddle to maintain her balance. Her mount expanded its wings and pumped the air around them. The full span of the alba-ox's wings forced her feet to slide free of her stirrups. Wind whipped past her face, tangling her hair and blurring her vision. The rocky cliff sped past her on their steady descent to the floor of the canyon. If she fell off her alba-ox, she wouldn't survive.

She clutched for the dangling reins. Her feet slid along rough fur. She managed to stay in her saddle by using the animal's wings as footholds. The alba-ox thrashed its head back and forth, not liking the tight hold she had on the reins or her feet on its wings. With no other choice, Marohka fought the bucking and bouncing action of the alba-ox to stay in her seat.

Suddenly, the animal's wings dipped and veered to the left, just missing a large boulder projecting out of the rock face. She slid from her saddle. Her head connected with the leg of her mount. Darkness fell. Her mind shifted. A new set of pictures sped through her head.

A dry wind brushed her cheek. The power of victory rushed through her system. The finish line in sight, she smelled the sweet adulation of victory. Elated, she scanned the horizon of her bright new future full of promise and hope.

A desert filled with white sand stretched out in front of her. An oasis flickered in the distance. Luscious fruit hung from the trees. A pool of crystal-clear water sparkled in the sun. The beautiful haven enticed her forward. Paradise registered in her head, and triumph rang its sweet song in her ears.

Racing across the sand, she realized time was slipping away. The heat from the sun, the dry blade of

the wind on her face, the blankness of her surroundings weighed on her steps slowed her. She couldn't move, couldn't reach the goal. Something held her back.

The cheers, the crowds, the people. Where were they?

A rock mocked. "You desired your independence. Now you're all alone to enjoy it."

She trudged slowly onto the soft grass of her private sanctuary. Her heart fell. Water sang from a spring, tinkling a melody of welcome to her tired feet. She sank onto the wet sand, closed her eyes, and wept. Battle won, victory empty.

"Would you like some tea? I can make it myself."

The voice rang through a dark gray haze. Marohka shook her head to clear her thoughts. She opened her eyes and saw a smiling young face. Curly brown hair, a dimple on her right cheek, a cute little girl of about four, maybe five, dressed in a pink lacy pinafore, stood in front of her.

"Who are you?" Marohka sat on a leather sofa, taking in the place. A warm fire burned in a stone fireplace, sending a woodsy aroma through the room. Rugs graced the floors. A cotton-stuffed doll sat on a rocker grinning. The homey aura relaxed her senses.

The little girl giggled. "Mommy, don't tease me."

Her perspective shifted. "Oh, Sara, why don't we wait on tea until your father gets home?"

Sara's face fell. "But he won't be home until forever . . . he's at work."

Seeing the girl unhappy, Marohka threw back the lap spread and shifted to stand. "Then why don't we go out?"

The girl shook her head. Then, she laid her hand on Marohka's stomach. "Oh, no, Daddy wouldn't want us to do that. Not with my little brother on the way."

She glanced at her large round belly. A pain in her ribs—a sharp kick—drove home the reality of the baby nestled in her womb. Fear sped through her mind. This couldn't be. She didn't know anything about having a baby.

Panicked and desperate to escape, she struggled to stand. "I have to get away from here."

Tender brown eyes suddenly lit with alarm. "But, Mom, it's not safe out there. You have to stay with me."

Marohka paused. A dizzy haze circled her vision. She fell back on the couch and closed her eyes.

The irritating buzz of all the decisions she needed to make kept humming in her head. Career? Family? Children? Stahl? Qualtrilium ore?

She brushed her hand at the pesky beasts, but the noise grew louder.

* * * *

“Marohka, talk to me. Are you all right?”

She lifted her hand, and Stihl grabbed it.

“Marohka?”

Her hand fell limp in his with no response to his touch. He checked the body scanner, which read the signals from the micro transmitters in her clothes. No broken bones or internal bleeding. The knot on her forehead could mean a concussion. He studied her ashen face and placed a cold compress on her head to help with the swelling. Dark color bled into the cavity around her left eye. His stomach twisted into knots at her pain. Again, he’d failed to protect her from harm.

“How is she?” Cyd interrupted Stihl’s thoughts. “Want me to fly down and help?”

“No, you stay where you are. No point in taking the chance of you getting hurt,” Stihl said to Cyd over his ECD. “She simply has a bump on the head.”

Cyd posed the next question. “How about her alba-ox?”

Stihl glanced at the alba-ox that had saved Marohka’s life. Its large wing had wrapped around her, protected her from the rough wall of the cliff, and cushioned her fall on the rocks.

Recognizing the animal’s distress because of the ones he owned on his ranch, Stihl shook his head. “It appears to have a broken wing, and a few deep cuts on its neck and chest. There’s a lot of blood covering it.”

He smelled the stifling odor and turned his head to gulp in a whiff of fresh air.

“Is it in any pain?”

The alba-ox tried once to rise, but since then, it’d lain lifelessly in the dirt. “Don’t know. It might be dead.”

He left Marohka’s side and walked to the animal. Its tail twitched when he drew near. “It’s still alive, but I’m not sure for how much longer.”

Stihl hunched down and talked in a calm voice to the beast. “All right, big boy, what have you done to yourself?”

Examining the animal’s wounds, he spoke to Cyd. “From the injuries I see, it’s not got long.”

He stroked the animal’s face, trying to ease its suffering. “I’ll do what I can. After you arrive at the mining camp, make sure to contact Hank and tell him what happened. He might be able to send a team out here to help.”

Applying med-strips to the major wounds, Stihl hoped to reassure the alba-ox. He hated to see any animal in pain. Unfortunately, he couldn't do much.

"All right, but you know if Hank doesn't arrive by early twilight, there won't be much for him to recover." Cyd's sad tone confirmed Stihl's estimation of the animal's fate. "What about Marohka?"

Stihl stood and walked back, contemplating his next course of action. He had to carry her some place safe. "Isn't there a cabin near here?"

Stihl bent over her again. Blood stained her clothing, but it appeared to be mostly the alba-oxen's blood. Fur and dirt sprinkled her short, curly hair. Her eyes remained closed.

"Yes, remember the cabin we camped in a few years back? It's not very far. Just cross over the little stream to your left," Cyd directed. "Then travel through the woods about twenty leg-lengths. The code for the lock is nine-nine-seven-seven-five."

"All right, you head on to the Trisar camp. Marohka and I will rest here today. Then when she's feeling better, we'll meet up with you at the camp."

"Are you sure?" Cyd's voice sounded gruff. "The canyon can be dangerous this time of year with flash floods and animals venturing out after the winter. Once you're out of the ECD's range, you'll have trouble reaching anyone."

"I know." Stihl hated the idea of being stranded too. But what other choice did he have. Marohka needed to rest. "Don't worry. The trip might take us a little longer, but we should be able to make it to camp by tomorrow afternoon."

"If not, then—"

Stihl clicked his ECD off.

No point in arguing any further. He had bigger issues to address.

Chapter Nine

Marohka struggled to open her eyes. The smell of fire sticks burning tickled her nose. Feet shuffling around the room teased her hearing.

A picture of the little girl flashed in Marohka's head. Her parched lips wouldn't move. A sandpaper tongue didn't help the process any either. Forcing her eyes open produced only a grainy blur. She blinked once. After several more, images formed in the fog.

A tin roof, an iron bed, a dim view of the world outside, a wooden door took shape. *A structure.*

Primitive, but a roof. Shifting her head on the pillow, a drum pounded a hard beat in her head.

In pain, she moaned after the simple movement. Her eyes closed. Seeing her surroundings wasn't really that important.

"Marohka?"

She knew the voice.

"Starlight, open your eyes."

The soft tremor of the voice enticed her. Slowly, to keep the band from sounding off in her head, she opened her eyes. Stihl's face formed in her line of vision.

"How are you feeling?" He smiled.

"Ah . . ." She licked her lips.

"Wait an iton. I'll bring you some water." With no more than those few words, he disappeared.

An illusion, her mind reasoned, like her other dreams. She closed her eyes again, unwilling to think about how much she wished he were here. Wherever here might be.

A cool drop of water washed over her bottom lip. Her tongue darted out to taste the sweet flavor. *Rain.* Opening her mouth, she caught the liquid essence of life on her dry tongue.

* * * *

Stihl dribbled a small amount of water into her mouth and waited after each spoonful for her to swallow. He lifted the cold compact on her head and checked the bump above her left eyebrow. It appeared to be going down, but the coloring around her eye grew darker. She'd be sporting a multicolor soldier's patch by morning.

Luckily, she'd not caused any permanent damage. When he'd seen her disappear over the side of the cliff, his heart had plummeted along with her. Reacting without thinking, he'd followed her over the side. Her alba-ox hadn't stumbled or fallen, or even, as far as Stihl could determine, misjudged the terrain. The animal simply walked off the side of the cliff.

Emotions stirred in his chest. She tugged at something within him, a part of himself he hadn't known he could give. Protecting her, taking care of her, or simply being with her wasn't enough. He wanted more, required more. His hands trembled, and he stroked her hair away from her face. Unable to resist, touching, pleasing her, having her in his sight, all those little things gave him pleasure. Somehow, she'd taken possession of his soul. Now, he needed her.

Sudden clarity hit. Only by blending with her would he be complete. His loins tightened with lust. She opened her eyes. A misty fog clouded them.

"It's all right, Marohka. You're safe."

"Stihl?" She wet her lips. "Where are we?"

"It doesn't matter. Just rest." He shifted next to her on the bed.

She frowned.

"Is your head hurting?"

"Yes, but . . ." She wiggled on the bed and then groaned.

"Easy there, you have a few bruises which need time to heal. Lie still, and I'll get a med-patch to ease the pain."

"But, Stihl."

An unsteady hand touched his arm. He paused before rising, her gaze pleading with him to explain. "I don't understand. What's going on?"

He laid his hand on her cheek. "Right now, you need to rest. The next time you wake up, I'll explain."

She opened her mouth to argue, would've if she'd been stronger. But with a sigh, she closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

He smiled. She wouldn't let him off so easy again.

* * * *

The light shining through the window hit Marohka's eyes the moment she'd opened them.

It must be morning.

Memories from the day before flashed through her head—her alba-ox's fall from the cliff, a remote cabin, Stihl's gentle touch. He slept beside her on the warm, cozy bed. Her head nestled on his bare chest, and her cheek pressed against his heart. A steady thump reaffirmed her own heartbeat.

She slid her fingers over his smooth skin and toyed with his curly chest hair. She worried the skin back and forth with her strokes. The granite strength of him appealed to her soft feminine center, a place she'd always kept closely guarded from a man's rough touch.

Stihl, with his bedroom brown eyes, had entered her life uninvited and stormed the gates of all her carefully laid plans. He'd changed her view as to what she longed for in a mate. His patience tested her, making her doubt what she truly wanted in life. His gentle probing forced her to question her will to resist.

The idea of truly bonding with him teased her with a chance for happiness. After the way he'd been taking care of her for the last few zitions, a desire she hadn't known existed blossomed into a gut-wrenching flower of need.

Each time she woke up, he'd been there giving her water, feeding her, reassuring her with gentle gestures. He'd held her close, shared his body heat when she'd been cold, offered comfort after her disturbing dreams. Not once did he desert her.

Her mind full of images of him, she tried to assess the endless number of reasons to leave. But her body cried for him to relieve the ache in her soul.

Could she accept what he offered for a little while? Sample the pleasures of having a mate? Or did she have to blend with him to experience the joy? She snuggled closer and worked to fit him into her life's path. Would it be wrong?

"Marohka?" He stopped her hand. "What's the matter?"

Unsure as to how to achieve her dueling objectives, she lifted her head. His face, rugged from a night's growth, awoke her over-sensitized desires.

"I liked you stroking me, but you're rubbing the skin raw." He squeezed her hand.

She glanced at the fingers he held and dismissed his comment under the heavier weight of her thoughts.

Gathering her courage, she peeked at him under her lashes. "Stihl, I want to make love to you."

His gaze grew warm, sparkling in an unfamiliar way. "Do you have a certain time in mind?"

A grin formed at the corner of his mouth. Was he laughing at her? The idea upset her, and she backed away. "If you'd rather not, I won't force you."

"I was teasing." He rolled over with her in his arms and pinned her to the bed. "I can't imagine anything I'd rather do."

He smiled, and his head dropped. His chin nudged her shirt away from her neck. Kisses rained down on her skin.

The moist stroke of his tongue caressed and worshiped her ear. She slid her hands into his hair.

“Stihl, I—”

“You have such beautiful skin.”

His hot mouth against her neck fired ripples of pleasure to race down her spine. She yearned to relax and enjoy herself, but the weight of Stihl’s heavy body lying on top of her sent a swarm of tingling fears through her veins. Desire and fear warred within her mind.

Stuck beneath him, she wiggled. Her nervousness about his power over her added to her terror. To calm herself, she glanced around the room. The icy metal ceiling, the rudimentary furniture, and the fire’s cold embers—her gaze darted from object to object. Harder and harder, she struggled to enjoy Stihl’s touch.

She closed her eyes, and flashed back to the bout in the mating arena. Stihl’s broad chest pinned her to the mat. Her victory lost, her life changed.

Marohka tightened her hands and tugged at his hair.

* * * *

Sensitive to her emotions, Stihl worked his way back to the soft tender skin behind her ear. A warning sounded in his head. He checked her face and noticed the tension resonating from her shoulders and arms.

She remained stiff and unmoving in his arms. Desire no longer held her in its grasp. Another reason explained her elevated breathing and tightly closed eyes. One in which, Stihl wasn’t a party to. He traced a single finger down her nose. “Marohka, look at me.”

Her eyes opened, and fear flashed in their depths. “Stihl . . .”

Stunned, he drew back seeking answers. Ones, he knew, she didn’t have. He shifted his weight off her and settled back on the bed. His mind racing for clues he’d somehow missed until this moment. Her reaction after he’d pinned her in the first challenge. The way she’d become unnerved on the train. The lady panicked whenever she found herself under a man.

* * * *

Marohka tugged the blanket up around her and rose to a sitting position, taking slow controlled breaths. Her heart rate settled, and she searched for the reason for her panic attack.

The man beside her didn’t stir.

Not sure how to proceed, she started talking. “Stihl, I understand if you’re upset, but I wasn’t playing a game with you.” She turned to gauge his reaction. He lay staring at the ceiling.

“I’ve never encountered this problem before.” She tried a smile, but couldn’t achieve it. “But, then again, I haven’t been in this type of situation before.”

With her words, his gaze met hers. She expected to see some form of judgment, some anger for playing with his emotions, but understanding surrounded her instead.

“You’re right.” He covered her hand. “Why don’t we try again with you on top?”

Confused by his answer, she shook her head. “But aren’t you mad?”

He directed her down onto his chest. He stroked her shoulders. “There’s no need. I rushed you.” His hands slid to her waist and stopped on her lower back. “Now I’ll let you set the pace.”

She eyed him. What exactly did that mean? Could he be giving her another chance?

He captured her lips and diverted her thoughts. Little samples of his mouth teased her with his flavor. Each time he drew back, she hungered for more. A meeting of lips, a stroke of his tongue, a sensual dance of desire drew her closer and closer. The wet heat of his mouth built a flame which set her on fire.

His hands, never still, caressed her, and he slowly worked her out of her shirt. Each stroke awoke a yearning, almost an obsession to blend with this man, to become one. She could not only feel his hands moving over her, but she viewed them in her mind too.

Her underwear offered no barrier. He slid them from her hips, down her legs, and squeezed her buttocks. The mix of seeing and feeling his hands drove her to explore. She longed to spark the same emotions in him and roamed her hands freely over him. Her palms flat against his chest, she molded his flesh. The powerful strength of his muscles, the solid force of his ribs and smooth silk of his skin, all caressed her fingertips. The rhythmic beat of his heart played like a drum to her senses, stealing her breath away.

Lifting her head, she studied his face then blushed. Lust, dark and hot, swam in his heavy-lidded eyes and on his swollen lips. Shocked because she’d invoked such a response, she stared at him with an unbelieving glare.

“Yes, Marohka, you turn me on.”

His gleaming white teeth showed in his huge smile. Doubt engulfed her mind. She’d been taught how to please a man and knew the mechanics of lovemaking. The problem rested in putting theory into practice. Thoughts of different techniques ran through her head. Flashes of her stroking him in an assortment of places lit her face with embarrassment. Could she go through with this?

Stihl’s hands traced her spine. “Marohka, we don’t have to make love. I can wait until you’re ready.”

She sank into his dark brown eyes and fought not to drown in their depths. He’d wait if she asked, but the idea of delaying seemed worse than the thought of continuing. With her purpose in mind, she slid her hands down his chest to the waistline of his pants.

“I have to.” She undid the top button. “I want to experience what it’s like to be a part of you.” She parted the material.

His hand stopped hers. "Once we make love, Marohka, you won't be able to hold me off any longer. I'll need you more than ever."

His gaze warned her of the risk she'd be taking, but she couldn't heed the advice. She'd come too far to turn back now. He released her hand. Her fingertips touched the tip of his shaft. Moaning, he accepted her decision.

Desire, like a branding iron, burned through the center of her body. Right or wrong, she wouldn't turn back. She needed this man, his rod between her legs touching the core of her being. She slid her hand down the swollen length of his sex. He inhaled, sharply.

She yanked back her hand. "I'm sorry, did I hurt you?"

His hand caught hers. "No, starlight. It just felt so good." He directed her hand back in place.

"I . . ."

His shaft twitched and pulsed. She opened the break in his pants and milked his length. "Why don't I remove your pants?"

He started to assist her, but she shoved his hands away, sat, and handled the task. Her own nakedness didn't register. She only wanted him out of his clothes. A gleam sparked in his eyes. He lifted his hips off the mattress and aided her job of working his pants off his legs. When she finished, he laid back quietly.

With him lying naked before her, she slowly smoothed her hand back up his strong leg, over his knee to his thick, muscular thigh. She found the strength of the male body delightful, a sight, no doubt, to enjoy. But until now, she hadn't been close enough to fully comprehend the impact of having one at her fingertips. A sexually aroused man at close range was impressive, if not a little daunting.

Drawn like a magnet, she carefully touched his thick staff. This time, his sigh encouraged as she stroked and caressed his long rod. The hard urgency throbbing beneath the iron silk thrilled her senses.

His strong hand cupped her breast. A fire lit under his slightest touch. The teasing stroke of his callused fingers played over her breast and turned her nipple into a hard bud. Her inexperienced body never exposed to such pleasure awoke with a burning fire to mate. With desire guiding her, she leaned forward to drink in the taste of his lips. Luscious, hot, flavor played across her tongue.

He took possession of her mouth. His fingers fondled her breast, rubbing the tip with arousing tenderness. A sigh of pleasure escaped her lips. A river of heat flowed through her stomach and pooled between her legs.

Unable to breathe, she jerked away to catch her breath, only to have it taken away again when Stihl's mouth covered the peak of her breast. His tongue circled her nipple, licked, then pressed the tip between his lips and sucked it gently into his mouth.

A wild cry erupted from her mouth. Stunned, she couldn't believe her breasts were so sensitive, not to where a man touching them could ignite a fire in her soul. Cupping his head in her hand, she shoved herself forward and straddled his lap. He leaned back. His hard-aroused flesh fell between her legs. She knew what came next, and she rejected the idea of waiting.

With her knees on both sides of his hips, she guided his thick shaft into position and slowly slid over his rod. He caressed her breasts. An intense throb of rejection hit. Her mind stopped her downward progress. Could he be too big for her? Not a possibility, but the pain was real. Gulping down a breath of air, she again tried to move along the thick column of flesh. The burning sensation stopped her again.

"Stihl, this isn't working." She shifted.

He placed his hands on her thighs to stay her movement. "Hold on." He captured her hands and placed them around his neck. "Why don't you kiss me?"

She eyed him. Could he help? With his shaft sitting at the entrance of her body, she followed his lead and leaned forward. Her lips met his, and a light stroke traced the delicate skin between her legs. Shivers tingled along her limbs.

He flooded her senses, not only with his hot determined kisses but also with the light touch of his fingers. He mirrored the stroke of his tongue with the soft, teasing probe between her legs. A new arousing sensation rippled over her skin. She waited.

Each tantalizing nudge promised her something more. She followed the rhythm he set. Her hips danced forward for a brief shot of pleasure, spurred on by his finger flickering over a tender spot. She waited, waited for him to touch her again only to have him tease and retreat. She moaned and surrendered the bliss of his mouth to bury her face against his neck.

"Stihl, please." She begged him to end the enticing torture.

Unable to stand any more, she shoved his hand away and slid down over his staff. With each thrust of her hips, she drew him deeper and deeper inside her, intensifying her pleasure. Unable to stay still, she danced to the ancient rhythm of desire. Eagerness outweighed discomfort. Slowly her body stretched to meet the want of his.

The pain became irrelevant. Nothing mattered, but the intense rapture she found in his arms. His needs matched hers, urging her higher and higher. Up and down, she rode him. A musical crescendo of emotions filled her, moving her closer and closer to the edge of the unknown. Certain she'd explode and unable to force herself any farther, she froze.

He continued to buck beneath her, which carried her along on a river of passion. With each punch of his hips, a force expanded. Her toes tingled. Electricity raced along the bottom of her feet, up her leg and around her spine. The energy gathered in her head like a bomb. She waited, poised for an eruption.

With her eyelids tightly closed, she envisioned Stihl standing beside her on a ledge. Sparks of energy circled them and drew them closer to what appeared to be a dark hole.

“Come with me,” he whispered and grabbed for her wrist.

She surged above him, and his strikes grew stronger.

In her mind, she reared away from him, not willing to follow him into the black abyss. A low rumble sounded in his throat. His control broke. His hands clamped around her hips. He arched into her, pulling her down hard against him, filling her to the hilt. With him so deep inside her, sparks of pure power ignited around her.

He convulsed. The force of his release sent him over the edge. A sharp cry sounded and echoed through her head. Alive with new sensations, she moved closer and closer to the edge. In her mind’s eye, she searched. Where was he? Blackness filled her mind. An abyss of loneliness clawed at her feet.

“Stihl,” she screamed. In her head, she longed to see him with her on the ledge. Her mind called for him, and she rushed to satisfy her physical needs. The link between them severed. He disappeared.

Stuck on the edge, with no light on her horizon, she swam alone. Her body broke the surface, pulsating with pleasure. She rode the dark waves, cutting back and forth against the tide of satisfaction. The strong undercurrent refused her the pleasure of her release. Instead, it forced her onward toward the dark sandy beach ahead. Like sea weed, she lay spent on the empty shore.

Alone.

Two emotions swam through her head, the ultimate pleasure of sex and the utter despair of being unloved. Each formed a small rip in the fabric of her being. Tears rolled unchecked down her face. Unwilling to move, she waited for Stihl to ask her to leave. They hadn’t reached enlightenment. It proved his lack of desire for her after all.

Yes, he’d given her pleasure. But she struggled at the loss of the connection, which should’ve formed between them. A missing part—a sharing, a glow, a link. Their joining lacked the fulfillment she’d expected. Now, she knew for certain, there’d be no future for them. The truth cut like a black blade through her soul.

She screamed in anguish and sprang to her feet. Monsters sprang from a black hole in her mind. Their large muscular bodies glowed like black opals in the dark. A piercing red light shot from their eyes and shined through the black veil of their masks. Each held a weapon of torture.

The demons of fear and loneliness led the pack. They invaded her mind. Ready to do battle, they lashed out. She quickly jumped back and twisted around to protect herself. The icy blade of isolation swept across her chest. The edge of a cold steel sword skated along her skin.

To defend herself, she landed a foot behind the kneecap of one of her opponents. He fell. She turned to face the other brutes and missed the devil on the ground. An iron vise circled her ankle.

“Marohka.”

Stihl's voice invaded her thoughts, but she ignored him. The battle at hand demanded all her attention. She kicked at the monster holding her ankle with her free foot and yelled her battle cry. "I will not surrender."

With a roll, which knocked her off balance, the clever beast pinned her to the ground. Arms swinging, legs kicking, she fought her demons.

* * * *

On the cold floor wrestling with Marohka, Stihl grasped a quick breath. Her slender body struggled against his, fighting his attempt to restrain her hands. She used every muscle to shift his weight off of her and onto the floor.

Her gaze not focused on anything in the room, the battle raged within her head. When she'd jumped from the bed screaming, her eyes glazed over with terror, he'd scanned the room for an unknown threat.

With no danger in sight, he'd tried to offer her comfort and reached out a hand, but she reared back like he meant to strike. Unable to connect with her telepathically without touching her, he had thrown himself at her and struggled to gain entrance into her thoughts, but she didn't respond to his probing. A dark fog surrounded her in his mind. Tiny bits of scenes flashed in his visions. In a battle with some dark creatures, she fought the monsters that held her captive in their grips.

Then, he'd known. The demons projected in her mind were him personified. Yet, he couldn't maintain a mental link with her and, at the same time, fight her physically. Only by his restraining her would she become aware of whom she was fighting. Stihl grabbed for her hands, leaving an open shot to his jaw. Both of them found their target.

His head snapped back with the blow, but he managed to capture her hands. He wrestled her to the floor and secured her beneath him, giving her no way to escape. After a few calming breaths, he dug through her thoughts.

Laying his head on her shoulder, he placed his chest over hers and closed his eyes. He matched his breathing to hers. Slowly, he worked through the shadows of her mind. Flashes of the images in her head appeared in his.

A dark void laid an arm's length away from where she stood. Large, dark figures surrounded her, each fighting to drag her into the black depths. She fought them with everything she could muster and held them at bay. The battle stuck at a deadlock.

He slowly approached her from behind. Once within reach, he clasped an arm around her waist and jerked her back against his chest. With her off guard, he captured her attention.

"Marohka, listen to me. Whatever you think you're seeing in your head, it's not real."

"Stihl, what are you doing here?" She turned in the circle of his arms. "Get out of here."

"No."

She blinked. “No?”

“The dream you’re having isn’t real. I won’t let you fight these demons alone.”

She glanced around. The large dark figures standing beside her itons ago were now gone. “Look, Stihl, you don’t know what your getting into.” She turned. Her red face showed her anger. “Just stay out of my head. You’ll only get hurt.”

Before he answered, a wall fell between them, ripping her from his arms. He fought the image by lifting his head and glanced around at the empty cabin. She lay beneath him with her eyes closed. She appeared to be asleep if not for the intense expression on her face.

He grabbed her shoulders. “Wake up, Marohka. Don’t shut me out.”

Her head rocked back and forth.

“Open your eyes.”

She looked up, and shards of contempt hit his senses.

“Marohka, it’s just a bad dream.”

“No.” She tugged at her hands, and he released them. “It’s not a dream.”

He studied her face. “Then explain to me what it is.”

Her hands ran along the lines of his shoulders. Back and forth, she rubbed the muscles. “Each of one of those dark figures is a different emotion.” Her hands stopped. “When you leave me, I’ll have—”

“Who says I’m leaving?” Stihl interrupted.

“You did.”

“What?” He shook his head, trying to figure out what she was talking about. “I have not.”

Marohka stared at him for an iton. Her gaze shifted to a place over his shoulder.

“When?”

A scene of their earlier tussle on the bed played across her face. Stihl found where she’d made her mistake. “You didn’t want to bond. You only sought the physical release of our joining.” He brushed a short strawberry-blond hair away from her face. “Right?”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Unless we each give a part of ourselves, we won’t share the light of fulfillment.” He stared into her

troubled eyes. “That’s the bonding part of our marriage.”

“I can’t bond with you. If I do, I’ll lose an important part of myself.” Lines formed across her brow.

“Why?” He struggled to understand what she thought would happen. Blending connected her to him, him to her, a sharing of mind, heart, and soul. Did she question his devotion? How could she not know he’d treasure her like a priceless gift?

Marohka sighed. “It’s like a duel. One side of my heart seeks to bond with you, to give you everything I am. But the other side is the person I’ve worked to become, a strong, independent woman.” Her gaze begged him to understand. “Don’t you see I can’t have one without losing the other? If one wins the other is destroyed.”

“You think I want to change who you are?”

“Yes. . . . No. . . . I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I’m struggling to come to terms with the two.”

He stroked her hair trying to calm her troubled mind. “Marohka, you’ve spent a lot of time protecting yourself from me. Have you ever stopped to consider I might have the same issues with you? I’m sharing myself with you. You have to see what’s in my heart.”

“No. I won’t invade your thoughts.”

“That’s commendable, but I want you to understand how much I care about you and how important you are to my happiness.” He smiled.

Her mind gently probed his.

“I won’t rob you of who you are. That’s the person I care about.”

“Stihl, it’s not easy. I’ve built strong walls around my heart. I don’t want to get hurt.”

“Close your eyes.” He kissed each eyelid. “Now, share my thoughts.”

He stroked her hair and eased her tension. “Tell me what you see.”

Chapter Ten

Purple, yellow, and white blossoms danced across the field. A sweet fragrance lay like a soft blanket over the scene. Birds sang a gentle song to their partners.

Marohka glimpsed the blue sky in the distance. The warm glow of the two suns kissed her skin. The soft flowing material of the sleeves of her dress brushed against her arms. Stihl lifted her and placed her back in bed, but no one stood beside her in her mind. She relaxed and enjoyed the landscape.

"I see a meadow full of flowers." His chest covered hers. "I'm lying all alone on the grass. The mountains in the distance are beautiful."

"Do you know where you are?"

"No." She glanced around, but the scenic place wasn't like anywhere she'd ever been.

"You're not very far from my house. If you look to your right, you'll see my home in the distance."

On the horizon stood a wooden structure, a few stories high. A large porch ran along the front of the house. Tall oval windows welcomed weary travelers.

Stihl's home. His heart lay imbedded in the fabric of the land, a link which formed an integral part of his makeup. Behind the house stood a number of other buildings and a corral. Animals ate from a large wooden trough. What type of animals, she couldn't determine.

"What do you think?"

She turned to her left and addressed him. "It's a beautiful place. I understand now why you love it."

"We can live there if you want."

She glanced back at the big house. "Who else lives there?"

"No one. Cyd has a cabin down the road." Stihl pointed off to the left. "He likes his privacy."

A lovely house, she'd enjoy living in it. But she didn't respond or give him an answer. The man, already cocky and self-assured, would only use the knowledge of her dreaming of living outside the city against her if he knew.

The brush of his lips caressed her neck, and the whisper of his breath teased her ear. "You'd love it, you know."

She glanced to where he sat beside her on the grass. Her hands tightened around something. She checked them, but they were empty. "You're playing with me."

His hands slid over her skin.

"You're projecting a scene in my head, but you're trying to seduce my body."

The wide smile on his face didn't object to the truth. In fact, he appeared pleased with himself. "There are advantages to both reality and fantasy."

She stared at him a moment then blinked. She narrowed her eyes to glare into his. The weight of him above her pressed home the difference between the two scenes. "I don't live in a fantasy, Stihl. I know what I want."

"Do you?" His gaze held an indeterminable glint.

"Stihl, I have things I have to do. I can't afford the luxury of playing around."

"As my mate, your only job is to make me happy."

Marohka closed her eyes and shook her head. Instantly, she fell back into the scene at the meadow. Stihl now lay on top of her, raining kisses down her neck.

"I'm not your slave."

The soft downy hair of his chest brushed against her breasts and enticed her to snuggle closer.

"No, you're a very sexy woman, who's afraid to trust her mate." His words hit her like ice water. She didn't trust him.

Why?

He'd cared for her after her fall from the alba-ox. What did he have to do to prove himself?

Scenes with her father flashed in her head. A cave-in at a mine, men needing help, the mine in trouble, every crisis required her attention—like the current problems with the Trisar Mine. Each time, she'd handled the crisis without incident. Yet, every time her father revoked the authority he'd given. Short term, he required her help, but long term, he refused to give her control.

"I'm not your father."

"I didn't say you were." She wondered if the two men could be alike.

"Maybe not, but you're comparing me to him."

She punched him on the shoulder and stared into his face. "You're reading my thoughts."

"I have to use whatever advantage I can."

The light from the window blinded her, and she adjusted her sight to stare into his face. The dark walls of the cabin framed his head. "Stihl, I'll admit I'm having trouble trusting you." She paused unsure how to continue.

"Why?"

“You’re not what I expected.” She placed her hands on both sides of his face. “You’re a kind, generous person, but I’m not what you need.”

“Shouldn’t I get to decide that?”

“No. I’m not the little woman who’d be happy being stuck at home. I want it all.” She slid her hands into his silky hair. “A career, a family, a man who can let me be strong, I’m not a passive person.”

“I’m not looking for a passive mate.”

“But don’t you see that’s what you need.”

“Why?”

Stunned by his question, she searched her mind for some of the characteristics he should have in a mate. A blank wall stared back.

He interrupted her thoughts. “No, that’s your idea of what I should have in a mate, not what I want.”

“I’m not a politician’s wife.”

“I’m not a politician.”

“I like to fight.” She struggled against him, trying to gain her freedom.

“I like to win.” He shifted her back beneath him.

“But, Stihl, we don’t mix.”

He slid lower and rubbed his cheek against her neck and chest. The rough texture of his beard sent tremors of awareness along her skin. “I don’t think so.”

His gaze heated, he turned his head to taste her nipple. His wet tongue danced over her flesh. A shiver ran through her, piecing the thin shield protecting her heart.

“I can’t bond with you.”

“You have to.” His lips circled the rosy peak and sucked her heated flesh into his mouth.

She gasped. “Why?”

The wild sensations running through the center of her body forced her eyes closed. Again a picture formed. In the same meadow, she strolled toward the house. A shadow stood on the front porch. She paused, but Stihl coaxed her closer by caressing her back with long, slow strokes. His hands slid lower, which pushed her forward. He surrounded her with his presence, not letting her vary from where he wanted her to go.

“Stihl, I . . .” she muttered, and his lips slid to her other breast. The picture in her head wavered.

His hot mouth poised over her, heat marked her skin. She tugged his head forward begging him to pull her flesh into his mouth. His hands on her waist seduced her back to the scene in her head. She caught sight of the person standing on the front porch. A woman stepped forward into the sunlight.

Her mind froze, shocked by the image of herself standing on the doorstep. She surged backward, reacting to the scene in her head. With a quick shift of position, Stihl drove his rod deep, which cleared everything but him from her mind.

He claimed her, not letting her deny the bliss he could give. She moved with him, giving, seeking, taking pleasure in all he offered. Her toes tingled with pleasure.

This time, when she saw him stand on the edge of the cliff, the dark abyss behind him, she let him draw her to his chest. “Come with me, starlight. Let me show you the light.”

Poised on the edge of completion, she stepped forward. Light filled her. A glow she couldn’t contain pulsed through her driving her over the cliff into the bright, luminous bliss beyond. She fell into the warm loving thoughts of their life together.

Floating for an iton, she rested on his chest. His hands caressed her back and butt. Her mind slowly returned to reality. Their bodies still connected, she nestled closer, and her energy slowly returned.

With each breath, the pressure of her world invaded her thoughts. She may have experienced the light with Stihl and shared a connection she’d never known before, but she had things to do. The problems at the mine were waiting.

Marohka lifted her head. His hands slid along her spine and stopped at her waist. He held her in place, not allowing her movement to uncouple them.

Drawing in a deep breath, she caught his unique scent and focused in on his face. His lids veiled his eyes. A wicked grin caressed his lips. His dimple teased her like on the night they’d met.

“Stihl, shouldn’t we leave?” she asked hastily so she couldn’t change her mind.

His eyes opened, the dark brown pools showing desire in their depths. “Yes, but first I’d like to make love to you again.” His hands slid lower. “But I promised Cyd we’d be at the mine by midday.”

He rolled over, carried her with him, and slipped from her body. His hand rubbed her cheek, and he placed a quick kiss on her forehead. “I’d much rather spend the day here with you.”

His heated gaze sizzled over her breasts, stomach, and thighs. Then he rolled out of bed and stood on the other side. “We have a little food left from last night.” He retrieved his pants.

She couldn’t help but notice his naked butt disappear under his clothing. Turning to retrieve the large shirt she had on earlier and her underwear, she glanced around the cabin. “Where are my

clothes?”

The cough preceding his reply warned her about the unappealing answer. “I had to bury them.”

“What?” She whipped around.

Only half dressed, he stood, stoking the fire. “With alba-ox’s blood all over them, they stunk.” He turned. “So I buried them.”

Exposed without her clothes, Marohka clutched the large shirt against her chest. “But what am I supposed to wear?”

“My shirt.” He indicated the shirt in her hands. “And my coat. Cyd has the alba-oxen with our extra clothes, so we can change when we get there.”

He turned back to the fireplace.

“What about my new coat?”

“Gone.” Without even a glance over his shoulder, he continued with his task.

“And my shoes?”

“They’re here by the fire.” He pointed to where they sat by a chair.

Without another option, she slid on his shirt. Her clothes were gone. The poor alba-ox had lost more than clothes on the unplanned trip over the cliff. Stihl informed her of the animal’s demise. She grappled with a reason for the animal’s misstep. Not a hole or crevice marred the path where it could’ve stumbled. At least, not one she remembered seeing.

Dressed in his oversized shirt, she walked to the fireplace. In amazement, she watched him stir a pot positioned above a fire. Flames danced beneath it. “I’ve never seen anyone who cooked with fire.”

“It’s a skill my grandfather taught me. Growing up in the outback of Lustralia, we lacked a food simulator out where we lived.” Stihl pulled the pot a safe distance away from the heat. “This should hold us for a while.

“We only have one plate.” He dished out a portion of the food onto a small piece of tin. “You can have it. I’ll eat out of the pot.”

Brown gravy ran across the plate with chunks of vegetables and meat sprinkled among it. Marohka poked at each item with her fork. She sampled a small bite. “What are we having?”

“Outback stew. It’s made with whatever you have on hand. I found a few provisions and threw them together. I didn’t examine too hard what they were.” Stihl lifted his spoon. “After you eat, we’ll clean up and get going.”

She glanced around the cabin. With only a few chairs by the fire and a bed against the far wall, the

room appeared almost empty. Settling down on a hard chair, she forced herself to eat. Stihl stood by the fire without taking a seat. He appeared lost in his own world. She wondered about his thoughts. Did he regret making love to her?

Her eyes fell on her left hand. The pattern appeared darker and more intricate. With a quick peek at her right hand, she noticed her design had changed slightly. *What completed the process?*

“We should be at the camp in a few zitons.” He poured water from a bucket and rinsed out the pot and his spoon. “If you’re finished, we’ll head out.” He retrieved her plate, and she picked up her shoe. He rinsed off her items and then set them on the hearth to dry. Once finished, he dumped the extra water on the fire.

The room lost its warm glow, turning dark and shabby. The only source of light now glowed from the dirty window by the door. She quickly slid her foot into her other shoe, not wanting to stay here any longer. Everything around her suddenly lost its luster. She stood and started for the door.

Stihl followed. “You’ll need to wear this. Even though it’s early spring, it can still get cold in the canyon.”

She peeked over her shoulder. He held a long knee-length coat. The long heavy coat would swallow her once she slipped it over her shoulders.

“It should help keep you warm until we arrive at the camp.”

Walking to him, she searched his face for some sign of his feelings. Did he truly care for her, the way she was beginning to care for him? His gaze revealed nothing. She turned. He placed the coat on her shoulders. Would he take care of anyone the way he had her? Or was she special?

The answers mattered.

* * * *

Stihl sat behind Marohka on the back of the alba-oxen. He surveyed the land and the large webbed trees around them. Many dangers lurked in the shadows in this part of the country.

The area appeared harmless, but early spring rains could start water avalanches. The tall water wall over ten leg-lengths high could start down the mountains without warning. Composed of a mixture of melting snow, overflow runoffs from high-level lakes, and a waterspout of rain, once in the wall’s path, most things didn’t survive. Traveling over a small log bridge, he checked the rapid current of the creek. He rushed their mount along the trail away from the potential problem.

Animal tracks dotted the area, but there were no recent signs of predators lurking nearby. He checked the terrain ahead then glanced at Marohka’s hands on the reins. He’d noticed her studying her mark after they made love. She believed the bright symbol meant she could escape. In truth, the mark wouldn’t fully merge with his until she carried his child.

He smiled.

She wiggled.

Her thoughts flashed in his head. Her green gaze sparked with anger under a yellow mining hat. Men worked in dark shadows around her.

He disliked her worrying about what lay ahead of them at the mining camp. He wanted her attention centered on him alone. The lady might think she had options, but he refused to allow her any means to slip away. Not now, not ever. The reason for bonding with her had changed. Before they'd shared the light of fulfillment, he needed her to meet his father's requirements for his inheritance. Now, he craved her for himself.

She needed him in a way he found addictive, mainly because she didn't judge him like everyone else in his family. He shook his head to clear his thoughts. It no longer matter why he wanted her. He just did.

"Stihl, how much farther until we get to the camp?"

"Not long."

"Is it over a ziton away?"

"Maybe two."

"Do you think Cyd has made it there already?"

"Yes." Stihl had no desire to talk.

The wind blew against his bare back, and Marohka shivered. He hugged her tighter against his chest using his body heat and seductive ideas to warm her. She snuggled deeper into his embrace. He released the reins, and she led their mount. He directed her thoughts away from the mine. He raised the heat in her system with a more sensual need by implanting pictures in her head.

* * * *

Erotic images played through Marohka's head. She struggled with the idea of making love on the back of an alba-ox while riding through the outback landscape.

Stihl sat nestled tight behind her, his thick thighs squeezing her legs where she rested between them. His warm body hugged hers. His arms circled her waist. Her mind stretch a little farther and conjured up sensuous pictures. The sway of their alba-ox's step rocked her against him, which made her hot and needy.

Images of them together kept flashing through her memory. The problems at the mine unable to divert her thoughts, pictures of them making love sped through her mind. She shifted in the saddle to ease the tension in her lower body. Maybe, they should've never made love. But in reality, she wished they'd do it again.

His strong hands slid from the saddle horn to her thighs. Words whispered passed her ear. "You

want me inside you.”

She remained quiet for fear of shattering the fantasy. She imagined the kiss on the side of her neck, but she tilted her head to give him easier access anyway. His hand slithered along the opening of her coat, and the reins in her hands slipped. A cold hand stroked her warm thigh, but she voiced no objection. With an arm around her waist, he hugged her tighter. His thick erection pressed against her lower back.

Naughty fingers slid teasingly close to the hot wet space between her legs. A moan escaped her lips. She wanted him to touch her, hungered for it more than she ever imagined possible. She shifted her leg and tried to direct his actions.

“Stihl, please . . .” She begged him to ease the throbbing low in the center of her being. She longed to guide his movements and loosened her grip. He needed to finish what he’d started.

“No, keep your hands on the reins.” One hand covered both of hers.

She obeyed and gripped the reins tighter. His fingers, teasing her with featherlight touches, edged slowly toward their target.

* * * *

Stihl loved the way she wiggled and squirmed. He tempted, teased, and stroked her through the wet fabric of her underwear. Her breast hugged his arm. He yearned to drive her to the edge of bliss and have her explode in his arms.

He slid his hand over her stomach to the waistband of her underwear. She trembled. With slow, tantalizing steps, he walked his fingers through the curly hair lying between her legs and touched the center of her heat.

Her hips arched. Each stroke ignited a flame. The sweet scent of her body combined with her soft moans of rapture lit a fire in his loins. Her colorful hair caressed his cheek. The frantic beat of her pulse lay just under the skin of her neck. He danced his tongue repeatedly over erratic rhythm.

* * * *

Frantic with desire, Marohka jerked their mount to a stop. She required more than a few appetizers. Only his touch could satisfy the hunger eating at her soul. With a gasping breath, she tore his hands away and reared up in the stirrups. “I can’t wait. I have to have you now.”

With one foot out of the stirrup, she would’ve turned and landed back in his lap, if he hadn’t slid from the saddle. He caught her around the waist and lifted her to the ground. His hard body beneath her fingertips, he quivered at her touch. His pulse leaped. She threw herself at him, with no other thought but him in her head.

He caught her against his chest. Her hands raked through his hair while his lips claimed hers. The sweet taste demanded more, and he plunged deeper into the warm recesses of her mouth. She wrapped herself around him. Her arms circled his neck. Her legs locked around his waist. She

couldn't get close enough.

* * * *

On fire, Stihl wondered if a man could explode from need. They tumbled to the ground. He rolled so his body took the brunt of the fall. He tangled his hands with hers, and he helped work his coat free of her body. Her hands skittered over his flesh, which raised goose bumps in their wake.

With his coat lying beneath her on the soft grass, he didn't remove her shirt but found her breast with his mouth through the fabric. She arched beneath him sending her pelvic bone up against his groin. Little murmurs of pleasure sounded in her throat.

He attempted a slow seduction to draw out her pleasure, but he couldn't wait. His body demanded its own release. Freeing her from her clothes, he settled between her legs. His lips and rod poised at each of her seductive lips. "I want to share your light." He covered her mouth with his and slammed his hips forward.

He claimed her, driving her closer and closer to the dark abyss. Tiny tremors signaled her climax. On the rim of the passion cliff, he wrapped his hand around hers. With one leap, he sent them both over the edge into the light of bliss.

Chapter Eleven

Melody birds sang a sweet hymn in the distance. Scented pollen filled the air. The warm heat from the two suns encouraged Marohka to remain unmoving on the crisp grass. She was exhausted. Her mind raced with activity.

The joy of blending with Stihl sent a pulsating energy through her system. Emotions and memories that were foreign to her flashed in her mind. His thoughts and feelings merged with hers.

A radiant peace flew on feathery wings into her heart. The light they entered after their joining created a glow of happiness she'd never experienced before. The bond seeped into her system and found cracks in the armor around her heart. What she wanted from her career fought with what she needed in her private life. Could she have both?

Not possible. But right now, lying in Stihl's arms, she believed she had the strength and courage to make it happen. Her head resting on his chest, the steady beat of his heart sounded strong and reassured her of their future. Even if she had to give him up somewhere down the line, no one could ever take away this moment.

Breathing in the sweet smell of clover, she recalled each detail. Heated by a wildfire of passion, they'd stripped each other of their clothes. His shirt torn, dials popped off and disappeared in the grass. They'd appear worst for wear when they rode into camp. The reminder needled her into moving.

She lifted her head. His gaze greeted hers. But before she spoke, he placed his finger over her lips.

"Don't say it. I know we should keep moving." He traced her lips, and his eyes darkened. "But you have to feel how much I need you. We won't make it to the mine without having to stop again."

The desire reflected in the black depths sent a shiver of desire over her skin. Heat spread to her toes. He wanted her. It may not be love, but it felt so incredible she didn't care. A chance her heart demanded she take.

He rolled her over onto her back and pinned her to the ground. His weight rested on his forearms.

She slid her arms around his neck and ran her fingers through the curly hair at his nape. "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Why?"

The blue sky glowed clear and bright beyond his shoulders creating a world full of light. A familiar glow echoed through her mind.

"Well . . ." She played with his dark hair, letting the silky strands trail through her fingers and drew out her answer. "I think"—she lifted her head and nipped at his lips playfully—"I should be on top."

"Next time." His hot urgent mouth crushed hers, keeping her from voicing any other objection.

* * * *

Marohka caught sight of the Trisar camp in the distance. The rough area consisted of one main building, which sat in the center of a number of smaller buildings. A large open space sat in front.

In the summer, the courtyard offered an array of colorful wildflowers. The men used the area to play games and hangout. But at this time of year with it barely spring and still cold, the area lay empty. Dead red grass covered the ground.

A corral sat at one end of the complex away from the buildings. Both the alba-oxen and the hover-jets shared the same space. The trail ended right next to the cote. No animals or jets were allowed beyond that point.

The camp located in one of the few level areas near the mountains, resided between the mine and the valley floor. The two suns rose over the mountains and set in the valley behind them. Wildlife roamed freely. A river, fed by runoff from the mountains, provided fresh fish as it wove its way through the landscape. A winding path to the right led to the canyons, to the left the path back to Central City. Fresh mountain air blew on the breeze, singing a sweet song of peace. No place in Lustralia could compare with this beauty.

“Where have you been? I’ve been expecting you for a few zitons,” Cyd said, approaching them. The rough gravel crunched beneath his feet.

“We got a late start.” Stihl helped her off their mount.

The early spring wind whipped her short feisty hair across her vision. The blissful smell of caffleck floated in the air. Her stomach gave a low grumbling noise. Not letting the aroma distract her, she turned to Cyd the moment her feet touched the ground. “Which cabin has my things?”

“Cabin one.” Cyd added, “Colorful eye patch by the way.”

“Good.” Impatient to change into her clothes, she rushed by him and didn’t wait for him to point out the hut.

She’d been to the camp a number of times and knew her way around. The unchanged, weathered buildings were made from the rare material of trees. The rustic color of the cabins blended with the gray background of the mountains in the distance.

The chirping song of a grape bird welcomed her, but the absence of men’s voices struck her as odd. At this time of day, people generally stood around the compound. Today, she caught sight of no one on her trip to the cabin.

She surveyed the main building, which housed Guilio’s office, the kitchen, and the rest-din area. The men ate their meals and spent their downtime there. No one stood at the doors. No sound came through the open doorway. The washhouse stood next to the main one and showed no life signs. The miners’ cabins lacked any activity around them either.

Only the voices of the men following her could be heard.

“Marohka’s clothes were covered in alba-oxen blood, so I had to destroy them,” Stihl said.

She arrived at her assigned cabin, opened the door, and walked in without waiting to hear Cyd’s reply. On one bed sat her bag. On the other lay someone else’s things. Rummaging through her clothing, she picked out a pair of slacks and a thick top. Then she turned to the two men who stood outside the door.

“I’ll be out in a minute.”

Stihl nodded and shut the door.

She slipped out of her clothes and took in the inside of the cabin at the same time. The bed, where her things sat, looked comfortable enough. She admired the batt on top.

The pattern of colorful squares created a picture of the surrounding landscape. Someone’s wife must have spent hours working on the design. The other bed held the batt’s partner. Between the two beds stood a heating unit.

The walls glistened with the natural color of the unstained wood. No pictures marred their surface. Shutters covered the lone window. The closed door barred the only means of escape from the wood box. The eerie feeling of being confined rushed her through the task of changing clothes.

After she slipped on her blouse, she noticed the things on the other bed appeared to be Cyd’s. Was this his room? With the limited space available at the camp and her being Stihl’s mate, they were forcing the three of them to bunk together.

She stepped into her shoes and threw Stihl’s coat over her shoulders. Marohka opened the door.

“They’re not sure what happened,” Cyd said.

“Why was he in the tunnel alone?” Stihl’s forehead wrinkled in thought. A worried glint swam in the depths of his brown eyes.

“What’s going on?”

Stihl grabbed her hand and drew her close to his side in an attempt to offer her comfort. Her mind instantly went on alert. “It seems one of the miners got caught in a cave-in. They’re not sure exactly what happened.”

She jerked away from him and turned to Cyd. “How could that happen? There are strict rules about the supports we use. There should be no reason for a cave-in.” Then an evil thought struck. “Are they sure it was a cave-in?”

Cyd hedged. “Well, they’re not exactly sure what happened. The miner’s body was found under a number of boulders.” He folded his hands together like a tent. “And one of the supports looked to be compromised.”

Cyd shook his head. "Guilio is not ruling anything out. From what I gather, there's been a number of problems occurring at the mine."

"I better talk to Guilio. We need to get to the bottom of this." She marched toward the main building with determined strides.

Stihl grabbed her by the shoulder. "Wait up there an iton. Guilio is at the mine."

She turned and shrugged his hand from her shoulder. "Then I better head for the mine. Something is going seriously wrong, and I need to put a stop to it right now."

Stihl gripped her waist. "No, Marohka, you should stay here with Cyd." His glare drilled into hers and issued a warning. "I don't want you getting into any more trouble."

Her anger ignited. Heat burned her face. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She stomped her foot on his boot to emphasize her point. "Let go."

His hold tightened.

"It's not my fault the alba-ox decided to walk off the side of the cliff," she snapped.

"That may be true. But with the strange behavior of your alba-ox and you being poisoned at the theater, I'm not taking any chances," he argued.

Marohka blinked back her confusion. "What are you talking about? I thought I drank too much at the theater. I wasn't poisoned."

"Look, it doesn't matter. Just stay here with Cyd while I go check this out." Stihl offered her a quick peck on the cheek and released her. "Please."

She shook her head. "I don't like this."

"I know, but do it anyway." His gaze begged her to do as he asked for once.

"Stihl, it's my job to . . ."

"That's right, and taking care of you is mine. Now, stay put." He turned to leave.

"But, I should be there." She disliked the idea of him going alone.

"Not until I've checked it out."

She fumed and marked his steps to the corral. No man alive could make her madder. Noticing his bare chest, she called out, "Wait."

When he paused, she rushed to him, slipped the coat from her shoulders and handed it to him. "It's

even colder up there. You better take this.”

His smile melted her insides. He slipped into his coat. “Thanks for not fighting me on this, Marohka. I need you to be safe.”

This time, his kiss wasn’t quick. The flavor just beyond his lips drew her in, making her want more, need more, demand more. When he would’ve pulled back, she stepped closer seeking a deeper connection, reassurance. His kiss soothed her ruffled nerves, and she forgot for an iton everything but him. Her world narrowed. The joy and pleasure found in his arms filled her soul.

After he ended the kiss, she opened her eyes to the soft velvet brown warmth of his. The dark pool of desire tugged at her heart. He shifted his gaze to a point just beyond her shoulder. “I have to go.” Reluctantly, he loosened his grip, and his arms slowly fell to his sides. He kissed her cheek. “I’ll return as soon as I can.” He stepped back.

“I should go with you,” she said, ready to argue her point. “I—”

“No,” he interrupted. “Cyd, watch her. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

“Sure thing.” Cyd’s fingers circled her biceps. “Come on, Marohka, why don’t we find something to eat?”

In response to his idea, her stomach rumbled, but she didn’t step away. Her gaze followed Stihl. He walked to the cote and mounted a hover-jet.

“If you’re not back in a ziton, I’m coming after you,” she yelled.

The sleek machine hummed to life with a soft groan. He didn’t turn or wave. She called out to him in her mind, quietly pleading with him for the right to accompany him.

* * * *

Stihl revved the engine to a low buzz before setting the craft in motion. Unable to trust himself to glance back at Marohka, he pressed forward. She’d be safer at the camp with Cyd.

The hover-jet’s speed quickly ate up the distance between the camp and the mine. He wished for the zillionth time that the machine could travel over ridges along the canyons from Central City. But the air jets needed a consistent flat surface. If it strayed more than a zit off the path, the hover-jet would fall to the bottom of the ravine.

The jets couldn’t fly more than a few leg-lengths from the ground. But once on a flat wide surface the machine raced over the ground with little danger to the rider, perfect for getting across rough terrain.

In the distance, the mountains shielded the valley. Their snow-capped peaks gleamed in the sunlight. Boulders, both large and small, blocked his path, but the jet passed by them without a bump. This same trek would’ve taken him more than a ziton to travel if he’d been on foot or the back of an alba-ox. The hover-jet completed the trip in under a few itons.

Once near the mine, Stihl noticed a group of men gathered around the entrance. The dark cavernous mouth of the cave stood behind them. The sound of his approach alerted a few men, and they turned. Guilio broke away from the group.

“Hey, Stihl, see you’ve made it.” He held out his arm in customary greeting. “How’s Marohka?”

Stihl stepped off the jet and gripped Guilio’s forearm. “She’s fine, just a slight concession.”

Pointing to the mine in front of him, Stihl inquired. “How about you? I heard you’ve had a little excitement.”

“You could say that. This mine here is nothing but a dark, evil witch. She tempts a man with her enticing favors then kills him with her black heart.” His aged face furrowed in disgust. “She’s trouble with a capital *T*.”

“Did you find out what happened?” Stihl paid no attention to the older man’s ramblings.

“No. From what we can tell, it looks like a damaged support collapsed and caused the other support to buckle. It could’ve happened at any time. Zook happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Stihl lowered his voice so as not to be overheard. “Was the support sabotaged?”

Guilio shook his head and tugged a thin brown stick from his pocket. “Can’t say. That support beam could’ve been damaged at any time.”

He offered the stick to Stihl. With a wave of his hand, he declined. The strong flavor of a chew stick repulsed his taste buds, and the supposed calming effects gave him headaches.

“Hate to think one of my boys did this.” Guilio bit down on the stick in his mouth. With a worried look over his shoulder, he finished with a shrug. “But you never know especially if the price is right.”

“What are you going to do?” Stihl wondered if the mine would shut down because of the inquiry.

“Not much I can do, other than report it to the authorities. Zook’s family lives in Central City. They want his body sent there.”

“Is communication back up?”

“Yes, Hank sent us the part we needed so that’s one less worry.” The stick moved to the other side of Guilio’s mouth. “What about you? Your offer ready?”

Stihl glanced around, gauging the distance between him and the nearest set of ears. “I’m ready when you are.”

“Good.” Guilio walked to another hover-jet. “Let’s go. There’s nothing else we can do here.”

He called out his instructions to a man nearby, boarded the jet, and took off for the camp. With no other option, Stihl followed.

Once back in camp, he caught sight of Marohka heading for the cote before they even cleared their machines.

“Guilio, are you all right?” She stepped to the older man’s side. Her hand rested on his arm.

“Now, girly, there’s no reason for you to fret. I’m fine. Poor Zook, he’s the one with a crushed skull.”

Her voice sounded strained. “Oh, Guilio, I’m so sorry. This never should’ve happened.”

“Yes, well . . .” He patted her hand. “It’s part of the business.” He removed the chew stick from his mouth and tossed it aside. “Having a new mate appears to agree with you.”

She touched her eye. “Not with this color patch.”

“Well, you still look good.” He slid an arm around her shoulders. “Let’s head inside out of the cold. I need a stiff drink.”

Trailing behind them, Stihl caught her hugging the older man. Her fondness for him must have developed over years from working together. Stihl hated it. Adrift, he realized she hadn’t spoken to him yet. Her entire focus centered on Guilio. Jealousy gripped Stihl’s heart with its pointy spike.

Guilio, old enough to be her father and an old friend of her family, held her hand in his. Her short hair bobbed against his shoulder. Stihl longed to call the man out.

Stihl followed and curbed his sudden flash of temper.

* * * *

A ziton later with Marohka sitting in the rest-din, talking with the other miners, Stihl decided he’d slip away. He needed to meet with Guilio.

The floor of the older man’s office lay covered in stacks of magazines, files, and other papers strewn about. What items couldn’t find a home on the floor, sat on his desk. The color of the walls was hidden under layers of maps and charts pinned to the surface. The room reeked of the strong scent of cheap liquor.

Dumping a pile of folders from a chair to the floor, Stihl dropped into the seat and sipped the stiff drink Guilio handed him. He eyed the mess. “Clean up lately?”

“Don’t let the disorder fool you. I know where everything is.” He shuffled a few folders around on his desk. “Now, where did I put that file?”

Stihl laughed as expected. “You’re not fooling me, you old coot. You know more of what’s going on

around here than you're willing to admit."

"Yes, well . . ." Guilio frowned. "Some people think I'm nothing but a miner who's lost a few rocks." He shrugged. "The idea serves its purpose at times."

"So, do you want to come clean and tell me the true story?" Stihl narrowed his gaze suspecting the truth. Guilio hadn't given him a direct answer earlier at the mine. With so many eyes and ears close at hand, Stihl hadn't pushed the point. Now, he demanded answers.

"We got trouble, boy. A rock with a good deal of Zook's blood on it found its way a fair distance from his body." Guilio gulped down a large swallow of his drink. "Rocks that size don't bounce."

"You think someone staged the cave-in?" Stihl's thoughts jumped on the idea of a killer being among them. He needed to keep an even closer eye on Marohka.

"Looks like."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

Guilio shook his head and took another big swig from his drink. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Yes, nothing. I can't prove a thing. It's just a feeling in an old miner's gut." He rubbed his portly belly. "Who'll believe me?"

Stihl studied the other man. Twigs of gray hair stuck up on top of his head, while the sides were slick as ice. Wrinkles caused by both laughter and worry, etched deep ravines down his cheeks. His gaze held the wisdom of a cruel world with any hope of changing that inevitability lost.

"I would." He softened the compliment with, "Who wouldn't believe an old coot like you."

"Plenty." The old miner's shoulders shifted like they had been released of a heavy load. "Also, I hope the eye patch Marohka's sporting is from her fall." His tone threatened retribution if Stihl didn't answer correctly.

"It is."

"Good, that girl doesn't need any more trouble."

Stihl caught the man's overprotective attitude to protect Marohka. He wanted to question Guilio about her life before he knew her, but it wouldn't be a good way to start their business meeting.

Guilio leaned back in his chair. "Who, by the way, are you calling an old coot? I could run circles around you, boy."

"As long as the circles aren't too big?" Stihl teased in an attempt to ease the tension.

“Only too true.” He laughed and finished his drink. “Now, tell me about your offer. The sooner I sell this mine, the better.”

Chapter Twelve

“Zook’s wife wants his body sent to Central City for the Life celebration. They are shipping him on his way as soon as they can,” Upton, the older of the two men, said.

With the classic looks of a miner, he had strong arms, broad shoulders, a round middle, and a worn expression on his face. He’d been at the job for over twenty years. “Zook’s battle ceremony is arranged for tomorrow. Guilio has a warrior coming to perform the dance with his swords.”

“Is there anything else the men would like to do for Zook? We could have a small Life celebration here.” Marohka studied the drained faces of the two men. She couldn’t do much to ease their loss.

“No, a few men asked for leave to attend the one in Central City. We’ll give them the time off.” Upton massaged his hand down his neck. “Everyone else will be happy with the battle ceremony.”

As the lead mineralogist, Marohka took his word on what they should do. He lived with the miners and knew how to handle the men’s demands.

With just the three of them at the table and only a few others in the room, she wanted to take advantage of their privacy. She’d diverted Cyd away from them by sending him after some paperwork in her cabin. She required some answers while he was gone.

“How bad is the cave-in?” She thought ahead to decide how many hours the mine would have to be shut down. Another setback they didn’t need.

Upton shrugged and picked up his cup. “We should be able to return to work in a few zitons. It’s a partial collapse in the rear section of tunnel seven.”

“Then, how did Zook get hurt?”

“It must have happened right on top of him. At least that’s the way we figured it. Otherwise, he could’ve gotten out of the way.” Gang, the younger of the two men, held the job of second in charge. He handled the day to day operation while Upton handled most of the paperwork.

“Why was he in the tunnel by himself? According to company policy, every man is supposed to have a partner with him at all times.” She tried to keep the accusation from her voice, but the tone still didn’t sound right to her ears.

“His partner stood four steps in front of him, when the wall gave way. Zook took a blow to the head and fell under the rubble.” Upton wrapped his hands around his cup. “Nothing we could do.”

“What’s going on?” She clenched her hands under the table. “This mine has had nothing but trouble from the beginning. Governmental delays, equipment problems, output below expectation. Now, someone’s been killed by a faulty support. This is unacceptable.” She stared at both men. Their worried frowns increased the pain churning through her stomach. “I want answers.”

“Marohka, I checked every support yesterday. They were fine,” Gang said. “We’ve followed every company rule to the letter.”

Her anger boiled. These men weren't at fault, but a man still lay dead in another part of the camp. The responsibility of his death rested on her shoulders, a burden she couldn't shrug off. She needed to figure out what was going on. "When Cyd gets back with those reports, we'll review them with a nail pick. We can't work at the mine, but I still want to understand what's happening around here."

Upton shoved his gray hair out of his eyes and cleared his throat. "Marohka, we're running on low. We've been at the mine for over eighteen zitons."

Before she could answer, Gang agreed. "Look, I know you want to figure out what's going on. So do we. But until the mine is cleared, there's not much we can do."

Marohka wanted to argue, to demand results, to slay a dragon, or to beat something into a bloody pulp. But the men in front of her drew her attention. Their faces pale, their eyes sad, their energy depleted, they met her anger with grim resolve. She shared their hurt. They'd lost a friend.

She stood and swallowed the harsh words bubbling in the back of her throat. "You're right. Let's meet back here in a couple of zitons. Then both of you can get a bit to eat, and we'll head out."

The need to escape hit. She turned on her heels and left the rest-din. On the way to her cabin, Cyd blocked her path, but she sidestepped him without pausing.

Cyd stopped. "Don't you want these reports?"

"No, give them to Guilio."

"Why?"

The answer rebounded with the slamming of her cabin door. No more words could escape the knot in her throat. Alone, her composure crumbled. How could such a horrible thing happen? Zook had a family, children who deserved their father. She threw her bag from her bed and yelled at the walls. "What is going on around this crazy place? Wasn't it bad enough for the mine to show a lost?"

She gathered up a pillow and punched it with her fist. "Now, someone is dead."

The soft, foamy square of fluff offered no resistance. "I should never have let Stihl delay me."

She repeatedly pounded the soft pillow. "I should've been here days ago. If not for Stihl, I would've been."

The door groaned, and she turned. The pillow flew across the room and hit the target, the exact center of Stihl's chest.

"Get out," she yelled and reached for the nearest weapon.

Stihl shut the door, and a second pillow flew. "Now, Marohka." He caught the piece of fluff with ease. Her fury flared higher. "I think you need to calm down."

His words added fuel to the fire. Anger bubbled within her and boiled over. Ready to do battle, she raised her hands. “Get out.” She broke into a rage. “I don’t need you to tell me what to do. Just, get out of my—”

The blow of his shoulder slamming her against the bed hit before she finished her sentence. She wrestled against him, using every move she knew to gain an advantage. The knee to the crotch missed and hit his thigh. The right hook skimmed past his ear. A roll to the left with a quick shift to the right, he countered with a simple transfer of his weight. She was trapped beneath his, her hands held captive under one of his strong wrists above her head.

She gasped for breath. “Let me go.”

“No.”

She wrapped her teeth around the muscle along the ridge of his shoulder.

He whispered in her ear, “Don’t even think about it.” His fingers lace their way through her hair.

“I thought we established the fact that I don’t like to be held down.”

“Then quit fighting me.”

“Stihl, please, you don’t understand. This is all my fault.” She lowered her head onto the bed and stared at his face.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you see? It’s my fault Zook’s dead.”

He appeared confused. “How do you figure that?”

“I should’ve been here earlier. I let you distract me.”

“Marohka, it wouldn’t have mattered.” His head rocked back and forth. “You couldn’t have prevented what happened.”

“It’s my job. Don’t you see I should’ve been here? I knew the mine was having trouble.”

The sympathy on his face registered, and she shifted her gaze to the knotted wood ceiling. She didn’t deserve his forgiveness, felt unworthy of such an emotion.

“Starlight, look at me.”

“Stihl . . .” She closed her eyes and fought the urge to let go of the guilt. A man was dead. Someone had to take the blame.

His cheek brushed hers, and he whispered in her ear. “You can’t be everywhere.”

She didn't answer.

Who to blame battled at the forefront of her mind. She searched for an answer and fought the emotion raging through her blood. Slowly, she became aware of his hard body pressing firmly against hers. The shield of his chest covered her heart. His thick thigh between her legs allowed the scent of her desire to escape. The smell of him snuck into her lungs with each breath she took.

His hands slid along her sides and calmed her mind from the heavy burden of guilt. But an equally conflicting emotion emerged. Small kisses awoke the nerve endings in her neck. He not only stroked her with gently caresses, but he also soothed her worries by invading her thoughts. In his quest to conquer her fears, he worked to undermine her determination to punish herself for the wrong done to Zook.

"No one," echoed through her mind, "could have predicted what happened."

His hands covered her breasts, and he teased her nipples through her blouse with his thumbs. Evocative images fluttered through her mind. His mouth offered little kisses to tempt her lips. Desire sizzled. Unable to withstand his advantage of attacking both her mind and body, she worked her hands free. She glided them over the strong muscles of his back. When his lips slid from hers, she voiced her last words of resistance. "Stihl, I can't deny my responsibility."

His velvety brown eyes met hers. He ended the war waging inside her and offered peace. "You weren't at fault. I didn't know about the mine's problems, or we would've gotten here sooner."

She stared at his face. Was he saying he shared in the blame? "Stihl, this isn't your problem."

"Wrong. As my mate, whatever affects you, affects me."

Wanting to deny the truth of the statement, she answered. "Taking care of the mine is not your job. It's mine."

"Yes, but don't you see? The bond between us makes it important to me too. Our thoughts are blending. Each of us is sharing a little bit of the puzzle that makes up our life. I understand your desire to be the best mineralogist in Lustralia. I can't separate you from your dream, any more than I can separate myself from you."

Her mind refused to allow him to share the blame. She closed her eyes and cut the connection between them. "I have to stand alone."

He moved. The sharp stab of abandonment lanced through her heart. He rolled over and shifted her to lie against his chest. Then he released her. "There's no crime in leaning on someone else."

She looked at him and set her hand on his chest. He could've continued to lie on top of her, holding her down against the bed. She hadn't struggled, wouldn't have minded in fact, but instead he set her free. His arms crossed beneath his head. The relaxed position confused her more than his words.

"Should I leave?"

“Not unless you want to.”

“Then what do you want to do now?”

His gaze shifted to her lips and then grew hot. Slowly, his stare traveled to her neck then her chest. “Whatever makes you happy.” An eyebrow lifted. “It’s your turn to be on top.”

Her mind cleared. Her senses awoke. This she understood. Maybe she could have both Stihl and her career.

* * * *

The smell of meat cooking sparked a response from Stihl’s stomach. A loud rumble erupted as he entered the rest-din. The noise at a soft roar slowed to a low hum. People turned. Curiosity showed on their faces behind welcoming smiles. Word of Marohka having a new mate must’ve spread.

He didn’t vary his steps on his way to Cyd’s table. Guilio and another man sat at the same table. Stihl assumed they were waiting for their lunch. “What’s up?”

Guilio looked up. “Just got word the mine is cleared. Figured Marohka would want to head up there.” His grin widened. “But we couldn’t decide if we should disturb you or not.”

Stihl pulled out a chair. “No need. She’s on her way.”

“Is she feeling better?” Cyd lifted his cup. “She seemed pretty upset earlier.”

Stihl nodded to the man serving drinks and indicated he wanted a cup of caffleck too. “She blames herself for what happened.”

“Not her fault. She wasn’t even here.”

“And you are?” Stihl glanced at the young miner.

“This is Gang Memor. He is one of the mineralogists at the mine,” Guilio said.

“Anything related to the mine, she feels is her responsibility, even if she was absent.” Stihl picked up the cup the waiter had placed in front of him.

“Vin puts a lot of pressure on that little lady. I guess he planned for a boy,” Guilio said, referring to her father.

Stihl decided he needed to have a talk with her father. Then he grinned. “Well, I’m glad he didn’t get one.”

The other men studied him. A smile formed on their faces with male understanding.

“What are you guys smiling about?” Marohka asked after joining them.

Standing, Stihl rushed to answer for the group and ended their conversation about her. “Guilio informed us the mine is open.”

“Good, then we should leave.” She refused the seat Stihl pulled out. “Cyd, where are those reports and maps? Guilio, I want the latest output reports.” She worked her way around the table. “Gang, where is Upton?”

Stihl grabbed her arm, not letting her walk away. “Wait a moment. Why don’t we eat a bite before we head out?”

Her green gaze sent him a scorching glare. Her thoughts screamed with her impatience for action. He grinned. In his mind, he replayed her sweet surrender from earlier, but their tussle hadn’t dampened her will to fight.

“We need to get to the mine.”

“When did you last eat?” He tugged her into the chair beside his. She might’ve grabbed some food while he was at the mine, but he doubted it. Her gaze bit into him. He returned to his seat.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Yes, but the rest of us are.” He indicated the men around them and slid his coat from her shoulders. She couldn’t keep going without eating. He hoped one of the dishes would tempt her appetite. “A hot meal is being served now. We don’t want to come back to a cold one.”

She let him help her with her coat then turned away. The server placed plates in front of each of the other men. Stihl addressed the waiter. “We’ll both have lunch, too.”

The man nodded and left.

Stihl slid his arm along the back of her chair and leaned close to her ear. “You need your strength if you plan to pin me later.”

She stiffened and edged away. He couldn’t help but smile, and he toyed with the hair dancing around her neck.

“Where is Upton?” she asked the other men.

Gang answered. “He should be here in a few moments. He said he wanted to shower before we went back to the mine.”

She nodded. The waiter returned and served each of them a plate full of food. She picked up her fork. He waited until she ate a bite before he started to eat his own lunch. He’d discovered since they’d been together that she wouldn’t eat if she was upset.

With everyone eating, he delayed speaking until the end of the meal, then turned to the mine owner. “How long, Guilio, before you decide on the new buyer?”

He popped the last bite of his bread in his mouth and swallowed. “Don’t think it’ll take too long. There’s only one other group interested in the mine. They should have their deal in by tomorrow morning.”

Marohka shoved back her chair and rose to her feet. She’d eaten about half her lunch and played with her food the rest of the time. Stihl longed for her to eat more, but he rejected the idea of embarrassing her in front of the others.

“Can we leave now?” She slid her chair back into place.

Stihl drank the last swallow of caffleck. “I guess.”

The men around him shuffled to their feet. Chairs scuffed against the floor. Other men in the room stood. Voices grew louder. The lunch crowd broke up and walked to the door.

“I’ll get the reports from Guilio’s office.” Cyd stepped in the opposite direction from the group.

Stihl caught Marohka’s arm as they stepped outside.

“Where’s Upton?” she asked Gang again.

The man looked around. “Don’t know. He hasn’t been sleeping well lately. Maybe, he went back to sleep. Do you want me to get him?”

“No, let him sleep,” Guilio said before she replied. “I’ll send him out when he wakes up.”

“You’re not going, Guilio?” Stihl sensed her frustration with everyone on her staff.

“No point,” Guilio said. “Marohka doesn’t need any of us. Do you, girly?”

“If you want to come—” she started, but he cut her off.

“You know what you’re doing.” He waved a hand, turned, and strolled away. His uneven gait caught Stihl’s attention. What did Guilio mean? Why didn’t she need their help?

Determined to find the answer, Stihl turned. Cyd joined them with the reports and maps. The group boarded their hover-jets. He rushed to catch up.

* * * *

Upton felt like a prisoner in the room he’d called home for the past year. The glow of the two suns barely cast any light through the milky glass of his window. Even the pictures of naked women on the walls didn’t improve the cavelike atmosphere of the small space.

“She’s going to find where we diverted the tunnel,” Upton said to the man on the other end of his ECD. He drew circles on the batt on his bed. “It won’t be long before the qualtrilium starts rolling in.”

He filled his lungs with musky air and slid his sweaty palms over the covers. He disliked the part he played in deceiving Taunton Minerals.

“It won’t matter,” said a rough voice in his ear. “Tomorrow, the bid will be in to Guilio, and we’ll have control of the mine by lunch time.”

“How can you be so sure he’ll accept your offer? Did you tell Guilio about the other mineral we’ll be mining?” Upton questioned the bright story he was being told. The dark walls of his cabin shrank. He shifted his gaze to the sexy curves of the woman he dreamed about nightly.

“No, but with the amount I’m giving him, he’d be dimcoco to refuse.”

“Did you”—Upton hedged, not able to breathe normally—“hear what happened to Zook?”

“Caught in a cave-in, right?”

“That’s what they’re saying, but it looks suspicious. Zook continually voiced concerns about the way the mine was being managed.” Upton waited an iton. “With all the delays we’ve caused, you know, they’ll blame us for his death.”

“Doesn’t matter. They can’t prove a thing. We’ve been doing our jobs. As soon as this sale goes through, they can take their suspicions and our jobs and cook them.”

“I’ll just be glad when it’s all over.” A stream of sweat worked a ticklish course down his back. He peered at the naked woman above his bed again. She tempted him with wicked thoughts. His rod swelled. Money would buy him all sorts of pleasures.

“One more day,” the voice growled and ended the call.

* * * *

“What are you doing?”

Stihl’s voice echoed through the dark, dust-filled mine. A heavy pungent smell of wet rock, soil, and men’s sweat clung to the air, making it hard to breathe.

Marohka didn’t respond. A low tick which came from the wall beside her, sounded in her head. Armidiggos liked to burrow in the dirt. The small animal helped her pinpoint the exact location of the qualtrilium.

“Marohka.” His hand touched her arm.

“Yeah.” She jumped and slapped his hand away. “What are you doing, trying to scare the life out of me?”

“No, I was trying to figure out what you’re doing?” He held up the light.

“I’m working.” She leaned closer to the wall. “Now, be quiet.”

He stood beside her, but she tuned him out and refocused her attention on the signals running through her thoughts. Click, click, click—food, food, food rang in her head. The small animals scrambled back and forth through their small tunnels in the wall.

She walked back along the wall, searching for the armidiggos's outlet into the tunnel. On the dirty floor, she bent to examine the scattering of debris. The small scratches and droppings marked the animals' paths, but they were very easy to miss.

"It looks like the tunnel took a wrong turn there." She pointed to a spot about three zits back down the wall to her right.

"How do you know?"

"Because that's where the ore is." She rose and stopped next to the spot where the tunnel should've been. Lifting a staining pen, she marked the rock. "The reports show somewhere along this tunnel we got off-track. This is where."

He shook his head. "How do you know?"

"Years of practice. Let's tell the guys they can come in now." She strolled toward the exit.

"Don't you want to examine the spot where the cave collapsed?"

A chill shivered down her spine. She'd told everyone but Stihl to stay out of the mine while she determined the problem with the mine's drilling. Now after resolving the issue, she longed to leave. But as usual, responsibility dictated she at least examined the site of the accident. Not, she thought, that it would give her any answers.

"It's just down this way." She walked quickly through the tunnels.

"Slow down." He grabbed her arm. "I still don't see how you can know where the digging got off course when you didn't use any equipment to help you." He pointed to the instrument in her hand.

"I'll tell you later." She shivered. The dark rock walls were closing in, robbing her of air. All she wanted was to complete the business at hand and leave.

"Right up here is the support beam that failed." She pointed to the bent metal pole at her feet. "Zook's partner stepped around the corner up there."

Inspecting the repairs, she noticed the new beam, but the area still held several large rocks lying against the tunnel walls. She took a mental note to mention the oversight to Upton.

Stihl stood a few legs-lengths away. He stepped off the distance from the beam to the bend in the tunnel.

"Do you think Zook's partner could've seen something?" She wondered out loud.

“No, it’s just lucky he wasn’t hurt too.”

The depressing thought of two men dying at the site increased the pounding beat of her heart. Old fears gripped her nerves, and she bit her tongue to keep herself from crying out. All her childhood nightmares of cave-ins crashed over her senses.

The dark tunnel walls slid closer. She stepped back. The smell of blood tickled her nose and turned her stomach. Dark images raced through her mind. *I’m an adult. Silly little dreams don’t scare me.* She turned and hurried down the path to the entrance, leaving Stihl behind.

“Marohka, wait up.” He rushed up beside her and grabbed her hand to draw her to a stop.

She gulped down a quick breath. The dank air sat heavy in her lungs, smothering her with fear. Her heart raced. She wrapped her arm around his and pushed him forward. “Stihl, let’s get out of here first so I can tell the men they can get back to work.”

“All right.” He matched her steps.

With the exit in sight, Marohka slowed her stride. “I’m heading off to talk to Gang right now. I’ll meet you back by the jet in a few itons.”

She left him standing by the exit. The men loitering around the opening cleared a path, and she walked to the foreman. “I found where we got off course. I marked the place. You should start digging there.” She stopped by Gang’s side. “There must be a problem with the reports. I’ll go over them when I get back to camp. But for now, let’s start on a new tunnel.”

“Right.” He turned to the men. “Boys, it’s back to work.”

As the miners filed past her, their whispered snippets fell on her ears.

“... bewitches the rock.”

“Wish the walls would ...”

“Has the touch.”

The men liked to talk about her ability. The rumors claimed she possessed mystical powers. She didn’t care what they said as long as the mine got back on track.

“I want ‘two sun’ teams digging a new tunnel. We should hit qualtrilium in the next few zitons.” She smiled at Gang. “Let’s see if we can get the mine to cough up some of its riches.”

“I’ll let you know our progress,” he promised and turned to carry out her orders.

Letting him deal with the details, she walked back to Stihl. He stood next to Cyd talking to some of the other miners. Their voices dropped when they saw her.

“You ready to go?”

The guilt on their faces confirmed her assumption of them talking about her, but she didn't pursue the issue.

"Whenever you are." Stihl slid his arm around her waist and led her to his jet. "Cyd, we'll meet you back at the camp. I want to show Marohka a special spot I found earlier."

Cyd nodded, boarded his scooter, and took off in the direction of the camp.

Chapter Thirteen

Unlike the valley below, the rough landscape held no sign of spring waiting around the corner. Here the wind blew frigid air against her skin. In the distance, the mountains still showed snow on their peaks. The chilly temperature didn't foster a desire from her for a scenic side trip.

Marohka shifted her vision from the gray, dreary plateau stretched out in front of her to Stihl. He sat on his glider. "There's not a rock, tree, or mountain around here I haven't seen. What's up?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he helped her onto the jet.

The scooter sped down the path Cyd had traveled for a few hundred leg-lengths before Stihl changed course. He turned, maneuvered around a bend past a number of large boulders, and stopped next to a little stream.

The engine died. He stepped off the jet and held out his hand. "I thought I'd find a secluded spot so you could tell me what happened back there."

"Are you talking about in the mine?" She walked to the water. Gravel crunched loudly under her feet. She leaned against a large rock and stared at the purple, pink, and orange stones in the riverbed. During rain season, this whole area stood under water.

"Yes."

"You mean the part about me not using the measurement tools, right?" she asked in case he'd noticed how nervous she'd gotten about being in the mine.

"Yes."

"I'm a witch. Or didn't you hear? The men all say I can talk to rocks." In jest, she turned to the rock. "Mr. Rock, tell me your secrets."

"Marohka." His voice held a stern quality. He walked behind her, cupped her shoulders, and turned her around. "Tell me how you did it."

What could she say? Would he laugh or even believe her? She lacked the courage to find out.

"Stihl, a woman has a right to her little secrets."

His hands dropped to his sides. His whole body poised for action. He didn't move. His gaze hit her like picks. He waited, waited for her to tell him what he wanted to know.

"You won't understand." She longed for him to drop the matter.

His hand touched her cheek. His rough glove brushed over her cold face. "Why can't you tell me?"

He'd never understand. Drawing in a deep breath, she gathered her strength. "I hear the chatter of armidiggos."

“Arm-i-dingos?”

With a sigh, she repeated, “No, arm-i-dig-goes.”

Marohka drew her face away from his hand. It hurt too much to have him touching her, especially when he’d reject her soon. She stepped back, but she couldn’t move more than a zit away. The boulder behind her blocked her escape.

He stepped forward and trapped her against the rock. His arms circled her waist. “Go on.”

She stared at the black coat one of the men let him borrow. “It’s a small animal which lives near qualtrilium. I track their movements, so I can determine how close we are to the ore.”

She focused on his strong features. His thick biceps tightened under her hands. She waited for him to shift away or for his expression to change. “They’re unable to burrow through the qualtrilium, but they like the rock around it. That’s how I knew where we needed to dig.”

“How do you track them?” His chest caressed her breasts.

“I hear them in my head.” She slid her hands to his shoulders. A well-placed knee could still save her, if he decided to laugh. “I recognize the markings for their tunnels. If you walk through the mine without any light, you can hear the sound of their claws twittering. They like complete darkness.”

A twinkle lit his brown eyes. She shuffled her feet into a better position, just in case.

“Can anyone else hear them?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. No one ever mentioned hearing them, but she’d never really asked anyone either. She didn’t discuss the subject.

His lips curved into a smile.

“Don’t laugh at me, Stihl. I’m not imagining it.” She fought the allure of his broad chest and got ready to strike.

He leaned closer to her ear. “Then I’d have to laugh at myself too.”

She jerked away. “What? Can you hear them, too?”

His arms slid along her back. He drew her deeper into his embrace. “No, I hear or communicate with a larger animal.”

“What . . . what type of animal?”

“A billow-bird,” he said with a grin.

“Are you telling me the truth?” She struggled to free herself from his embrace.

“Yes, some people are able to communicate with animals. At least the experts say it is a form of interaction. My brothers lead alba-oxen with their minds, but they both hate the animal. They’re city boys.”

“Then, I’m not a freak?” She searched through her mind for proof of his statement.

“Well, some people do find you a little freaky.” She glanced at him, and he added, “But not me.”

The wicked grin on his face forced her to question whether to believe him or not. “Stihl, why don’t we head back to the camp? It’s cold out here.”

“I could warm you up.” His dark eyes sparkled with desire.

She giggled at the unexpected suggestion.

Marohka Taunton Fermesium giggled. She never giggled, but she couldn’t help it. The man was impossible. Here they were, in the middle of nowhere, in weather to turn flesh into an icicle, and he wanted to get naked.

“Yes, but there’s a warm bed back at camp.”

“There is that”—his grip tightened—“but it’s so far away. I’ll never make it without a kiss.”

“Think of it as a challenge,” she teased and wiggled in his arms to gain her freedom.

“I do every time you come close enough to kiss.” His mouth swept down and covered hers.

The man has no patience.

She melted against his chest. She worked her arms around his neck. His tongue drove all thought from her mind. Her own patience fought the limits of her control.

He stepped back, and she clutched his coat with her fists.

“I think we better head back to camp.” He gripped her hands and tugged them free of his coat. He kissed each one then walked back toward the jet.

After straddling the seat, he helped her settle behind him. She slid her arms around his waist, and he groaned.

“Make it fast,” she said.

His laughter rumbled against her chest.

* * * *

The day didn’t want to end.

Marohka sat listening to the men gathered around the table in the rest-din. Stihl sat next to her talking to Cyd, Guilio, and Upton about the ceremony for Zook. Gang had retired earlier. She wished she could do the same, but her job demanded she stay involved in any discussion involving the camp.

After reviewing the bad reports again, she'd talked to every man in the camp and assured each that every precaution was in place. No more cave-ins would occur. Now, she longed to go to bed.

"Girly, you look tired. Why don't you head on off to bed?"

Guilio's words rang through her exhausted mind. "Good idea." She rose to her feet.

Stihl stood. "I'll walk you to the cabin."

"Why? I can get there by myself." She turned and marched away. Did he think her incapable of getting to their hut by herself? If not so tired, she would have punched him, but it wasn't worth the effort right now.

She stepped inside the cabin, and warm air hit her in the face. The heating unit hummed. Light from the window showed her rumpled bed from her earlier lovemaking session with Stihl. Cyd's bed appeared untouched. Marohka still wondered if the man planned on sharing their cabin, but from what she'd learned, no other place was available.

Too tired to care, she sat to remove her boots. Something shifted behind her on the bed. She jumped up quickly and twisted around to stare at the blanket. A long, ropelike body slid out from under the covers.

"Jeez." Her heart pounding, she leaped back until her back hit the door. "What is it about this place?"

Every nerve ending tingling, a rapid beat sent fear pulsing through her veins. Pictures flashed in her mind of snakes slithering over her skin. She shivered and gripped her arms with her hands. *Oh, how I hate the disgusting things.*

With the door behind her, she could make a fast escape. She grasped the handle. A voice echoed from her memory. "Oh, what a baby. You can't even handle a little snake."

She recalled the last time.

The sweaty hand on the doorknob fell away.

"Handle this," she whispered to herself. Even though her heart begged for her to let Stihl take care of it. "Why do they always choose snakes?"

On the bed sat the slithery creature, wrapped in a dangerous coil near the head. Every instinct screamed for her to run. She forced her feet closer. Slitted black eyes stared at her from a round head. A long forked tongue flicked in and out. The snake advised her to retreat. The colorful body

of red and orange coiled tighter, like a spring ready to strike.

She pounced. Each corner of the blanket flew over the snake, her target quickly covered with leg-lengths of cloth. With her heart pounding in her ears, she gathered the batt around the snake. With each wiggle, an answering pulse knotted her stomach. Her hands trembled. Her brain scrambled for what to do next.

All the ends secure, she clutched the batt and hauled the snake-filled cover from the bed. Victory lay within her grasp.

She opened the door and saw Cyd walking down the path. Stihl sent him to check on her, but at this point, she could not care less.

“Great.” She shoved the bundle into his hands. “Get rid of this.”

She quickly stepped back. “I don’t care much for snakes.”

“Snakes?” Cyd juggled the blanket and its deadly contents. “Where did you find it?”

“Stihl’s bed. I guess someone doesn’t like his charm.” With no desire to be anywhere near their uninvited guest, or anyone else, she stepped back inside the cabin and closed the door.

* * * *

Stihl glanced at the door a few times before it squeaked opened. The room was quiet. Most of the men had retired for the night. Only Guilio remained at the table. Cyd stepped through the door.

“What took so long?” Stihl asked.

His friend glanced around at the people near them. “Marohka received a visitor.”

“Someone we know?” Guilio raised an eyebrow in question.

“No, Marohka found him in her bed.”

“What?” Stihl jumped to his feet.

“I got rid of him without much trouble.” Cyd held out the quilt on his arm. “But she’ll need her blanket back.”

“Where is this guy?” Stihl stepped forward to rip the batt from Cyd’s hands.

“He’s probably slithered off into the woods by now.” Cyd grinned and laid a restraining hand on Stihl’s shoulder. “Someone put a poisonous snake in her bed.”

“Was she bitten?” He held his breath, waited for Cyd’s answer to run to her aid.

“No, she’s fine. Bundled up the snake without a peep, then handed it to me.” Respect glowed in

Cyd's eyes. "Luke, that girl's got guts."

"That girly never has scared easily." Guilio yanked a chew stick from his pocket. "The men tried to frighten her the same way when she first started coming here. She didn't even blink an eye."

Stihl wondered about Marohka's true feeling. She was skilled at hiding them. "Where is she?"

"In the cabin."

"All alone?"

"I think so. I didn't see anyone else." Cyd drew out a chair. "And I checked the area around the cabin before returning."

Stihl shuffled his feet. His thoughts centered on Marohka.

"Go ahead and check on her. You won't be satisfied until you do," Guilio encouraged, his stained teeth showing through his grin. "We'll wait for you here."

Stihl glanced at the door. "No harm in checking." But as tired as she was, she's probably asleep. He walked toward the exit.

"Yell, if you need help," Guilio added.

The twilight hours of the second sun cast a soothing glow. Stihl strolled across the camp, gravel crunching beneath his feet. The late-night air moistened his skin. The lights in the cabin were off, the shutter closed. He opened the door quietly, hoping not to disturb her sleep. The dim sunlight from the open door led him to where she rested in the middle of their bed, her eyes closed.

He added the blanket to the one covering her and stood gazing down at her silky hair. The innocent look on her face captured his heart. Untouched until this morning, she'd woken him with a hot desire, which burned through her body and forced her into uncharted waters.

With a little gentle persuasion, she'd blossomed into a woman capable of setting him on fire with a single glance. Now, truly his mate and a vital part of him, he had to protect her. He bent and dropped a quick kiss on her cheek.

"Stihl?"

"Yes, starlight, go back to sleep."

Her eyes remained closed. Her brow wrinkled. "Are you coming to bed?"

Stihl kissed her again. "In a little bit."

She nodded, and then turned onto her side.

The desire to join her almost kept him from returning to talk to Cyd, but he wanted to work out a

plan where she'd not be alone again.

When he returned to rest-din, Cyd and Guilio sat in the same place. Everyone else in the room had left. Stihl walked to his seat. "We should arrange for one of us to be with Marohka at all times."

"I thought we were already doing that," Cyd said.

"Then we need to tighten it up." Stihl sat down, planning not to stay long with Marohka in the cabin by herself.

"Cyd's been filling me in on what's been going on. I think you fellas better let someone else know what's happening." Guilio switched his chew stick to the other side of his mouth.

Stihl shook his head. "We have no proof. It's just a gut feeling."

"That feeling seems to be going around," Guilio argued, "but sometimes it needs to be voiced to the right people."

"As much as I hate to mention it"—Cyd studied his hands—"we might want to tell your dad, Stihl."

"No."

Guilio jerked his chew stick out of his mouth and pointed it at Stihl. "Now wait, the boy's got a good idea."

"I know why you don't want to tell your dad, but if you kept it simple," Cyd said.

"There's nothing simple with my dad."

"Look, Luke, just tell him Marohka had a few accidents." Cyd stared at Stihl. "Let him know we're not sure what's happening, but that you're worried."

"And how will that help?"

"Boy, you've got an attitude. You think her dad's not gonna blister you if you let anything happen to her? Vin will petition the council of elders to roast your butt," Guilio barked.

"And how will telling my father about the accidents change that?" Stihl resented the old man's comments.

Guilio shook his head. "Are you dimcoco? He can protect you and her if you give him a chance."

"How? By locking us up in his house?" Stihl tapped his fingers impatiently against the table.

"Hold up." Cyd laid a hand on Stihl's arm. "We're just warning your dad about the problem. We're not turning it over to him."

"And what do you expect him to do?" Stihl argued. "You know him, Cyd. He'll demand control and

place us firmly under his thumb.”

Cyd frowned and nodded. Stihl stared at the door. He wanted his father’s help, but the question remained, how to obtain it without the results creating more trouble?

“Put him to work,” Guilio spouted off.

“What?” Stihl glared at the older man.

“Give him something to do.” His wrinkled face held a grin. “Tell him to ask around, see if she has any enemies. Let him play detective.”

“Keep him busy.” Cyd nodded. “Then he wouldn’t bother you.”

Could it be that easy? Stihl checked his timepiece. His father might still be up. “All right.” He pointed his fingers at both of them. “But if this doesn’t work, you guys are in trouble.”

He stood, yanked his ECD unit out of his pocket, and slipped it over his ear. “May I use your office?”

“Sure, boy, I’m heading to bed.” The old man shoved his round belly away from the table and rose to his feet.

“Cyd, you go check on Marohka,” Stihl said before he left the room. He hated asking his father for help, but he didn’t know what other choice he had.

* * * *

“Hey, son, the survey came in today from the Morrison brothers,” his father said right after the hellos.

Stihl tuned out the information about their land-raping idea. The guest chair was again covered with papers. He shoved them to the floor and sat down.

“That’s great, Dad, but it’s not the reason I called.” He knotted his hands into fists. He forced himself to tell his dad about Marohka being poisoned at the theater and about her accident on the trail to the mine. “Dad, I’m concerned. She might be in some kind of trouble.”

“Now, son”—his father drew the two words out—“just because the girl has a little bad luck doesn’t mean someone is after her.”

“Yes, I know, but . . .” Stihl paused and searched for a plausible solution. “Maybe someone doesn’t like her being with me? Another man might have wanted her for his mate?”

“Never would’ve happened.”

“Why not?”

His father cleared his throat, a sure sign of him hiding something.

“Dad?”

“Now, son, I was only looking out for you,” Zarro hedged.

“Tell me what you did.” Stihl raised his voice.

No answer.

He waited. “Dad?”

“Marohka has skills I wanted to have in our family so I arranged it so no other man could select her from the mating ball.”

“Dad.” Stihl lowered his voice to keep from screaming out his frustration. “How long have you denied Marohka the right to have another mate?”

“Stihl, we need her.”

“Dad?”

“Eight years.”

“Oh, no, you mean every year she attended the mating ball?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, Dad.” Stihl dropped his head to his chest. This news would infuriate Marohka. She’d view it as another reason not to trust him.

“Look, I’ll ask around.” His dad rushed on. “Don’t worry.”

“You’ll be discreet.” Stihl forced his fingers to release their death grip. “Right? I don’t need any more trouble.”

“Yes, no one will suspect why I’m asking. I think you’re overreacting, but I trust your instincts and will investigate.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Stihl worked to calm down. His father, as usual, had only been trying to help. “I appreciate it.”

“Also, I’ve heard a few rumors. You may have some competition for the Trisar deal. Good luck, son.”

“Thanks, Marohka and I will probably be leaving for the ranch in the next day or two. Call me there if you find out anything. Night.”

Stihl clicked off his ECD and left. He walked across the courtyard and wondered if he'd pay for this call with more help than he wanted from his father.

Right now, too tired to think of any other plan to protect Marohka, he headed for bed.

* * * *

Zarro threw his ECD on his desk and sat staring at it.

His study, his quiet haven, violated earlier by Tankton's family, now lay quiet. He'd gotten a ziton of work done before Stihl's call.

Now, his peaceful retreat crumbled around Zarro again, torn apart by his son's doubts. Not one to spook easily, Stihl's concern held some element of truth.

Yet, Zarro couldn't believe anyone would want to hurt the girl. From what he'd learned about Marohka, she performed her job and didn't bother anyone.

Hard worker? Yes.

On the strong-willed side? Yes.

Unfair or mean spirited? No.

He'd never heard of her having any enemies. Most people liked and respected her. He'd researched her background before he set her up to be Stihl's mate.

His son had to be worried, because he rarely asked for help.

Uneasy, Zarro wondered if this was some kind of game. Was Stihl trying to distract Zarro so he'd take the heat off about the mine? He considered the question. It didn't play right. Wasn't Stihl's style.

Tankton, yes.

Stihl, no.

Joha, maybe.

The thought reminded Zarro, he hadn't seen Tankton all evening. Not unusual for him to be out late, but it was becoming a habit. Also, he hadn't talked to Joha in days. Nagging thoughts buzzed through his head. He waved his hand in the air to brush them away. While doing some investigative work, he might as well check into what his other two sons were doing too.

He'd also find out a little more about who wanted to win the Trisar deal.

He checked the time and decided to make a few calls. Sleep wouldn't come his way for a long time, not with his mind racing for answers.

* * * *

Marohka woke to find Stihl on one side, a wall on the other. Pinned between the two, she had to climb over him to get out of bed.

The loud snoring coming from Cyd's corner helped cover the noise she made while gathering her stuff. She hoped to make it to Guilio's shower before the old miner got up. She shut the door behind her, juggled her bag, and slid into her coat. The weather this morning was cold and gray, and clouds shrouded the mountains. If she weren't mistaken, they'd receive rain by the day's end. The biting wind hounded her footsteps on her way to the main structure. A few people stood near the corral. She wondered if the battle warrior for Zook's ceremony had arrived.

After she entered Guilio's office, she walked into his lily. Few people knew about his shower, because he allowed no one to use it. But she didn't give it a thought, having been granted permission years ago. With the hydro-pump on, she stepped under the steamy spray. A few itons later, a loud knock sounded on the door.

"Whoever you are, you better get out here quick," the voice yelled over the running water.

She turned the knobs and slid the bath sheet off the hook by the door. "Guilio, I'll be out in a moment."

Once dressed, she stepped out of the lily. Guilio sat behind his desk working the chew stick between his lips.

"What's up?"

"Does Stihl know you're here?" The old miner pointed to the seat on the other side of the desk.

"No." She sat down. "Does it matter?"

"You gave him the slip, didn't you?"

She nodded. "So?"

"Cyd asleep, too?"

"Yes. They came to bed late." She leaned back in her chair. "Why all the questions?"

"Cyd said you found a snake in your bed."

"Yes, it's happened before." Tired of his grilling, she switched tactics. "How old is Meda?"

He pulled the chew stick out of his mouth. "What does Meda have to do with this?"

Marohka fired at him, demanding answers the same way he had. "Don't you know your own daughter's age?"

“Sure I do.”

“Right.” She drug out the word, then grinned. “Not much fun being on the receiving end of an inquisition, is it?”

He pointed his stick at her. “Girly, you’re heading for trouble.”

“Don’t I always?”

Guilio leaned back in his chair, weighing his next words. “This man of yours, you like him?”

“He’s all right.” She shrugged. “For a man.”

“Are you working with him?”

“You mean on his bid?”

He nodded. “In his proposal, he has your company still working the mining.”

She hadn’t known Stihl’s plans, but it’d help if Taunton Minerals didn’t lose their contract. “He’d have to buy us out otherwise.”

“His buyout includes me keeping ten percent of the mine. The other offer won’t work that way. Straight cash.”

“How are you going to handle your prior investors?”

He raised a brow. “They’ll receive a percentage of the sale.”

She shook her head. “If this deposit is as big as I predicted, an investor would come out ahead with a piece of the mine.”

“Noted.” He smiled and peered at a report on his desk. “It also looks like the digging is back on track.”

The door banged against the wall behind her, startled her. She swung around.

“Fire!” a miner screamed and barged into the room. “One of the cabins is on fire. Sound the alarm.”

“What?” She jumped to her feet.

The man ran back out. One step behind him, smoke billowed into the air. The smell burned her throat. Across the complex, men rushed around with fire control canisters. None advanced close enough to douse the flames. Seeing her cabin in flames, she dashed forward in a sprint. Her heart matched the thud of her feet on the ground. The man who owned her heart lay inside that cabin.

Men rushed around her, trying to douse the flames. She scurried closer, but two men scuffling,

blocked her progress and hampered the men who fought the blaze.

“Stihl, you can’t go back.”

Cyd’s voice hit her senses at the same time as the scorching heat from the inferno. “Stihl,” she yelled, barely able to see anything through the thick smoke.

The fire screamed louder, drowning out the voices around her. Knocking men out of her way, she fought her way forward. Smoke swirled. Her eyes, washed by her tears, blinded her to the horrors of the collapsing building. The deafening sound added with the cracks and pops as hungry flames sang through the air. Unable to see or hear anything above the roar of the fire, she struggled closer, and her instincts tingled with awareness of Stihl’s close proximity.

She drove ahead and grabbed her target. The muscular bicep jerked free of her grasp. The man stepped closer to the fire. Unsure if the man in front of her was Stihl or someone else, she wrapped her arms around his waist. Her cheek cushioned against his back. She prayed the man would back off.

Powerful fingers gripped her wrists and pried apart her hands. A huge form turned and captured her. He lifted her over his shoulder and carried her away from the flame, the heat, and Stihl.

Chapter Fourteen

Marohka lay quietly in the arms of her rescuer. He'd saved her from the heat of the fire, but he'd also kept her from getting to Stihl. She circled the man's neck with her arms and buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder. Heart-wrenching sobs sprang from her soul. Smoke and tears burned her throat.

"Marohka," a raspy voice said in her ear.

"I couldn't save him," she whispered, not lifting her head. Her mind struggled with her failure.

"Who were you trying to save?" The gravelly voice grated on her grief.

"That stubborn arrogant man, who was trying to save me," she said dryly through parched lips.

"Me?"

She drew back and studied the black sooty face of the man holding her. "Why, you sorry fool, what were you thinking?"

"I thought you were still in the cabin."

"Well, I wasn't." Touched that he'd go into a burning building to save her and thrilled he appeared safe, she wiped at the tears. She tightened her arms around his neck.

Anger lit his dark brown eyes. "Where were you?"

"I was in Guilio's office. I just got through with my shower." She wiggled for him to release her. His anxiety at not being able to protect her lanced her mind. She struggled against the emotion and glanced around. He stood in the middle of Guilio's office.

Stihl's grip tightened. "Why didn't you tell me you were leaving the cabin?"

"You were asleep."

"Marohka, we've been through this before. I want to know where you are at all times." His voice turned even rougher. "Understood?"

She strained against him. "Stihl, don't be silly. I shouldn't have to report my every move to you."

"Yes, you do." His grip tightened.

"No, I don't. Why are you so stubborn on this point?"

"Because I am. Now promise me you'll comply with my wishes."

"No."

“Marohka, you could be in danger.”

“No, every time something has happened to me, it could’ve just as easily happened to you. You’re the one who got caught in the fire, not me.”

“Marohka.” His arms like bands of iron wouldn’t let her go. “Now who’s being stubborn?”

“You.” She shoved at his chest. “You want me to promise to report my every move, but will you do the same?”

He paused and dropped her legs. She’d hoped her threat would make him back down. Her breast caressed his chest.

“I will, if you will.”

She refused to believe he’d comply. “You’ll let me know where you are every moment of the day?”

“Why not?” He held her close. “Most of the time I’ll be with you, so it shouldn’t be too hard.”

She shook her head. How could she make him see reason? “This isn’t a good idea. We need time to ourselves.”

“I didn’t say we had to spend every moment together. I simply want to know where you are.” His hands slid along her back. “Why is that so bad?”

With his arms around her and the weight of almost losing him still fresh in her mind, she didn’t feel his request was unfair. But—it meant one more step toward losing her independence. “How about we make this a short term agreement, like until we get back to Royal City? That way, it’s a more realistic goal.”

His gaze revealed his displeasure at the compromise. “Is that the best I can get?”

“For now,” she answered.

“Then, I guess I’ll take it.” His lips covered hers. His teeth nipped at her lower lip, and his mouth slid over hers in a sensuous teasing kiss. “You promise?”

He taunted her until she gave him her word.

“I promise,” she gasped with a little hiccup.

“Me too.” His mouth claimed hers and offered her body a different kind of promise.

* * * *

Marohka paced the length of her new cabin. Stihl hovered around her after the close call with the fire. She’d only managed to obtain a few itons by claiming she needed to change for Zook’s memorial. Now, she hoped to talk to her father and provide him with an update.

A ring sounded in her ear, and she brushed her hair away from her face.

“Hello,” Vin Taunton said.

“Hey, Dad, I thought I’d let you know we’ve corrected the problem here at Trisar Mine. The numbers are increasing as we speak.”

“That’s great news, Marohka.” His elevated tone expressed his pleasure. “It’ll increase the selling price of the company.”

“What?” A blow hit her in the chest. She gasped. “But Dad, Taunton Minerals isn’t up for sale.”

“Now, Marohka.” Her father paused. His words stumbled slowly out of his mouth. “With the losses we’ve incurred due to the Trisar deal, I’ve borrowed against the profit of other projects. Even if things improve, we won’t be in the black for years. You’re married now, and our best source of income is gone.”

“But, Dad, I can still work. The company will be profitable again.” She struggled to come up with an argument.

“No. Stihl is your main priority, and I lack the time. I’ve received an appointment from the council of elders.”

“What are you talking about?”

Again, he spoke as if judging every word. “Marohka, you know I’ve been unhappy at my job for a long time. So, I applied for a position with the Lustralia Mining Commission.” His voice rang with pride. “The council of elders approved me for the head advisor.”

She couldn’t believe her ears. “But, Dad, . . .”

“Marohka,” he interrupted, “I never would’ve taken it if I didn’t know you’d be happy. But you have a new mate, and you’re starting a new life. It’s the perfect time to try a new job and get out of debt. This way, I can also spend more time with your mother.”

“That’s great, Dad,” Marohka said in agreement. “But . . .”

He rushed to reassure her. “Don’t worry. You’ll receive a portion of the sale. You and Stihl might even decide to buy a place right here by us.”

“But, Daddy,” she tried again.

“Look, Marohka, this is what I want. I’m not stuck running the company, and I can enjoy a new job.” His tone turned stern. “This is the way it has to be. You have to make a life with your mate and spend less time at work.”

“I could do both.” She argued, “And you could still take the appointment.”

“No, Stihl would never allow it.” Her father refused to budge on his decision. “He deserves your full attention.”

“Wait, Dad, this isn’t fair.” She knotted her hands into fists. “I’ve worked hard to establish myself as a mineralogist. Our company is the leader in excavating qualtrilium. You can’t just sell.”

“Now, Marohka, this’ll be the best thing for everyone.”

Not for me, she wanted to scream, but her father didn’t give her a chance to speak.

“After you think about it, you’ll see I’m right.” A buzzer rang through her ECD. “Look, I’ve got to go. Don’t worry, I’ll handle everything.”

“Uh . . .”

He rushed on. “You enjoy your new mate. Your mother and I love you. Bye.”

A click sounded in her ear. A loud growl escaped through her clenched lips.

Her desire to keep Taunton Minerals crumbled. Her father spent years in a job he’d detested. She loved it. He hated it. The company only showed a profit after she developed the skill to find qualtrilium.

Now because of her bad advice about the Trisar Mine, the company would slip through her fingers.

Knuckles hit the door.

“Marohka, Zook’s memorial dance will be starting soon,” a voice rang through the closed door.

Responsibility called, but for the first time in her life, she seriously considered not answering it.

* * * *

Everyone gathered reverently in the middle of the camp for Zook’s memorial. Feather-back tripod stools sat in a semicircle around a large piece of leather canvas. Stihl sat on one side of Marohka, his arm resting on the back of her chair. Cyd sat on her other side. A weepy sun peeked through the ominous gray clouds.

In the time-honored tradition of the ancestors, the solemn warrior stood alone in front of the crowd. Dressed in leather pants, he wore chain mail over his chest. His arms adorned with drawings of his battles, the precious stones for his victories covered the headdress on his head. His silver swords rested on the ground at his sides.

On each side of the dancer’s pants, red, yellow, and purple feathers fluttered in the breeze. The warrior swayed back and forth as if caught by a brisk current. The ornate costume danced with color.

With one step, the warrior stretched his hands out to the world at large. Marohka recalled, this meant the birth of life. Each movement represented a stage or event in Zook's life. A turn of his head, then his hands lifted to the sky, an awakening.

The sun streamed down on the face of the warrior like a heavenly spotlight. The man turned first one way and then the other. At times, fluid as a quiet stream, then he'd rush around like caught in the rapid river of life. Searching, seeking, his journey led him to the swords in the middle of the tarp. The warrior tested the weight of each sword in his hand. He showed the wonder of the young man's discovery.

"Yeah!" the dancer suddenly yelled.

Startled, Marohka jumped in reaction to the noise. Slashing, clashing, he fought the air around him. A war raged like a storm in the warrior, a boy leaving the safety of his father's home. She knew the cry for freedom, had heard the same soaring tune crying from her own soul. With high kicks and leaping jumps, the dancer worked his way around the open area. He gave an artful display of each fighting technique.

Enchanted, she noted the warrior's quick pause. His head turned as if hearing something in the distance. A sound only he could hear. Then he continued his battle, and then paused again.

The dancer walked to center stage and dropped to one knee. He laid the swords at his sides and lowered his head as if in prayer. Slowly he lifted his head, his face full of awe. Marohka shared his feelings of amazement. The wonders of love captured his attention. His gaze showed a loving devotion any woman could not help but honor.

He picked up his left sword and offered it to the love of his life. She wanted to reach out and accept it, wishing in her heart she could be worthy of such a love. The warrior laid his gift on the ground in front of him. Tears fell, and she wondered if she'd ever find such a priceless gift.

He reclaimed his right sword, and the dance continued. With each triumph a cry of joy sounded, with each defeat the tip of the warrior's sword touched the ground. Waves of emotions swept over her.

The dancer did a flip and landed sprawled on the ground. She laughed and felt the joy of parenthood. The warrior laid a knife for each child born beside the sword in the middle of the field. She shared the successes and failures of Zook's life.

Fascinated by the action and the emotions when the warrior suddenly fell to the ground, she felt every muscle in her body jerk to attention. He lay motionless in the dirt. She wondered about the dancer's health and started to rise. Stihl's hand kept her in her seat.

Then it hit her—Zook's battle was over.

A life lost.

Thoughts of her own death hit her in the gut. Had she achieved everything she'd hoped to? *No*, her mind screamed. Grief tightened its grip on her chest. She buried her face against Stihl's shoulder. His

arms encircled her, drawing her into his warmth.

Cold, so very cold, her heart bled with pain. Tears streamed down her face. They lacked the ability to wash away the loss of someone's life. Her father's decision to sell the company pierced her plans for the future. The defeat of not securing her own dream increased her agony. She edged closer to Stihl, needing him in a way she'd never needed anyone else in her life.

"You've never seen a warrior's dance before, have you?" he whispered in her ear.

With a deep breath, she wiped the moisture from her face. "Only when my grandfather died, and then I was little."

He drew her onto his lap. The people around them stood and folded up their stools. "It's a very moving experience."

She raised her head to look into his eyes. "I never cry. I don't giggle. In the last two days, I've done both."

His smile warmed some of the ice tentacles holding her heart. "Just helping you broaden your horizons."

"Hey, Lukes, why don't we step inside?" Cyd's neon blue hair glistened against the darken sky. "It's cold out here, and it'll probably start raining any iton now."

"I agree." She stood. "I've almost frozen into a solid block of ice."

They walked across the complex, making their way with the rest of the crowd to the main building.

They entered the rest-din to the dim roar of a room full of people. Every table full, men stood around in small groups talking. At the far end of the room, a line formed for the buffet table, which sat laden with food. The appetizing aroma hit her senses, and her stomach grumbled.

They followed Cyd and wove their way through the room to Upton and Gang's table. Once there, they found a few available seats.

Gang's youthful face greeted them. "We were beginning to wonder if you were coming inside."

"Is it always this crowded?" Cyd asked over the noise.

"No, it'll settle down once everyone gets some food. The first set of miners will be heading out to the mine soon." Upton nodded his greeting to someone in the distance.

Marohka didn't bother to look around. "Where's Guilio?"

"He's in a meeting"—Gang glanced at Stihl—"with the other buyer. They've been at it a while."

Stihl changed the subject. "Any word, yet, as to how the fire started in our cabin?"

She peeked at him and wondered if he was worried about his bid. He had seemed confident yesterday.

“The fire team thinks the problem involves the insulation around the fire stone. It was worn.” Gang frowned. “This camp has a lot of old equipment.”

“We’re sending the heating unit to an advisor in Central City. He should be able to tell us what went wrong.” Upton’s gaze stayed on the door.

Stihl frowned. He didn’t like the answer, or the lack of answers he was getting. “I’d like to see the results.”

“I’ll tell Guilio to forward the report to you.” Upton stood. “It looks like the food line is moving.”

* * * *

The room’s noise level dropped to a low hum by the time Guilio walked into the rest-den. Marohka noticed a light spring in his uneven gait, and his wrinkled face broke into a crooked grin. She wondered at the source of his joy, but before she could ask, Upton spoke. “Are you finally finished?”

“Yes, just made the deal of a lifetime.” Guilio slapped Upton on the back. “Sorry, Stihl, but I accepted another offer.”

Stihl shrugged at the news. “Got what you wanted?”

“With a little give-and-take.” Guilio glanced at her, his eyes bright, his voice cheerful. “My prior investors will receive one percent of the mine while I’ll have ten. The rest girly, is pure gold. Enough, I might add, to retire.”

He sat down. “Your dad, Marohka, will get a buyout bonus.”

“Sounds like a great deal,” Stihl answered.

“He raked me over the rocks,” a voice said from behind Guilio.

She bolted to her feet. “Almon, what are you doing here?”

“I’m the new buyer.”

“You?” Her mind raced with how he could afford to do this type of deal. “How?”

His heated gaze swept along her body. “The same way your mate planned to do it. I seduced investors.”

She stared at him. Her mind forced the pieces together. “Are you also planning to make a bid for Taunton Minerals?”

“Yes. Are you afraid I’ll put you out of a job?”

“No.” She gritted her teeth to keep from reacting to the sinister smirk on his face.

Guilio removed a chew stick from his pocket. “You’d be lucky to get this girl. She can work anywhere.”

“Who are you?” Stihl stood and slipped his arm around Marohka’s waist.

Almon held his forearm out cordially to Stihl. “That’s right. We haven’t met. I’m Almon Pepin.”

They gripped each others forearms in front of her. One tall and broad, the other thin and meek, but she didn’t bother doing an in-depth comparison. More was going on here than the posturing of two men. Something didn’t add up. Almon knew she’d predicted this mine could have the largest deposit ever. He shouldn’t have the right to bid on the mine.

“Let’s sit down.” Almon retrieved a chair from another table and set it between Marohka and Upton.

Unhappy to be anywhere close to Almon, she shifted her chair closer to Stihl.

“You want some food?” Guilio nodded at a server.

“Sounds good.” Almon’s face glowed with his recent victory.

The questions running through her head rang louder than the talk buzzing around the table. How could he defy her father and use his knowledge about the mine to start his own investment group? Her father considered him a trusted employee. What else was he hiding?

Missing pieces fell in place. Government permits were part of his job. Was he the reason for so many delays? He also had access to all the reports, equipment needs, and output goals. Did he sabotage the mine to pick it up cheap? No, that didn’t sound right. If Guilio received a great price, something else had to be in the mix. What?

She focused on Upton’s guilty face. “What else haven’t you told us?”

The talk around the table stopped. Upton’s gaze darted to Almon. Everyone else turned to her. “What else did you find in the mine?” She stabbed at another link in the chain. “What other resource?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about?” Upton looked at everyone but her.

“Sure you do. I never got the core sample I requested.” She pointed her finger at his chest. “Instead, I received excuses.”

“I sent the sample to your office,” Gang piped in.

“I never received it.” Her gaze shifted to Almon. “Did you?”

Almon's fingers stroked his mustache. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The cocky fool thought he could hide his deception. Did he think she was blind? She jumped to her feet. "Don't lie to me. There's been too many problems with this mine. You and Upton have been behind them all."

"Now, girly, don't turn nasty." Guilio shook his head. "Just because I sold the mine to someone other than your mate, you shouldn't get upset."

Steam rising within her, she recognized the burn in her face. She drew in a deep breath and pointed her finger at the two men. "Guilio, these two men lied to you. Between the two of them, they've done nothing but cause problems for this mine. Almon is in charge of governmental permits. Upton reviews all reports and directs the dig."

She turned to Gang. "Didn't you tell me this morning production has increased now that we've started digging at the new location?"

"Yes, but the reports were off," he said.

"No, Upton was feeding you bad data." She stared at him. "Right?"

"Marohka . . ." Upton started.

Almon cut him off. "I believe your mate must have warped your brain. I've heard sex can do that to a headstrong woman."

His sly smile lit her fury. She clenched her fists and retreated a step to gain some room to strike. "Wrong. At every point where the things fell apart, either you or Upton were in charge of the process."

Stihl's hand landed on her shoulder. "Marohka, you can't prove anything."

"Want to bet?" She spat out, angry at the truth. "I may not have proof right now"—she glanced at Upton, then at Almon—"but I'll get it. As of today, I want you both off this site."

Almon rose to his feet. "Sorry, can't comply. I'm one of the new owners. I have a right to be here."

She surged forward, ready to pound his smiling face with her fist. Stihl grabbed her around the waist. He stopped her forward momentum, and she missed her mark. Almon stepped back untouched.

"Such a temper," he admonished.

The other men at the table drew back. A few rose to their feet.

"She must be amazing in bed," Almon continued with a raise of his eyebrow. "I'd love to hear all about it, Stihl."

“I think you should be quiet,” Upton cautioned and stepped away from the table.

“You better take your friend’s advice.” Stihl shoved her behind him and blocked her path with his shoulder and forearm.

“Don’t worry, Stihl. I can handle Marohka. She would’ve been my mate, if I’d truly wanted it.” Almon’s mustache turned up at the corners, and he offered a sickly smile.

Marohka gagged. “In your dreams.” She fought past Stihl.

“Yes, well, it could’ve happened, but I don’t happen to have a daddy like his.” Almon nodded his head at Stihl.

Almon’s baiting comment dangled in the air, and she swallowed the lure. “What does Stihl’s dad have to do with anything?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you didn’t know?” His grin widened, his teeth showing white under his black mustache.

“I think you’d better shut up,” Stihl snapped.

What,” Almon goaded Stihl, “are you afraid I’m going to tell her your father reserved her for . . . the . . . last . . . eight years?” He drew out the last of his sentence and stroked his mustache.

The muscles in Stihl’s arm bunched under her hand. “You can’t reserve a mate.”

“Well, most of us can’t, but then our fathers aren’t on the Council of Elders.” Almon sneered.

“But why would he do such a thing?” Her anger at him faltered with this news.

“That’s enough,” Stihl barked.

She looked at him to test the truth of Almon’s words. Stihl’s brief glance at her confirmed his guilt. Almon spoke the truth.

“Really, I’d think she’d want to know she’s expected to save Ridge Rock.” Almon’s gaze shifted to Stihl. “Haven’t you told her about your family’s mine?”

“No,” Stihl whispered, his voice ominous.

Stepping away from him, she glanced between him and Almon, uncertain which represented the bigger cheat.

“Too bad.” Almon’s voice rang with false sympathy. “Poor Marohka, looks like you’ve found another man like your father. He only wants to use your talent to help himself.” His tone mocked her. “I hope you didn’t believe he actually loved you.”

Stihl surged forward. His right hand landed a punch to Almon’s ribs. “You have no idea what I feel

for her.”

He towered over his intended victim. Almon stumbled backward and upturned a few chairs.

“Tell me, since you’re so innocent”—Stihl’s words dripped with venom—“were you also involved with Zook’s death?”

“Stihl.” Guilio removed his chew stick. “What would he have to gain by killing Zook?”

“Who knows? Maybe Zook threatened to expose him.” Stihl matched every step the man in front of him took.

The set angle of Stihl’s jaw proved he’d drawn his own conclusions. No amount of arguing could change it. His fist flew through the air to connect with Almon’s face.

Chapter Fifteen

Almon swerved. The blow missed. Stihl recovered quickly and nailed his prey. Almon circled behind a table blocking off Stihl's attack, but couldn't halt his progress. He knocked the table over, and it flew out of the way.

The arrogant attitude Almon showed earlier faded, his cowardly colors shining through. "I had nothing to do with Zook's death. I wasn't even here."

"What about the fire in our cabin?" Stihl accused. "Maybe you wanted to get me out of the way?"

"I didn't start the fire." Almon retreated and backed himself into a wall. "I just arrived and was down at the corral. Guilio, tell him."

"Look, Stihl, you don't have any proof. Anyone could've done it."

The roar in Stihl's ears and the anger pulsing through his system wouldn't let him give into the argument. His fist flew through the air landing against the soft flesh of Almon's face. The hard cheekbone groaned in protest itons before his head snapped back from the impact.

Stihl grunted and followed the force of the blow. His arm reached its limit, and he shifted his weight to add extra power to the strike. Almon fell back against the wall. With his opponent's exit blocked, Stihl closed in. Aimed for retribution, he drove his hands with precision. Stomach, chest, face, each took their blows.

The man's crimes ran through Stihl's mind with each punch. One landed for Almon trying to poison Marohka. Two for her alba-ox plunging over the cliff. Three, four, for the poisonous snake in her bed and starting a fire in their cabin. Stihl added power to his blow for Almon outbidding him on the Trisar deal and killing Zook.

"Enough, buddy. If you keep it up you'll kill him," a voice echoed.

An arm tightened around Stihl's neck. He stepped back. Almon fell to the floor, blood dripping from his mouth and nose.

"I know you're involved with what's been happening to Marohka, and if I find any proof . . ." Stihl let his threat hang in the air.

"Better leave the boy alone." Guilio gripped his hand around Stihl's arm. "You've gotten your piece of flesh. Now you better worry about damage control."

"He could be behind Zook's death," Stihl argued, "or he might be the one who poisoned Marohka."

"You can't prove it." Guilio bit down on his chew stick. "Right now, you better worry about her. She looked very angry when she left."

Stihl turned and stared at the older man. "What are you talking about?"

Guilio glanced at the door. "If I know Marohka, she's probably long gone."

Stihl turned to his friend. "Cyd?"

"I was watching the fight." Cyd raced for the door.

"Great, why can't she learn to stay put?"

"Well, she does tend to strive on being difficult." Guilio's mouth slid into a crooked grin.

"That's the understatement of the year." Stihl rushed outside.

* * * *

Stihl stood in the middle of the mining office gazing at the mayhem of files, papers, and maps. He wondered if Marohka could be hiding in the mess.

"I've looked everywhere. She's gone," Cyd said the moment he entered the room. "Her stuff is not in the cabin where you were planning on sleeping."

"Then where did she go?" Stihl flexed his sore hand at his side. He wondered why he'd elected to fight Almon instead of consoling Marohka. She had to be crushed.

"I don't know. I asked around, but no one saw her." Cyd stepped back into the hallway. "I also went down to the corral. One of the alba-oxen is missing."

Stihl walked out of the office. He refused to believe she'd left. "Why didn't she let me explain?"

"Well, with all the accusations Almon was throwing around, it's a wonder she didn't jump in and fight you as well." Cyd paused in mid-stride. "Did you know about your dad reserving her?"

"Not at the time, but he told me last night." Stihl shook his head. "I bet I had guilt written all over my face."

"Well . . ."

"No wonder she's upset."

At the exit, they paused by the doorway.

"What do you plan on doing about Rock Ridge?" Cyd laid a hand on Stihl's shoulder. "With the Trisar deal dead, Tankton will push for us to start strip mining. He wants to get the profits as fast as he can." Cyd shook his head in regret. "I don't see any way to stop it."

"Me either, but right now, I can't worry about it. I need to find Marohka." Stihl surveyed the storm raging outside the door, pounding the ground with large raindrops. "If I know her, she's headed straight into trouble, and I have to follow her."

“Do you think that’s wise?” Cyd pointed at the downpour.

“No,” Stihl grumbled, “but I’m still going to do it.”

“I could arrange for some of the guys to help and form a search brigade,” Cyd offered.

The weight of Marohka being in danger fell on his shoulders. He didn’t want to add to the problem by putting others at risk too. “No, it’d only add one more strike against me in Marohka’s eyes, if I endanger others as well.”

He opened the door a little wider. Rain hammered the rocky soil. Puddles grew, forming larger pools until water spread over the ground and covered any space not already acquired. A lake developed where only dirt used to be.

“And with this downpour, water-avalanches are likely to happen. I can’t take the risk of someone else getting hurt.”

The sky lit with bolts of lighting. Thunder roared in the distance. The wind whistled.

“She ran away because of me, so it’s up to me to find her.” Stihl pictured her in his mind and flashes of the landscape appeared. The path didn’t resemble the one heading back to Central City.

“You might wait until it lets up some,” Cyd said.

Stihl frowned.

“All right, Luke, maybe she hasn’t gotten far.”

“Right.” Stihl pulled his coat closer to ward off the rain. “Stay here in case she doubles back. I’ll try to contact you either when I find her or by morning.”

Communication could be tricky. He’d already called her ECD, but he’d lost the signal.

“Are you taking a jet or an alba-ox?”

“Jet, it travels faster.” Stihl walked out from under the cover of the building.

The wind buffeted him. Rain slashed against his cheeks. The icy kiss reminded him a cold wet ride lay ahead.

He clenched his jaw and decided she’d pay for this little adventure. His patience sat at zero.

* * * *

Almon, the lying, cheating, arrogant rock-head was still better than Stihl. At least, he’d never played with her feelings. She’d trusted Stihl. Thought he’d care. Then he’d deceived her. Men, she couldn’t trust them.

The rain mingled with the tears on her cheeks. The alba-ox followed her lead, trudging along through the mud. The wind whipped her hair around her head. The cold, dark, depressing night chilled her bones and matched the stone where her heart once lay.

With his secrets uncovered, images of Stihl sped through her mind. His smile, once warm and kind, now revealed itself as false. His concern staged. His desire forced. Could he explain his true reason for wanting her as his mate?

“You are a beautiful intelligent woman,” his voice echoed in her mind. A picture of them outside the theatre appeared in her head.

“Right, like I can believe that now,” she muttered.

The warmth of his arms and his gentle kindness convinced her of his sincerity. Yet, he’d lied.

She dropped her chin to her chest. Was her destiny to be alone? Why couldn’t someone love her for herself? Or were her mining skills the only thing men found appealing? Her father turned his back on her too by selling their company. Why, because it was unprofitable or something else?

Didn’t she deserve a say in what happened? Didn’t her thoughts on the subject matter?

Almon, who she hated, recognized the way men used her. He’d joined them by conniving against her to steal everything she held dear from her control. She slammed her palm on the saddle horn. She should’ve followed up on the core samples. The mine held another profitable mineral. She just knew it.

Also, the data he’d gained from the company should make it illegal for him to buy the mine. But again, men, the elders of the country perceived it as good business.

Did Stihl’s father know about the deal? Did he want his son to fail?

Thunder crashed.

She raised her head and squared her shoulders. It didn’t matter. She’d find a way to block the sale. And if her father sold the company, she’d find a new job.

Cold rain dripped onto her face.

Without Stihl to stand in her way, her career would be her life. She’d live alone, and any man who required her expertise would pay a heavy price for the service. She wouldn’t miss Stihl, wouldn’t even think about him. He’d had his chance, and he’d blown it.

The alba-ox jerked beneath her, rushing his steps in the soup at his feet. She gripped the reins tighter.

His cruel joke, with her the punch line, backfired. He couldn’t use her or take advantage of her any longer. She knew the score.

She glanced around. The path in front of her faded into a soggy mess. How far had she traveled? The ox she'd trusted to know the way appeared to be wandering through the woods aimlessly.

Time showed two ziton passed.

It suddenly occurred to her she was lost. She yanked her mount to a stop.

A perfect end to a lousy day.

* * * *

Angry and tired, Stihl followed the tracks he found in the mud. He wasted over a ziton by searching in the wrong place. He'd expected her to head for Central City, so he'd followed the rocky main trail, but he found no tracks.

Furious with her, he'd blocked out the messages his mind sent him. After reaching the pebbly soil of the canyon incline, he decided he'd traveled the wrong path. Backtracking, he picked up her alba-oxen's sizable footprints. The rain, slowing to a weeping drizzle, hampered his progress. But the wet ground made it easier for him to find the markings. Judging by the small amount of water in each hole, he was close.

The dark clouds limited his vision. Objects around him appeared large and more menacing. A boulder to his left cast a forbidding mask over the rough terrain. A flicker, a subtle shift of a shadow in the distance alerted him to an object moving up ahead.

"Now, I have her," he grumbled.

The path she'd taken led her farther into the wooded high plains and away from Central City. In their current spot, they'd make it faster to his mountain home than back to camp. With the jet, they'd arrive in less than a ziton, even if the rain didn't stop.

A tingle of awareness brushed over the hairs on the back of his neck. His ears tuned into a low roar. A unique scent rode on the wind, dark, musty, and infused with earthy minerals. All his senses stood on alert. A threat stalked his step. Fear forced him into action. A quick glance over his shoulder, and his mind froze.

Taller than any building he'd ever seen, a wall of water raced toward him. The whisper of a massacre grew into a yowl. The fury warned any creature that stood in its path. The sound, amplified by his fear, wailed through his head. His gaze darted, left, right, searching for safety.

No escape. No way out.

Death clawed at his heels. A gray cauldron bubbled with debris and trash, and the tall wall demolished everything in its path.

An instant to decide.

He altered his course of action and sped for a grove of web-trees on the horizon.

“Run, Marohka.” His scream echoed through the night. “Run.”

* * * *

Sudden emotions flooded through her mind. She released the reins of the alba-ox and gripped her head. Fear consumed her. Goose bumps rose on her skin. A deafening roar sounded in her ears. She struggled to breathe. Danger lurked nearby.

She turned her head and glanced over her shoulder to see the beast chasing her. Nothing lay behind her. Only fog dimmed the space, the same gray soup, she’d been dealing with for the last two zitions.

Her heart raced. An unexplained anxiety clamored through her chest. She fought to control her panic. Eyes swollen, she blinked to clear her sight. The alba-ox beneath her threw back its head and moved into a trot.

Images flashed through her head, playing on the befuddled mist in her mind.

A man . . .

On a jet . . .

Racing across the landscape . . .

A churning dark cloud behind him . . .

A rain storm?

The horror in Stilh’s gaze lanced through her and hit her heart with a deadly blow. It stopped for an iton before she focused all of her attention onto the scene in her head. Some unknown force chased him.

An invisible arch connected them. His terror caught her in its grip. Thick fingers squeezed her heart with fear. Her breath grew labored, following the rise and fall of his chest. Her skin grew slick, sticky with his panicky sweat. She shared the hysteria racing through every nerve in his body. Her hands trembled.

Tied to his emotions, she felt him pulled back away from whatever escalated his fears, away from the link that joined their thoughts. A deep gully wove its way between them. She caught a flash of a bridge in the distance. She realized she’d crossed the platform a short time ago. In danger on the other side, he’d followed her. With a jerk on the reins, she turned the alba-ox around.

The threat gaining ground, she wiggled her nose to fight off the putrid breath of the approaching beast, which hovered on the wind.

The gloomy haze played tricks with her eyesight. Pictures of his jet speeding over the uneven surface became intermixed with the land markers. Unable to distinguish the difference between the things she viewed in her mind and what lay in her field of vision, she fought the fog and forced her alba-ox

forward to find Stihl. The animal balked, and a break in the thick mist revealed a large ravine. They stood on the rim. A mental test teleported her to within a toe span from the edge. Was she willing to sacrifice everything for him?

His voice whispered. "I can't die. Marohka needs me."

Shocked by the love resonating in his soul, she stepped forward. Her heart beat like thunder, matching his. Her mind rushed to connect with his thoughts. Wild with worry, she scanned the zone around her, searching for Stihl, hungry for the sight of him. A dark murkiness sat at her feet. A huge bottomless gorge stood below. Yet, she didn't fall.

A sparkle of light blinked. A thin line guided her steps.

A transparent bridge twinkled in the mist. With renewed hope, she strolled across the crystal platform.

The sounds of the churning water rushing through the ravine plunged her back to the reality of the situation. Her skittish mount tugged on the reins. She gripped them tighter and forced the animal to walk across the bridge.

In the distance, a giant wall of water sped across the flood plain toward Stihl on his jet. His path led him through a large grove of webbed trees about forty leg-lengths ahead.

Outside of the danger zone, she gasped in horror. Although Stihl hurried away from the tidal wave, the hungry monster slowly gained ground and ate at his heels. The land behind him obliterated. The dark wall spit water down over him.

With one lunge, the vicious serpent consumed him in one bite. His jet swept out from under him like a toy, and he disappeared.

A scream rang from her soul.

* * * *

Blasted from his feet and kicked by a weight equal to a herd of alba-oxen, Stihl fell into a dark world. Water covered his head, suffocated him. A swift current carried him through the muck, trapped him in an eddy of foul-tasting liquid.

His brain screamed for him to swim. His hands grasped muddy slime. His legs fish-tailed through garbage.

Pain dotted his skin as debris pummeled his flesh.

A quick gulp of air rushed into his lungs when he broke through the surface for an iton, A solid punch sucked him back under,

His knees hit his head, and then he somersaulted through the mud into endless circle of torment.

A twist, a turn, his flailing movement shot off in every direction. Which way to the surface?

A fist crashed into his shoulder. Pain raced down his arm. Rough long tentacles of an unseen creature grabbed his arms and legs. Thick arms circled his chest. His hands slid over his captor. He wrestled with the solid feelers to free himself. After escaping one, another curved around his shoulder and waist.

The stiff current slammed repeatedly against his body while the creature held him captive. With no foothold, his legs flapped like a flag in the wind. Out of breath, his lungs on fire, his nose coated with mud, Stihl attempted to steal a gasp of air. Putrid water rushed into his mouth, and he gagged.

His body ached.

No air filled his lungs.

His energy gone.

The sweet peace of death beckoned.

Chapter Sixteen

“No, Stihl, I won’t let you die,” Marohka screamed and then gulped in heavy moist air.

Tears threatened her sight. With no sign of Stihl in the water, she kicked her feet hard against her mount’s flanks and forced the animal into a canter. Her heart raced with fear and worry. She scanned the shallow edges of the wave’s wake.

On the horizon, a barrier of water, twenty leg-lengths in size, rushed for the edge of the cliff. She turned to the horrific sight of the aftermath of the hellish avalanche. She searched the debris-strewn land.

A deafening roar sounded. The wall of water, like a building without supports, fell into the gully. The structure hit the bottom of the ravine, and the ground shook. Water and waste billowed up. A churning gray cloud of mist rose to the heaven.

A stabbing pain pierced her left shoulder. An agonized idea ran through her head. She gripped the reins tighter. Stihl, stuck in the liquid mess, might be gone from her life forever. Her mind demanded she find him. He couldn’t have disappeared. She refused to believe him dead.

Her sharp gaze darted from object to object in the middle of the mess. Small rocks and sticks bobbed in the swift current while large objects dropped and halted their progress. Scanning each piece of debris, somewhere in the tangled soup, she hoped to see a hand, a foot, a piece of clothing. Anything to tell her, Stihl was alive.

Her eyes burned with tears. The rapid beat of her heart pounded home the need to find him quickly, but the wide expanse of water blocked her path. She kicked her mount, urging the animal to walk faster. It balked at wading through the muddy stream. With a few harder nudges, the alba-ox stepped slowly forward.

“Stihl, where are you?”

* * * *

Moments before his head broke the water’s surface, her voice sounded in his head. He wondered at its origin. Cold air hit his face. His nose caught a whiff of air. Rancid liquid bit into his taste buds. A much-needed breath expanded his lungs. He opened his eyes. Fire lit up his eyeballs. He shut them and brushed his hand across his face. Once the excess moisture was gone, he opened them again. With the pain less and his vision blurred, he blinked to see his surroundings.

Caught in the limbs of a webbed tree, his legs dangled in the putrid water rushing beneath his feet. He’d seen pictures of devastation, but couldn’t accept the fact he sat in the middle of the mess. He shoved back his hair and tried to gasp in the incredible sight.

“Stihl . . . Stihl, can you hear me?”

He caught sight of Marohka. On her mount, she worked her way across the receding water. Joy filled his heart at her not being caught by the wave. Then he remembered why he’d landed in this

crisis. Why, he wondered, did he even endure the lady misery?

“Marohka,” he croaked, his voice no louder than a hoarse whisper.

Her head turned.

He spoke again. “Over here, Mar . . .”

His body ached. He tested each limb to see if he’d incurred any permanent damage. Only his left shoulder rang with pain. He pulled himself forward and found a foothold. With care, he worked his way out of his savior’s branches.

* * * *

Marohka charted his course through the tree. His clothes, with a thick layer of muck clinging to them, hung on him like rags. His hair laid plastered to his head, matted with muddy debris. Streaks of dirt marked his face, which appeared pale and drawn.

He was gorgeous.

Drawing nearer, her fear for him turned to anger. He could be dead. “Stihl, what were you doing?” she yelled. “Are you dimcoco?”

“No, I just thought I’d take a ride in a rain storm.”

He glared at her from where he sat on the lower limb of a webbed tree. “How about you? Are you happy now that I’m covered in mud and stuck in a tree?”

His gruff attitude added to her rising horror of having almost lost him. She wanted to throttle the man.

“I was on my way back to Central City.” She positioned the alba-ox below his legs. She jerked on the reins. She ignored his hurtful comment and admitted to herself her part in this situation.

“Get on,” she ordered and shifted so his feet rested on her mount’s rump. He slid onto the saddle. As soon as his arms slid around her waist, she nudged the alba-ox away from the tree.

“You were headed in the wrong direction.” He grabbed the reins out of her hands.

Cut marks scored his hands and arms. His weight rested heavy against her back. He trembled, and the shutter raced through her like a whip.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you see any ledges?” He pointed to the ground.

“So?” She stared at the wide-open space, gouged and scored by the passing water wall.

“The trail to the camp follows a series of narrow pathways, which have canyons and cliffs. This way heads into the mountains.”

“All right, then I’ll turn around.” She wrapped her hands over his.

“No,” he said next to her ear. “We’ll head for my house.”

“And if I refuse?” She shook her head and peered back over her shoulder. The pain in his face lanced through her heart until her gaze caught his. A dark threat swam in the depths of his eyes.

“It wasn’t a request.”

* * * *

A few itons later, Stihl wondered at the woman’s resolve. The hood that had covered her head lay on her shoulders. Colorful strands of hair dripped tiny drops of water from their length. A red nose accented her pale face. Exhausted, she would’ve fallen off their mount if he hadn’t held her in place. Yet, her rebellious green eyes fought him when she glanced back.

He’d tried every way possible to gain her trust. The woman refused to listen to reason.

“Stihl, I . . .”

“I don’t want to hear it.” His patience with her gone, he cut her off and jerked on the reins to keep their mount moving. “Marohka, how many times do I have to tell you? You belong with me.” He shifted to force her to face forward. “I’m tired, wet, and hungry. I’m not fighting with you. For once, you’ll do what I tell you to do.”

“Stihl . . .”

“Just let it go,” he groaned in her ear. “Right now I just want to get home.”

Over the next ziton, the land changed from flat plains to the foothills of the mountains. Near the edge of his property, a large pile of rocks and dead wood bunched together in piles confused Stihl for a moment until he determined the answer.

The Morrison brothers.

Upset, he sought peace from the beauty of the land. The red glow of Damion, the second sun of Vectar shone low in the north sky. His house, on the horizon, waited for his return. Colors lit the sky with bright streaks of purple, orange, and yellow. A welcoming sign, after the months he’d spent away from his beloved home.

He wanted to wake Marohka and share this with her, but she needed her sleep. She’d sat stiffly in front of him for most of the trip, trying her best not to give in to the fatigue, which plagued both of them. Only in the last few itons had her resolve weakened.

With her lying against him, each breath her lungs drew echoed through his chest. Her left shoulder

hit the bruise caused by his earlier encounter with the webbed tree. Spent from the day's events, he wondered which one of them supported the weight of the other.

The wind sent a whiff of her unique scent to his nose. One body part hardened. He wondered at the power she held over him. Strong, determined, and sexier than any woman he'd ever known, he fought to tame the beast that denied her the ability to trust. He'd reassured her countless times, but it didn't help. The only way to solve the problem was to complete the blending process, and he had a plan to make it happen.

The alba-ox stopped in front of the house. Stihl slid off the animal with Marohka in his arms. He struggled for strength in his left arm. She shifted and wrapped her arms around his neck. The pain eased.

The light stone on the porch guided him to the front door. He punched in the security code, and the door slid open. Her head nestled on his shoulder. He wove his way up the stairs and through the house to the room in the back. Here, he punched in another code and opened the door. He laid her on the bed. Her eyelids blinked open.

"Do you want something to eat?"

"No, just sleep." Her eyes closed.

His wet coat was spread over her relaxed form. He disconnected the fasteners and freed her from the moist fabric. She shifted, and he glanced at her face.

"What are you doing? I should be helping you."

"I was removing your coat so you could rest."

"I'm fine." She frowned and stood. "You're the one who almost drowned."

"No, once I help you with your clothes, I'll go soak in some hot water." He tugged the coat from her shoulders. "You'll be able to rest better without wet clothes on."

He slid his hands down her arms removing her hands from her sleeves. Her sweater was damp, and he noticed her soaked pants. Quickly, before she could object, he shifted his hands to her waist and lifted her sweater over her head. Her face buried in the fabric, he let go. The muffled sound of her voice echoed under her cloth, but he paid no attention. He unfastened her slacks and slid them from her hips.

Free from her sweater, she shoved at his hands. "Wait an iton."

Her pants landed at her feet. His lust responded to her skimpily clad form, dressed only in a pair of shoes, underwear, and a breast wrap.

"Now you can relax."

"Stihl, I'm fine. Don't you want help?" She stepped out of her pants. "I know you hurt your

shoulder. Why don't you let me take a look at it?"

"No, the shoulder is fine." He stepped back.

She stepped closer.

He drew back, not wanting her touch. "You need to rest."

His emotions raw, he knew he couldn't be as gentle as he should be. "Look, Marohka, it's been a long day. Why don't you rest in bed while I unwind in a hot pool of water?" He took a step back. "I'm filthy."

She stared, a confused light in her eyes.

"I'll come to bed in a little while," he said in an attempt to ease her suspicions.

She sat on the bed, removed the rest of her clothes and shoes, and then climbed under the covers. Once she was settled, he rounded the corner to the lily.

With the heat jets on, he removed his clothes and slid into the water. For the first time in what felt like days, he relaxed. Marohka, safe in the other room, lay securely in his bed. Tomorrow, he'd worry about the other problems in his life.

* * * *

In the dark room, only a small ray of light hit the floor by the lily. Marohka heard and felt the rhythm of her heart. It drummed out a battle song bent on keeping her awake. Stihl's distant attitude raced through her head forming questions. The soft bed beneath her beckoned her to sleep, but her nagging doubts refused her the right to relax.

She pictured Stihl in the tree where she'd found him. His unyielding mood denied her more than a few simple words. She'd not even been able to ask if he was hurt. The ginger way he sat in the saddle and his soft groans when the alba-ox shifted screamed of his bruised and battered body. Yet, he'd held himself away from her for most of the ride.

Why? Was it because of his muddy clothes, or was there another reason? Why did he reject her touch? Was he upset because he'd needed her help? None of it made sense.

She recalled sharing Stihl's thoughts and his wide range of emotions. Their link opened her eyes. When faced with his own death, his concern had been for her, his true feelings real. Possessive, controlling and even downright annoying, with all his faults, he still cared.

Deep down his desires mirrored hers. She loved him.

Yet, why stay away from her? What demons plagued him?

Each time they'd made love, he'd given loving support to calm her fears. Only once were his fears of being unable to protect her revealed. What was he hiding? What were his issues?

Needing to know, she pictured him lying in the pool on the other side of the wall. With his eyes closed, water lapped up over his chest. She tuned into his thoughts.

“Dad, I don’t agree with Tankton. There has to be another way.” He sat in a high back chair arguing with a large man behind a broad oak desk. Books stood in perfect rows on the shelves adorning the walls. Wood furniture glowed with years of care. The study and the man displayed an image of authority.

“Tough.” The big man’s fist hit the desk. “Your time has run out. As director of the family’s funds, it’s your job to ensure everyone in the family has the money they need to live.”

“Come on, Dad, they’re both older than me. They should have successful careers by now, but they don’t even try. Why force me to be their keeper?”

“Your grandfather put you in charge of the mine and the property. You control the money.”

“But, Dad.”

The stern man lifted his hand to silence Stihl. Dark eyes met hers.

“Your mate is here,” Stihl’s dad said.

Stihl turned and looked at her for an iton, then shrugged. “She doesn’t want me.”

“Stihl . . .” She reached out a hand.

“What difference does that make? She’s the one I’ve chosen for you, and you’ll do what is best for the family.”

“Dad . . .”

“Now, wait one iton.” She stepped forward, but the large man behind the desk disappeared. She searched the office for his father.

“What are you doing here, Marohka?” Stihl stood in front of her, his dark gaze drilling into hers.

The scene changed. Only white walls glared down at her on the bed. She shook her head and refocused. She was slow to fit together the pieces of what the scene revealed. Stihl, like her, felt a responsibility to his family. His grandfather forced the burden of managing the family’s wealth onto his shoulders, just like her father had placed the yoke of heading the family business onto hers.

No wonder he knew her so well. They each possessed family who demanded their attention. He might not know it, but his life mirrored hers in a number of ways. Her heart opened a little wider.

Peace drifted over her like a warm blanket, and she fell asleep.

* * * *

Stihl walked out of the bedroom and hit the lock. Marohka couldn't escape the mating area. With no windows in the room, the only way in or out was through this door.

She might be tired at the moment, but no doubt upon recovering her strength, she'd scream for her release. The idea of him holding her prisoner would set her off. She'd already invaded his thoughts. A solid wooden door wouldn't stop her from trying to break free.

He turned and walked down the stairs. He'd gained some of his energy back after resting in the hot pool in the lily.

After fixing a turkin layer to eat, he planned to join Marohka in the special room his family had for bonding. Every man had used the room at one time or another for its safety features. Royal women played dirty and turned violent when provoked. With padded walls and only a bed in the room, all other objects were removed from angry hands. Soft surfaces helped prevent injuries.

Stihl laughed, unconcerned about how determined she became. He wouldn't release her until they'd completely blended and he tamed her streak of independence. She wanted him but didn't trust his motives. Once they blended, it'd no longer be a problem. She'd know him as well as she knew herself, which he suspected wasn't very well.

In the service area, he selected a quick bite to eat and decided he'd better order in more supplies. His snack in hand, he strolled back into the main room to relax and enjoy the view outside the large windows of the mountains in the distance. He settled on the couch and relaxed. Only here, on this property, did he truly find peace. No people crowded his space. The land, his only companion, except for . . .

His hand fell to his side. Grief hit him at the loss of his faithful dog. Marohka would love it here too. She liked open space, freedom. She refused a desk job and traveled to different locations regularly, which proved she liked to be outside.

And after they moved out here, they'd get another dog. With the loss of the Trisar deal, they wouldn't be able to live out at the house full-time. Not if his job required him be in the city. But, if the land was strip mined, they might not want to live here anyway.

His heart heavy, he sighed with regret. All his plans in ruins, he mulled through his problems. He stared out the window without seeing the colors washing the western sky. Corolla sun glowed with the light of a new day.

After a while, he drew his ECD from his pocket, adjusted the device over his ear, and called Cyd.

"This better be good, Luke, or you're dead." His friend's voice grumbled in his ear.

"Woke you?" He shoved a pillow behind his back. "What if you were like me and hadn't even been to sleep yet?"

"You find her?"

“Yes, she’d gotten lost. About a ziton from the ranch, so I decided to head here instead of back to the camp.” Stihl yawned. “Been here a few itons.”

“Why didn’t you wait and call me later? Like at a decent time?” Cyd mumbled. “I just climbed into bed.”

“Couldn’t, I’m headed into the mating chamber. I don’t know when I’ll get out.” He suddenly realized what Cyd had said. “Why were you up so late? Has there been more trouble at the mine?”

“No, curious about some of Almon’s answers during your fight, I had a few questions.” Cyd paused.

Stihl heard the soft rustling of blankets. “And?”

“It seems Almon believes himself to be in love with Marohka. He was very upset to learn someone might be out to hurt her. The reason he says for him going after the Trisar Mine was so he could win her over with money.” Cyd chuckled. “The crazy man thinks that’s what she wants.”

“It’s a reasonable plan, but what was he planning to do about me?” Stihl wondered if the attempts on her life could’ve been botched attempts aimed at hurting him.

Cyd’s laughter rang through the ECD. “He didn’t think you’d survive. Almon says she’s determined to remain independent.”

“Then why would she turn to him, if she managed to rid herself of me?”

“Oh, therein lies the beauty of the plan. He intended to hire her. It seems her old man has a new offer and is planning on sell their company. Once the Trisar Mine starts paying, Almon hopes to buy out her dad. As her boss, he thought he’d be a perfect choice for her mate. And with you gone, she’d be free to marry anyone she chose.”

Stihl wondered about Almon’s plan. It sounded feasible on the surface, but it would’ve never worked. She’d never agree to married Almon. Besides, Stihl had no intention of giving her up. “The man is going to be disappointed.”

“Yes, but . . .” Cyd paused. “It means he wasn’t behind the attempts on her life, or the accidents which have been happening around the two of you.”

“Right.”

“Make sure to set the alarm while you’re in the mating chamber,” Cyd advised. “If you want, I’ll head that way tomorrow.”

“You mean today. And that’s part of the plan. You need to check the area around the outskirts of our property. The Morrison brothers have already started doing some clearing. I’m calling Dad to tell them to stop.”

“What if I find something?”

“Let me know, or handle it.”

“In whatever way I deem necessary?”

“Yes.” Stihl hated what this request could mean, but he had no option.

“Will do, Luke.”

Stihl clicked the button to end the call. He couldn't think of anyone who might want her or him dead. An unseen villain required time he didn't have. His hands and mind busy with Marohka, his father or Cyd would have to handle the other issues.

A thought occurred to him, and he hit the call button. He gave the number and waited. His father's ECD message played.

“Hey, Dad, sorry I couldn't reach you. I thought I'd let you know we're at the ranch.” He paused and forced his idea into words. “The Trisar deal fell through, but with some luck, I might be able to work something else out with Marohka's father and his company. Tell the Morrison brothers to back off.” He hit the button to disconnect.

She might not like the idea, but her dad just might. Stihl started for the stairs. After they worked everything out, they'd give her dad a call. Who better to run your company than your daughter's mate?

Smiling at the new prospect, Stihl headed for the mating chamber. He needed a few zitons of sleep before Marohka woke up. She'd require all his energy.

Chapter Seventeen

The warm, cozy bed invited Marohka to fall back to sleep, but her bladder demanded relief. She opened one eye, fumbled with the blankets, turned over, and sat up. The dim lighting in the room glowed from a skylight and a few small moonstones. She glanced around, unsure of her location or how she'd gotten there.

The walls were white with a plush, cushy surface like they were stuffed. The floor, when her foot touched it, felt like the pad of a dueling mat. No furniture, other than the bed, occupied the room. Her mind raced to the prior day's events. Stihl had brought her here last night after his accident. Was this his house?

She stood and walked along the wall beside her to an opening with two adjacent doors. Not sure which one led to the lily, she picked one at random and tried the knob.

It didn't open.

Surprised and a little confused, she twisted the handle of the other door. In the lily, the walls again were white and plush. A white bathing pool sat in the corner. The recycling mechanism for the water sent small ripples across the smooth surface. A steady humming noise played in the room. Finished, she stumbled back to bed.

The large lump on the other side of the bed caught her attention before she climbed back under the covers. She tugged on blankets and uncovered Stihl's head. She stared at him, confused as to what to do. He had put her to bed last night, but when she'd tried to coax him to join her, he'd refused. Why? What game was he playing?

The door out of the room being locked bothered her. If she climbed back in bed, she'd wake up under him. The idea, although appealing, didn't fit in with her plan.

Wary of the link between them, she needed to straighten a few things out before they made love again. It'd probably be best to maintain some distance.

Decision made, she retrieved her pillow and tugged the top blanket off the bed. Luckily, the floor was padded. She walked to the nearest corner. Then she paused. Why should she give up her bed? The house probably had a dozen other bedrooms. And since she couldn't leave, he should find somewhere else to sleep.

She dropped the pillow and blanket back in their places then walked around the bed. She tugged the covers back. She touched his arm and noticed the light imprint on his right hand. "Stihl, wake up. You need to sleep somewhere else."

His eyes open slowly after she nudged him a few more times. "Go sleep in a different bed."

He grabbed her forearm. "No, I'm fine right where I am."

"Then I'll sleep elsewhere." She jerked on her arm. "Unlock the door."

His gaze narrowed, and then without warning he yanked her down on top of him. “No, you’ll sleep here.”

She scrambled to move off his chest, but his arms held her secure. She fell beside him, and he rolled over. His weight pinned her, and he tugged the blankets back over them. “Stihl, it’s not a good idea for us to sleep together.” She shoved at his chest.

“Fine, you don’t have to sleep.”

“But you can go sleep in another bed.”

He laid his head on the pillow beside hers. “I don’t want to.”

“Then open the door, and I’ll find another room.”

His warm breath brushed her cheeks. “No, I like just where you are.”

She wiggled and tried to avoid his warm, hard body. Her anger with him mounted. “But, Stihl, we need to talk.”

He shifted her hips back beneath his. “Marohka, be quiet, or I’ll find a way to keep you quiet.”

Stuck, she listened to his steady breathing. Why was he being so difficult? “Stihl, how long do you plan to hold me prisoner?”

* * * *

Stihl gazed down at her strawberry-blonde hair. Brown and yellow gold strands spilled across her pillow. Sea-green eyes stared at him. Her beauty excited him, and his heart beat faster. “Let’s just say we’re here until we end the problem you’re having with me.”

“I don’t have enough time left in my life for you to solve that problem.” She fidgeted under him and slid her hands over his shoulders.

“Well, I guess we’re stuck here for a while.”

He laughed at the frustrated frown on her face.

“Stihl, I can’t think. You’re too close.” Her hands gripped his sore muscles. “I need some breathing room. I’m hungry and tired and . . .”

“There are food tablets in the dispenser in the lily. If you want anything more, you’ll have to wait until we’ve resolved our differences.”

He shifted her in his arms.

“Does your shoulder hurt?”

“What?” Unprepared for her change of tactics, he wriggled, restlessly as her hands massaged the tight ache in his muscles.

“You injured it yesterday in the web-tree. I was wondering if it still hurts.”

He shook his head. “It’s fine.”

“Do you feel like explaining to me how you landed in the middle of a flash flood?”

Embarrassed by the accident, he answered more harshly than he intended. “No, let’s just say I had other things on my mind.”

“What were you doing out in the storm?”

“I was looking for you.” He rolled over, unable to talk to her with her soft breasts caressing his chest. “If you hadn’t run off from the camp, I wouldn’t have been out in that crazy weather in the first place.”

“You didn’t have to come after me,” she whispered.

The flood of anger racing through him threatened to boil over, and he glared at the ceiling to regain control. “Right, like I could let you roam around the outback by yourself.”

She rolled to the other side of the bed and stood. After putting on her coat, she walked to the far wall and turned. “All right, Stihl, if the only way I can escape this padded room is to resolve our problems, let’s start with why you lied to me.”

He sat up and jammed her pillow behind his back. The rigid lines of her body heightened his steaming temper. “I didn’t lie to you.”

She stepped forward and then stopped. “What do you call it? I asked you why you chose me as a mate, and you said because of my mind.” She shook her head and walked a few paces along the wall. “Stupid me, I believed you.”

“No, Marohka, you believed me because you are *not* stupid.” He heard himself yelling and lowered his voice. “If you’ll think about it, you’ll know I spoke the truth.”

“Right, then why didn’t you mention your family’s mine?”

“My family?” It took a moment before he understood the question. “To be honest, I thought you knew. We’ve owned it for years, and the mine wasn’t the reason why I chose you.”

She paused, turned, and paced back along the wall. “Your daddy chose me. He reserved me for the last eight years. Did you ever once think about how I felt?” She shook her head and closed her eyes as if in pain. “To not be chosen year after year?”

“I had no idea my father did that to you until the day before you found out.”

Her hands flexed at her sides. She shifted her weight from foot to foot like a fighter.

“And I planned on telling you once we arrived here, but . . .” Her striding back and forth across the room wore on his nerves. “Almon mentioned it, and then before I could explain things got out of hand.” Stihl finished in a rush. “If you’d stuck around, I could’ve . . .”

Her agitated movements forced him to rethink his answer. How could he tell her without upsetting her more?

“My dad didn’t even mention your name until last year, and then only as a reminder to receive my inheritance.”

“What?” Her face turned red. Anger screamed from her skin. “You mean the reason I’m here is because you want this land?” She stepped closer, her fists knotted. “Am I somehow the price for you to receive it?”

Her distress wearing on his nerves, he shoved back the blanket and sat on the side of the bed. “No, my grandfather asked for me to settle down and have a family.”

“How can you say that?” Her voice rose in volume. “Didn’t your father name me as the one you had to marry?”

He stared at her, but he couldn’t rectify the situation. “Yes, but I could have chosen someone else. My father would’ve understood,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Would he? How sure are you of that fact?”

Was she right? Would his father have given him a choice? He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. You’re the one I wanted. The one I selected as my mate.”

“But don’t you see, Stihl? Even if you didn’t plan for me to help you with your mine”—she stepped off her anger again—“your father did.”

“My father is not your mate.” Stihl stood and walked to where she paced. He caught her by the shoulders and pressed her against the wall. “I’m the one who matters here.”

“But, Stihl . . .”

“No, Marohka. I don’t know what my father had in mind. But the point is I never lied to you. I wanted you because you are a beautiful, intelligent woman. No other reason. No other motive.” He stared into her red, flustered face, unable at the moment to accept his explanation. “Have I asked you to help me with the mine?”

She shifted away. His naked body, he noted, caused her to fidget. “No.”

“Did I ask for your help with the Trisar proposal?” He stepped closer, crowding her against the wall. His thighs brushed the rough texture of her coat.

“No.” Her hands landed on his chest.

“Then what makes you think I want to use your expertise?”

She shrugged. He released her shoulders. His hands moved to her waist. Her gaze shifted to the space over his right shoulder. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

With the tip of his finger, he lifted her chin to force her to look into his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

A deep hurt swam in the depths of her eyes. She blinked and erected her protective shield back into place. She stiffened. “I’m not an easy person, Stihl. Most people only want to know me because they hope to gain something.” She shoved at his chest. “I figured the same was true of you.”

His hands on her waist kept her in place. “And now that you know it’s not true of me?”

Green light sparked from her eyes. “Right. And will you receive your inheritance even if you and I don’t bond?”

He paused. He scrambled for a way to avoid another fight. “It’s unimportant, because I’m bonding with you.”

“And if I have no desire to be your mate?”

“Then we’ll stay locked up in here until you do.” He waited for her reaction to his words.

Her ebbing anger rose again. She glared and pounded her hands against his chest. “That’s the real reason we’re locked in here, isn’t it?”

After stepping closer, he stopped the battle against his chest and said, “You won’t be happy until we’ve fully bonded.”

“What? Are you dimcoco?” she argued. “Does bonding make me blind, deaf, and mute? It’s not a cure for relationship problems.”

“It is for what ails you,” he growled and leaned closer. He smelled her hunger, which hung in the air, a scent bent on exciting his own need. His lips grazed the side of her neck.

“What ails . . .”

He circled her ear with his tongue.

She choked out, “Me?”

“Me,” he whispered with a smile.

She stood perfectly still. “The cure?”

Her hands rested quietly on his chest not pushing him away or finding their way around his neck. Her lack of response didn't slow him down. His journey continued across her cheeks to her lips.

"Me." He nipped at the side of her mouth. "You ache to have me inside you, satisfying your insatiable appetite."

She turned her head, giving him access to her neck. He enjoyed the trip down her throat to the split in her coat.

"Who says I even want you?" she whispered.

He smiled and raised his head. The slight flush of her skin and the beat of her heart confirmed her desire for him. "Starlight, you're on a slow burn."

He stroked the edge of her breasts with his thumbs. She gasped with need. "You've learned what it's like to come apart in my arms. Now your body and mind crave being connected to mine." He slid the fabric off her shoulders, and her coat parted. "That's why you're so easily agitated."

"Did you ever think it could be because I don't like you?"

"No." He lowered his glance to her hard nipples.

"What if I ask you to leave me alone?"

He jerked at the suggestion. He longed for her with a hunger that consumed him, but he wouldn't force her to make love. "I couldn't, if I tried to."

He brushed a finger over the tip of her breast. She sucked in a quick breath. "Your body is yearning for a release. Why do you deny it?"

Her hands shoved at his chest. "Why do you?"

"What do you mean? I've never denied I want you."

"Yes, you like to make love to me, but are you truly willing to share your mind with me?"

He stared into her eyes. What was she asking him?

"Don't you have demons, Stihl?"

All of his inadequacies flashed through his head. He'd not protected her, had failed at saving his grandfather's land, and had even allowed himself to be caught in the path of a water avalanche. Stepping back, he pulled her coat together and covered the luscious view he'd been privy to. "Sure, I do."

"Then why don't I ever see them?"

He stepped away from her and sat on the edge of the bed. His troubled thoughts clouded the desire

he'd felt only itons earlier. How would she react to his doubts, his hopes, his needs? Could he share with her what his soul craved?

His masculine pride demanded he deny her request. He had to keep these failures hidden from his mate. Lost in his own problems, he didn't object when she left the room.

* * * *

Lying in the cool clear bathing pool, Marohka felt as if the water around her should turn to steam. A slow burn pulsed through her system. Stihl alone possessed what she needed. If he weren't so obstinate, he'd know how much she wanted him. But no, the man had to be difficult.

He probed her mind, searched her thoughts, but she kept her mind blank and refused to give him the answer he sought.

The door to the lily opened. His tall muscular form filled the doorway. Her pulse jumped. Her heart pounded. Like a predator, he entered the room without a sound. His gaze held her captive, while he slowly slid into the pool.

"I'm not sharing my feelings for my father, and I won't require you share yours either." His rich voice played like music through her system.

She itched to brush the wet drops from the hairs on his chest, which sparkled like diamonds. She ached with the desire to rub her body against his. His broad feet slid across the tops of hers. His determination to have her submit to his every desire glowed in the depths of his eyes.

"All right, our fathers are off-limits." But she still required answers. "Why are you being so stubborn?"

"How?"

"Why can't you just tell me you love me?"

"Why can't you?" His dark gaze bore into hers, condemning her own lack of response. She'd not voiced the words either.

"I . . ." She licked her lips. "I love you, Stihl."

He stood in front of her. His fingers lifted her left hand. "Are you sure?"

She couldn't speak with her heart waiting for his reply, so she nodded instead.

He traced the pale pattern on the back of her hand. "We still haven't completed the bonding process. I think you've been holding out on me."

He'd not given himself completely to her either. Anger rushed through her system. She jerked her hand out of his. "Right, I'm the one holding out." She shoved to her feet. "Where's the 'I love you,' 'I need you,' 'I want you.' Why can't you say the words? Why is it so hard?"

With a quick turn, her foot hit the step to exit the pond. Two wet hands landed on her waist. A twist and the full force of her body landed on the shoulders of her opponent.

The man sank under her weight, but his head never slid below the surface. Instead, he jerked her down along the hard wet contours of his body. Repositioning his feet, he stood with her plastered to him. His velvet-brown eyes burned with a lustful glare.

“Marohka Taunton, I want you for the rest of my life. I need you by my side forever, and I’ll love you until my dying breath.” Arms circled her like bands of iron. “Lady, you’ll never be free of me.”

“Stihl—” she started, but his lips silenced her words. Her mind fluttered with Stihl’s thoughts. A joining of not only their bodies, his hands slid over her back, and the scene shifted.

Memories and emotions, feelings and desires, his dreams danced in her head. For once no demons stood in the distance marring the picture. Peace settled. Sweet music floated on the air, through her blood, in her heart. His wicked lips rubbed against hers, and he carried her body on a seductive journey by drawing pictures in her mind.

White ribbons swirled around them in celebration of their love. Red flower petals rained over them. The two suns colored the sky—blue, green, and purple. The world spun with brilliant hues of light. She stood within the circle of his strong arms, enjoying the sight. Without warning, a touch as chilly as death skittered along her ankle. Icy fingers brushed her skin and gripped her leg. The bright ribbons which circled her itons ago, changed now into cold hard bands of iron. They bound her in a soft clear layer of protection.

“Stihl,” she screamed. She tightened her hands into fists. She fought the transparent force. His arms were still around her, but she couldn’t feel them. An oppressive, frozen weight bound her limbs. In a panic, she realized she couldn’t move.

Stihl’s sly demons captured her. Wrapped in the tight cocoon of his love, she faced his fear. She understood his need to protect her, but it cut her off.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “Nothing will ever threaten your life again.”

Her physical strength useless against his doubt, she searched her mind and scrambled for a way to break free. Tears of frustration built, clouding her vision. “I can’t feel you, Stihl. You have to help me fight your demons.”

He shook his head. A frown marred his face. “But you’re safe. I can’t risk you ever being hurt.”

Her tears fell on his fingers, and a slight give loosened the ribbons binding her. “Please, Stihl. I want to experience your touch, know your warmth.”

Chapter Eighteen

“No, I need to protect you,” Stihl argued.

She strained against the bindings, and her pain nicked his senses.

“I love you, Stihl.” Her gaze begged him to slay the monster holding her captive.

He battled with his conflicting emotions and struggled with a maneuver to defeat his demons. As her husband, his job was to keep her safe. He loved her and fell short of protecting her in the past. He couldn’t fail again.

Yet . . .

“Yes, Stihl, I could die, but how can I hold you, touch you, love you if I can’t feel your body next to mine.” A shiver raced down her spine and tingled against his fingertips.

The cold pressure of the bindings pressed against his skin. Her hard cheek caressed his chest. The transparent shield prevented him from touching her warm flesh. “I’m afraid, Marohka. I can’t take the chance of losing you.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, yet he felt no warmth emanating from them. “You’ve already lost me, if you won’t let me share myself with you.”

With a stroke of a frigid finger, she brushed a lock of hair from his face. “You’ve seen my demons, fought them. Now, yours are tied tight around me, but I refuse to let your fears win.”

She slid her hand down his back and cupped his butt. “I need you. I plan to set you on fire. But, if you want an ice maiden”—the words whispered against his lips, and her cool breath teased him—“then I’m your girl.”

His pulse raged. His thoughts slammed into a wall of emotions. Love, need, desire bombarded him with demands. He cupped his hand over her icy cheek. It melted. The blood pumping through her veins echoed through his. She worked her warm mouth over his and fed on his heat. The heady sensation of her thawing beneath his hands ignited a fire inside him, and he gripped her hips.

The dull light in his head cleared—no gray spots, no boundaries. Her body and spirit free, she wrapped herself around him in blissful union. Where she ended and he started, he didn’t know, didn’t care. He took pleasure from the love she gave. Nothing to hide, no holding back, he won what they both longed for and found a bounty of delights.

She guided his thick rod into the soft haven of her body. He couldn’t speak, or moan, or even grunt. With their minds linked, he felt his passion for her spiraled out of control. She held her eyes tightly closed, and her white teeth bit into her swollen lips. Soft cries escaped from her throat. Faster and faster he drove his movements to match the rhythms of time and space. On the brink, suspended for an iton, they stood in sync with the universe.

His climax exploded. Flames, hot and undying, danced around him. Past hurts vanished. Her

laughter rang in his head. Happiness settled.

With him beside her, at peace and sated, he accepted the special gift of her love.

* * * *

With everyone in the house asleep, the peaceful solitude of his study didn't sink into Zarro's mind. The regal beauty of his oak desk or the scent of the leather-bound books failed to ease his stress like they normally did.

Zarro's troubled thoughts hung over his head like a black cloud. Stihl, as usual, possessed great instincts. Someone out there wanted to hurt either him or Marohka. Zarro glanced at the report lying on his desk. The fire at the camp had started with help from someone.

The accident on the trail and the poison at the theater, he couldn't confirm. A storm was brewing, not only the one outside his window, but also another one. Someone threatened to tear his world apart. With feelers out all over town, he planned to find the culprit.

He stretched his stiff shoulders and flexed his hands balling them into tight fists. Oh, how his hands ached to hit something. He drew in a cleansing breath and held onto his control.

Who stood behind this threat? What did they hope to gain?

The strike started after Stihl claimed Marohka as his mate. Yet, if that wasn't the reason, why were they happening now?

Other factors filtered into the mix. Zarro picked up the papers lying on his desk. The Trisar Mine cost Vin Taunton's company a great deal, but with the sale, the company shouldn't have to book any losses.

Of course, the company wouldn't be profitable. Not with Marohka gone. His sources confirmed her as the driving force behind Vin's company. But if he hadn't wanted her to leave, why not turn down Stihl's request for her as his mate?

And what about Vin's new job and the rumors about Taunton Minerals being up for sale. Why? Was it because of the Trisar deal, or the loss of his daughter to run the company, or her marriage to Stihl?

Zarro shuffled through the reports. No one other than Vin and Marohka owned more than ten percent of the company, so it couldn't be an angry investor.

Something didn't add up. Why was someone trying to kill her or Stihl? They had no enemies.

Frustrated with the lack of answers, he slammed his fist on his desk. The sound echoed through the house. Something was missing. He could feel it, but he couldn't decide what it was. He studied the data lying across his desk. Somewhere in all the mess lay the answer. *I have to find it.*

He downed the last swig of liquor from his glass.

No one will harm my family.

* * * *

“You’re sure you don’t care what you eat?” Marohka asked.

Stihl played the first message on his ECD and answered over his father’s voice. “I’m so hungry it won’t matter.”

“... I’m sorry. I missed the chance to talk to you when you called,” his dad was saying. “I’m glad to hear everything is working out with your mate. We should be able to make the decision on the mine at the meeting next week.”

A short pause then his father continued. “With you out of town, we decided to cut back production until we heard from you. If you can’t raise the funding to operate the mine in its current format, we’ll be forced to ...”

“Do you want a spirit with your dinner or caffleck?”

Her voice from the service room blended with his father’s, and Stihl missed the last of the call. “Spirit would be great.”

He rewound the message and focused on his father’s words. “... we’ll be forced to consider the Morrison brothers’ offer. About the other matter, I’ve done some checking. The fire at the camp was intentional. The other incidents are still unproven. I have a few more leads to check out.”

Marohka entered the room carrying a plate in each hand. The sizzling aroma of meat hit his senses. His mouth watered. He pushed the button to delete the message and waited for the next one.

“Here’s our food.” She set down the plates. “I have to go back for the drinks.”

He caught her hand and stopped her from moving away. “No, you eat. I’ll get the drinks.” He stood, walked into the service room and listened to the final message.

“Hey, Stihl, I decided to call your ECD seeing as I can’t reach my daughter on hers.” The male voice continued in a reluctant manner. “I just received the news today about the Trisar Mine being sold. I know Marohka will be anxious about the outcome. Tell her she did everything she could to save the contract, but things have worked out for the best. The payoff will cover our losses with a little profit added in.”

A pause, then Vin Taunton rushed on. “She needs to spend time with you, Stihl. Her mother and I want her to be happy. Give her our love.”

Stihl picked up the two glasses sitting on the counter. Her father sounded relieved to have the mine off his hands. From what he’d learned from her profile, her father’s company sat in good financial standing. This information, added to what he’d learned from Cyd about her father planning to sell the company, told Stihl his idea might work. If he could convince her that he had the answers to their company’s problems.

He placed her drink in front of her and returned to his seat. No time like the present to close the deal.

“Your dad left a note on my ECD.” He sipped from his glass and watched her reaction. “He said not to worry about the Trisar Mine. The payoff will cover the losses your company incurred with a little profit.”

She paused in eating and set down her utensil. Then without a glance, she picked up her spirit and drank a long swallow. “I didn’t know my dad had your ECD number.”

He twirled the contents of his drink, and the sweet aroma of the liquor awoke his taste buds. His stomach grumbled with hunger. He set his drink on the table and picked up his utensil. “He probably found it in the file I gave him.”

“Oh.” She toyed with her food. “Is that all he said?”

He hesitated and studied her for an iton before he cut his meat. She sat staring at him, her unease apparent, but he couldn’t determine the cause. Their ties with their fathers were an area neither had chosen to share.

Now, he wondered if he should’ve pressed the point. “No, he just said he wanted you to be happy and to give you his love.”

He took his first bite of food in days. The flavor sang on his tongue. A strong active sex life certainly enhanced one’s appetite. Her silence slowly invaded the pleasure of his feast. He glanced at her to find her frowning at her plate. “Is there something wrong with the food?”

She shook her head and shoved her plate away. “I guess I wasn’t that hungry after all.”

He knew her too well to believe the lie. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Not your concern.”

When his hand slammed against the table, she jumped in her seat. His anger vanished as quickly as it sparked. “I thought we established the fact anything concerning you concerns me.”

Her gaze sparkle with a glow of resentment, then she blinked. “You’re right.”

“What? What did you say?”

“I said you are right.”

She cleverly shut him out by staring down at her glass. He fought the urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her until her teeth rattled.

“I’m just a little worried about my dad.”

“Why?”

Her head sprang up, but she remained quiet. Confusion danced in her eyes, and she turned her head to stare out the window in the den.

Hoping to calm her ruffled feelings and instead of demanding she tell him her problem, he captured her hand and placed it in the center of his. “Marohka, please tell me why you’re upset about your father. Is he in trouble?”

The soft smile in her gaze when she turned soothed Stihl’s frustration.

“No, Dad has a new job with the Lustralia Mining Commission. That’s why he agreed to let you claim me as your mate.” Her head dropped. “He’s selling our company.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you know any other question?” She glanced up, and laughter lines played around her eyes.

“All right, why is that a problem?”

“I . . .” She tugged on her hand, but he held firm. “I work for my dad.”

“Yes?”

“If I’m your mate,” she stared at her food. “I can’t work for him anymore.”

“So?” Like dragging an alba-ox across a cactus field, her answers tested his patience.

She pulled on her hand again. “He counts on my expertise.”

“Wait.” He used his other hand to lift her chin to study the green light in her eyes. “Are you trying to tell me *you* run your father’s company?”

“Well, I . . .” Again she stalled.

“Yes or no?”

Doubt surfaced before pride flashed. “Yes,” she answered. “My dad’s never really liked the business. He liked the research, but there isn’t any money in research, so my grandfather, who liked to work in the field, let my father handle all the office work. After my grandfather retired, my dad taught me the business. The better I became, the less field and paperwork he did.”

She shifted her head, and he released her chin.

“After learning how to use my skill with the armidiggos, I traveled to the mines. While I was away, Daddy agree to come into the office, and then only until I returned. I handled the day-to-day paperwork and all the offsite work.”

“And his job?”

“He enjoys the research and spent time in the lab or visited the university.” She picked up her glass with her free hand and gulped down a long drink. “I think Mom pestered him into letting me have a mate. That’s when he decided to search for a new position. Once he received the appointment, he saw no reason to keep the company.” Worry lines marred her forehead.

“And why is that a problem?”

“I don’t know. I’ve worked so hard to make the company profitable and now . . .” She shook her head. “I shouldn’t have bonded with you.”

He freed her hand and retrieved the glass from her other one to place it on the table. With grim determination, he shoved back his chair, rose, and drew her to her feet. He encircled her in his arms and held her close. “We’ll work this out, even if I have to let you return to being a mineralogist.”

She stiffened. “Let me?”

He tightened his arms. “With me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe your father would let us buy the company. We could pay him a share of the profits, and then he’d be free to take his new job.” He stared into her face. “That is, if you think you can work with me?”

She blinked. “Are you saying you want to run my father’s company?”

“Why not?”

“But . . .” Doubt glowed from her eyes.

“Look, Marohka, it could be the perfect solution for everyone. Your father will have his freedom while you can continue to work, which is what you want.” He ran his hands over her back. “And we could work together instead of being apart for twelve zitons a day.”

She relaxed against his chest.

“Do you think we can work together?”

“Yes, but . . .” Concern grew in her gaze.

He felt guilty for manipulating her, but he knew if they made it work, they’d both have what they wanted. “If you’re worried I can’t do the job, remember I know the business. I’ve been dealing with miners for years.”

An unspoken question flashed in her eyes.

“As for what’s in it for me,” he answered, “I’ll receive a new job with a steady paycheck, a chance to work with my wife, and, if I’m lucky, a way to stall the strip mining proposal my family wants to do.”

“What strip mining proposal?” She drew away.

He let his arms fall to his sides. Mentally, he landed a right hook against his jaw. She shouldn’t be exposed to his problems.

He walked to the long leather couch facing the twilight glow of distant mountains. He settled in the plush corner and stared at the scene outside the window. He gripped his knees with his hands.

How much should he tell her?

Chapter Nineteen

“Stihl?” Marohka walked in front of him and handed him his glass. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

She sat beside him, and he slid his arm around her shoulders.

The unique scent of him under the spicy fragrance of his soap tickled her senses. To pressure him wouldn’t help. She’d tried to in the mating room and had failed. Stihl moved at his own pace. Rushing him only caused an adverse reaction. When he came to terms with his answer, he’d share.

She laid her hand on his thick thigh. He covered her hand with his larger one. The link between them grew stronger, but his thoughts weren’t open. She turned to the view outside the window and sipped her drink.

Small animals scurried across the land. A large bird, riding the wind currents, flew in the sky. The shadows on the ground warned the small animals of the killer luring overhead. They froze. She barely made out their shadows. Then, without warning, the bird dove for its prey. The rodent caught in the hunter’s talons lost its battle.

A shiver sped through her. The bird soared off to enjoy its feast. The other rodents, which escaped the claws of the flying beast, darted about with their early morning activities. One less stood in their numbers.

“I own Rock Ridge.”

She turned back to Stihl, nodded, and set down her glass.

“What you don’t know is the conditions around the mine.” He paused. She felt his struggle to explain his emotions.

“My grandfather not only left this land to me but also the controlling interest in our mine. But I have to meet certain conditions before I’m allowed to make all decisions regarding the mine.” His hand rubbed her shoulder. “One is to share the profits with my father and two brothers. The next is to settle down and raise a family.”

He fell silent.

“That’s where I come in,” she prompted.

“Yes. I can only maintain control, if the other members of the family don’t overrule me. My dad demanded I claim you as my mate as a condition for his continued support.”

As if spitting out the distasteful words, he added. “My brothers want control. They planned to unseat me, so they can increase our profit. They decided strip mining would unveil the ore much faster and increase their returns.”

“But it ruins the land.”

“Yes, but”—he toyed with her hair—“the land doesn’t matter to them. It *does* to me. They’re only interested in the money.”

“Yes, but now that I’m your mate, your father will give you his support, right?”

“Good question, but I’m not sure how long my father will hold out against my brothers. One is living with him, and the other is expecting his second child. They’re both applying pressure.” Stihl picked up his drink.

“I was hoping to pay them off with the commission I make on the Trisar deal. Then I planned on working on the mine’s produce rate again, but . . .”

He lifted his glass. “With the Trisar deal dead, I require a steady job. If I work for your father, we’ll be able to be together every day. And it will buy me some time.”

“How?”

“Well, if I support Tankton’s and Joha’s basic needs, then they can’t steal control of the mine. Hopefully, it’ll give me time to turn things around at our mine.” He finished off his drink. “And it will keep them from spending outside of their means.”

“Really?” Untrusting of his brothers, she didn’t believe they’d live within their means no matter how much money they possessed.

“No, but I can hope.”

“You know, if you’re working for my dad’s company, I might be convinced to help you with your mine.” She slid her hand along his inner thigh. “I could check out the problems and offer you a little advice.” She offered him a wicked grin. “Of course, it’ll cost you.”

He covered her hand. “I’m not sure I can afford it. I have a new wife, remember?”

She slid her hand from under his and worked her way slowly up his leg. “I’m sure we could work out some terms which would fit within your budget.”

“I don’t like”—his voice rose when she reached her destination—“credit.” He gulped. “I’d rather pay in advance.”

She slid her hand over the growing bulge beneath his pants. She shifted on the couch and found the button on his pants. “I’m sure something could be arranged.”

He stopped the progress of her hand. “I like to know the cost before I agree to any services.”

She allowed her gaze to follow a path over the clasp of his pants, across the wide width of his chest to his face. A wicked smirk danced about his mouth. “Very wise. You wouldn’t want me to take advantage of you.”

“Or me of you.” He caught her hands on his chest and drew her onto his lap. “If you look into the problems at the mine, you have to do it because you want to and not for any other reason.”

Marohka straddled Stihl’s lap. Her dress rode up the sides of her legs. The center of her heat nestled against the thick bulge in his pants. She ached to have him deep inside her. Thoughts of the mine were no longer an issue. She focused on other things.

“Marohka,” he whispered. His stare revealed his struggle against his own desires. “You need to know what you do or don’t do for the mine has nothing to do with us.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” She lifted her hips. “I still expect to be paid.”

“Oh, I’ll pay.” His hands, which sat at her waist, slid down her legs and caught the hem of her dress. “Just name your price.” His hands moved back up the inside of her thighs, and his eyes glittered with lust.

“I want . . .” Her breath caught in her throat. His thumbs stroked the tender skin between her legs. Passion bloomed.

His hands stilled. “Where’re your underwear?”

“What?”

“Or were you planning on seducing me?” His fingers toyed with her thighs, and his thumbs stroked her sensitive flesh. His dimple flicked beside his mouth.

“I decided to be prepared in case you . . .” She ached, and she let her head fall forward onto his chest.

“So what’s your price?” His lips moved over her face with seductive little kisses. “Just tell me, and I’ll comply.”

His fingers skimmed the edge of her heat. She couldn’t handle anymore of his teasing and reached between them to yank the button on his pants free. She dug for him, found his thick rod, and tugged it free of his clothing. She slid over his pulsing sex. His fingers continued to tease the juncture where their bodies met.

Losing control, she rode him until her body, mind, and soul screamed with her release. Then she collapsed on top of him. He rolled her onto the couch, unable to let her rest until he found his own release. After all, he wanted to make sure she received her money’s worth.

* * * *

The black marble mountain formed the huge face for the dark savage mouth, which stood open in front of her. The entrance sent chills of apprehension along Marohka’s spine. Her heartbeat increased, and her palms grew sweaty. Pictures flashed in her head of the mine’s walls chomping down on her, crushing her in a rock slide feast. Her father said she had an overactive imagination, but she wouldn’t allow her silly fears to control her actions.

She crunched back and forth on the gravel path in dusty boots to generate some heat in her limbs. The nippy wind escaping from the mine urged her away from the entrance. Dressed in thick layers of clothing, she'd warm up once they started moving. Then, she'd also be able to conquer her fears.

It's just because you've never been in this mine. She shoved her metal hat back on her head and waited for Stihl to activate the torches. *There is nothing to be afraid of.*

The torch lit, he turned. "You ready?"

She nodded with a smile. He didn't need to know she dreaded their adventure.

"Most of the miners work out of the north entrance. They're not currently working in this part of the mine, not with all the cutbacks we've made."

She followed behind him looking at the light gray support beams lining the walls. She focused on their strong support. She noted the reinforced post at each cross section were in good condition with no stress or cracks in the beams. The light color of the metal revealed their age. "How long has the mine been operational?"

Ahead of her, Stihl stopped by a switch and activated the torches lining the wall. She stood a few leg-lengths away.

"The mine has been in my family for the past forty years. This was the original entrance." He stopped and looked around. She stepped to him, and he clasped her hand. "After a few years, my grandfather opened a second shaft because my mother disliked all the miners hanging around the house."

Stihl shook his head. A pensive smile curved his lips. "The miners were a little rowdy back then. At least one fight a day broke out. The men not working instigated wild parties in the evenings. Some, you could say, got a little out of control. With colorful words flying and the men's unruly antics, Mom demanded my grandfather relocate the opening away from the house."

He laughed. "She wanted to save her children from the unsightly elements of the world, but it didn't work. My grandfather enjoyed giving her grief, but the vein in this section played out or he wouldn't have moved it."

Marohka scoured the walls, searching for any indication of armidiggos in the area. After a few twists and turns, Stihl halted at a fork in the tunnel.

"That section has been closed for awhile. The ore played out." He pointed to the left then turned to the passage on the right. "We backtracked and found another stratum of ore down there, but it played out as well."

He led her into the tunnel on the left. "For some reason, I've always felt we made a mistake in closing this part of the mine. But my grandfather didn't agree with me so he started digging a shaft in another section. That's why we haven't seen any miners. They're all in the other area."

A rocky dirt wall stood in front of them, blocking their way. Stihl stopped. "I thought with your talent, you might be able to tell me if I'm dreaming."

She freed his hand and examined the small enclosed area. Tiny rocks scattered across the floor. The walls, decorated by dark ribbons from the rain that seeped down into the ground, were thick and unyielding. The dank air lay heavy in her lungs. The walls slid closer.

She drew in a few deep breaths to help her concentrate. The torch in Stihl's hand failed to light the area, but she knew where to search for the small almost invisible pinholes. Going to one knee, she scanned the base of the wall for the small droppings. She could detect a tiny sound ringing in the distance. Armidiggos were close.

Concentrating on where the noise was coming from, she tried to determine in which direction the Armidiggos were burrowing. A crunch echoed through the tunnel. She shifted her head. The footsteps grew louder on the gravel floor. She turned.

"I think you'd better stand up," the male voice demanded.

"Tankton, what are you doing?" Stihl said.

A large, broad-shouldered man blocked the tunnel. Her gaze fell to the scope of a very mean looking gun aimed at her chest. The world narrowed down to that weapon.

Each detail rang in Marohka's head in her defense teacher's voice. *"A four-five-six omomagnum is crafted out of high-quality steel and has a seven-mm barrel with pinpoint ammunition. The bullets disintegrate a person's internal organs without leaving a mark on their skin."*

The man's pudgy finger rested on the trigger.

Following the man instructions, she rose to her feet with extra care so as not to alarm him. "Who are you?"

"My brother," Stihl snapped. "What is this about?"

"Oh, come on, Stihl. Dad says you're the smart one." Tankton kept his gun trained on her, but his wild eyes darted between her and Stihl.

"I'd think it'd be obvious. I don't want you to have control of the mine. At first, I thought it'd be easy enough to just eliminate Marohka, but well . . ." Tankton shrugged, and his gaze shifted to Stihl. Tension filled the area. "Now, it doesn't matter anymore. Either one of you will do."

His words cut deep into her heart. To hear these sentiments from someone he loved had to be hard for Stihl.

"Then let Marohka go. If you kill me, you'll get the mine." Stihl stepped closer to her.

"I don't think so." Tankton shook his head. "You've been in the mating chamber for a couple of days now. Chances are Marohka is carrying your child."

Her hand covered her stomach.

“I don’t want a baby stealing Dad’s heart. He might decide to carry out your wishes for the sake of the child.” The hand holding the gun waved with regret. “No, it’ll be better to snuff both of you out at the same time.”

“Are you going to shoot us?” She worried about the new life growing inside her womb. “Won’t someone notice that we died from gun shot wounds?”

“Oh, she’s clever.” Tankton raised an eyebrow. “What? Do you want to help me plan your death?”

Stunned, she remained quiet.

“No?” Tankton smiled and turned to his brother. “It really is a shame, Stihl. If you’d only been less diligent, I could’ve gotten you out of this arrangement.”

“What do you mean?” Stihl grabbed Marohka’s hand. She held it tightly and shifted closer to his side.

“Who do you think poisoned her at the theater, or caused her alba-ox to take a flying leap off the canyon trail?”

Tankton gave a sneering grin. “Don’t tell me you forgot about my special skill?”

Stihl’s head fell to his chest. She squeezed his hand, and his head lifted. “I should’ve known. You pulled those kinds of stunts when we were kids by making my alba-ox act up.”

Marohka wondered if the man was crazy. “Did you also set fire to the cabin at the Trisar’s mining camp?”

“No, I had someone else do it for me. A good plan too, until Cyd woke up and alerted the miners.” Tankton edged his way back down the tunnel. “But I guess dying in a cave-in is more fitting. You’ll both be buried alive in the mine you so love, Stihl.”

Tankton grimaced at the dirt walls. “I hate this place, but I think it’s the perfect death for you, Stihl. All I have to do is activate the charges on the supports in the tunnel. And just like that, I’ll be free of both of you.” He showed them the device in his free hand.

Stihl released her hand and started forward. She grabbed his arm. “No, Stihl.”

“Better listen to her. I don’t want to shoot you.” Tankton’s voice cracked. “I didn’t plan for things to turn out like this, but it’s the only way to secure my future.” A flash of regret passed over Tankton’s face.

“No, if you give us a chance we’ll find another way,” Stihl argued. “Marohka has a special talent for discovering quatrillum. She’ll help us.”

“You don’t have to do this.” She stepped up beside Stihl. “We’ll increase the output, and you’ll receive more money than you need from the mine.”

Tankton paused, and then shook his head. “It won’t matter. We’ll still have to divide the profits four ways.” He raised the gun higher into the air. “No, it’s much better this way.”

He backed up a few more steps. A hand appeared out of the darkness. A vicious blow landed against Tankton’s neck. Shock flashed across his face.

Frame by slow frame time passed.

Tankton’s stunned eyes lit on his gun.

Air rushed from her lungs on a scream.

A smile lit his face.

His head dipped.

The trigger clicked.

Time jolted back to normal. Her sight blurred with a sudden blow to her body.

* * * *

“Marohka!”

Stihl jerked her away from the path of the bullet. A ping sounded on the back wall. Bits of debris hit the lower part of his pants leg. His heart beat like a speeding train.

He turned her in his arms and examined her for injuries. “Are you all right?”

Stunned, she blinked. “Yes, I think so.”

He hugged her in a tight embrace.

Cyd stood over Tankton, who sat dazed on the ground. “Did he hit her?”

“No.” Stihl held her against his chest and stared at his brother. What could he say?

Dumbfounded, Tankton stared first at his empty hand and then at the gun where it lay against the wall. Tankton considered the distance then glanced at the black box in his other hand.

Stihl’s gaze shifted to the box. A green light blinked. He focused back on his brother’s face and read the answer to what the light meant. “You armed it, didn’t you?”

Tankton closed his eyes and nodded.

“What?” Cyd stepped around to glance at the box.

With lightning speed, Stihl set Marohka away from him and shoved her down the tunnel. She stumbled, and he offered a guiding hand. His hands sweaty, his mind numb, his demons demanded he protect her from harm. He had to get her out of the mine. He stood over his brother. “How long do we have?”

Tankton shook his head.

Stihl kicked his brother’s foot. “Tell me.”

“Only a few itons until the charges go off.” Tankton gripped his head in his hands. “I wanted time to escape.”

“Get her out of here. And don’t stop for anything.” Stihl handed her to Cyd.

Her gaze burned into him, before he turned to his brother.

“No, Stihl, leave him,” Marohka screamed.

“I’m right behind you,” he yelled back to her and grabbed his brother’s arm to yank him to his feet. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

* * * *

“No, Stihl, I have nothing left to live for. You do. Get out of here while you still can.” Tankton jerked away from Stihl. He had no reason to leave, nothing waited for him on the outside. “I’m staying.”

“Are you nuts?” Stihl’s grip tightened, and he continued to tug on his brother’s arm. “We need to move.”

“No.” Tankton used all his strength to jerk away. Stihl stumbled into one of the steel supports.

Tankton dove for his gun. His hand closed around the cold metal of the handle. He turned and pointed the gun at his brother’s chest. “Don’t make me shoot.”

“Tankton, don’t do this. Let’s just run.”

“No, Stihl, I can’t be you.” Tankton crawled back to lean against the tunnel wall. “Nothing I’ve ever done has measured up, not to Dad or Granddad. I can’t be like them. Words, prose, books and rhymes, they’re my life.”

“It doesn’t matter as long as you’re happy.” Stihl held out his hand and stepped forward.

“No, Stihl, move back.”

Tankton lifted the gun higher. Stihl couldn’t know about the dark demons which plague a failure’s

mind.

An innocent pawn in the game of success, Stihl followed the strings his father yanked to control them. He stood like a puppet master to every event in their life.

If Stihl and Marohka had died in the cave-in, Tankton knew he'd have mourned their death. But now, with time ticking, he'd alternate his course of action. He couldn't watch Stihl die. As the older brother, Tankton wouldn't fail in his last task to save Stihl. He had a life worth living and deserved a chance.

"Move." Tankton forced Stihl closer to the support.

The finger on the trigger twitched when Stihl didn't move. A bullet hit the wall next to his shoulder. His baby brother shifted farther into the back area of the tunnel. A rush of power surged through Tankton at seeing Stihl follow his order.

"Neither one of us is leaving."

Tankton shifted his position and kept the gun trained on Stihl.

"What about your wife? Shouldn't you think of her?" Stihl shifted back against the steel beam, a leg-length away from the back wall of the tunnel.

Tankton snickered. "Right, she'll be glad I'm gone. Then she won't have to give me her token sex."

"She's carrying your child."

"Yes, because she enjoys all the attention. She couldn't care less what happens to me." Tankton smiled weakly. "Welcome to my world."

A rumble started like a giant belch. The sound raced through the tunnel. A dark billowing cloud rushed at them through the shaft.

Stihl yelled above the noise. "Tankton, you have . . ."

The deafening roar drowned out the rest of his words. Dirt filled Tankton's lungs. Large boulders rained down on the floor, shaking the foundation of the mine. Steel beams buckled. Small rocks pelted him. Debris roiled through the tunnel. The lights blinked out. A dark silence crumbled over him, and the wall behind him collapsed.

Chapter Twenty

The sudden eruption froze Marohka in her tracks. The noise vibrated through her head. Cyd, unprepared for her sudden shift in momentum, paused and drew her forward for a few more stumbling steps.

“No,” she yelled. “We have to go back.”

The ground beneath her feet trembled. Her body shook, and the tunnel far down in the mine crumbled. Off balance, she placed a hand on the wall to steady herself. A pulse beat through the soil as though a demon had them in his grip.

A sound, Marohka would never forget, bellowed through the tunnel. Her mind froze. Stihl, behind her, caught in the monster’s throat, was being consumed by the rock, dirt, and gravel. The walls behind her crumbled.

A strong blast of hot wind almost knocked her to her knees. The air, thick with dust and rock, she fought for each breath. Darkness covered her like a cloud. Even the lights from the torches couldn’t break through the inkiness. Terror’s fist pummeled her chest, pounding out the desire to live. Without Stihl, life wasn’t worth living. She fell to the floor, screaming. She clenched mounds of dirt.

An eternity later, a hand touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see the soft glow of the torches hanging along the tunnel walls. She glanced up to see who clutched her arm. A large dirty giant sat crouched by her side.

“Help,” she screamed and jerked away from the figure. His huge hand refused to budge.

“Marohka, it’s me,” Cyd said.

She threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around his neck, crying. “Oh, Cyd, he’s gone.”

His arms enclosed her in his warmth, his heart breaking right alongside hers. He offered no comments or false reassurances. His big arms held her while she cried.

Men’s voices echoed from a tunnel that led to the exit. “What’s going on down there?”

She lifted her head and stared down the path toward the sound. A bright light blinded the area.

Someone asked, “Was anyone caught in the cave-in?”

“Yes, Stihl and Tankton were following us,” Cyd’s said in a rough voice. He stood and pulled her to her feet. “We were coming from the stubbed fork on the left-hand side.”

“Then let’s get to it,” the man ordered and moved around them.

A number of men passed. Some carried large air guns to break the rocks into smaller pieces, while others lugged along large power-packs to suck the debris from the cave-in site. Trash robots followed the group. They’d haul the waste back to the surface.

They trooped past her, and she turned to follow.

“You shouldn’t be in here.” Cyd blocked her path. “Stihl said to get you out of the mine.”

She glanced up. Dirt marked his face. His somber eyes showed his grief. She shared the big man’s pain and laid her hand on his cheek. “I can’t leave. I love him too much.”

Cyd stared at her for a moment. Then he smiled and nodded. “Didn’t hold out much hope of convincing you anyway.”

Slowly, they walked back down the path. The floor of the cave was covered with debris. The supports buckled in places, still held up the roof. Hope blossomed in her chest until they turned a corner and faced a wall of rubble.

The men, hard at work, moved like armidiggos over the mess. Her heart sank. No way could Stihl have survived.

* * * *

With her head in her hands, Marohka sat on a large rock at the mouth of the mine. For the past few zitons, she’d been doing everything conceivable to help the miners. It was no use. Once they found Tankton’s body, she hadn’t been able to stay in the mine. Stihl would’ve done anything to save his brother. If Tankton hadn’t made it, how could Stihl?

She closed her eyes against the bright suns glaring down from the crystal blue sky. In her heart, Marohka begrudgingly admitted the truth to herself. She’d been trying to connect with Stihl in her head for the last ziton. A black wall of death sent a chill through her heart.

Grief overcame her, and tears formed in her soul, but her eyes remained dry. The pain was too deep to be released with a few drops of water. Regret and anger churned. She’d fought him every step of the way. And now, when she’d finally bonded with him, he was gone.

Now free, her career path would be secure. But her dreams had changed. She no longer wanted to be a mineralogist, not if Stihl wasn’t by her side. She covered her stomach with her hand, and agony surged through her system. She’d loss everything she’d held dear.

A picture flashed. A small bundle. A baby. Stihl’s baby.

She wrapped her arms around her waist. For the first time in her life, the idea of being a mother lifted her spirits.

A whooping sound caught her attention. A gyro-craft descended from the sky.

Only one person could be in the machine, Stihl’s dad. He alone would have the right to fly across Lustralia in an aircraft. The large spinning propellers blew a cloud of dust around the area. The machine landed on the rough gravel path, which led to the house. She waited for the passengers to disembark.

“Marohka,” someone called. She turned to see Cyd and another man carrying a body-board out of the mine. Stihl lay, unmoving, on the device.

With her heart pounding, she rushed to his side. His eyes were closed. She clasped his hand, but he didn’t move. Was he dead? Her brain struggled with grief until she caught the movement of his chest.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s unconscious for the moment,” Cyd said. “We think he might have taken a blow to the head.”

She fell into step with the group as they moved toward the house. A shadow fell over her. The men carrying Stihl stopped. A large man loomed at her side, his hair graying at his temples. She knew the man immediately by his resemblance to his son.

On the other side of the board, another man started scanning Stihl with a medical-scope. After checking Stihl, the med glance at Stihl’s dad. “It looks like he has a broken leg. But I’m not sure about his head. We’ll need to do some more tests.”

“We’ll fly him to the medical center in Central City,” Stihl’s dad said. “Let’s get him onto the gyro-craft.”

The group moved down the path to where the aircraft sat. Working together, the men loaded Stihl in the back of the flying machine.

She opened the front door and moved to the seat next to the pilot. A hand stopped her progress.

“There’s only room for the four of us. You’ll have to travel over land,” Zarro said.

Marohka turned to Stihl’s father. The man responsible for her long stint as an unmated woman ignited her anger. “I don’t think so.”

She jerked on her arm, but his grip held firm. “Let’s just say its payback time.”

Then with a quick little jump onto the seat, her foot hit her mark between his legs. Zarro released her arm and fell back from the aircraft. She turned to the pilot, who sat in his seat, and signaled for him to take off. The engines flared to life.

* * * *

With Cyd’s help, Zarro moved away from the spinning blades. At a safe distance, they watched the machine rise into the air and fly away.

After a few steps to return the blood to the injured area, he said in a strained voice. “The lady doesn’t soften her punches, does she?”

“No, you could say the lady doesn’t endure any injustice without handing out some of her own.”

Cyd smiled and turned. “She wasn’t happy about learning you’d reserved her for Stihl.”

The comment about payback now made sense. He’d have to work to win her over. Stihl meant too much to him to let her come between them. Zarro stepped onto the porch and thought about the woman he’d chosen for Stihl. “I bet with her temper a number of sparks flew between them. I’m sorry I missed it.”

“Oh, I don’t think the light show will die anytime soon.” Cyd leaned back against the porch railing. “Marohka knows what she wants. And she doesn’t let Stihl get away with anything.”

Zarro lowered himself gently into a rocker. He needed to rest for an iton. “Then I guess I’d better prepare myself for the show. I have a feeling my son is very pleased with his wife.” The thought sparked a vision of his own wife. He wondered how he’d ever explain what had happened to their sons.

* * * *

A smile crossed Stihl’s face.

The med ran his scope back over Stihl’s head. His brain waves numbers were increasing. Something sparked the patient’s sense of humor.

The med checked Stihl again and waited for the man to wake.

* * * *

A few days later, Stihl watched Marohka flutter around the room. She straightened blankets, poured water, and positioned chairs around the foot of the bed. He’d only been out of Central City medical center for a few zitons, and she hadn’t sat down since they’d been home.

“When did they say they’d be here?” Stihl shifted his leg on the pillow in the center of the bed into a better position.

“Anytime now,” she answered without glancing his way.

“Want to stop an iton and tell me what’s bothering you?”

She paused near the curtain leading into the lily and turned her head. A glare fell on the soft brace encasing his injured leg. A flicker of anger sparked in their depths. Her hands knotted into fists. Her heated glance traveled over his red shorts and paused for an iton on his crotch. Her face reddened, and then her gaze slid to his chest. Her eyes met his.

A liquid-hot fire burned a picture through his brain.

Stihl smiled. “Marohka, the doctor said I can return to my normal activities.” He held out his hand. “Why don’t you come over here and sit down?”

She stepped back. “No, our fathers will be here any iton. We have to be ready.”

“Did they tell you what they wanted to talk about?”

“No. When I asked my dad about us buying Taunton Minerals, he wouldn’t give me an answer.” She fumed. “Both he and your father keep putting me off with ‘Wait until Stihl is feeling better.’” She pushed one of the chairs closer to the bed. “Like I don’t have a brain.”

“They just didn’t want you to worry.” He watched her fuss about the room, unable to settle down until she received her answers, and he caressed her sexy body.

“Did Dad say how Tankton’s memorial service in Royal City went yesterday?” She shook her head and turned away so he couldn’t see her face.

“No, your father doesn’t talk to me.” She sounded strained. “Cyd said it was very nice.”

Stihl hated her being so far away and longed to soothe her ruffled nerves. “Marohka, please come here.”

Cyd’s voice echoed into the bedroom. “Welcome, Mr. Taunton.” Marohka left the room and stepped out into the main room of their decker home.

His dad, the first one through the door, walked directly to the bed. “Hey, son, how are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Dad.” Stihl caught the worry lines marking his father’s face. He gripped his forearm. “How about you?”

“I’m doing all right, son.” His dad’s eyes showed his pain before he stepped back to include the other people in the room. “This girl of yours hasn’t let any of us near you.”

She bristled.

“You’ve had a few other things, I’m sure, to occupy your time, Dad.” He reached out a hand to greet Marohka’s father. “Glad to see you again, Mr. Taunton.”

Vin grasped Stihl’s forearm. “Call me, Vin.”

“Why doesn’t everyone take a seat?” She pointed to the chairs around the room. “I’m sure you’re anxious to tell us the purpose of your visit.”

“Well, we wanted to check on Stihl.” Vin sat in one of the chairs at the end of the bed next to Zarro.

“I’m doing fine.” Stihl glanced around to see Cyd’s large frame standing near the door. Marohka sat in the chair beside the bed.

“That’s good, son. We were worried.” Zarro rubbed his palms against his pants legs. “Your mother sends her love.”

“All right, let’s cut the niceties. Tell us what’s going on. We’ve both been waiting for some answers.”

“Marohka, there’s no reason to be rude.” Her father shook a finger at her. “Your mother taught you better.”

“Dad, I’ve been more than patient.” She tossed her hair off her shoulders.

“The girl’s right, Vin. We’ve kept her in the dark long enough,” Zarro said, taking control. “Marohka, your father and I have worked out a deal between Taunton Minerals and Rock Ridge Mining.”

“What kind of deal?” she snarled between clenched teeth.

Stihl covered her hand. A wild impatient rhythm pulsed through her veins. “Let him finish, Marohka.”

She glared at him, but she remained silent.

“I told Zarro, you and Stihl wanted to buy my company. He thought it was a good idea.” Vin kept his voice low and soothing as he tried to calm his daughter. “With my new position on the mining council, I don’t have time to run Taunton Minerals anymore. We both felt a new company might benefit us both.”

“Stihl, you have complete control over the Rock Ridge Mine, so we worked out a deal to merge the two companies.” Zarro raised his hand. “That way between you and Marohka, you’ll have the most shares and can run the company the way you want. Each family member will receive a portion of the company, so everyone will receive a share of the profits.”

Marohka’s hand gripped Stihl’s. “What about Tankton’s wife? Is she willing to agree with this plan?”

“Clene is hoping to avoid trouble.” Zarro’s gaze shifted to Stihl. “Tankton had a problem.”

Regret clouded his father’s eyes.

“Deep in debt to one of the Morrison brothers, they offered him an exchange.” His dad drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If Tankton ensured they’d receive the strip-mining contract on Rock Ridge, they’d relieve him of his debt and give him a large bonus. He planned on using the bonus to buy into the Trisar Mine.”

“What? Was he the investor behind Almon’s bid?” Marohka stood and tugged on her hand for Stihl to release it.

He didn’t. Instead, he tugged her down onto the bed.

Zarro nodded. “Yes, he knew if Stihl obtained the Trisar deal, he wouldn’t agree to the contract with the Morrison brothers.”

She turned to her father. “So Almon was in on it?”

“No.” Vin shook his head. “Almon had no idea what Tankton was doing. He approached Almon with a deal to buy Trisar. Almon arranged the deal because of the information he had on the new mineral, utanium, found at the mine.”

Stihl wondered what would happen to the mine now that Almon’s investor was dead. “Are you saying he lost the Trisar deal?”

“Yes. With the new numbers going up and the discovery of utanium, Guilio decided to keep the mine.” Vin rubbed his hands together. “He’s also decided to let us keep the contract.”

“Yes, but that’s still no excuse for Tankton trying to kill us,” Marohka exclaimed.

The pain crossing his dad’s face hit Stihl in the gut. His father blamed himself for the attack on their lives.

“Marohka.” He placed her hand on his chest and forced her to look at him. “Tankton wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Maybe, but he still tried to kill you,” she argued, tears clouding her eyes.

Stihl realized with him in the hospital, she’d been struggling with her fears alone. He cupped her face in his hands. “Starlight, he’s dead. He can’t pay any higher price.”

“But, Stihl, he almost killed you.” Her tears edged over the corners of her eyes.

He wiped the moisture from her face. Her love seeped into his soul. They’d come so close to losing it all.

The door, clicking shut, confirmed they were alone.

Her arms moved around his neck.

“I’m not going anywhere, Marohka.” He slid his hands down her back and found the hem of her shirt. The soft texture of her skin sent a fire through his loins.

“Promise,” she whispered a heartbeat from his lips.

He covered her mouth with his and circled her waist with his arms. A picture flashed through his head, a baby, his and Marohka’s baby. He drew her closer content to spending the rest of his life fighting to tame her demons.

Epilogue

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Cyd asked from inside the corral. “Marohka has been so calm and docile since she had Josh. Why provoke her fears again?”

Stihl laughed and handed Josh over the corral fence. “Two reasons, old buddy. First, I’d like another son, and the only sure way to achieve that is to bring on Marohka’s fertile season. Second, she’s incredibly sexy when she’s angry.”

Cyd placed the toddler on his hip. “I’ll say it again, Luke, you have issues.”

“And a lot of fun with my mate,” Stihl answered.

With everything secure at work and his new assistant in place, he planned to devote some time to his wife. “Now make sure Josh is secure in the saddle and walk beside him as he rides Tiger.”

“Tager, Tager.”

Cyd nodded and carried the excited child to the large bird saddled in the pen. “Come here, Tiger, we’re going to give Josh here a ride.”

Cyd sat the boy in the saddle. The sound of a door slamming rang through the area. Stihl turned.

“What are you doing?” Marohka rushed across the yard.

Waving for Cyd to continue, Stihl caught her around the waist before she stepped near the corral’s fence. He draped her over his shoulders and walked back to the house.

She screamed and pounded on his back. “Let me down! I told you not to let Josh ride that bird.”

Stihl didn’t bother to answer until he’d reached the padded room in the back of the house. He locked the door and set her on her feet.

“Yes, and I wanted another son.”

Her emerald gaze sent spikes of need through him, before she backed away. “You’re not even getting close enough to touch me after a stunt like this.”

“Oh, yeah?” He grinned.

A burst of color sparkled from her skirt, and she whirled around. Her foot hit the back of his knees and caught him off guard. He fell with a thump on the padded mat. Her fears for her son’s safety utmost in her enraged mind, she landed on top of him yelling and swinging her fists. One connected with his jaw.

He rolled and pinned her under him. “Come on, starlight, you can do better than that.”

Her demons couldn’t keep him from loving her. He held her hands above her head and nibbled on

her neck while she wiggled beneath him fighting to break loose. Happy to have her where he wanted her, Stihl stroked her soft skin and seduced her mind and spirit into submission. Life with her would never be dull.

The End

About the Author

Tina Gayle is a person that enjoys learning new things. After trying several different careers, she decided that she really wanted to be a Pretender. She discovered that, as a writer, she could go anywhere and do anything, the perfect job for her. Already a natural storyteller, she worked to convert the skill she developed as a child into creating characters and stories with passion and ambition. In her free time, she's busy with her husband, two active boys, a large extended family, and many friends.