

WASTELAND

R.G. Alexander
the Priestess

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Damn the rules, damn the gods...even if he has to share her, she belongs to him.

Wasteland, Book 4

High Priestess Xian has followed the Path of the Peaceful Sun since she was chosen at birth. Yet the joy she receives from helping others is overshadowed by her growing belief that the world they live in is...wrong.

At a crossroads, unsure of her ability to do her job—unsure of anything—she journeys to the ruins of the old city, hoping to uncover secrets that will give her clarity. Instead she finds the path to her goal clouded by an unexpected desire for her handsome guard, Hel, and for the battered stranger they find along the way.

Hel can't prevent Xian from reaching out to the mysterious Siraj, but there is danger in allowing him to stay. Siraj belongs to no caste, follows no rules but his own. And Xian's fascination with him makes Hel's blood boil. No one can know that Hel has always loved her, or the secret he's kept hidden for years. But Siraj's advances and Xian's curiosity force Hel to cross lines he never before dared...

Warning: The word of the day is Voyeurism. Oh, and explicit sex with two men and one previously repressed High Priestess. Bi ménage, anal sex, oral sex, kissing, licking, rimming, author blushing ...so you know it must be good.

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The Priestess

R.G. Alexander

Dedication

For Cookie—Love is the reason. To Beth, my Armageddon Encyclopedia. And to my fellow Smutketeers—Eden Bradley, Crystal Jordan and Lilli Feisty—I couldn't end the world with a finer bunch of deviants.

Chapter One

“Shall I kill them for you?”

Xian turned from the small altar on her private balcony and smiled softly. “You’ve asked each time I come back from a meeting with the council. What would you do should I ever say yes?”

Her Sun Guard quirked his lips. “Obey with haste and enthusiasm, High Priestess, as I always do.”

She shook her head. “Much as I am tempted today, I’m still not sure the Goddess would approve.”

But then, she wasn’t sure She wouldn’t. Not after hearing the men of the council spitting bile and demanding blood for the loss of the recent Sacrifice. That, combined with the previous disappearance of several Roses, prostitutes from the brothel, had them shouting recriminations and fear for the return of The Burning Time.

Chamberlain Vey kindly pointed out that though there had been incidents in the past, they had been rare until now. Until Xian. No Sacrifice, no Wanderer taken for seed and returned to the Goddess, had ever turned the tides and escaped, taking a Breeder with them.

During the meeting, he actually demanded that the Temple must increase the Sacrifice rituals. To kill two—even three Wanderers at a time to make up for what was lost. They cried faith, but it was greed and thwarted lust she saw in their eyes. They did not fear the reprisal of an angry god, nor did they respect the Goddess. They were children throwing tantrums at having their toys taken away.

Nitara.

Xian knew the Breeder was safe. Knew now that Nitara had willingly chosen to save the Wanderer, the desert warrior, and run with him. She’d spoken privately with Nikkan and Leilin, Nitara’s siblings and accomplices. She’d loved the young woman like her own flesh and blood. What hurt most was that Nitara hadn’t trusted Xian enough to tell her that she’d had more than first-time nerves. To tell her that she’d spent her Taming Moon with a Wanderer whom their soothing draughts had not affected, and formed an attachment to him.

A bitter chuckle escaped her lips. Why would she? It was Xian who had placed her on her path. Even when, after years of study under the former High Priestess, Xian still didn’t understand why the ritual was necessary herself. Oh, she knew what she’d been taught. In order to soothe the Sun’s anger, in order to aid the Goddess, it must be a life for a life—sacrificial blood for a virgin’s blood. But it felt wrong.

That feeling didn’t stop her from forcing the murderous burden onto her charges...too many times to count. If her predecessor had not seen Xian’s birth veil or markings as a sign that she would be a Temple

leader, she too could have been a Breeder, could have been called upon to kill the father of her child moments after conception. As it was, she was born with blood on her hands, since her true mother had not survived the birthing process. That too, was considered a sign.

“My Priestess, if you do not stop looking so sad, I will have no choice but to believe they have offended you beyond repair and slay them all. What troubles you? Do they continue to blame you for the young Breeder’s escape?”

Hel, her Sun Guard, was the only one involved that she hadn’t spoken to yet. She didn’t want to admit, even to herself, that he had kept it from her. He was her confidant, her protector. For six rotations of the starlit sky, since her predecessor had passed and she’d been given the mantle of High Priestess, he had never wavered in his commitment to her. Even during Akaash and Nitara’s flight, he had wrapped Xian in his arms, protecting her from the fire and the angry mob with his own body.

But he hadn’t told her why he’d been instrumental in helping them escape.

She turned to study him more fully. The sun through the sheer blue curtains that separated her from the harsh daylight cast his skin in shades of dark bronze. A testament to his tolerance for and life beneath the hot sun.

All Sun Guards were impressive compared to the ordinary citizens of Kroy Wen and the eunuchs. They spent their entire lives training, after all. But Hel was...more. Strong and broad-shouldered, he was taller than most of the others. Blue-black hair curled against his neck with the heat of the day, and eyes the color of the healing malachite stone glowed from his darkly tanned face.

He’d made many a Priestess flush with his mere presence. The eunuchs would often share the Temple gossip with Xian. They told her how the others wished Hel would enter the lottery just once, that one of the reasons they imagined he didn’t, had to do with speculation about his relationship with their High Priestess.

There was none. No male touched the High Priestess. But Xian would be lying to herself if she denied her fantasies. How often had she completed a fertility ritual by the light of the moon, or taught a newly blooming Breeder the ways of self-pleasure, and found an image of Hel in her mind? Too often.

Her role in the Temple forbade such selfish urges. Her passion and energy was for Kroy Wen and all her charges, not for herself. As she was trained. As it was meant to be. She was chosen by the High Priestess Ani and the Goddess to be mother to all, and could never be mother, or lover, to one. Certainly not to a Sun Guard who was duty-bound to follow her every command.

You didn’t command him to help Nikkan save Nitara.

Friendships between eunuchs and outer guards were rare indeed. As they should be. The eunuchs had been created to protect the Breeders in the inner sanctum of the Temple. Some were chosen at birth, some were the result of punishment when her predecessor had been forced to make an example.

The Sun Guards worked outside, also protecting those who dwelled inside these walls, but they did not befriend, or in many cases respect, the inner guards. It wasn’t something Xian necessarily approved of,

but she'd been taught that the separation was necessary for the safety of the Breeders. She supposed she'd just had that lesson reaffirmed.

Hel was not merely another Sun Guard, loyal only to her. He had secrets. A life separate from hers. It rattled her, thinking she might not know him as well as she thought.

She crossed her arms, determination steeling her spine. It was time. She couldn't back down now. "Hel, arm yourself and gather any supplies you believe we'll need. I must journey to The Vault." She hesitated. "I would prefer that you not share this information with your fellow Sun Guards."

His lashes flickered in surprise, but he didn't question her. Bowing low he backed into the room, toward his own small adjacent one to comply.

She knew what he wanted to say. They had already made the perilous journey once this year. It was only done when those Priestesses who had trained to understand the stars and their meaning deemed it safe. When the Crone foresaw a clear path. When other Sun Guards stood at the ready to make the journey with them.

This was not one of those times. Yet Xian felt compelled. She glanced down at the altar with the carved, lush figure placed in the center. Perhaps the Goddess was guiding her steps.

Perhaps.

"She knows, Hel."

Hel pressed Nikkan against the wall in the smooth, circular hallway. "And how would she unless you told her, eunuch? I did not believe you would be so free with your tongue, especially with so much at stake. For all of us."

A female voice broke the tense silence behind him. "I told her, Sun Guard."

He didn't take his eyes away from Nikkan, knowing that for an outer guard to look upon a Breeder would mean death. "Why?"

A soft feminine sigh echoed in the narrow walkway. "She was as much sister to Nitara as I was. And she is our High Priestess. I knew she would not rest easy until she knew the how and why of our actions. Nikkan's...mine...yours."

Nikkan adjusted his tunic when Hel released him, looking flustered. "I wanted to warn you so you did not lie when she asked you. Unless she has already?"

Hel ran a hand through his hair, his mind racing. Had she? The moon had filled only to empty again since that night, and once his charge had left her self-imposed isolation, she'd been different. Quieter. She used to tell him everything. He knew far more about the inner workings of the Temple than he should. But she'd barely spoken to him in days.

"She's said nothing. Asked me nothing."

Nikkan's sister spoke from behind him again. "This is good news, Sun Guard. By rights she could reassign you, banish you. Just as she could have had both Nikkan and myself punished. Instead she keeps her silence. Protects us all from the council and the judgment of the others in the Temple. Protects us from my mother's fate."

"No, you don't understand, Breeder. This is not good news. But I don't have time to explain. She has told me we set out for the old ruins tonight. Alone."

Nikkan paled. "Tonight? Without telling anyone? But there's been no preparation, no prayers. The rains have only just come. Why?"

Hel towered over the eunuch. "I do not know. But she is the High Priestess. She has kept your secret, so you will keep hers, or by the Goddess I will remove more body parts than you can stand to do without when we return."

"You are quite protective of Xian aren't you, Sun Guard? More loyal to her than to the Temple? I am glad. She deserves that kind of loyalty."

Hel dropped his chin in acknowledgement of the woman's words, stepping back to leave. Nikkan stopped him. "Hel, you have been a good friend to Leilin and I. Getting word to the trader for the Wanderer, not stopping Nitara and her lover from escaping when we all know you could have. If you should come across word...if anyone knows how she fares..."

"I will let you know. But I am no paragon. I did not do it for you." Hel turned his back on them both and strode down the hall toward the west entrance, and the Sun Guard barracks. He needed a few special supplies.

As he walked his mind returned to her. His High Priestess. She was in pain. He could see that. He just had no idea how to fix it. An enemy he could fight. He could tear apart the council chamberlain who looked down his nose at her while ogling her sex through the sheer panel of her skirts. But this quiet pain, this silence, it nearly unmanned him.

She was his reason.

For what he was, what he did, why he stayed. It had always been her. Xian. How much had he done to ensure a place at her side when she reached her majority and required her own personal guard? How far would he have gone, had he gone, to achieve his rank? All for her. The gods of the Wanderers and those who dwelt inside the city walls be damned. She was his altar, his religion and the answer to all his prayers. Or perhaps his punishment. Being so close for all these years without being able to touch her...

He closed his eyes and saw her, a vision of perfect curves and golden skin covered in the swirled markings of her rank. Her breasts were heavy and lush. Her hips swayed to a siren melody that had always drawn him in. Onyx hair hung straight and shimmering to her waist...and that face. It was exotic and otherworldly. Almond eyes an unusual violet and blue in hue, framed by thick coal-colored lashes. Her full

lips always looked pink and freshly kissed behind her sheer veil. When she smiled it fell on him like gentle rain in the desert. Necessary.

Damn him back to The Burning Time. He spoke blasphemy. A Sun Guard's belief sustained him, kept him loyal to the Temple. But then, he hadn't always been amongst them.

A fact that his High Priestess could never know.

The warmth of the evening sun hit his face and a familiar voice greeted him. "Follow the Path of the Peaceful Sun, Hel. How are you this day?"

"May the Goddess guide you through the darkness, Fyral. I must speak with our Father." Hel smiled at his brother in arms, and the bald, dark-skinned man grabbed his arm in greeting, pulling him farther into the Sun Guard camps.

The Sun Guard of the High Priestess was the only outer guard allowed to dwell inside the Temple. The rest lived in barracks, mud-brick longhouses adjacent to the outer mountain wall of the limestone Temple, where they shared everything. Food, laughter, fighting and friendship. Raised to be guardians, warriors. Raised in strength.

They were the men who guarded the Breeders and Priestess class. The men who captured the Sacrifices meant for Kroy Wen. They kept all usurpers, pirates and overzealous traders at bay for the growers, herders, fishermen and artisans of the city. Hel felt a surprised jolt of pride as he watched the men training in hand-to-hand combat and weaponry on his way to the main longhouse. This had been his family for so long. Though they did not start out that way.

Fyral had trained with him beneath their Father, the man who had taken responsibility for their education, for years. Fyral pointed to the sparring guards. "We are all on high alert, since the loss of the last Sacrifice. You can tell our High Priestess it will not happen again. She need have no doubt that we will change loyalties either."

Hel stopped, tensing beside his friend. "Why would that be a concern?"

Fyral snorted. "That bastard from the council tried to talk to our honored Fathers, claiming that war with the Wanderers was the only way to appease the Angry Sun. That it was necessary to ensure the continuation of the civilized world. He said the Temple had twisted the old ways, grown soft. That the High Priestess was too compassionate for her own good, and had no doubt helped a valued Breeder escape. He attempted to convince them that a new hierarchy of councilmen and Sun Guards would be beneficial to all of Kroy Wen."

Rage burned, a living thing in Hel's chest. "Chamberlain Vey and I may have to have a private talk before too long. He goes too far."

"Be at ease, Brother. It is resolved. The Fathers made it clear that he would not be welcomed in the barracks again. No citizen will go against one Sun Guard, let alone all, and live to tell about it. Chamberlain or no. The Wanderers are warriors, yes. But they fight mostly amongst themselves. Admirable in their skill

and survival instincts, but no threat to our way of life. We have no issue with them.” Fyral patted Hel’s back. “Father is inside. I must train the youngest of us, but I hope you’ll come back when I’m through. I’ve missed sparring with you.”

Hel smiled and nodded, heading for the longhouse. Fyral might underestimate the Wanderers. They had no desire to dwell in the cities, true, but they grew in number, stronger each year. They had more than just survived. They had advanced. And he knew that in the six years since he’d been assigned to the Temple, their clans had only increased. How much longer would they allow their warriors to be taken for their seed and killed for these citizen’s entertainment?

He pushed back the curtain made of thick hide and saw his Father sitting by the hearth, sharpening his favorite long spear. His bushy beard and full mane of hair had gone white with age, but his body and movements were still those of a warrior. A Sun Guard. He spoke without looking up. “Hel. You honor an old man.”

“Your instincts are sharper than ever, I see. Honor? This is your way of saying I never visit, yes?”

Father just smiled. “You have known your path from the start, as have I. I am revered above all Fathers to have one of my own as Sun Guard to the High Priestess. I know all that is required of you that takes you from us.”

Hel knelt at the older man’s feet. “I have never forgotten all you did for me. How much you risked.”

“You must risk much to gain much. There is no need to speak of it again. Why have you come?”

Hel lowered his voice. There was no easy way to ask this. “I seek to borrow some things from your collection.”

The tip of the spear was at Hel’s throat before he could take a breath. The old man’s eyelid twitched. “What collection?”

“Father, I do not test you. I seek only that which may protect the High Priestess.”

“Why?”

“I cannot tell you. By her command.”

The craggy face so familiar to Hel studied him, before nodding and standing abruptly. “If it be for the High Priestess, it is for the Goddess. And for the Goddess, I have sworn to do anything.” He shook his head ruefully as he pulled a loose brick from the wall beside his bed. “I do not know why I thought you wouldn’t remember these. You were there when I found most of them.”

Hel remembered. He’d watched the powerful man digging through the rubble of shimmering stone and sharp-edged rocks to find his strange treasures. He’d been fascinated. By all of it. He’d even kept a few things of his own, things he would take with him now, in case he needed to trade to keep Xian safe.

He wouldn’t have to if he spoke out now. Why wasn’t he calling the ready guard for this journey? Why, instead, was he preparing in secret, when he knew how the Temple and the Sun Guard would react to the High Priestess leaving the city unscheduled, and with only one protector?

He could say it was because he was bound to follow her orders, but that was not the case. There were some laws even the High Priestess was bound to. Most meant for her safety, to ensure the continuation of their way of life. But that was not why.

The true answer came readily enough. He wanted her for himself. A few days with no one but Xian at his side. A few days where she wasn't called upon to train the Breeders, encourage the midwives, overlook the artisans or soothe the citizens of Kroy Wen with her sensual rituals.

The High Priestess was the most sought-after person in the city. Hel often wished she would rest, take some time to herself. But she never did. She gave of herself every day, and would until she died. As would he. It was their path.

The only thing she did not participate in was the lottery, a fact with which he could only feel relief. The thought of another man touching her made his blood boil. She was his. It was a primitive feeling, one she'd never encouraged or reciprocated, but it was strong. From the moment he'd seen her as a young boy he'd known it. A quiet voice inside him wondered if, without the demands of the Temple weighing on her shoulders, she would know it too.

His Father made a pleased sound, and pulled out several unusual objects. "Here. This is no doubt what you were thinking of. I was going to give them to you anyway. Consider them my gift to you."

Hel smiled. "You are too generous, thank you. Follow the path of the Peaceful Sun, my Father."

The old man nodded, reaching once more for his spear. "May the Goddess guide you through the darkness, boy."

Now he just had to get a few more things in order, and he would be ready to take his Priestess anywhere she wanted to go.

Chapter Two

Xian handed the sealed hemp scroll to the courier. “Timing is essential. High Priestess of the Temple of The S’ Anilorac is to receive this at the Wild Moon. Not a moment before or after. Is that understood?”

“Yes, High Priestess.” The swift-footed eunuch bowed his head, leaving the main prayer chamber with his head lowered in reverence. Xian had no worries for him. In the camouflaged, protective garb of a courier, running the coastlines, he should safely avoid all enemies...including the pirates that scoured the shores. There were several caves and overhangs along the route to protect him from the strongest light of day, and he could do most of his running at night. She prayed for him, and that her fellow High Priestess would understand the missive.

She noticed Hel appear in the hallway, his nod causing her heart to pound. All must be ready then. He hadn’t told his brothers in arms, otherwise they would have been demanding an audience.

Was she truly going to do this?

Yes. She had to. If she was to serve the people in the name of the Goddess, there was no other way.

Xian tried not to let Hel’s presence distract her as she took care of the rest of her Temple business. She wasn’t sure how long she’d be gone, and she wanted everything to be settled before she left. Though she admitted she should have been done much earlier. She was hesitating.

This main prayer hall had always inspired her, given her strength. It had high curving walls, polished smooth and glistening with beautiful shades of red, brown and slate gray in the torch and candlelight. She used to sit in the corner, watching her mentor guide her fellow Priestesses, guide the spiritual life of the city, and marvel at her power. Hope to be like her one day. She was praying some of that power would rub off on her now, so she could do what she needed to do.

She heard a harsh snort echo off the chamber walls, and sighed, knowing she could no longer ignore the Crone. The older woman had come up from her seclusion several hours before, and was standing in the corner of the large room, beside the brazier smoking with white, purifying sage. Xian’s throat tightened.

From the youngest of ages her High Priestess mentor had taught her the hierarchy of their order. Stargazers who charted the sky, in search of signs of the Sun’s returning anger. Midwives who aided in bringing new life to the world and took care of the infants until they could be settled into their proper caste. Crafters who made strong netting for fishermen and pretty baubles out of sun-glass and other gems for trade, as well as pottery for food and precious water. Herbalists who specialized in healing tonics and aphrodisiacs. All of them, along with those Breeders who had already proven to be fertile and had

participated in at least one Sacrifice, were eligible for the lottery, the annual choosing of citizens for a night of sexual revelry, a night that often led to multiple conceptions.

Only two types of Priestess were restrained from participating. The High Priestess and the Crones. The Crones were chosen at birth, just like she and all the others had been. They dwelt for a time in the Temple, but when they came of age they retreated deep into the sacred caverns, the Womb of the Goddess, and spent their days ingesting herbs and inhaling steam from the deep chasms below in order to aid them in their visions.

When Xian was younger, she'd often envied them. They were not expected to learn all that she was, to be responsible for an entire community, though it was clear *they* did not see it that way. They looked up, look within, returning to the Temple halls to create the mark for each Breeder and Priestess, and to share their future visions with the High Priestess in order to bring her clarity. They were special.

Did Meidra know about her plans? Would she share it with the others? She stood and gave the woman her attention. "Crone, Goddess blessings upon you."

Those dark far-seeing eyes looked into hers as she walked slowly forward. "Do you remember when I gave you your first mark, High Priestess?"

Xian notice Hel step closer outside the doorway, and she tried to ignore the nervous flutters in her chest. "Of course, Meidra. Your skills were beyond compare, even then."

The older woman reached out to trace the crescent-moon birthmark beneath Xian's breast, the dusky desert red of the tattoo curling around it. "Four symbols intertwine around the sign of the Goddess on your skin and these same ones were repeated on your back. To surround you with strength. Protection. Passion. And the fourth, and most important...Sacred Truth. Each High Priestess is given markings similar in style but unique to them. The Crones saw special things for you, Xian. From the beginning, you were different."

"What are you trying to say, Meidra?"

The Crone tilted her head, smiling the secret smile that had always sent a chill up Xian's spine. "Nitara followed her own path. It is not your fault. You must follow yours to its end. The Goddess demands no less from you."

She turned and walked away, stopping next to Hel in the doorway. He stood at attention, his eyes hovering somewhere over her right shoulder. Xian knew it was his training. The Sun Guards weren't permitted to make eye contact with their charges. Yet she'd often wished he would shed that rule with her. She'd stared up at those understanding malachite eyes as she'd told him of her worries about Kroy Wen, her concerns for the future of the Temple.

He'd been there the first time she'd had to decide where a babe was to be placed, when she'd been shocked to realize she wasn't completely sure she'd made the right decision. The Goddess had not whispered in her ear to assure her that the young boy child was to be a fisherman or a grower. He had known how unsettled that truth had made her. But she never knew if he really heard her. Really saw her.

The Crone chuckled beside Hel, drawing Xian's attention once more. "I've seen you as well, great Sun Guard. Don't think I haven't. If you'll take some advice from an old woman, I will offer it. Be willing to share more than your cache of fine goods for the safety of your High Priestess. Her safety and happiness mean salvation...more than you know."

Hel jerked his chin in acknowledgment, and the Crone was gone.

"All is ready, High Priestess."

Xian bowed to the larger statue of the Goddess, coming to walk beside her guard. "I need to gather a few more things, Hel."

She studied the honeycombed halls of her secure home closely, as if it were for the last time. "Wait here." She slid the stone door closed, looking around her private sleeping quarters. It was separated from the rest of the temple, the only room facing the ocean. Xian remembered the first time she'd been allowed into this room, the first time she'd seen the view from the balcony and the moment the hazy orange-yellow sky gave way to blue and green sea. The Temple had been built into the rock on the far edge of town between the ocean and the center of Kroy Wen. The best position for defense. The cliff beneath her was too steep for a pirate to scale, the mountain impenetrable. To her right, she could see the fishermen gathering, so small, so busy at their tasks. To her left, endless sky.

Xian sat on her bed and hugged her pillow to her chest. The Crone had said she must follow her own path. And Hel. Would he follow it with her to its end? She'd never been alone with him, and after his recent actions, she wasn't sure why she still trusted him. Yet, she did. Just thinking of him made her body heat, her nipples harden. Need, not trust. But it was enough.

She knelt on the floor and reached for her traveling pack from under the bed. She slid her hand beneath her stuffed mattress and smiled. The cool metal filled her palm before she quickly pulled it out and slid the chain over her neck. The small, strangely shaped keepsake slipped down to hide between her breasts. The key. She had everything she needed now.

It was time to go.

They went down into the tunnels that only a select few knew of, hidden deep beneath the Temple itself. One path led out to the sea, one to the Womb of the Goddess where the Crones dwelt, and it was down that path that it split off, heading into the Garden of the Moon.

It was a strange path, one that Xian had marveled at the first time she'd seen it for its perfect, cylindrical shape. Hel knew it well. He'd told her that part of the Sun Guards training was to walk this path, to clear out any of the creatures that sought to make it home, paving a safe path for the High Priestess and her annual journey to the Vault.

They traveled in swift silence until she noticed movement in the low light. "You've acquired a horse? But Hel, I did not ask you to—"

The welcome neigh silenced her for a moment. A mare was tethered to the entrance, a beautiful, pure white mare, and Xian couldn't hide her surprise. "The Garden is a walk of meditation and reflection. One is not supposed to be at ease, but to recall all those who walked through darkness without comfort after The Burning Time."

Hel chuckled. "One is not supposed to travel through the Garden of the Moon during the wet seasons. I will not take chances with your safety. I'm on strict orders from the Crone, you'll recall. I trust you and Luna will get along just fine."

Xian couldn't help the smile as the mare pressed her soft, flaring snout against her shoulder. How often had she wished to ride one of these rare, magnificent beasts? Her predecessor taught her that a High Priestess must walk amongst the people, not hold themselves above them, lest she lose perspective. But the child in her had longed to race with the wind through her hair as she'd seen the Sun Guards do on their way into the Wasteland. Longed to feel the kind of freedom Hel offered her.

He smiled down at her as though he could hear her thoughts. Before she could tell him to send the mare back to the city, that it was too fine a beast to waste on her journey, he gripped her waist with his large, callused hands and lifted her into the air.

She had a sudden flash of that night. The night Nitara stole away with her Wanderer. The explosion of the brazier, the crazed push of the mob...and then, Hel was there. He'd wrapped his muscular arms around her and swept her away, back to the safety of the inner Temple. Her mind had been in turmoil at what was happening around her, but her body had exploded with sensation.

The heat of his body, the warm, rich smell of his skin—it was intoxicating. Xian had performed the fertility ritual beneath the moonlight before the citizens of Kroy Wen, revealing her sex and reveling in the pleasure of the Goddess to ensure the growth of plants and herbs, gentle weather and new life. She taught young Breeders how to find relief with their own hands, how to seduce, arouse and satisfy their chosen Sacrifice's in order to ensure conception. But she'd never felt what she had in Hel's embrace.

Her face had been buried in his neck as he'd carried her, and when he'd set her down she'd seen the intensity in his eyes and known that passion dwelt inside him. He'd left too quickly for her to process her own reaction, let alone his. She'd spent the rest of the night going back and forth between worry for Nitara, and arousal for Hel. When she could stand it no longer, instead of praying at her personal altar for strength and guidance, she had closed her eyes and pictured him, using a tool made of polished sun-glass to fill the void inside her and find relief.

"High Priestess? Xian, answer me."

The horse was skittish beneath her, impatient, and Xian realized that her hands were clenched tight around Hel's shoulders. How long he'd been holding her, hovering above the blanketed mare she couldn't say.

Her cheeks filled with heat, and she released him, sifting her fingers through the satin mane in order to distract herself from the desire knotting her stomach. “Thank you, Hel. We should get moving.”

He turned away from her to grab the braided reins of hemp, but she was sure she heard the smile in his voice. “As you say, Priestess.”

They headed into the cavernous expanse, and Xian tried to tell herself that she wasn’t glad to be alone with Hel these next few days.

She prayed that the Goddess would forgive her the lie.

Hel walked ahead of the mare, half his attention on the path ahead, the rest on the woman behind him. There was a lightness in his heart. It had appeared the moment he’d seen her reaction to the horse, and it had been growing with each step they took away from the Temple, and the people who took Xian’s attention and energy.

She was his. For now.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever noticed how beautiful the Garden is. How could I have missed all of this?”

Hel looked around at her words. The rains had come recently. Those hard rains that above meant danger, death, but down here meant life. The High Priestess was only allowed to make her journey during a time when there was no chance for flooding, so Hel was glad she could see this.

The Garden of the Moon was in bloom. The small central stream had swelled in size, framed by newly sprouted plants and strangely shaped and colorful fungi. Thick roots knotted the ceiling of the cavern and climbed down the walls. And up ahead... “High Priestess, look up.”

He turned to watch her expression as they entered his favorite place. It was easy to believe in magic, in the stories of the chosen that survived The Burning Time, sheltered by the gently penetrating light of the Goddess, when you saw it. Green and blue glowing tendrils of incandescent light flowed from the water, up the ropy walls of the tunnel to cover the overhang above them like a star-filled sky. He could see his own awe mirrored in her expression. A joy he hadn’t seen in too many moon risings to count.

“Hel, could we stop here for the night? I had no idea. I would have gladly braved the dangers of rising water if I’d known I could see this... It truly is a Garden of the Moon. It is beautiful.”

She was beautiful. “It should be safe for the night. Let me set up your hammock, and then I will gather some fresh herbs for our meal.”

The High Priestess slid off the horse as though she’d been born on one, shaking her veiled head adamantly. “You are only one Sun Guard. Gather what you must, I can make my own bed. I am the High Priestess, not an invalid.”

He bowed his agreement before heading deeper into the darkness, just outside of sight. Hel felt like a child again. Watching from the shadows as she struggled with rope and vine. Her travel robes offered him

no glimpse of her bare, pale gold sex, the copper nipples that had tormented him day after day. In a way, it was even more tantalizing, knowing what was beneath, knowing what she concealed for the journey.

She bent over and he bit back a groan, his usual restraint swept away by this place, this isolated place. None of his peers were looking on to judge him, none of the priestesses were stealing his charge away. No one and nothing could stop him from taking her into his arms, from touching her. Nothing but honor. Honor and the belief that she would hate him if he tried.

His cock was hard as stone. He needed relief and fast. Before he took the woman he loved by force and brought the wrath of her Goddess down upon him.

Chapter Three

“What is taking him so long, Luna?”

Xian slid her palm across the beautiful horse’s flank to soothe the creature’s nerves. Or her own. In the silence she’d been hearing strange rustling sounds, unnatural noises that had sent her imagination into overdrive. The stories of what survived beneath the surface along with what remained of humanity were tales told to terrorize young Priestesses into avoiding the tunnels. The Crones had survived well enough, but as High Priestess, Xian knew that part of their education included weapons training with the eunuchs. It was believed to help focus the mind, but Xian could see now how it might also protect them should the need arise.

“This is ludicrous.” She took the small torch light he’d left her and started off in the same direction he had. There was flora enough beside their camp to serve them, and any other reasons for his absence should have been long taken care of.

A light ahead followed by a splashing noise slowed her steps. Was he bathing? Why hadn’t he told her? Why had her Sun Guard left her unprotected for something like that? Oddly, Xian didn’t feel offense or anger, just...intense curiosity. She slid her torch into a crevice in the wall and moved closer, swallowing the gasp that pushed against her lips at her first good look at him.

Great Goddess, he was stunning. Naked men were not unknown to her. She’d seen Wanderers prepared for Sacrifice, overseen the lottery to ensure the safety of her Priestesses and Breeders. But to her, all paled in comparison to Hel beneath a fall of water.

His body rippled with coiled power. His wet hair fell in heavy curls to his shoulders, wide back flexing in time with the rhythmic movements of his hands as he washed. Her gaze followed the line of his body as it tapered sharply into his narrow waist. He had a strange curving scar climbing his back, disappearing beneath his hairline, and a symbol for the sun on his shoulder, the mark of the Sun Guard. She barely had time to study it before he turned slightly, and she lost all ability to reason.

He wasn’t washing. He was pleasuring himself, his fist wrapped tight around a thick and impressive erection that made her thighs tingle. Flushed with blood and desire, and slick with water, his cock fascinated her. Her mouth dried, and she bit her lip, wondering if it would be hot to the touch, wondering how it would taste.

Though she had never seen a man pleasuring himself without another man or woman, the men of Kroy Wen did not believe in self-denial. There was no shame in passion. It was the way of the Goddess,

how she soothed her savage consort. It was the way of women, and how they soothed the men. Xian wished to soothe Hel's passion, but it was not to be. Not for her. But even knowing that, she couldn't make herself leave.

His hips rocked in time to the slide of his grip on his cock. Xian trembled, and felt her own hand slide down her belly through her robes, toward her aching empty sex. She glanced up at his face, at the look of agonized pleasure, the jaw clenched with need, and she pressed her palm between her legs.

What would it feel like, to have him inside her? Not cold, like the glass and clay phalluses in the temple. Nor soft like her own hands, or the hands of those she instructed. His cock would fill her with heat, burn her as surely as the sun. And she would revel in the flames as he wrapped his strength around her and took her against the cold tunnel wall.

Desire was a living thing within her. The motions of his body, his beautifully masculine face, making her blood pound, her body shudder as she came closer and closer to the edge. The cloth of her robes grew damp with her arousal as her fingers circled the sensitive nub faster, harder. Matching his rhythm.

She had never felt this kind of intensity. To her, pleasure had always been a warm glow, a sensual, clear stream that eased her. Healthy and good. Of the Goddess. This was madness. Dangerous. This was temptation.

His free hand curled around the rock beside his head and his strokes grew more powerful. The tip of his cock pearly with arousal, and his back arched as though he were in pain. The most addicting kind of pain.

"Xian. Oh, Xian."

He called her name, and her gaze flew back to his face. His eyes were closed tight as he came, with her name on his lips. Had she been in his fantasy the way he'd been in hers? The idea sent her flying into her own release, blood filling her mouth where she'd bitten her cheek to hold in her cries.

"I thought you were sent from the stars to save me, but now I see you're just as real as I am. Even better. I admit I wanted a good fuck before I died."

The deep, rasping voice was followed by large hands, one squeezing her breast, one covering her hand between her legs.

Xian screamed and tried to throw him off. She felt his hands relax, as if he was about to let her go willingly...and then he was flying. She whirled in time to see a naked Hel straddle the stranger's chest, sharp dagger raised above his arm.

"Hel, stop!" Her words froze him before he could bring the weapon down.

The man opened his brown eyes and wrinkled his brow. "Cock, huh? Well, it wasn't my first choice, but how many options does a dying man get?" His lashes fluttered, head dropping to the ground with a loud thud as he passed out.

He wasn't dressed like a citizen of Kroy Wen, but it was impossible to tell, since most of him was covered in blood. "We have to get him cleaned up, see where his injury originates."

"Xia—High Priestess, please." Hel spoke through clenched teeth. "This man molested you, would have done worse if he'd had the strength. That is an offense punishable by death. Do not stay my hand, let me be done with him."

Xian was shaking, her adrenaline high, but she was determined. "He will not die by my word. He was obviously out of his head with his wounds. Help me get him undressed and into the water."

Hel stood and looked down at her body. She followed his gaze, cringing when she saw the bloody handprint on the fabric that strained across her breast. "He touched you as though you were a Rose, a whore. As though he had the right."

Xian stared at Hel's nipples, entranced by the single bead of water that clung tenaciously to the hard tip. She licked her lips. "It was not his fault. To him I was just a woman, nothing more."

He was silent for so long that Xian lifted her lashes, only to gasp when her gaze clashed with intense, malachite eyes. She could see the anger there, the frustration...the desire. She was breathless with the power of his attention turned on her.

"High Priestess, no one who has ever met you has any doubt of your gender. Or your beauty. But no man, regardless of class or culture, should be allowed to touch a woman without permission."

He thought she was beautiful. And he was naked. "You should get him cleaned off. I'll find the necessary moss and herbs to see to his wounds."

He hefted the man over his shoulder. "Do not leave my line of sight. Anything you can't find around here we can gather on the way back to Luna and our camp. I'm not sure why you left in the first place, though I'm glad I was nearby when he showed up."

She turned before he could see the heat filling her cheeks. Would he put it together? Would he realize that she'd been watching him touch himself? That she'd heard him say her name?

Bending beside the stream, she listened to Hel struggle with the limp man who'd touched her. No man had ever touched her before. Not like that. It was disconcerting. Goddess forgive her, but all she could think about was how much she wished it was Hel who'd touched her.

What was wrong with her? This was not why she'd come on this journey. Clarity. Answers. A reason for the doubts that had been growing in her mind for years, that had finally overwhelmed her after the loss of Nitara. She needed understanding. What she didn't need was to throw away everything she'd been taught, everything she knew, in order to satisfy her selfish urges—urges that were admittedly getting harder to ignore with each moment spent alone with Hel.

Was the stranger a sign from the Goddess? Caring for an injured man would indeed be a barrier to further intimacy with her Sun Guard. For some reason, she found no comfort in that thought.

Hel was angry. At fate, at the interloper and at Xian. He sat, a stoic sentinel at the edge of the fire as he watched her tend to the unconscious man. She was wiping down his body, cooling the fever that had appeared as soon as they'd returned to camp. Touching him, this man who had arrived out of nowhere, in the Garden of the Moon, a path kept secret and sacred for years. He was obviously on the run. The wounds on his body were made by a jagged weapon, and the broken skin and bruising on his knuckles told Hel it wasn't a one-sided fight. Were his attackers nearby? What had he done to deserve this kind of punishment?

He'd checked out his body as he'd cleaned him. The man had no markings on the back of his neck, so he wasn't born to the Wanderers. In fact he had no particular markings to speak of. Nothing to identify him to city, job, or people. He was, in short, an anomaly. A dangerous thing, when Hel traveled alone with Xian.

But his worries weren't completely about protecting his High Priestess. Watching Xian touch another man's bare skin, even one who was apparently unconscious, was driving him mad.

She had tended to the wounded before, with those Priestesses schooled in the healing arts. But, standing guard outside and watching were two entirely different things.

He couldn't hold his tongue. "Your food grows cold. You won't be able to care for anyone if you do not take care of yourself."

She pushed her hair back with a tired sigh. "You are right, as usual. The Goddess can do more for him now than I can. That and rest."

Hel clenched his hands into fists on his thighs as she came to sit beside him, close enough to touch. The smell of her. Sage and another scent that was spicy, intoxicating. He had to do something to take his mind off how intoxicating. But there was no way he was going to leave her alone. Not with that man.

"High Priestess, may I ask you a personal question?" He watched her look up in surprise, their eyes locking again. He didn't look away, and she didn't tell him to. "Why have you not asked me about the escape of the Sacrifice?"

She swallowed the bite of food she'd just taken, choking a bit until he handed her some agave juice. He could see she hadn't been expecting that, but he had to know.

Instead of answering, she asked him a question in return. "Do you recall the incident when the Priestess was discovered with a Sun Guard in the city? The banishment that followed?"

Now it was Hel's turn to be surprised. "That was a long time ago. I had nothing to do—"

"No, no," she interrupted him. "I wasn't suggesting you did. You must have been twelve then. I was merely ten. The Priestess was Nitara's mother." She broke eye contact and leaned her head back against the cavern wall. The position gave him the freedom to study the perfection of her features in the firelight, and wonder what she would do should he remove her veil.

"My mentor, High Priestess Ani, turned it into a lesson to be taught to all Priestesses, all Breeders. The pressure on Nitara, on Nikkan and Leilin was extreme." Xian sighed. "It is no secret that I favored

Nitara above the others. Her innocence. Her inquisitive mind. Much was expected, from the both of us, so we understood each other. She was more than a pupil. She was my friend. *Is* my friend. A friend I don't want turned into another tale of immorality."

Her voice grew raspy with emotion, and Hel let out a low curse. "I am sorry, my Priestess. I thought it was what you wanted."

She placed her hand on his arm. "You thought I wanted...?" She was silent for several long moments, just studying his features, as if she were seeing him for the first time. "May I ask *you* a personal question, Hel?"

"Of course."

"Why did you never enter the lottery?"

Hel swallowed. Damn. One question he didn't want to answer. Not now. "How do you know I haven't?"

"I know what goes on in my Temple, Hel. And I know that those in charge of gathering names often bemoan the fact that the most handsome and esteemed Sun Guard in Kroy Wen refuses to share his exceptional genes."

She blushed and his lips curved upward. "Exceptional?"

Her startling violet gaze narrowed on him. "Do not change the subject. Why?"

He shifted, uncomfortable and more aroused than he should be. What man could fault him? The woman he desired above all things was asking about his sexual activities. "I am the Sun Guard of the High Priestess. You are above reproach, and I must be as well. Which means those within the Temple are safe from my attentions."

"You know there is no judgment in passion, only joy. All men are encouraged to help replenish the population, regardless of station. You should not feel restrained by your office. By me." She hesitated, biting her lower lip. "Those within the Temple? But not out?"

He saw the look on her face, and chuckled. "When a Sun Guard is on leave he is allowed to visit The Dusty Rose. I do enjoy the curves of a woman, if that is your question."

She leaned closer, watching his lips move as he spoke, and his cock grew painfully hard. Did she know what she was doing, looking at him like that? What she was asking for? His earlier need for release was nothing compared to this compulsion, this craving. He had to kiss her, touch her, damn the consequences.

A male voice, groggy with sleep broke through the heated tension. "That is too bad, Sun Guard. I was hoping you might want to cuddle."

Chapter Four

His name was Siraj. He was the most unusual, outspoken man Xian had ever met. It had taken an extra day to arrive at the tunnel's end because of his injuries, and they'd stopped to have a meal until moonrise, safe from the heat of the day.

The stranger made the time pass quickly. His fever had broken early that morning, and he was healing rapidly, though obviously still in pain. He took it in stride though, and Goddess knew there was nothing wrong with his voice.

He'd spent the last day telling stories, impossible tales of adventure and feats of daring. The things he knew. He knew she was a Priestess, knew about Kroy Wen, but he insisted he wasn't from there, nor did he care to go. He spoke of traveling with the traders, raiding island ruins with pirates...even spoke of the Wanderers as though he knew them.

It was obvious Hel doubted the truth of his words. "The Wanderer clans would never allow an outsider into The Rites of Spring. It's sacred to them. Private."

Siraj flicked his long, mahogany braid over his shoulder, his brown eyes twinkling. "They would if one of the clan leaders personally invited him in return for saving the life of his first born." He shrugged. "However, merely observing a sexual feast left me rather...hungry... You would be as well if you'd seen that kabu temptress. I believe my host told me her name was Kadira. Beautiful dark hair, and that body..." He shivered, winking at Xian. "But, it was obvious she was already spoken for, and I decided to leave before I was gutted by a possessive warrior. I did get some fuel for my treader while I was there. Some of those Wanderers are very handy to have around. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, right, Sun Guard?"

"Fuel? Treader?" Xian looked at Hel, confused. Her mind was full of the images he'd described. Wanderers, rituals, pirate islands. It sounded dangerous. Exciting.

Hel glared at Siraj before lowering his head to Xian. "The Sun Guards have often shared tales around the campfires of the increasingly elaborate metal contraptions made by some of the more inventive Wanderers. Fast as the swiftest horse, loud and terrible and billowing smoke. They can move higher into the mountains this way, through terrain that would be near impossible on foot and difficult on a steed. We have learned it's something to avoid, and the Fathers have forbidden traders from selling certain...items...in our city that would arouse fears. Those autos, like his treader, included. The citizens are already intimidated by the Wanderers' strength. It would only worsen if they knew of their intelligence."

Siraj grimaced. "Of course. Who needs progress? Not me."

Something, a memory flashed in Xian's mind, and without thinking, she stood and rummaged through her travel pack. She pulled out the large book and sifted through the pages until she found what she was looking for, trying to ignore the sharp inhalation and swearing filling the large cavern behind her.

There it was. In the very back, the page yellowed with age even inside the protective covering. Machines. A faded image with large black wheels, like the wheels of a cart, only thicker and not made of metal.

The handwritten notes from one of the former High Priestesses told of the machines that had been saved below ground with the foresight of the Goddess. Those that worked on heated water and pulled power from the sun.

They had been used to build the Temples and brothels carved into the sides of the mountain, by command of the Goddess, before they fell into disrepair. With no one knowing how to fix them, they were made into sculptures or used to create much-needed tools for the citizens. And the Wanderers had these? Had they found them, or found the blueprints to build them? And how had she not known?

"Why did no one inform me?"

Hel was standing beside her, his jaw grinding as he hid the book from Siraj with his body. "It has long been a silent agreement between the Fathers and the High Priestess. The less known about the origin of the Sacrifice, the better. To prevent panic in the city. Apprehension amongst the order." Hel lowered his voice. "What possessed you? No High Priestess has ever removed The Book of Knowledge from the Temple. It is too precious. Too valuable."

She took a step back, intimidated by the censure in his tone. "I do not answer to you, Sun Guard. I have my reasons."

Hel gripped her shoulders, and she gasped, burned by the heat of his touch. "You answer to me when it comes to your safety. I gave a blood oath to protect you with my life. An oath you seem to be doing everything in your power to make more difficult. It is a crime to remove this from the Temple. For anyone."

She was trembling. In part from fear that he was not as loyal as she'd first believed, in part from the need coiling in her belly at his touch. She was going insane, Goddess help her. Hel had to understand.

He must have seen something in her expression. He sighed and released her arms, sliding one hand down to the small of her back and guiding her away from Siraj with a terse, "Don't move," to the smirking man reclining on the ground.

Xian could barely hear above the pounding in her ears. Would he refuse to continue on this journey? Worse, would he expose her crime to the council and those within the Temple who looked to her for guidance?

She saw the rope ladder ahead. The ladder that led up to the surface. They were so close. The old ruins sat above them, the Vault mere hours away. So close. Would she never have her answers?

Xian turned to meet Hel's gaze. "Please, let me—"

Hel's blazing green eyes silenced her. He took the book from her hands and set it on a small ledge in the rock, safe from the damp ground. He gripped her hips and lifted her high against the ladder, throwing her off balance so that she instinctively gripped the rope above her with her hands.

He moved closer. "Please let you explain? Please let you get yourself killed? Break every law Kroy Wen has without letting me in on what you are planning to do?"

Her new position had her lips even with his, and they were so close, she could feel his breath caressing her cheeks. His voice grew thick and rough as he pressed against her. "You can trust me, my Priestess. You must know that by now."

Could she? He was a man. Men, she'd long been taught, were ruled by the Sun. Ruled by hot emotions—lust, anger, ego. He was also a Sun Guard, raised in loyalty and faith. More than that—he was Hel. And yes, she trusted him. Isn't that why she wanted him and no other beside her on her quest?

She studied his face. He was right. She had broken so many Temple laws already. Put the both of them, and now Siraj, in danger because of it. Did she dare, in this isolated darkness, break another?

Her grip tightened on the rope ladder, and she leaned forward. The small space between their lips disappeared. The prickly growth of hair on his face scraped her cheek as she angled her head to kiss him. It was strange, unfamiliar. She had never kissed a man before. It sent shivers of delight throughout her body.

Hel froze against her for an instant, long enough for her to doubt her impulse a thousand times, and then he shuddered. Hard. Groaning, he pulled her hips against him. His lips softened, gentled, opening to taste her.

Oh Goddess. She'd no idea his lips would be so soft, when the rest of him was solid as granite. Silk covered granite. She melted into his embrace, her own mouth opening instinctively as he traced her full lower lip with his tongue.

He tasted like dark cinnamon and agave liquor. Tasted of every dark desire she had in the night. Her tongue slid against his, inspired by the noises of encouragement erupting from his throat. The sensation soaked her sex in instant, overwhelming arousal. What would that tongue feel like against her skin? Her neck? Her breasts?

Hel pulled back. "Priestess. Xian. Wait..."

"No." She moaned in denial. She didn't want this moment to end. Not now. Not yet. But she soon realized he had no intention of ending it. He wanted more. He began to untie the side lacings of her traveling robe, unwrapping her slowly, like a treasured gift.

When the fabric was spread apart it revealed her High Priestess robe. Its sheer panel was unable to conceal her peaked nipples, and between her thighs, the damp fabric. He pushed the outer robes down her

arms, as far as they could go, and he reached for the ties at her shoulders, the ties that would lower her dress to her waist.

Their harsh, expectant breath filled the silence. When she was finally bared to the waist, Hel took a step back, his jaw working and his face flushed with need.

“You cannot know how long... I have to... I must...”

Xian cried out in surprised pleasure when his head bent to take one aching nipple between his lips. His large hand cupped her heavy breast, lifting it higher as his mouth opened wide, filling his mouth to overflowing with her flesh.

Yes.

His other hand gripped the edge of her skirt and lifted, and as soon as she felt the cooler air on her thighs she wrapped her legs around his waist. His erection was burning her through the fabric of his pants, and her body was angry that the thin, rough cloth stood between them. That anything did. She needed him inside her.

She started to release her grip on the rope, to reach down and tear his laces off if she had to. She was crazed. Frenzied. Alive.

Hel sensed the movement and stopped her, lifting his head from her breast with a menacingly sexy growl. “No, Xian.” He grabbed the dangling lacing from her robe and wrapped them around her wrists in swift, practiced movements. A thrill shot through her even though she desperately wanted to touch him, stroke him.

He pried her clinging thighs off his hips and dropped to his knees. He met her gaze and smiled tightly. “Not that. But I can give you this. I need to give you this.”

Xian swallowed as he placed her legs over his shoulders, giving him a clear, unhindered view of her sex. “So perfect.” His fingers spread the delicate lips apart, and his thumb pressed against her. “Delicate and perfect.” He inhaled deep, his eyelids flickering as he took her scent in.

She watched, fascinated by the sight of this strong warrior at her feet, all his attention focused on her. Her eyes blurred from not blinking. How could she? Hel was burying his face between her legs, his tongue lapping at her arousal, drinking greedily from her swollen, sensitive lips. She’d never felt anything like it. It was as if he were consuming her. Ravenous for her taste.

The rope scraping her back through the robes, the laces restraining her, and Hel’s tongue filling her sex were so forbidden, erotic. Was this what Nitara, what Nitara’s own mother had felt? Why they were willing to risk their lives, everything they were, to have it? To have this feeling. This all-encompassing feeling of being claimed again and again.

And Hel was claiming her. His fingers had joined his tongue, thrusting deep, curling inside her, gathering all she was into him. Glutting himself on her juices.

She arched her neck and caught a glimmer of movement behind Hel.

Siraj.

He held one finger to his lips, smiling mischievously, as if they were two children sharing a secret. She gasped, and Hel groaned, his tongue pressing deeper, harder inside her.

She looked down at Siraj's body, still healing from his battle wounds. He'd opened the lacings of his pants, revealing a long, hard erection, his own fist wrapped around it as he watched them.

Hel didn't sense the intruder, too intent on bringing her pleasure. Siraj leaned against the cavern wall, stroking himself as Xian watched. Long, lazy strokes that riveted her gaze. She hadn't noticed before how attractive his lean, sinuous body was. How sensual.

What was wrong with her? It was Hel's body she'd fantasized about. Hel kissing her, bringing her to the brink. Yet...feeling Siraj's gaze on her body, watching him watch them...it only seemed to increase her desire.

Her heels dug into Hel's back, hips pushing against his mouth and his fingers and tongue picked up a faster rhythm, making her cry out in pleasure, so close to the stars.

Siraj's pace quickened as well, his face tightening with arousal, his white-knuckled grip on his cock holding Xian spellbound. He snared her gaze with his own, the brown eyes dark, bottomless. He wanted her to watch him. When his orgasm overtook him, Xian moaned, hiding his harsh breath with her own full-throated cries.

He lifted the hand, wet with his own come, and sucked his fingers into his mouth slowly. Wickedly. His eyes flashed as he studied the kneeling Hel once more. Then Siraj was gone, and Xian was consumed in the fires of her own climax. Taken over by it.

Lost.

A part of her mind knew Hel was standing, untying her arms and lowering her to the ground. That he was carefully redoing her robes, his lips, damp with her arousal, kissing her heated forehead with an aching gentleness. She knew, but she couldn't seem to pull herself together. Couldn't meet his gaze, or thank him for the pleasure he'd given.

Falling from such heights in a heartbeat, she berated herself for what she'd done. A few days away from the confines of her safe Temple walls and she'd thrown herself at her Sun Guard and allowed an outsider to observe her sin. Despite High Priestess Ani's lessons, despite a lifetime of following the destiny she was born to. She'd wanted more. If he hadn't held back, she would have given herself completely.

Why had he? He was a man. He seemed to want her. Why had he stopped her, kept her from touching him? Perhaps he was more loyal to the Temple than she thought.

Another blessing in disguise from the Goddess. She'd saved Xian from breaking the rules for someone who didn't want her. Not as much, she was beginning to realize, as she wanted him.

Chapter Five

She was here at last. Her body was still vibrating from her ride on what Siraj called a treader. Hel had been right. It was loud and billowed smoke. But it had taken hours off their journey and after Xian had overcome her fear, she found she'd truly enjoyed the ride. Did other cities have access to this kind of marvel? Why had she not been told? Her mentor was strict and upheld the ways of the Goddess without exception. Could that be the reason Kroy Wen was so isolated? So trapped in the past?

Xian knew Hel was angry. He'd demanded she ride with him on Luna, but she wasn't ready to be so close to him again. To wrap her arms around him and pretend she was no longer affected, that they could go back to before he touched her. Before she lost control.

He'd wanted the pretence. She could sense it. Once he'd guided her back to an innocently waiting Siraj, Hel had stayed away from her, playing the part of distant Sun Guard. It may have been for the other man's benefit, because he didn't know that Siraj had witnessed their passion, participated, but his actions hurt her nonetheless. They made it clear that she'd been right in her fears.

So she'd ridden with Siraj on his treader instead, with Hel keeping pace on Luna behind them. Xian was thankful that Siraj made no comments about all he'd seen. Not that she'd had an easier time touching him. Whatever had awoken within her from that first kiss with Hel seemed to be growing in strength. It hungered.

They had made it through the ruins without running into scavengers or incident. Jagged, oddly formed shards of metal pushed up from the ground, and sun-glass covered the ground, glinting under the moon's glow like an ocean of light.

The night sky pulsed with colorful clouds moving in a mystic, mournful dance. It was called The Roar. A near constant reminder in the night sky of the pain the Goddess suffered to protect humanity. What She'd lost. On those nights when the sky was clear, full of only stars, Kroy Wen celebrated it as a good omen. A sign of healing. She could have used such a sign tonight.

No matter. She had finally arrived. Safe within the familiar confines of The Vault, with the men waiting outside, giving her the privacy she needed for what came next.

Xian looked around, clasping The Book of Knowledge to her chest. It had come from here. All the wisdom of their ancestors, all they'd needed to remake their world. Ingredients for healing draughts, gardening in harsh environments, meditations on serenity and creating sustainable water and sewage systems...it was all inside this book. It had been bestowed upon the first of the Priestesses by the Goddess.

The room was large, but sharply angled and box-like. The walls, not layered with color and life from the stone, but unnaturally shaped tiles of a single hue. The floor beneath her was littered with a thick kind of ash.

According to the story, The Vault had once been a place of unlimited knowledge. Books had covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Xian could not fathom such a room. The book she held was one of only a handful she knew of, and all of them were the property of the few Temples scattered along the coast. They were sacred. Reading was meant for the Priestess order alone. A sacred law, to protect the rare tomes and the wisdom within them from being misused. To think there had once been so many, and all in one place. It was unbelievable.

And yet... She opened her book and noticed, not for the first time, that each protected page was a different size, each with unique lettering and relating to different topics. It was as though they had not been made at the same time, or by the same person. But hadn't the Goddess guided the first of their order to create it? Who was she to ask the how and why?

But she did. She questioned everything of late, it seemed. It was why she was here. It was why she'd brought the key. The reason she was about to break a sacred oath to her mentor, one that had been passed down faithfully since The Burning Time.

She set the book down and lifted the chain from around her neck to study the small key. "I vow never to bring this to The Vault without intent. Never to intend without reason. And to be prepared to face the repercussions of the Goddess."

The wording of the vow did not expressly forbid use of the key, though her predecessor was careful to add her own warning. This was the only key, and the responsibility was a heavy burden. It was one of the few times she'd seen fear in High Priestess Ani's expression, and it had been enough for Xian.

Until now.

When she'd taken the mantle, learned what it meant to be High Priestess of Kroy Wen, she'd thought she understood. All played their roles for a reason. The castes were there for a reason. Men and women kept separate for a reason. The will of the Goddess. The whim of The Angry Sun. But there had to be more.

She could not shake the feeling that this world was...wrong. That innocents like Nitara and her mother before her should not be considered criminals for feeling compassion. For feeling love.

Wasn't She the Goddess of love and empathy? How then could She have made these rules? The rules that forced Xian to take a babe away from its weeping mother and plot its course in life before it had the chance to open its eyes, let alone make a choice. The rules that took people away from their communities and drugged them in order to drain them of their life force, then soon after, their life.

And then there was the council. Created to keep balance, to keep peace, it had long since become a vehicle for angry men to proclaim themselves leaders while doing nothing. Nothing but decrying every institution put in place for their safety, protection and quality of life.

Six trips to The Vault since she'd taken her office, and she'd never wavered. Outwardly. Inside, her need for more answers, her need for clarity, continued to grow. Today she would use the key. She only prayed the answers were there, and that the Goddess would forgive her.

Xian knelt in the crumbling pile of dust, marveling anew at the strange circular tins, empty now, but once used to store food, lying upended on the floor. A white chair covered in cracks and dust sat in the corner, a hole in its seat that grew the only plant life for miles. Some strange contraption that reminded her a bit of a piece of Siraj's treader stood guard in the opposite corner of the room.

It had all been left untouched by the High Priestesses who made their pilgrimage here. Small and large odd trinkets, the meaning of which had been lost to time, peeked out from the disintegrating paper.

Light from her torch in the doorway caught on the black, rusted metal of the box. The box she was looking for. The hair stood up on her arms. It seemed so innocuous. It was hard to believe so many generations had been afraid of it. Yet, she could not deny that she too was trembling as she picked it up and placed it on her lap.

She studied the locking mechanism. The unusually shaped hole matched the key perfectly. She placed it inside, watching it slide into place and held her breath. No lightning struck. She was still here.

It wouldn't open. She tried to push the key in farther, wiggled it, and something clicked. Sending up a small prayer that she wasn't making a huge mistake, she lifted the lid.

"Oh my."

Xian knew her eyes had gone wide with wonder. Inside was a treasure beyond all her imaginings. Covered in the same clear protection as the pages in The Book of Knowledge were several folded pieces of paper. Beneath them, two small books.

Unfolding the one on the top she gasped. It was large and filled with images and strange symbols. Islands and continents and more oceans and streams, more bodies of water than Xian had ever imagined or seen.

"A map." The Priestesses had maps of trade and courier routes as well as the tunnel systems, and she knew the Sun Guards had created maps of the eastern half of the Wasteland, in order to plan their raids more efficiently. But this map was different. She wished she understood what it meant. Particularly the large landmass at the very bottom of the map. It had been circled in red with arrows pointing to it. The circle did not appear to be a part of the original map.

Xian folded it carefully, painstakingly, and returned it to the box. She lifted the other slippery page and opened it up. It was full of words and clear images that looked like some of those in The Book of Knowledge. Bold letters drew her eye.

The End is Near? Solar Flares and Earthquakes increase as the Mayan Calendar Enters Final Countdown.

What did that mean? Were they speaking of The Burning Time? Had it been prophesied? Xian narrowed her gaze to read the small print. So many of the words were unfamiliar. But the image of The Angry Sun breathing molten fire in a dark sky was clear enough. These Mayan people had known. They must have been similar to the Cronos with their visions. And, at least according to this scribe, very few listened to their warnings. Those few who did were deemed insane by their fellow citizens.

She placed that back inside the box as well, a surge of excitement making her dizzy as she reached for the small books. Books no one had seen or touched in generations. They were in a clear sealed bag. One cover was simple brown, a single multi-petaled flower in the center. One soft with age, the tops of several pages folded down, as though to be remembered for later.

She studied the sealed section of the bag. There was no ribbon or lacing binding it together. No melted wax. She tugged lightly on the two ends and it opened with several small clicking sounds. How amazing.

With hesitant and gentle reverence, she lifted the brown book out of its container and felt the weight of it in her hands. She was afraid to open it. Afraid it would fall apart as the others in The Vault had long ago. But this book looked well intact. It had been protected from the elements for all this time. Protected from the warmth of the air. She had to open it.

It's been five months since it happened. I'd forgotten this journal was in my bag. It was supposed to be a birthday present for my daughter...

They were right. The lunatic survivalists that trapped us here beneath the library were right. This was not like the Y2K scare or any of the others. This was real. This was apocalyptic.

Mark is gone. He must be. He worked in an office on Wall Street. All our family and friends... gone. And the reports we've gotten from what's left of the military... Nothing remains. Any life that survived above has been destroyed by the radiation. A solar storm, they say. A fire that scorched large portions of the Earth. That melted glaciers and boiled oceans. Who could live through that?

The military apparently. Though they did leave one suit and some testing equipment behind for us to share so we could see the wreckage for ourselves, perhaps find more supplies.

How do I tell Tessa her father is dead? That it was a freak accident and not fate that brought us to the library in time, not to pick up a copy of her favorite story, but to be taken belowground by some foul-looking men with knives and a few crazy librarians? Yet they saved us.

They saved us. But is this really salvation?

Xian turned the page, tears streaming from her eyes as her hand opened to capture the image that slipped out at her action. So lifelike, it showed a blonde woman, her arms wrapped around a tall, dark-

haired man who held a grinning child in his arms. They looked so happy, surrounded by lush green trees and colorful flowers.

And the sky...

“It was blue.”

She wiped her cheeks, blinking through the tears as she soaked in the colors. They stood in the sun, uncovered and uncaring, beneath a sky that mirrored the ocean in its beauty. So much beauty. All gone.

She continued reading.

We've met others. People who happened to be in subways or mines when everything burned. People who lived beneath the city in places I never knew existed—some of them say there are animals being kept safe underground as well. Tessa was pleased at the news.

More military, though they seem to have their own survival plan now, separate from ours. Some of them have already lost touch with what it means to be civilized, showing allegiance only to each other—like a clan or tribe of warriors. But at least we are not the only ones left. And if there are more here, there must be survivors all over the country. The world.

We can be outside now, mostly at night. There was rain, though very little, and it was cleansing. They are saying we need to rebuild, that everything we need is in the books that were saved along with us. And those books have become valuable.

A couple of raiding parties have tried to take them, and a few of the women were raped and killed in the process. This is not the first time the men have attacked, several women are pregnant even now, but for my Tessa, I will try to make it the last. She is too young to understand, and I hope she never does.

The women held an emergency meeting. We are weaker, but we must gain the advantage. We have to protect ourselves. Our children. We will be smarter than they are. We hear the men talking at night, fearing another solar storm. Fearing God's wrath. Maybe we can use that to our advantage. Convince them that protecting us is a way to soothe that anger. And we must use the information we have here as a form of control as well. They must not be allowed to hurt our children. To hurt Tessa. One of the older librarians has been reading a book on Goddess worship and pagan mythology. She thinks she's stumbled upon something that might help. I wouldn't have chosen this path, but there is no man like Mark among the survivors. There are few men who can be trusted. The women must survive. It's the only way we can have a future. Tessa must survive this wasteland, she must be given a chance.

Hel wasn't sure what to do. What had happened? She'd been standoffish since he'd touched her, preferring to finish the journey with Siraj instead. But this. This was something different.

Xian had come out of The Vault with an expression on her face he'd never seen before. More than lost. More than broken. As though someone had told her the moon would never rise again. She'd asked to

be taken to the cleansing cave—a nearby cavern that held a spring of clean, hot water where travelers could bathe or refresh themselves. He'd taken one look at her and agreed immediately, not arguing when Siraj wanted to join him to ensure her protection. All he could think about was Xian. What was wrong?

Siraj crossed his arms and leaned against the rocky opening, staring out at the emerging orange dawn. "If she were mine, she wouldn't be in there alone. Especially not when she looks so beaten up."

Hel stiffened. "She's not yours. She's not mine either. She belongs to no man."

Siraj snorted. "That is a shame. If any woman in the Wasteland was ripe for pleasure, it's our curvy Priestess in there. If I'm not mistaken, you don't go burying your face between the thighs of any female unless she's a Rose...or she belongs to you."

Hel had Siraj's front pressed against the rock face, his body leaning heavily against him and a dagger pressing against his neck before the man could blink. "I should kill you now."

Siraj chuckled breathlessly. "Probably. Though I doubt Xian would think highly of you if you did. I'm still recovering from wounds *she* tended. So, my dear Sun Guard, I see you can be aggressive when you want to be." He pressed his ass against Hel, and Hel was shocked to feel his own reaction. "Much as I enjoy the rough stuff, I can tell your Priestess needs it more. She needs a passionate distraction, a lover who can take the reins. Take her mind off of her troubles."

He was tempted. Oh, so tempted. He relaxed his grip on Siraj. "I am a Sun Guard. To sleep with a Priestess outside of the lottery is to be banished. To sleep with her...would mean death. No doubt for us both."

Siraj rubbed his neck, turning to meet Hel's gaze. "There is nothing here but ghosts and regret. I won't tell if you won't. I'd be willing to bet you my treader that our lovely exotic flower will welcome your breach in protocol." He eyed Hel's knife warily. "She knew I was watching when you touched her. She enjoyed it. And I could tell she wanted more from you. She was yours for the asking."

Hel's grip tightened on his dagger, but it wasn't from the desire to use it. Just desire. Xian had known? He felt a flash of jealousy that Siraj had seen her, the woman he'd worshipped for so long. Worshipped but not known. Not the way he wanted to. He was beginning to realize that this might be his only chance. She had responded to him. Wanted him.

Siraj seemed to sense him weakening. "She needs you. I've got good instincts, I've had to, but I don't need them to know that."

Something stirred within him. Shifted. "You may be right." He thought about how long he'd fantasized about Xian, how many things he'd always wanted to do to her, things he'd barely admitted to himself. He'd spent so many years protecting her, he even did it in his mind. Perhaps it was time to stop.

He smiled wryly. "I don't suppose you'd want to wait out here?"

Delight transformed Siraj's handsome face. "I don't suppose I would."

Hel sighed and shook his head, trying to act nonchalant. Inside he could hardly contain the primal excitement burning in his veins. He felt a moment's worry, a moment's pity for Xian as he began to enter the cave.

Who would protect her from him?

Chapter Six

Xian knelt beside the pool of bubbling water, staring into the liquid, unblinking, as though it would give her all the answers. Answers that would make more sense to her than the ones she'd found in the box.

She piled her hair on top of her head, using a jeweled bone to hold it in place. Lowering her robes to her waist, she scooped a handful of the cleansing water and let it slide down her arm. She bathed herself slowly, studying the markings that covered her body. Marks of the Goddess. Sensual spirals twirled down her arms, her belly, even her sex. Her destiny had been written into her skin, her soul, for so long, she was not sure she could process what she'd found today.

The journal showed her what had been. The image of the man, woman and child, so happy together. The words of sadness, regret and resolve. Words that, in gifting Xian with a window into the past, had caused the small cracks in the foundation of her faith to split wide open.

She hadn't been able to finish the journal, nor examine the other book in the package, not with her stomach in knots, her eyes blurred with tears. What those women had done to survive was understandable and, in itself, incredible. But what did that mean for her? What was she now? Where did she belong?

"Xian."

She wasn't surprised to hear his voice. Her heart had been crying out for him since she'd arrived. She continued to wash without looking up. "Xian? Yes, I suppose that is appropriate, isn't it? I am no High Priestess. Not here. Not today."

He knelt behind her and she could feel the heat of his body against her bare back as he agreed. "No. Not today. Today you are Xian."

Her broken chuckle was tinged with bitterness...and hope. "And who is she? Do you know?"

Hel's blunt fingertips touched her chin, turning it until she had no choice but to look up into his eyes. "I have always known her. She has haunted my every dream, tempted me each day that I breathe air. She is all that is beautiful and strong." The determination in his malachite gaze made her shiver. "Xian is mine."

His kiss was not the gentle request it had been before. His lips were marking his territory. Taking everything. She loved it. When he lifted his head she was breathless, aroused, all thoughts of what she'd seen, what she'd learned, gone with the power of her need. She noticed Siraj over Hel's shoulder and startled in his arms.

She'd never seen that kind of smile on her Sun Guard before. It was confident. Sexual. "I know Siraj is here, Xian. This time, I know. I wish only for your pleasure. What would you do should I ask you to invite him to stay?"

He was studying her carefully. So carefully he must have seen the excitement sparkling in her eyes. Her voice was trembling when she answered. "Obey with haste and enthusiasm, Sun Guard, as I always do."

They shared a secret smile as both remembered the last time those words were spoken. Before their world had turned upside down.

A splash drew both their gazes to Siraj, who had already stripped bare and now stood in the heated pool, the water lapping low on his lean hips. "This is hotter than I'd imagined." His smirk told her he wasn't merely speaking of the water temperature. "What say you, sweet Xian? May I stay?"

She looked up at Hel once more, unsure where this was leading, but unable to deny her desire to find out. "Yes, Siraj. You may."

Siraj came closer, his warm brown eyes drawn to her full breasts. "I have the stars' own luck it seems. Though not in all things. Your Sun Guard is still woefully overdressed. As are you."

Hel shook his head at Siraj. "You're to follow my lead. That is our deal."

Siraj shrugged. "A deal I am more than happy with. I believe I'll enjoy your brand of, um, leadership. I merely grow impatient for your first command."

She'd thought Hel disliked Siraj. They must have reached some kind of understanding. She shifted in Hel's embrace, her tight nipples scraping his bare arm.

His jaw clenched. "Xian. Stand up and remove your robes."

Xian found herself obeying instantly. The tone in his voice thrilled her. She stood and the loose robes that had rested at her waist fell to her feet. She had no desire to cover herself. She wanted to be seen. To enjoy the masculine admiration in their expressions as they traced the heavy globes of her breasts, the dip in her waist, her sex bare but for her markings of fertility.

"By the moon, she is stunning." Siraj had lowered his voice reverently. He came closer, and Xian could see his long erection skimming the top of the steamy water.

Hel stood beside her, setting his weapons and boots on the ground before slowly removing his clothes. "Yes, but she is so much more than that. There are no words to describe her. There never have been."

Her heart jumped at his words. She wasn't perfect. "Careful, Hel. I would not wish you to be disappointed. I've never—I don't—"

He placed his thumb against her lower lip, stopping her words with a touch. "You could only disappoint me if you sent me away."

She sighed. He stood there, naked, something so pure and beautiful in his gaze, and she was overcome with emotion. "Then you will never be disappointed."

Hel lifted her easily in his arms and stepped into the water beside Siraj. “That is what I wanted to hear, my Xian. Now. Let us pleasure you.”

The two men shared a look, bending together to kiss her neck, her breasts. Hel lifted his head to join Xian in watching Siraj take one hard nipple between his teeth, biting with just enough pressure to make her gasp and arch in Hel’s arms.

“You like that, Xian? I didn’t think I would. Didn’t think I would enjoy seeing another’s mouth on your skin. Thought I would kill whoever tried.” He slid one hand beneath the water, between her legs. His fingers pushed inside her sex, her arousal easing his way, and he growled. “You more than like it, don’t you, my innocent Priestess? You love it. Love driving both of us wild, watching us go mad with wanting until all we can think about is fucking you. Claiming you.”

Goddess, his words. She knew words had the power to arouse, but she’d had no idea she could be so effected. Siraj was leaving a trail of not-so-gentle bites over her torso while Hel continued to thrust inside her with his fingers, the sensations enhanced by his graphic words.

She did love it. Less than a week ago she had never been touched. Men barely met her gaze. Women called her leader. Now, pressed between these two strong men, so different, but both desirable—now she felt right. A woman. A goddess. She had lost her usual serenity, her usual control. But she wasn’t afraid.

Hel would keep her safe. She trusted him, always had. Though she had never seen him like this. Controlling. Masterful. He was different. But so was she.

Siraj’s hand brushed against Hel’s where it touched the skin of her upper thigh, and she felt Hel flinch. She looked up at him, wondering at his reaction. It was known the men of Kroy Wen, even many of the Sun Guards, participated in same-sex relationships in between breeding times. It made sense when no lottery was scheduled, when they did not have enough to trade for a Rose, that they would seek satisfaction where they could find it. It was even promoted by the Temple to decrease frustration. Xian had the distinct feeling that Hel had never sought it out...and that Siraj had. The idea was evocative. Enticing.

She lost her train of thought as they moved closer, and she felt two hot cocks burning against her hips. Hel’s fingers, Siraj’s lips, they weren’t enough. She needed more. Craved it as she’d never craved anything before. She’d dreamt of it since she’d overseen the lottery, witnessed the Breeders and Priestesses open their bodies for the men’s primitive invasion. Flesh sliding against flesh, forcing two into one. Longed for it since Hel first took her in his arms.

Her body was aching. Empty. “Please.”

“You cannot torture her, Sun Guard.” Siraj was panting against her neck. “Not this time. She is too ready. If you do not take her soon, then I surely will.”

Hel snarled. “She is mine. You’ll put your cock nowhere without my permission.” With that warning he dragged Xian higher up his chest, until her breasts were crushed against his body and her mouth being ravaged under his.

He pressed his forehead against hers. "Stop me now if you must, Xian. There is no going back after this."

"No. Don't stop. I beg you. I want you to. I want it to be you."

Xian wrapped her legs around his waist, clinging to him as she remembered how he'd pulled away before. His groan was pained. "Have no worries, my love. I know exactly what you need."

She felt his hands grip her hips, guiding her body until she could feel his shaft brushing against the lips of her sex. "Yes."

"I offer myself to you, my Priestess. Soothe my anger. Sate my passion. Know me."

The ritual words uttered at the start of the lottery. She could see he was trying to show her honor and reverence. To pay tribute to the courtship of the Goddess and The Angry Sun. They were words she never thought to hear anyone say to her.

She responded in kind. "I accept your offering. Come inside and I will sate you with my body. Know me."

Hel skimmed his lips across hers, sharing his breath as he lowered her onto his erection. Her mouth opened on a soundless cry, and he took full advantage, filling her mouth as he filled her body.

Too big...too much. She'd pleased herself, used tools made of clay and sun-glass to simulate, to train others, but she wasn't prepared for how different this felt. This true intimacy. This connection.

His heartbeat pulsed through his skin inside her. When she thought she couldn't take any more of him, he angled her hips and lowered her another inch. She felt stretched to the point of pain, but it was a good pain. A beautiful pain.

He tore his mouth from hers and pressed his forehead against her shoulder and a fine tremor passed from his body to hers. Xian wrapped her arms around his neck, her hands in his hair. She felt connected to him, beyond the physical. She knew he was still holding back, still protecting her from the strength of his passion.

She began to rock against him, circling her hips slowly, sensually. Her breath caught and a sudden image flashed in her mind. Xian was kneeling in the Temple, surrounded by Priestesses before the last lottery. Several had expressed nervousness at that year's chosen. They were too rough. They did not know how to bring pleasure. She had invited them to her personal chambers, reminded them that they had the true power in the sensual struggle. They could please themselves. As they cried out in ecstasy around her, from their hands, their clay phalluses, she recalled seeing something out of the corner of her eye.

"Did you see us that day, Hel? Was I right? Or was it just wishful thinking?"

Brilliant green eyes flashed with knowledge and desire. He knew what she spoke of. He'd seen her.

She bit her lip and smiled. "You can tell me. I watched you too. In the Garden before Siraj appeared. I wanted you then. I do now. All of you."

Hel gave up the battle. His training, everything he was demanded he take care not to hurt her, not to overwhelm her with his passions. Sun Guards ate, slept and breathed restraint. Do not look. Do not touch. You are more than a man. You are all that stands between the future and chaos. It was hammered into him again and again until it was a part of him. But inside his feelings were far more primitive. Volatile. And her words, the knowledge that she wanted him, set the beast within him free.

Need erupted from his throat with a roar. He stood straight and flipped Xian onto her back at the edge of the hot spring. With one of his hands he gripped her wrists and held them over her head, gaze riveted to her breasts heaving with each panting breath.

He barely recognized his guttural voice. “You want all of me, Xian? Your wish is my command.”

His free hand gripped her knee, lifting it high as he began to fill her with long powerful strokes. Years of pent-up desires filled each hard thrust. Hel knew he was being too rough. Knew it was her first time, but her Goddess forgive him, he could no longer hold back.

“Take it.” He punctuated each word with a sling of his hips, watching her body arch off the ground with the force of his penetration. “Every. Last. Inch. All of me.”

The sleek heat of her body burned his cock, her hungry sex squeezing him tighter, as though her body recognized his, didn’t want him to leave. She cried out, calling his name the way she had in his dreams. But this was real. Her body was real beneath his. He couldn’t get enough.

She came. Came again. Tears of climax slid down her cheeks. Her body writhed, and her hands curled into claws in his grip and still he couldn’t stop. He never wanted this to end.

He was bent over her, half in, half out of the splashing water, when he felt the strong male hand on his back. Hel was about to shrug him off, focused on claiming Xian, but the gruff voice stopped him.

“You said I could put my cock nowhere without your permission, Sun Guard. You said nothing about my hands. Or my tongue.”

Xian’s body jerked beneath his at Siraj’s words and drew his gaze. Her eyes were wide and her pupils dilated from surprise and...interest? Hel’s mind was spinning with unsated hunger, his muscles rope-taut. When one hand joined another and lowered to his ass, he was too aroused to resist.

Hel continued to pump his hips against Xian’s, watching her beautiful face contort in ecstasy. He was focused on her, but he was also waiting, holding his breath in anticipation as he sensed Siraj kneel behind him in the water.

Xian’s tongue slid out to wet her lower lip as she felt Siraj’s kiss. He kissed her calf where it met Hel’s heated side. Her ankle where it clung to Hel’s tailbone. Siraj continued to kiss her as his hands spread Hel’s cheeks, his wet thumb slipping down the seam of Hel’s ass.

He slowed his thrusts, unsure what he should do. What he should feel. When Siraj pressed his thumb inside the ring of muscles, easing its way with the firm stroke of his tongue, Hel’s shout echoed through the small cave.

The feelings. He wanted to rip Siraj away, to push against his mouth and demand more. Each flick of his tongue sent a charge like heat lightning up his spine.

Xian bucked her hips against his, her voice breathless. “Show me, Hel. Show me how he touches you.”

Hel groaned. “You will undo me, love.” He took her mouth without another word, thrusting and swirling his tongue, mimicking Siraj’s mouth. He let her hands go and she lifted them to his shoulders, nails digging into his skin as she moaned against him.

His cock grew harder inside her, and blood burned in his veins. Too much sensation. The feel of Xian’s sex clinging to his cock, Siraj’s thumb pressing deeper inside his ass, along with his talented tongue, sent Hel over the edge.

His vision blurred as instinct took over. He ate at Xian’s mouth, taking her hard and fast, loving her screams vibrating against his lips. His climax rocked him to his soul. Everything he had, all that he was, poured into her. Xian. He felt the power of it as he had with no other.

He lifted his head and looked into indigo eyes gone soft with satisfaction. Siraj had moved away from them, and Hel sunk into the water, dragging Xian’s limp body down with him.

She buried her head into his shoulder, laying a kiss on his neck. Hel’s gaze clashed with Siraj’s, dark with unresolved passion. Nothing had gone the way he’d imagined, but he hadn’t lied to her.

Now that he’d had her, there would be no going back.

Chapter Seven

Hel was hot and angry. He'd gone to gather their packs and bring Luna into the shade of the cave's overhang. Alone. He was mad at himself for not thinking of it earlier, not taking care of their supplies and the rare animal that was, even now, looking at him with disappointment. He was mad at Siraj for playing up his injuries this morning, relying on Xian's compassionate nature to save him from the task.

Those injuries hadn't been on anyone's mind last night. But Xian had smiled up at him, and he knew he could not deny her.

Last night. After the first time, he'd been insatiable. Xian had been more than willing, as had Siraj. They hadn't spoken of what he'd done to Hel, and there'd been no repeat of the intimacy. Hel was thankful. He wasn't ready to think about how much he'd enjoyed the other man's touch. The two of them had silently agreed to work together to bring their sensual Priestess as much pleasure as humanly possible. And they had.

The memories of what they'd done stirred his arousal yet again. Xian's mouth filled with Siraj's cock as Hel took her from behind. Hel's head buried between her thighs while Siraj fucked her voluptuous breasts.

Siraj had been true to his word in letting Hel set the pace. He wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to truly share Xian. In his mind, in his heart, she had always been his alone. But he had to admit, he loved enhancing her pleasure with Siraj's help. As long as he was the one in control.

When he walked back into the limestone enclosure, taking his shirt off to wipe down his sweat-soaked body, it took a moment for his mind to register what he was seeing. Xian and Siraj were lying on her robe beside the pool, naked bodies entwined in an erotic embrace. Siraj's reddish brown braid was draped over her thigh, his eyes closed as he feasted on Xian's arousal. Her hips rocked against his mouth as her own full lips wrapped around as much of his long cock as she could take.

The blood rushed to Hel's cock so fast his head spun, and a new wave of anger washed over him at their moans. He had been dutifully seeing to their safety and supplies while Siraj had taken full advantage. Injuries his ass.

He stood, still as stone, watching the two of them find their pleasure. When Siraj lifted his mouth to cry out in climax, Hel moved swiftly, yanking him away from Xian's mouth as he came.

Siraj's neck arched at Hel's grip on his hair, his seed dripping down his cock. "Shit, Sun Guard. Oh, fuck that was good. Why did you stop us before she came?"

Hel glanced over at Xian. She'd come up onto her knees, her arms covering her breasts as she stared at him in surprise. Her wide eyes and flushed skin told him she was still in the grip of passion, still unsatisfied.

Good.

"You didn't follow the rules, Siraj."

The idiot smiled serenely. "Not true. I was merely showing her what I did for you last night. It was she who decided to pay me back in kind. I did not break my vow, for I put my cock nowhere. She took it."

Hel didn't crack a smile. "You aren't a Sun Guard or a Wanderer, and you definitely aren't an ordinary citizen from the cities—so you don't know. There are punishments for those who don't follow the rules."

Siraj narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Are there now?" Hel watched his gaze drop to his pants, his erection straining against the fabric. "What kind of punishment did you have in mind?"

Hel swore. He couldn't deny what he wanted. Couldn't deny the knowledge in Siraj's eyes. But he could show them both who was in charge of their pleasure.

They'd drive him insane.

He unlaced his pants. "Xian. I want you to stay right there, spread your legs and keep your hands on your knees where I can see them." He looked over at her long enough to ensure she obeyed, then turned his stare on Siraj. "You can show her how you use that talented tongue of yours from here. Or do your injuries hinder you?"

Siraj licked his lips, still wet with Xian's juices. "I can take whatever you can, Sun Guard."

Xian held her breath, her body shaking in reaction. She wasn't sure what had happened with Siraj. She'd been curious about what he'd done with Hel, and he'd known. One moment he was telling her of the time he'd sailed with a group of highly sexed pirates, of what he'd given in payment for safe passage down the coast, and the next he'd lowered his head between her legs. It had felt so good, and his erection had looked so painful, that she'd had to respond in kind.

When Hel returned she'd been frustrated, aroused...and guilty. It seemed wrong to experience that kind of pleasure without him. It was him she'd wanted. Hel had awoken this need inside her, not Siraj. But still, there was something about Siraj. He wasn't constrained by the rules that held the rest of them back. His view of the world, the way he spoke to her—without hesitance, without reverence—was attractive. She was drawn to him. Not like Hel, but still tantalized.

She watched Hel wrap Siraj's braid around his fist, watched Siraj reach inside the open flap of Hel's pants and grip his thick, blood-flushed shaft with firm fingers. Her nails dug into her thighs.

Great Goddess, but they were beautiful together. Siraj kneeling at Hel's feet took nothing away from his masculinity. There was no submission, only power as he took Hel's cock into his mouth. Only strength as Hel pumped his hips, growling as Siraj took everything he gave and more.

Her body was shaking with the need to come. She dragged her hand up her thigh, needing relief, needing to join them in their passion. Before she could touch her sex Hel's malachite gaze pierced her flesh.

He shook his head, skin tight over his face. "Do. Not. Fucking. Dare. You watch. Don't touch what is mine."

Siraj lifted his head and grinned. "She likes watching us, don't you, sweet little Xian? She loves it. I bet she'd love to see more."

Hel snarled. "I don't believe I said you could stop."

Siraj chuckled, but instantly wrapped his lips around Hel's erection once more.

Hel spoke to Xian through clenched teeth. "Is he right? Do you like watching him swallow my cock? He's good. I've never had anybody able to take this much."

Xian whimpered, but he wasn't finished. "Do you want to see me fuck him? Are you that curious?" Siraj moaned against his flesh, and Hel bared his teeth. "I can see he likes that idea. Or would you rather I just bent you over and took your ass, High Priestess? Let us feel firsthand what it is we've been missing."

She was surprised by the sudden rush of fear and curiosity. High Priestess. What was she doing here? Breaking every rule put into place to protect her, to protect the future. She stood, grabbing her robe to wrap around her as she ran outside, ignoring the male shouts of denial.

The harsh rays of the sun hit her like a physical blast. She was vulnerable. Out in the world with no protection, in more ways than one. For a moment she wished for the ignorance of yesterday. Before she'd read any of the journal. Before she'd known a man. Before she understood what it meant. What love meant. "What have I done?"

"Changed everything." Hel spoke into her ear before pulling the fabric of her robes over her head protectively, shielding the rest of her from the strong light of day with his body. "And damned if I'll let you out of my sight long enough for you to change it back."

He picked her up and carried her back inside. She watched him share a look with Siraj for a long, tension-filled moment.

Siraj sighed and reached for his pants and boots. "I should go tinker with my treader, bring it closer so Luna'll have something to commiserate with." He reached for his belt and untied one of the small pouches, setting it on the ground. "You'll need this. Trust me."

Xian and Hel were alone. He sat, still holding her in his arms, and rocked her as though she were a child. As though she were precious. She didn't feel like a child. Not after what she'd seen and experienced.

Not with the hard ridge of his erection pressing against her bare bottom. But he had something else on his mind.

He spoke in a hushed faraway voice that had Xian straining to hear. “I was nine when Father found me in these ruins. I don’t remember much before that. I was the child of a warrior. A Wanderer. I’d wanted to prove myself. I was too young to go with the raiding party, but that didn’t stop me. Unfortunately they were overtaken. Everyone died, but I escaped. I ran away.”

She felt his chest lift with a shaky breath. “I think I was scared. Ashamed. So I came to live in the ruins. It wasn’t long before I saw Father. He was a part of the Sun Guard, scouting ahead prior to the High Priestess Ani’s arrival. I’d injured myself, I was sick with fever, and I followed him.” He chuckled. “Father almost killed me, but when he saw how young I was, how ill, he took care of me. Hid me out of sight and smuggled me back to his longhouse.”

Xian lifted her head from his shoulder in surprise. He wasn’t born in Kroy Wen? Wasn’t chosen by the High Priestess from birth to be a Sun Guard? She looked at the scar on the back of his neck.

He noticed the direction of her glance. “I did that myself. Not very well, I admit, and Father never let me forget it. I wanted to blend in. But not at first. Father told the others I was one of the lost. A young Sun Guard lost in the Garden of the Moon during training. It’s not an unusual occurrence, so it was easy enough. Still, he risked everything for me. But I didn’t understand that then. I almost ran away, back to the Wanderers...my family. Despite my shame, everything I’d learned about the heretics of the city, the cruel foreign Goddess of the Temple told me I would surely be killed if I stayed.”

“Why didn’t you?” It was suddenly important for her to know the answer. Why would he have stayed? Become a Sun Guard no less?

Hel met her gaze, unblinking. “I saw a young Priestess being chased by her tutor. She couldn’t have been more than seven or eight, but she was sneaking out of the Temple to watch the horses go by. Fearless.”

Xian felt her eyes widen. Her? Was he talking about her?

He smiled. “When they’d passed, she allowed the older Priestess to drag her away. She looked up at me as she went by, her eyes a color I’d never seen the rival of...and she smiled. I heard her tutor scolding her, saying she needed a keeper.” Hel shrugged. “As quickly as that, I found my destiny. I knew that I wanted to be the one to protect you. I wanted to be the one you smiled at again. So I embraced my new life and never looked back.”

Xian’s heart was pounding so loudly she was sure he could hear it. “Why are you telling me this?” The knowledge of what the elder Sun Guard had done, in the wrong hands, could have Hel and his Father killed. Especially since Hel had become the personal Sun Guard of the High Priestess.

“I’m trusting you with everything that I am. All my secrets. I’m trying to tell you that I—”

She covered his mouth with her hand. She wasn't ready to hear more. Not now. She replaced her hand with her mouth. Showing him without words how she felt.

Hel soon took control of the kiss. Lowering her to the ground, he pressed his body between her thighs. The loose laces of his pants dug roughly into her flesh, the sensation only exciting her more. He pushed down his pants and she moaned into his mouth, loving the feel of his bare skin on hers.

He lifted his head, his cheeks flushed. "You're right. No more talking. Let's see what Siraj left for us." He reached out to grab the pouch and a small vial slipped out.

Xian recognized the liquid. The Priestesses who worked with the herbs that drugged and aroused the Sacrificed, also created this. An oil that heated the body and eased the way for men and women alike. It was a popular item, always in high demand with the traders.

Hel's rough chuckle told her he recognized it too. "Good man. Now what were we talking about earlier? Trying something new?"

She shivered beneath him. He meant taking her as a man takes another man. The idea was as intimidating as it was thrilling. "What if I can't—"

"Take me?" His smile reached his brilliant green eyes. "You can, Xian. Trust me."

Adrenaline made her giddy. "I do, Hel. I trust you with my life. And my body."

His smile wavered slightly. "Two out of three. Good enough, Priestess. For now." He kissed her again and she lost herself to it, until she felt him lift his hips and apply the oil to his erection.

She jumped at the first brush of his thumb along her sex, and lower, along the seam of her ass. A warm tingle penetrated her skin instantly, her arousal building swift and strong. Oh, Goddess. "Hel."

His voice was rough. "I feel it too. The heat. Fuck, Xian, I need you."

"Then take me."

Hel turned her over, spreading her legs wide and entering her sex in one movement. Xian shouted in surprised pleasure, her body beyond ready for him. She pressed her forehead into the ground, her breath coming out in joyful sobs as he claimed her.

When he pushed his thumb inside the tight ring of muscles hidden by the full curves of her ass, she arched her back, opening for him, loving the stretch, the sting. The oil set her nerves ablaze, and there was no room for anxiety or tension—only desire.

"You're ready for me, aren't you? Damn, you don't know how long I've been dreaming of holding those sweet curves in my hands. Being inside you."

She nodded against the ground, every part of her screaming in agreement. Begging for more. For him. She groaned in denial when he left her body, her brow furrowing as he turned her on her back.

"I want to see you, Xian. I need to see those eyes." He lifted her legs high over one shoulder, his thumb thrusting inside her ass, coating her already-tingling flesh with more oil.

She didn't need any more help. She needed him. She reached out, her hand grazing his hip, his cock, and wrapped her fingers around him. A rumbling, primal sound emerged from Hel's throat as he thrust instinctively against her. He pushed her hand away and she gasped, feeling the head of his erection pushing through the snug barrier.

"Fuck. Xian, open your eyes. Look at the man who takes you."

Xian couldn't help but respond to the command in Hel's tone. She lifted heavy lids and looked into the face more familiar to her than her own. He snared her gaze, refusing to let it go as he slowly slung his hips forward.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. This was beyond anything she'd experienced before. Ecstasy and pain, panic and exhilaration. It was as though every inch of her body, inside and out, was focused on where they were joined, sensitive to each thrust and drag of his cock.

It was the most intimate experience of her life. Her soul felt as though it was floating, leaving her body to merge with his. For long, wondrous moments, there was nothing but the sound of their breath, the beat of their hearts.

They came together, still staring into each other's eyes as the inferno blazed around them. Hel looked the same way she felt. Staggered. Bewildered. Overwhelmed.

Dear Goddess it was true. She loved him. More than her calling. More than her people. More than anything.

He smiled tenderly and separated from her body. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her into the steaming pool beside them and bathed her with gentle hands. She still felt dazed, still felt like she was floating. As he held her she found herself telling him about everything. Her doubts. Nitara. What she'd read of the journal, and the reason she'd stopped.

Hel was silent for long moments. "This woman sounds very wise."

Xian pushed back to study his expression for signs of mockery. There was none. "Wise? If what she wrote is true, then the world we built wasn't the design of the Goddess. Our world would be a lie based on—"

"Xian," Hel interrupted her. "I know men. I have fought with them, lived and bled with them. I know the evils they are capable of. Without the Sun Guards to protect the Temple, the chamberlain and the other men of the council would have taken over. Perhaps never attempted to recreate any type of civilization at all after The Burning Time. And the Sun Guards were created because of faith in the Goddess. Without that..." He shrugged.

"You're taking this very well."

Hel kissed her brow. "My faith was never for the Goddess. It was always for you. Meidra believed in you too. She said you were important. That you would bring salvation by finding your own path."

Xian shook her head, certain he was wrong. “I am no one’s salvation. I have no answers. After the last few days all I have are more questions.”

Hel lifted her out of the pool and began to dry her off with her outer robes. “You need to finish reading the journal. After Siraj returns we can go for the box. Together.”

“Siraj has returned. I hope we have enough food for company. I’ve brought some old friends.”

Xian turned to the cave entrance, puzzled by the strange tenor of Siraj’s comment. Hel stiffened beside her at the same time she saw them. Three men in desert gear surrounded Siraj. The largest one held a knife to his throat.

Chapter Eight

Hel laced his pants, standing in front of Xian as she frantically pulled her robe up over her body. He used the time to try assessing the situation. His weapons and ruin artifacts were in the corner of the cave. They were outnumbered, and they blocked the only exit.

He cursed himself for not being more aware of their surroundings. He'd been so lost in Xian, in his own selfish desires, that he hadn't protected her properly. Now they were all in danger.

Hel knew from their ragged dress and hostile manner that they were criminals and renegades. Desert pirates. They followed no law. They were less trustworthy than the ocean pirates. More volatile than the warriors.

He attempted to distract them from Xian. "So, Siraj, I see you have made another strong impression. Do you know these men?"

Siraj's jaw locked. "Only too well. We had a slight misunderstanding recently. They believed they could ransom a clan elder's heir for fuel and supplies. I, humbly, disagreed."

The larger man snorted. "You more than disagreed, Siraj. You stole him from us. Do you know how hard it was to get him? How much danger you put us in? We should have killed you the last time."

Xian shocked Hel by stepping out from behind him, hands on her hips. His Priestess. The warrior. "So you are responsible for his injuries when we found him?"

"Xian, be silent." Hel swore silently when the three men's gazes focused on her.

One particularly grungy man with a thick scar from his forehead to his chin sneered. "Siraj, you do well for yourself. A Kroy Wen Sun Guard and a Priestess? Perhaps there is hope for you to live another day. Shall we make a trade? Your life for these two. We'll also be taking that fine-looking mare outside."

"Oman, if you think the Wanderers were difficult adversaries, than you must know the Sun Guards would be just as deadly should you take a Priestess. Soon you'll have to move to the southern desert, just to get away from everyone who wants you dead."

Oman pressed close to Siraj's side, his large, crescent-shaped blade caressing his hip. "I gave you shelter. Took you in and shared scarce supplies because I thought... But you don't have what it takes to survive in the Wasteland. Other than your quick tongue and ready cock, you are useless to me. No wonder you have no family, no group of your own. You betray everyone." He walked forward, studying Xian. "You, however, are something different. I know a particular clan in the Wasteland who would readily agree to trade with us for the chance to get their hands on you and your protector. They've lost many healthy

young males to your bloody sacrifices, pretty one. A chance for payback may be worth food and fuel for us.”

Hel was enraged at the threat that put fear on Xian’s face. If there were time, he would kill him slowly, painfully for that. But he could see that the three men were on the edge with nothing to lose, and that made them dangerous. He had to get to his weapons.

He didn’t count on Xian having a plan of her own.

“What if we can give you something even more valuable to trade? The treasure of the Temple is hidden in these ruins. Would you let us go if we show you where it is?”

Hel watched Siraj make a pained face, closing his eyes at Xian’s words. Mistake. He couldn’t agree more. What was she thinking? These men would take her bait...and she would be in even more danger.

Oman was true to form. “Treasure? I knew it. We’ve seen the Sun Guards march into the ruins, year after year, going who knows where. We knew there must be a reason. You have a deal, Priestess. You will take me to this treasure. If it is as valuable as you say, we may let Siraj and your Sun Guard live.”

Xian took a step forward and Hel gripped her arm. “Don’t do this.”

She lifted her chin, every inch the regal Priestess. “I do not believe I gave you permission to speak.”

Oman chuckled harshly. “He can fuck you, but he can’t talk, eh? You’re my kind of Priestess, my lady. Lash, Moyle, stay here and keep your eyes on these two. Careful with Siraj—he’s slippery.”

Hel growled, stepping toward Oman. He wrapped his fingers around his throat and lifted him off his feet. “You take her nowhere.”

He heard an unusual crackling sound, like the rumble of a gathering storm. Felt a pinpoint zap that quickly spread throughout his body in waves of pain.

The last thing he saw were those eyes. Beautiful violet and blue, and so worried. For him.

Why had she opened her mouth? She’d seen the men with their weapons on Siraj, seen their expressions, and knew there was no way it was going to end well. All she could think of was getting them away from Hel and Siraj, getting them out in the open to give her Sun Guard a chance to attack.

She’d failed.

One of the renegades had slipped behind Hel as he’d held Oman in his crushing grip and touched him with an unusual weapon. Blue sparks had flashed from it into Hel’s skin, and he’d fallen to the ground in an instant. His heart still beat, but she wasn’t sure how much damage had been done. *She* had done that to him with her talk of treasure. She’d never forgive herself.

“Keep walking, Priestess.” Oman laughed. “Never seen one o’ those, have ya? That is what you get when you trade with the Wanderers and their inventors. Man said it picks up the static charge in the air, then slams bolts like lightning into the body. Would have killed you for sure, but your big Sun Guard’ll just have a nasty headache. That is, unless we hit him with it again.”

It wasn't that far to the Vault. Xian had to find a way to escape him. A way to circle back and save her men. Her man. Hel. If they got out of this she promised to tell him she loved him. Promised to never give him reason to doubt it again.

She stumbled, accidentally on purpose, and fell to her knees on the rocky ground. "I'm sorry. I'm not used to being out in the elements. Especially not during the day."

Oman sniffed without bothering to help her up. "Aren't you the lucky one? We can't escape the elements, as you call them. I call it a bloody evil sun and a soul-sucking desert. It's no way for a man to live. But at least it doesn't rob you of your manhood the way the cities do. The way your high and mighty High Priestess does."

"She does no such thing. What are you talking about?" Xian couldn't help but be insulted. The men had everything they wanted. They had freedoms the women could never dream of. It was the women who had to be hidden. The women who had to play roles.

"Oh sure, pretend you don't know." Oman shook his head, pushing her forward as soon as she got to her feet. "I know about your eunuchs. Well, you may as well have cut the dick off every man in that city. As it is you have them shackled by it. Don't do this or you won't get a Rose, don't do that or no lottery for you. Men aren't dogs, you know. You can't keep them in line forever with the promise of a sweet cunt. We need to be men. To fight and hunt and stalk our prey. Sooner or later your tame pups will turn and bite you. I know that much."

He had a point. The fact that she found herself agreeing at all with a filthy criminal who would probably kill her when he realized she'd been lying to him was disconcerting. But if it was true for the men, it was also true for the women. Nitara had proven that. The Roses who'd disappeared had proven that. Fear and faith kept people in line for a time, but sooner or later they would want to be free. To make their own mistakes. To fight their own battles.

Just as she had to fight hers. She stopped in her tracks, bending down to reach for a large rock. "Oman, you may be right. Women want strong men. Men who take what they want." She hid the rock in the folds of her robe and smiled sensually at him when he turned to study her suspiciously.

She arched her back slightly, showing her breasts to their full advantage, grateful for the sun's heat and the lover's flush it gave her body.

Oman whistled. "You are a lusty one for a Priestess. No wonder Siraj took a liking to you. He knows about the delights of the flesh."

Xian quirked her lips. "I bet you taught him everything he knows."

"A few things." He nodded. "A few. I bet I could teach you something right now. I'm sure you'll still be a good trade even if you're a little used up."

Her heart thundered as she watched him slip his pack off his shoulders and plant his knife in the ground beside it. One hand began to unlace his pants, the other reached out awkwardly toward her breast.

Xian lifted the stone and hit Oman on the side of his head. He screamed and fell to his knees, gripping the injury. “Godless bitch! You’ll pay for that.”

She ran. She had no idea where she was going, farther into the ruins where she’d never been before. But she didn’t care. She had to get away.

“You can’t get away, bitch. I know these ruins better than you. If I don’t get you the wild things that roam this place will. You’re safer if you just give up and take what’s coming to you.”

She shook her head. She’d rather die. She crawled up a jagged mound of rubble, her hands and knees already scraped and raw, desperate to escape. Some loose stones shifted, and she was falling, unable to stop, tumbling down the other side.

She cried out when the sharp protrusion of metal pierced her side, trapping her, near blinding her with pain. In moments a shadow blocked the sun. Oman. His smile was not pleasant.

This was not the way she’d wanted it to end. Raped and killed in the Wasteland. As he scrambled down the hill after her, she had a moment of clarity. This was what the woman who wrote the journal experienced after The Burning Time. This powerlessness, helplessness. This was why they’d done what they’d done. Because of men like Oman. Men like Chamberlain Vey. Violent men who lusted after power and control, but were too weak to win out over other men, so they abused women instead.

“I’m going to enjoy this. I really am. I’ll just have to get your Sun Guard to tell me about the treasure. As for Siraj, well, it will take years for Siraj to make up for what he’s done to me.” Oman pulled down his pants, spreading her legs. He ignored her shout of pain as the movement pushed the metal farther into her side. The pain was excruciating.

Xian closed her eyes, clinging to the image of Hel smiling above her, love in his eyes. His was the last face she wanted to see. That was the last memory. Not this. This was only a nightmare.

“What the fuck?” Oman squealed and his heavy weight flew off of her. Xian opened her eyes in time to see Hel fling him to the ground, one hand at his throat, the other clutching his dagger.

“You will die for touching her, you bastard. But not as quickly as your friends. I’ll stake you in the sun with your insides dangling out for the wild dogs.” Hel set down his dagger where Oman could see it, and began to use his fists to break the bones of the renegade’s face.

“Oh, Xian. Sweet, you’re wounded.” Siraj’s voice sounded far away. Xian couldn’t take her eyes from Hel. So much rage. So much anger. Like the Sun. For her.

He wasn’t going to stop.

“Hel. Don’t make him suffer. Siraj, don’t let him...”

Hel looked at her over his shoulder, hearing her words. Siraj leapt over the rock to lay a hand on his back. “Hel, she’s hurt. We need to get her out of this heat, clean her wound. End it. Now.”

“Traitor.” Oman spit blood out of his mouth, his voice garbled with pain as he spoke to Siraj.

Siraj leaned over his bruised body. “I owe you nothing. You fed me. I fucked you. I never signed on for kidnapping. Or rape. You deserve everything you get.”

Xian watched as Siraj took Oman’s head in his hands and twisted sharply, breaking his neck. Hel snarled up at him, but Siraj sent him a bitter smile. “She is watching, Hel. Better me than you.”

She slipped in and out of consciousness, getting bits and pieces of images. Hel carrying her, tending to her wound. Siraj wiping her down with a damp cloth, singing softly under his breath as though to soothe her.

When she woke, the cooler air told her it was night. She heard Luna’s neighing and relief washed over her. She was glad the mare was safe.

“Xian? Don’t get up too quickly, my love. Wait for me.” Hel came over and sat beside her, helping her to a sitting position. They were back in the cave, the small fire pit lighting every corner. There was no sign that the men had ever been there. No sign of what had happened to them.

Hel noticed her expression. “They are gone. Dead. They won’t bother you again.”

“Are you all right?” Xian accepted the agave juice he handed her, the soothing liquid making her sigh in relief.

Hel shrugged. “I didn’t enjoy that weapon. But it’s ours now. You are alive. That is all that matters.” He reached behind him and handed her the black metal box. “I brought this from the Vault. So you could finish reading the journal while you recover.”

“Hel, I need to tell you—”

“Anything you need to tell me can wait until you read. Siraj has made us something to eat. You need food.”

Siraj came inside, a metal plate topped with food in hand. “Talking about me? I’m just glad your Sun Guard hasn’t killed me yet for putting the two of you in danger.” He knelt down beside them, sincere concern in his eyes. “I had no idea they’d found me, Priestess. I swear to you.”

Xian cupped his cheek with her hand. “I know. This, none of it, is your fault. Hel knows that.”

“Hel knows that. He also knows that the next time dangerous men with weapons surround us, his woman will not decide to take it upon herself to save the day.” Hel’s growl drew her gaze back to his piercing green eyes. He didn’t hide the emotion in his expression. The fear. “I couldn’t take it again, Xian.”

His woman. Not High Priestess. Not his charge. His woman. That was what she was. Her true destiny. “I know, Hel. I just wanted you safe.”

He kissed her forehead and pointed to the box. “Eat. Read. Before I forget you’re wounded and bend you over my knee for the spanking you so richly deserve.”

A small thrill of arousal shot through her, but she nodded dutifully, knowing he needed that from her right now.

She ate the small bits of meat and herbs on her plate and opened the box, removing the journal with a sad sigh. She didn't want to finish this. Didn't want to read about any more pain or hardship. But Hel was right. She had to find out what happened. The whole truth, not bits and pieces.

She forced herself to read each and every entry. People had died. Of radiation. Murder. Women had died in childbirth. And babies had been born. Wounds had healed. And the rough outline of a society began to develop.

The last entry sent tears pouring down her cheeks and onto the old, strangely lined paper.

Tessa,

I give this gift to you along with the book we'd gone to the library to get that day. A gift so you will always know where you came from. Know that there was once a world where men and women worked together, laughed together and loved each other and their children. Your father loved you so much, Tessa. He loved both of us. He was a good man.

This wasn't what I wanted for your future. This is what had to be done. If I had been stronger I would have fled with a few of the others to those military wanderers. It is a rough life, but at least there is equality. There is a chance for families to live together.

When you are older, you may understand. I'll lock up this journal for safekeeping and give you the key on my grandmother's chain. Keep it hidden. When you are ready for the truth, you can return to this place and find me between the pages.

I also left you a map. One of the scientists that passed this way spoke of Antarctica. Of the possibility that life could thrive there now. That the solar storm melted the glaciers, but the land was not scorched beyond repair. Maybe someday you can go there with your family. Start again. Live the way you want to live. Not behind locked doors and hidden in caves. But free, as you were born to be.

I wish I could go with you.

I love you, baby. I always will. Remember me.

Xian thought of the mother she'd never known. The children she never thought she'd have. It was obvious this woman had done everything for love of her baby. A love that was shared by the man who had given of his essence to create it. It was so alien to Xian. And yet... She could easily imagine feeling that kind of love for Hel's child. As strong as the love she had for him. As the love she had always felt for the Goddess.

Meidra had said she would find her own path, and Xian could not help but think that this was destined. That this had all happened for a reason. After nearly two hundred star rotations in the Wasteland, surviving in a barren desert, they were being given a gift of renewal. Yet another chance to get it right. Everything she'd known had been proven wrong. She couldn't help but still believe a higher power had a

hand in all this. That She had brought Siraj to them. That She had made sure Hel had found his way to Kroy Wen all those years ago. To her.

She looked up to find Hel and Siraj watching her with concern as they sat by the fire. She set down the book and they jumped into action, both coming to sit on either side of her.

Her smile was wet with tears. "I have made up my mind. I will not be returning to Kroy Wen."

Hel tensed. "They will come after us. They'll think something happened to you."

She shook her head. "I sent a missive to the High Priestess of S'Alinorac before I left. The Wild Moon is in two days. She will receive word that she must send her apprentice to Kroy Wen's Temple." She shrugged. "I wasn't sure where this journey would take me, and I couldn't leave my charges with nothing. The apprentice will become the new High Priestess when it is discovered that I am gone for good. And if they look for me they won't find me." She reached for Hel's hand. "You can go back. You still have high standing. A life. No one knows your secrets. You could protect the new High Priestess."

He flinched at her words. "Is that what you want, Xian? You want me to leave you?"

Her heart began to race. "No, Hel. I—I love you. I just don't want to take you from your destiny."

Siraj chuckled. "Are you blind, Priestess? I have known from the moment we met that you were the Sun Guard's destiny. His path is yours. And a beautiful path it is. One I intend to stay on for as long as possible."

A chuckle escaped from between Xian's lips, joy filling her soul as she saw Hel's smile of agreement, the look in his eyes. He wanted to stay with her. He loved her as she loved him.

Hel lifted her hand and kissed her fingertips. "Where do we go, my love? A High Priestess who is no longer a High Priestess. A Wanderer-born Sun Guard with no family but you. And, well, Siraj." He shrugged at Siraj's cackle. "Where do we go?"

That was when she showed them the map and told them the story. They listened with the rapt wonder of children. Siraj as understanding as Hel had been about what the women of The Burning Time had done.

He was also fascinated by the large map. "So much world," he marveled. "The pirates tell stories...but I had no idea. This map alone could be the most priceless thing in existence to them."

They spoke deep into the night, making plans.

Siraj told her of a pirate by the name of Captain Xander. He owed Siraj a favor, and he was always a savvy trader. Siraj was confident Xander's ship would be able to make the long journey, for the right price.

Hel showed her what he'd brought to trade with, things his Father had given him. They were bizarre contraptions that should fetch enough to take them where they were trying to go.

A pirate ship. Xian never imagined in her life that she would run away to a strange land on a pirate ship. With two men nonetheless. Yet, nothing sounded sweeter. This was right. A fresh start.

But how could she leave everyone behind? Leilin, Meidra, Nikkan and the others who depended on her. How could she abandon them to the whim of the council? Chamberlain Vey?

The Priestess

Hel was holding the old image of the man, woman and child. “The sky is so blue. Do you think this place, this Ant-Ark-Tika, will look like that?”

“I don’t know. I suppose we’ll find out. But first, we need to break a few more laws. I think the Goddess will approve.”

Epilogue

She was dreaming. Her back cushioned by lush green grass, her feet in a cool stream of clear water. She'd dreamed that Leilin and Meidra had taken her words to heart. That they'd listened when she'd come back through The Garden of the Moon to tell them what she'd learned and where she was going.

From the news she'd gotten, the myth was spreading. Sun Guards training in the tunnels had seen the carving Siraj had so perfectly rendered of their map and been curious. Some even inspired.

Leilin and Nikkan had left Kroy Wen in search of Nitara and her family, to tell them of a place that The Burning Time did not touch. A paradise where life flourished. A place for new beginnings. Akaash had sent a message to Captain Xander. They were coming. Nitara, her lovers and family...and her child. Xian was overjoyed with the news. She knew they would decide to stay as some of the pirates had. Decide to start again. As she had.

She'd begun her own journal, finding the plants she needed to create her own ink. In it she'd spoken of the journey, both spiritual and physical, that had led her here. She spoke of her ocean voyage, which had been one surprise after the other. The two Roses who had disappeared from Kroy Wen had been aboard. Bryn and Ayla. Though there had been some tension because of what Xian was, the three soon became friends.

Bryn was a strong, sexual woman. And the stories she'd told Xian about what she did to Xander and his man Hawke on a regular basis...it made her blush just thinking about it. Bryn promised they would be back often. Already they'd brought back some small livestock and supplies, and several wonders created by an inventive trader known as Ezra. They'd even built a home here, though they weren't finished with their ocean adventures and exploration. It was a good sign of things to come.

"My love, I woke up and you were gone."

"Hel." She turned and took him into her arms. His hand slid over the curve of her belly, tight now with child, and down between her legs. She would never get enough of him. Never touch him enough, love him enough to make up for all the time they'd lost.

He caressed her features with his gaze. "You seemed lost in thought. Any regrets?"

Xian smiled. "Not a one. This place. You." She took his hand and placed it on her stomach. "Our child will be able to decide its own fate. And I will read Tessa's favorite story. A story about a young girl's brave adventure to a strange new world. How can I regret that? And you? Do you regret?"

A shadow crossed over his features. “Only that Father refused to come with us. And because of that decision, Fyral did the same.” He pulled her closer. “But they were convinced they had to stay to ensure that another chamberlain did not grow mad with power after Vey met his...untimely end.”

“Give them time. At least they understood. And they keep our secret. They love you.”

Hel smiled, the shadow passing. “As long as I have your love, I am blessed.”

“It is yours. Forever.”

He kissed her, his lips and fingers arousing her swiftly, her body knowing well the pleasure that awaited her.

“Don’t start without me.”

She smiled against Hel’s lips as she felt Siraj lay down behind her, his long erection pressing insistently between the cheeks of her ass. She wrapped her fingers around Hel’s thick cock, loving his moans, loving how she affected him, even now.

Siraj entwined his fingers with hers, so they were both touching Hel, both stroking as he grew ever harder beneath their touch. Hel’s malachite eyes narrowed dangerously on Siraj and he growled, but he didn’t push him away, bending his head instead to take one of Xian’s lush breasts into his mouth.

Siraj kissed her neck, and she could feel his smile. Xian was smiling too. He had insinuated himself into their lives, into their hearts...and whenever possible, into their bed. He still allowed Hel total control, but there was no doubt that Siraj knew how to get exactly what he wanted from both of them. She could no longer see a future without him. Without the both of them.

Her last thought before she lost herself to sensation was that she had finally found her answers. Finally found her destiny. Where she belonged...who she belonged to.

Xian had followed her own path. And it had led her home.

About the Author

R.G. Alexander writes erotic romance for Berkley Heat, Samhain Publishing and Ellora's Cave. She has lived all over the United States, studied archaeology and mythology, been a nurse and a vocalist, and now, a writer. She is happily married to a talented chef who is her best friend, her research assistant, and the love of her life. To learn more about R. G. Alexander please visit www.rgalexander.com. Send an email to R. G. Alexander at r.g.alexander@hotmail.com.

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Something magic this way comes...

Wicked Sexy

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Wicked ³, Book 1

Callie has always known the Abbotts were different. Witches, though they call themselves “Magians”. They are her second family. Harrison Abbott has been her best friend since they were children. Tucker Abbott, her life-long crush. And their brother, Tyghe? A magical pain in her backside.

When the Abbotts need her human perspective to solve a mystery, she doesn’t hesitate. Especially since it means getting everything she ever wanted. A chance to be one of them, to have magic, even if it’s only temporary.

Someone is attacking young women at Triune, a ritual that helps Magians find their perfect threesome—the match that will complete their magic and their hearts. Callie expected to be dazzled by her first glimpse into the Magian world, but the bone-melting desire between her and the Abbott brothers isn’t part of the plan.

Nor is the decades-old secret that makes her the target of a killer...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wicked Sexy:

Tucker lifted her chin, turning her face up to his. He looked lighter than she’d seen him in a long time. Younger. “Tyghe told me about the energy you were giving off at the salon. I saw for myself what one of us can do to you.” His jaw tightened, almost imperceptibly, but Callie saw it. “We are compatible, Callie. There is no doubt in my mind. Now as beautiful as that dress is, I think its time to take it off.”

Tyghe surprised them both by ducking his knees and lifting Callie over his shoulder, carrying her, she soon realized, to the wall with the handcuffs. “Oh, hell.”

He spanked her bottom playfully. “Don’t play coy with us, wicked girl. It wouldn’t be in here if you weren’t at least curious. And I can’t tell you how happy that makes me.” He set her down, lifting her hand to place a kiss inside her palm, his tongue tracing her life line. Callie shivered, and he smiled, slipping one faux-fur lined cuff around her wrist. “In the spirit of honesty, you should know this is not the first time Tucker and I have shared a woman.”

Tucker swore and Callie flinched, but Tyghe wouldn’t release her free hand, methodically closing the cuff with a loud click. “In fact,” he continued, grunting when he adjusted the chains to raise her arms above her head, avoiding her knee. “For a year or two there, we developed quite the reputation. I’d ‘Tyghe her up’, and he’d ‘Tucker her out’. Remember that, Tuck?”

Callie glared at him, but it was herself she was angry with. Tied up, the two men staring intently at her, undressing her, she was still aroused. Tyghe unhooked the now flame red dress from behind her neck, letting it drop to the floor, leaving her exposed in nothing but her underwear and heels. She loved the fire that lit in their stormy eyes. She had no shame. They'd done this with other women, and she didn't care. At least, not enough to ask them to stop.

That didn't mean she couldn't torture them the same way they were torturing her. "Thanks for the history lesson." She jerked her arms, jangling the chains. "This isn't my first rodeo either."

Tyghe's smile was tight. "Why do I get the feeling you aren't talking about what we did the other night? You mean your old boyfriend. How could we forget good old Mitchell? The rebel without applause."

"There was nothing wrong with Mitchell." He just wasn't Tucker...or Tyghe.

"There was nothing right about him, either." Tucker grumbled under his breath, surprising her. The few times he'd come out with Harrison when Callie was with Mitchell, he'd always been polite.

"He's the reason Tucker went a little wild for a while. Mitchell was the first guy you seemed serious about, the first one who hung around long enough to meet all of us. I think Tucker fucked his way through half the single females in Boston before he came up for air."

"Tyghe, you're a bastard." Tucker was unbuttoning his black shirt, his gaze snared by Callie's hardening nipples.

"Yeah, I'm the bastard. I just didn't want her hero worship to blind her to the fact that I'm not the only sinner in this room."

Callie started, her gaze colliding with the vulnerability in Tyghe's grey eyes. They'd been more intimate in the last few days than she'd ever allowed herself to be with another. Made love in positions and places that made her blush to think about. But they'd never spoken of her reaction to Tucker's touch. Never spoken of Tyghe's insecurities. Callie had believed he'd gotten over his concerns. Until now. Now she could see that he was still worried, even after all they'd done, that he'd be pushed aside for his older brother. As much as she wanted Tucker to touch her, as much as the revelation that he'd been jealous of her last relationship thrilled her, she couldn't let Tyghe think she didn't want him just as much.

She smiled at him, a little mischievously. "So, what do you do with a woman once you tie her up?"

Can a god of fire melt the heart of an ice queen?

Melting the Ice Queen

© 2008 Savannah Jordan

When a mysterious package shows up on the doorstep of self-proclaimed frigid bitch Cassandra Moore, she's more curious about who could have sent it to her than about the statue of the Egyptian god inside.

That night, the human spirit of her statue appears in her dream, giving her hottest sex she's ever had in her life. Emin is every girl's dream lover. He's mysterious, sexy as hell, and eager to satisfy every erotic whim Cassie entertains.

Yet Emin has secrets as deep as the myths of Egypt—he has sacrificed his magick and his life in the spirit world to be with Cassie.

The fires of passion blaze hotter with each encounter. But if Emin cannot melt Cassie's heart and convince her to love a fantasy, he is doomed to the hell between the realms.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit melt-your-panties sex, graphic language, ménage a trios, and a demigod that will make you gasp and swoon.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Melting the Ice Queen:

He was Egyptian, in the traditional pose and garb of a pharaoh or god. One hand held a staff, while the other was extended as though beckoning the faithful to his feet.

Who in the gods' name is this?

My heart, which refused to pick up a steady rhythm since the first contact with the statue, pounded in my chest. My mind whirred.

Egyptology was my favorite subject years ago in school. I had studied the myths and legends, gods and goddesses and I watched television specials, read every magazine article. But I've never seen this man. I picked up the ivory statuette, turning it in my hands, stroking the man's form and looking for a cartouche or indicating mark to tell me whose representation I held.

No name, no dynasty. Not one single indicating mark on the statue.

"Who are you?"

He did not answer, and I didn't expect him to—mystical happenings were just that, mystical, and the supernatural was something I had yet to experience in this lifetime. I shrugged and then dumped the remaining packaging material into the garbage. I wrapped the idol in my fingers, and the ivory warmed to my touch. Cradling my newly arrived treasure to my chest, I climbed the stairs to my bedroom.

A pile of discarded shoes cluttered the floor beside the door jamb. I skirted it and instead picked up a T-shirt dangling from the lid of my hamper in the bathroom, and stuffed it back in. Shoes were a necessity, crumpled laundry was not.

A breeze billowed my sheer linen curtains. Moonlight lay on the patchwork quilt, and left the rest of the room to shadows. The air was fragrant with lavender and cool as the breeze caressed my skin, just the way I like it. My radio, however, heralded doom. The little Sony sat on the nightstand and blasphemed about a coming heat wave, and the sweltering grip it would take on the city.

I hate hot weather.

I silenced the electronic harbinger, switched the setting to *Alarm* and shoved the clock radio back to make room for my Egyptian statue.

The statue was a mystery, but he made an excellent addition to my already Egyptianesque décor. His ivory blended well with my eggshell walls, the aged look made him appear all the warmer and more appealing. He stood, plinth slightly at an angle so that he was facing my bed. The staff he held now pointed directly into the moon outside my window, and his hand pointed at the center of my bed. Satisfied with his placement, I stripped off clothes as I walked through the room and into the adjacent bath. Then showered and in my nightgown, I climbed into bed beneath the gaze of the newcomer to my life.

A sigh escaped me and my eyes slipped closed.

“See you in my dreams.”

Somehow, I knew I was dreaming.

My eyes opened, and I was not in my bed, not in my own time.

I sat up, and was immediately in awe of my dreamscape. Golden statues of the creator god Ptah flanked the entrance, and in each corner stood life-sized versions of the statue on my nightstand. Pillars of white limestone stood in a line of silent sentinels along each wall, and draped between them hung translucent sheets of fabric. Incense drifted through the air, seducing me with patchouli, musk and spice. Torches blazed every few feet, and a balefire burned in the center of the westernmost side.

It was a temple dedicated, by looks, to the mystery man standing on my nightstand and the god Ptah, a creator deity from the ancient city of Memphis. But this temple was plusher and more inviting than any secret sanctuary. It was more like a sacred bedchamber.

A sense of wonder pulled at me, and I slipped from the raised bed upon which I sat. I stood in silent awe before the visage of the god Ptah who stepped from Chaos, and by thought and speech created all else according to early Egyptian mythology. His intent held great power. Then, I drifted the length of one wall, my fingertips trailing across the pillars, the curtains. Every tactile sensation was heightened. The pillars were smooth as glass, the fabric as light as air and the balefire, when I reached it, was intense, its heat pierced me to the core.

The curtains parted in the farthest right corner, and a man stepped through. His presence thrilled every nerve, danced in the blood of every vein. He was devastatingly handsome, with warm olive skin and dark hair dusting his shoulders. Brown eyes smoldered above a prominent nose underpinned by a well-trimmed moustache and beard. His lips were soft and full, and my heart beat with a wicked tattoo.

He was bare-chested, a linen wrap girded his hips, riding low. Armbands of gold cinched his biceps and a wide, beaded collar circled his neck. My soul resonated with his presence, my eyes widened as the heat of desire built within.

Something about him was familiar...

The statue!

The realization was a shock, but I knew without a doubt, coming towards me was the incredibly sexy, human version of my mystery statue. I opened my mouth to speak but shock held those words captive.

Who are you? Why are we in this temple?

He walked to me, placed a hand on my shoulder but did not speak. I pursed my lips around a question burning my tongue, a question he silenced when he wrapped his arms around me and pressed his lips to mine.

Oh my god!

A fleeting thought of pulling away and arguing with him passed through my mind, followed swiftly by the thought that this was just a really hot dream. Besides, he was too damned gorgeous to turn down.

No amount of hesitation or concern could squelch the lust his touch ignited in me. My body betrayed my need to maintain a cool distance. With my resistance sacrificed, everything felt right in his arms—the heat, the passion and the way my heart pounded. I wrapped my arms around him, and his desert heat caressed my skin. Clutched against his chest, and victim to the sacred oils scenting his skin, I swooned. He scooped my knees up with his arm and, with his other arm he supported my back as he lifted me.

I pressed my cheek to his chest and listened to the thunder of his pounding heart. He laid me on a raised altar padded and plush with pillows which we knocked off in our fervor. Our lips united again in a burning, tongue-tangled kiss, but he loosened his grip on my body. Then as he shifted his leg over mine, his lips trailed scorching kisses along the neckline of my nightgown. His passionate stare singed my cheeks with a high blush and warmed my pussy. He rose up between my knees, and produced a ceremonial dagger from somewhere in his wrap. My heart jumped into my throat.

How could I have missed that? I had felt something long and hard below his waist—but a knife? My knees quaked in a heady mix of fear and desire.

His eyes blazed with wicked intent. But the hilt of the knife was cool as he slid the blade down between my breasts and along my abdomen, cutting my nightclothes from me.

Finally, words formed on my lips.

“Who are you?”

The question trailed off into a low moan as he moved down, his face between my thighs as he blew a warm, wet breath across my cunt.

Yes, yes, yes!

Then, I lost eye contact as he dropped lower. A jolt of excitement raced through me, boiling the fluid in my veins when his tongue ran along my slit, and then plunged inside. His hands burned a trail up the inside of my thighs, and his fingers joined his mouth in the desecration of my pussy. I writhed in ecstasy.

His tongue and fingers drove me close to coming, and I knew no name to cry out. One more time, between pants and moans, I asked, "Who...are...you?"

Her destiny—destroy the world. Whether she wants to or not.

Calling the Wild

© 2009 Lila Dubois

Moira doesn't know who's hunting her, but she knows why. In her youth she unleashed a deadly force that killed everything within range—a strange power she has vowed never to use again.

Needing protection, she risks a bit of the old magic to call for backup. She gets more than she asks for. A lot more. A proud, sexually magnetic, enraged centaur who's far from a quiet, obedient servant.

Kiron at first tries to intimidate the witch into freeing him, but she possesses more backbone than the average human. When she's attacked again, he realizes she's not a real witch. In fact, she's not even human. And the sparks flying between them have nothing to do with the magical shackles that bind them together.

Curiosity grows to admiration, then to a love that in the end may not be enough to protect her. Moira's enemies are closing in, intending to harness her power to restore a dark kingdom that has lain dormant for a thousand years.

There's only one, heart-wrenching way out—give herself over to the full extent of her powers hoping that her true destiny lies with Kiron, and not in fulfilling a prophecy of death...

Enjoy the following excerpt for Calling the Wild:

Kiron traced his fingers over the cut. "Who did this?"

"I did. I let it happen."

"Why?"

"I needed information and paid in blood."

"That is dangerous."

"Everything about my life is dangerous."

Kiron bent low to examine her, his thumb tracing over line of the cut. Within the confines of her corset, Moira's nipple beaded.

"We need to leave," she whispered.

Though it was true that they needed to get away from the club, Moira was using it as an excuse. Away from the pulsing lights and music, what they'd done seemed like a terrible idea. She didn't know enough about centaurs to know if it has meant anything to him. She had some vague memories from Greek art and archaeology classes that the centaurs were known for their lust. Lust for drink, lust for battle and lust for women. If that meant that what had happened inside meant nothing to him, she would deal with it. What would be a problem, would be if she let what happened mean too much to her.

"Open the back," he said, stepping away from her. Her breast felt cold without his fingers.

“Why? You can ride in the cab.”

“I will not wear this weak human form any longer.” He stood back and spread his arms, lips pulled back in a sneer. Moira looked him over. He was tall as a human, over six feet. His upper body had the same muscular build, and his legs were thickly muscled also. She knew they were, because she could see the muscle definition in his thighs through his pants. Speaking of his pants... Moira looked him up and down.

The hilarity of her mythical centaur dressed in black PVC pants and a poet shirt hit Moira.

“Where did you get that outfit?” she asked on a giggle.

“I watched a man come out of the club wearing this and replicated it. He also had on a long red coat, but it was too hot so I discarded it.”

“Too bad about the coat. I would have paid good money to see you in it.”

“I look stupid.”

“No, I’m sure all the other badass centaurs wear frilly shirts.”

“Are you laughing at me, witch?”

“Laugh or cry, those are the options.”

White sparks spilled over him, growing until he was concealed by a waterfall of white. The sparks dimmed and cleared, the few stragglers blown away by the breeze that danced through the parking lot.

Kiron stood before her, a centaur once more. He even had the sword on his back.

“Where did the sword go when you changed?”

“I brought it into me, made it a piece of me.”

“You can do that? How?”

“I will show you when we get back to that messy place.”

Moira swallowed her questions about his magic and moved to the back of the truck to open the door and pull down the ramp. Looking around nervously, she waited until the lot was clear and then waved him in.

Kiron thundered up the ramp, the ring of his hooves on the metal ramp as loud as gunshots. Wincing, Moira slid the ramp into place and grabbed the door.

Kiron had finished turning around, though this time she had no sympathy for his cramped posture as she knew he could make himself more comfortable.

“Food,” he said unexpectedly.

“What about it?” Moira jumped on the bumper to grab the door.

“I do not know how often humans need to eat, but I am hungry.”

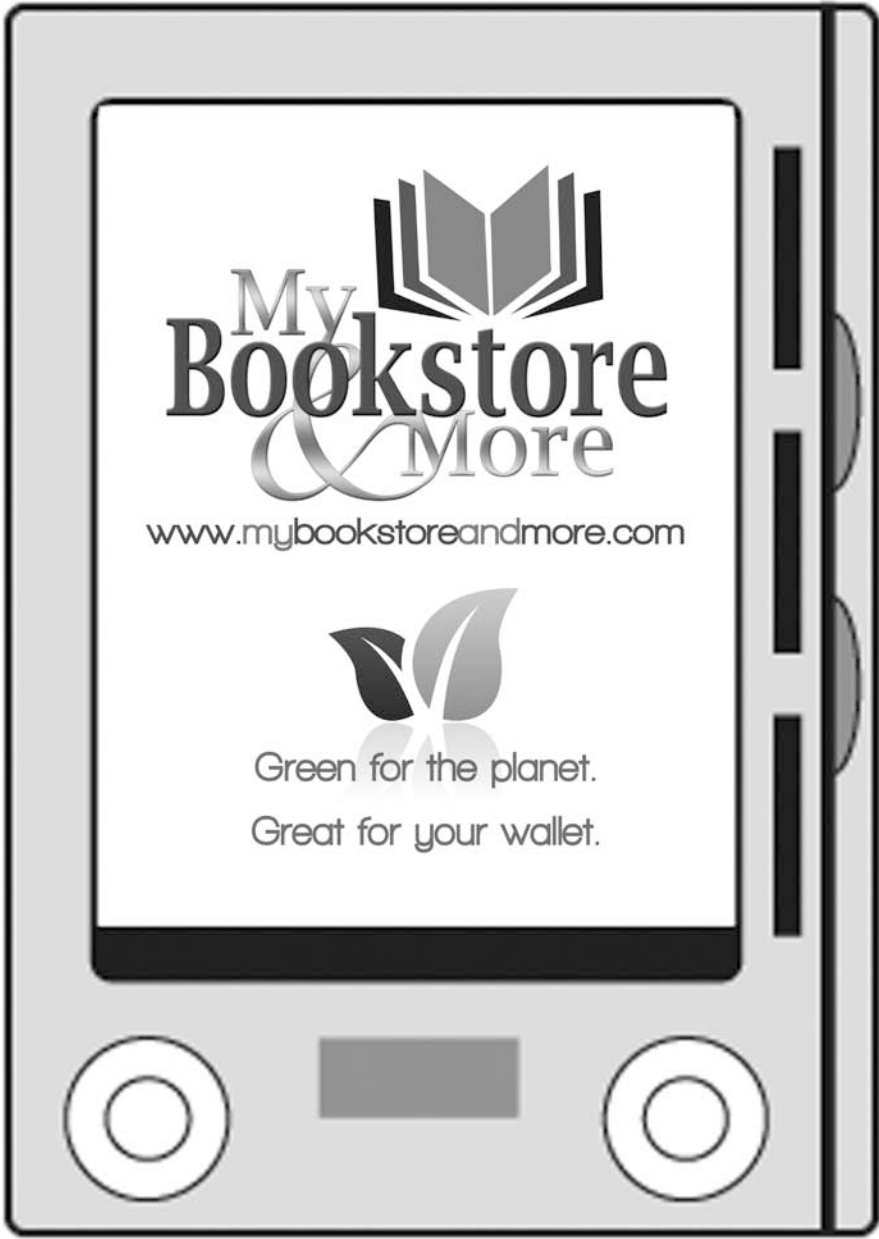
“Oh, right. Do you like burgers? Do you know what they are?”


“Yes, I do like burgers. Order me four.”

“Four burgers. Check.”

Moira closed the other door and bolted it in place, before racing to the front of the van and hauling herself up into the cabin.

With a final look at the club, she put the van in gear and pulled away.



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