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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

THE WARRIOR'S HEART

Sable Grey

Dedication

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Prologue

Viktor's hands shook as he stared down at his father's lifeless face. He was dead. No! It couldn't be real. But the thick rope-burn which encircled his father's neck was real enough. Dieter Kelemen had been murdered in his bed. Sorrow pierced through him as he reached for his father's arms with shaking hands. He felt like screaming, like ripping at his clothes. Instead, he bowed his head into Dieter's chest and muffled the sounds of anguish that pushed past the lump that formed in his throat.

Behind him, he heard his four brothers enter one by one, heard their intakes of breath and Alger's low curse. In the far corner, Katarin, their only sister, wept.

Viktor straightened and curled his fingers in the thick coverlet, then threw it back, revealing the stab wounds to Dieter's body. His father had been stabbed repeatedly. His gaze darted to the mark around his neck. Stabbed while someone choked off any shout of alarm. His father's knuckles were busted. He'd gone fighting. Viktor would have expected nothing less. He'd never known his father to be a weak man but the thought of him struggling for a breath as he swung at his assailants made bile rise in Viktor's throat. He also saw the bite marks, many of them, as if more than one had bitten him.

No blood, he realised. His gaze darted to the thin woman who stood at the opposite side of the bed, noting the deep lines that wore into her face around her mouth. Her dark eyes were red-rimmed indicating she'd been crying. Viktor frowned. Ilona had been his father's slave years before his mother's death but Viktor knew she'd been his lover for a much longer time. Though her own heart was broken, she'd washed Dieter's body clean and changed the bedding to spare Viktor and his brothers the sight of their father's bloodshed.

The large room suddenly seemed too small for him, and the grey stone walls of Kelemen Castle felt as if they were closing in, pushing the air from his lungs. He stumbled backwards but Alger's firm hand rested on his back.

"How has this happened, Father?" Viktor whispered. "Who brought your death to our door?"

Ilona's slender hand shook as she lifted a piece of material. "I found this in his bed. I had to pry it from his fingers."

Viktor's gaze rested on the crest sewn into the crimson stained material. Recognition settled and sudden rage filled his chest. The shout started from deep within him, tore from his throat and bounced around the room. When he turned, his brothers backed away and Katarin hurried to Ilona's side, burying her face into her mother's shoulder.

Viktor grabbed the table nearest him and hurled it against the stone wall, splintering the wooden structure into pieces. He vowed, in a voice that was only half human, that he would not rest until his father's death was avenged.

Chapter One

Jolan Lovasz crept down the winding stairway that led to a side door at the bottom of the north tower. It was the passage that her father's lovers used whilst her mother slept, to enter and leave the castle, and tonight it would prove a quick and successful escape for his daughter.

While Jolan normally would not defy her parents or wish to leave Maethi, the thought of marrying Count Mircea Dragomir pushed her desperately through the dark. His arrival at Maethi was in a throng of horsemen and a surprise to her father. His proposal to marry Aldarbern's only daughter came as a much larger shock. Until that day, they'd never met the count, only heard of his great army and fortress home that withstood the Mongolian attacks while others fell victim to their raids.

Jolan frowned in the darkness. Her father had poorly hidden his surprise and elation at the proposal. The arrangement had been agreed upon in moments, before Jolan even had time to realise what had happened. Then the count had been introduced to her. He was a tall, fearless man, wealthily adorned and handsome. Jolan should have been happy with the arrangement as she was well past the age for marriage, and her uncle had successfully rid her of any interest in those who might have approached her with a proposal. But an uneasy feeling filled her when she looked into the count's dark eyes.

"You hasten to agree to a union, Father, without even considering what motivates the proposal in the first place?" Jolan had waited until the count had retired to voice her concerns to her father.

"Why should I doubt the count's reasons?" Aldarbern had countered.

"Why? He marries below his station, Father, for wealth which does not reach what he would achieve were he to choose from another family."

Jolan's frown deepened in the dark as she continued down the stairwell. A fleeting look of doubt had come across her father's expression, chased quickly away by Cloelia's reminder that her visions had predicted a marriage which would increase the station of the Lovasz name. Jolan had looked to her mother for help but Linza Lovasz had learned early on not to cross the gypsy witch's words and offered no assistance.

The doorway came into view below and Jolan quickened her step. Escape was within reach. A horse awaited her at the edge of the wall, where she'd hidden a bundle of her belongings. Ishild, one of the servant women and Jolan's only true friend, upon hearing her plan, baked a loaf of bread for her to take with her when she could not convince Jolan to stay.

But three steps from the doorway, Jolan's step faltered as a shadow suddenly blocked the moonlight. Her breath caught in her chest as the figure moved forward and a pair of dark glittering eyes peered at her through the darkness.

"What's this?" Count Dragomir's soft voice wound through the shadows. "I expected a whore and find it is my own beloved creeping about in the dark like a little mouse."

Jolan's mind raced, seeking any excuse to explain why she was discovered in the stairwell. "I...I often like to take walks at night, when it's quiet." She continued when he did not respond, "This night has brought much for me to think of and I wanted to walk while I worked out all preparations that need be made for our union."

He stepped backward, unblocking her way and allowed her to descend into the moonlight. She fought the urge to move away when he placed a hand upon her back. His step was a slow stroll and she realised he meant to walk with her.

"I realise that my proposal came as a shock to you, as much as a shock as your beauty was to me when I met with you this day." The count spoke as they walked towards the north wall. "I knew only that Adalbern Lovasz had a daughter. Now that I have seen you, I know that the journey here was not a mistake."

His hand slid away from her back to her arm, then down to her hand as they walked. "You seemed fearful of me when we met." He looked down at her.

"Only for the stories of your great success and that you are a ruthless warrior against the Mongol savages." Jolan tensed as they approached the wall and he turned to walk east towards the river. The sound of the rushing water as it swept through the mountains was loud even at this distance. It was a sound that Jolan had always loved and would drown out the sound of her escape. But if they made it to the river's edge, her horse would be discovered. She tried to think of any reason to lure him away from the wall, in another direction. When she tried to veer to the right, he held her hand still, his path unaltered.

"It is true that I defend what belongs to me with the ruthlessness you have heard. You must understand, Jolan, men must sometimes kill to keep what is theirs." He spoke louder, leaning closer to her as they neared the river, so she could still hear his words plainly. "All

that I have, my family and I have worked for, and nothing will stand in my way in order to keep what is mine."

Movement at the edge of the river caught Jolan's attention. She squinted then her throat closed as they neared. One of Mircea Dragomir's men held Ishild, her back to his chest, a blade to her throat as another man groped at her exposed breasts. Ishild screamed but her distress was silent beneath the sound of the river. Jolan started forward, calling out for her friend, but the count's fingers tightened on her wrist, keeping her where they stood. The man with the knife looked up at them, his mouth pulling back to reveal a sinister grin. He dropped the knife and slid it across the top of Ishild's left breast. A thin line of blood appeared and when it began to run, the other bent forward and licked at the crimson droplets.

Jolan tried to jerk free of the count's grasp, screaming, but he did not release her, pulling her closer so he could close his free hand over her opposite shoulder. "You see, Jolan," his spoke next to her ear, "I am a passionate man too and appreciate your beauty. I will keep you and protect you from any that mean to take you away from me. The only ones who need fear me, my little mouse, are those who mean to deny me what is *mine*."

Jolan screamed with horror when Ishild's throat was cut. The man holding her released her so she could fall to the ground. As the other man straddled her dying body, Jolan whirled, unable to watch what was happening. Her gaze widened when she saw Cloelia standing but a few feet from them, thin arms crossed, her eyes hard and mouth pressed in a firm line. She tore free from the count's grasp and rushed towards the woman, realising too late Cloelia's part in what she'd witnessed. The crone's grip was tight and her eyes flashed angrily as she dragged her back to the doorway of the north tower.

Jolan looked back over her shoulder at the count to find him watching her. Her blood chilled. His eyes were bright yellow, glowing at her through the darkness.

"Haven't I warned you of the dangers of wandering around in the dark?" Cloelia hissed as she dragged Jolan up the stairwell. "You are fortunate Count Dragomir found you before you wandered into trouble." Jolan's whole body shook and uncontrollable sobs bubbled up from her throat. Ishild was dead!

"They...they k-k-killed her!" She managed to push the words out.

[&]quot;Killed who?"

[&]quot;They are...monsters!"

"Don't be ridiculous." Cloelia snapped as if Jolan were mad. "You are behaving peculiarly. I pray you did not find trouble while you were out there. Did you find trouble? You'll have to be cleansed." Cloelia continued up the stairwell nearly dragging Jolan behind her.

* * * *

Three months later, just weeks before she was to become the Countess Dragomir, she entered the great hall, summoned by her servant man, Tibor. "Come, Jolan, and meet the guard your father has commissioned to take us to Castle Drago. He is called Raban." Tibor indicated the stranger who stood in the middle of the room.

Jolan stopped, staring at the guard, in awe of his large build. Slowly, he turned, revealing a broad face of wide angles and a pair of piercing blue eyes. His torso was a wall of muscle beneath a brown wool tunic and just one thick trunk-like leg of him was larger around than her waist. Those legs bore loose fitted leggings wrapped at the calves with strips of dark leather that disappeared into the top of his leather boots. A sword and sheath hung at his waist, and he tucked it back with one large hand as he offered a slight bow.

"Only one? What is the point of that?" Jolan looked to Tibor with confusion. The rogue and Mongolian raids were of high threat to those travelling across the mountains and one man, no matter his size, couldn't save them from a party that meant to attack.

"You father has commissioned many. This is the guard charged to protect you personally," Tibor explained.

"How many are commissioned to protect us?" Jolan turned her attention to Tibor.

"Twenty." Tibor beamed. "And of course the men Count Dragomir will send to escort us to him. We shall be well protected."

Jolan wanted to tell him that that she preferred an attack by the Mongols over their arrival at Drago Castle. She said nothing, however. It would do no good. Her future was before her and her fate written. She'd failed in her attempt to escape, saw the true nature of the count and his men, and had been punished for lies when she'd tried to tell of what she'd witnessed. Her horse had been butchered, and it had been concluded, despite her story, that Ishild had stolen the horse and was leaving Maethi when she was overtaken by a small band

of Mongols. With the fear of the raids already rampaging across the mountainside, it was easy to believe the lie over the truth.

"Then it seems all is in place for our departure." Jolan cast a glance at the guard. "If the other twenty are like this one, they could crush half the Mongol army beneath their strangely expensive boots and slay the rest with their well crafted weapons." She turned as Tibor's gaze dropped to the guard's boots. She walked from the great hall to the door of the castle, ignoring Tibor when he called after her.

Outside, she found the twenty men commissioned as guards leading their horses to the stables. Four of them were of the same large build as Raban and all of them were equipped with the same kind of weapons. They looked an intimidating bunch and for a moment Jolan wondered whether, if offered more coin, they would do her bidding rather than her father's. But the idea was fleeting. No man could win against monsters that drank of blood and mounted the dead, with eyes that glowed bright in the night. She shivered and looked back at Tibor when he rested a hand on her shoulder.

"It would take much coin to commission this many guards. Why wouldn't my father spend his wealth on an army to defend our city instead?" She knew the answer. Because Count Dragomir had offered an army for no coin in exchange for his daughter's hand. It was not her father's gold which employed the newly commissioned guards but the coffers the count had sent upon his return to Drago.

Tibor ignored the question as the guard moved down the steps behind him. "Raban is to remain with you now as your personal guard. He has been instructed not to leave your side until you are safely delivered to the count."

Jolan stared at him. "I need no guard while I am in Maethi." Anger rose within her. "Have I not silenced myself and accepted what has been arranged for me as I was told? Have I not shown obedience? And for my silence, I am punished by being made a captive before I'm even wed?"

Tibor reached for her hand but she jerked it away from him, not wanting his tenderness. "It is for your benefit that..."

"My benefit? Nothing, since the day Count Dragomir arrived, has been done for my benefit but rather for the benefit of more coin." She lifted her gaze to the guard who stood silently behind Tibor watching their exchange without expression. "What services did the count's coin commission of you?"

The guard slanted a glance at Tibor then returned his attention to Jolan. "I am to remain at your side, charged to protect you from your uncle and to deliver you, as your protector, through the gates of Drago to Count Dragomir."

Tibor gasped. "She was not to know of our agreement regarding her uncle."

"Forgive me the mistake." But there was no apologetic tone to his voice and he was still looking at Jolan. He could have easily lied. But he hadn't. Why? Jolan tilted her head, scrutinising him more closely. Perhaps he thought she would more easily accept him if he spoke the truth. That would make him far more intelligent than she would suspect of a guard.

"If you wish the commission, you will not make another *mistake*," Tibor warned before facing Jolan again.

Jolan laughed coldly. "That is why you've brought the guards so early before we are to depart? Because of my uncle? Ewan Lovasz is the least of my worries and of the threats I am to face, Tibor. Far worse than my uncle awaits me at Drago." She reached for Tibor's hand. "Though your concern for me is appreciated, I can handle my uncle without the help of a guard." She would not tell him that her uncle had already taken what Tibor was so set upon protecting.

"He will remain with you." Tibor was unmoved by her affection.

Jolan let her hand slip away from his. "Of course he will, for nothing of what I want is considered by anyone of this house any longer." She turned and moved away, frowning at the heavy step that followed. Of course the guard would do as he was commissioned. Like the rest, his concern would be of coin.

"Why did you mention my uncle to me?" she asked out of curiosity after several minutes of his following.

His stride brought him forward to her side. "I do not like lies." He glanced down at her and shrugged his large shoulders. "And I am weak with women, it has been accused." His hard face suddenly split with an unexpected smile that softened his features.

A bolt of hope surged through Jolan, the first in months. With a guard, her father and those who worked for him would not feel the need to keep her under strict watch. And if this man was as gullible as he claimed, she could be well on her way to Brasov long before anyone realised she was missing.

Her mind raced around the idea as she found her way towards the woods to the south. She would hide a second set of clothes in the stables, take a horse, and later discard her clothes and her horse so that it looked as if she was overtaken at the road. She would have to travel the rest of the way afoot, disguised as a boy, until she could obtain a new horse.

The plan, though quickly devised, was sound. She would need to appear content with having the guard so that the others turned away their watchful eyes then convince the guard to unlock her at night to meet her in the stables for a tryst.

As they reached the clearing in the trees at the lake, Jolan turned and faced the guard. "Do you think me pretty?"

One dark eye brow arched momentarily. Raban's gaze darted to the trees, as if afraid he too was being watched, before his attention returned to Jolan. Slowly, his gaze dropped down her body and up again. He inclined his head and Jolan sent him her best smile.

"I am glad you think so, guard." She dropped her lashes. "I like the way you look too. Tibor is a silly old man. I *know* my uncle lusts for me." She knew all too well what her uncle was capable of and had experienced his vile lust first hand.

Turning, she stepped carefully onto a fallen log and paced its length as she spoke. "Let us play a game while you are to protect me."

"A game?" He moved closer when she almost lost her balance.

"We are both too old for games, I realise, but it shall make time pass more quickly for us, I think."

"What kind of game?"

"I shall imagine I am a princess rather than my father's daughter." She purposely allowed her foot to slip out so that she went tumbling to the side. As she suspected, his strong hands caught her before she fell. She grasped his shoulders as she took her time steadying herself.

"Careful," he warned.

"And I shall imagine you are my slave and you must do anything I bid of you." She allowed her hands to remain on his shoulders even after his fingers slid away from her waist. "Perhaps you are a warrior who my army took as prisoner and brought back to me."

The slight curl in the corner of his mouth let her know her little scenario amused him so she continued. "And if you wish to be released from captivity, you do as I wish." She leant forward. "I wish you to kiss me, slave."

For a moment his light gaze met hers then lowered to her mouth. She almost smiled. Instead she leant forward and closed her eyes. The moments dragged by but she remained as she was. She was just about to give up and open her eyes when his breath heated her lips. A second later, his mouth brushed against hers.

At first it was gentle, coaxing. She could tell he wasn't unaccustomed to women. That was encouraging. When she parted her lips, he stilled momentarily before thrusting his tongue forward and returning his hands to her waist. His fingers tightened and he stepped forward so that her slim torso met with his hard chest.

For a few dizzying minutes she lost herself in his lips, surprised at the passion his mouth provided. She'd assumed he would be clumsy and perhaps even paw at her, but instead he kissed like a man with much experience. His hands glided up her back, held her firmly to him as he fed from her mouth.

Jolan's hands ran over his muscled chest and circled around his neck, her fingers curling in his hair. The sound he made was deep, guttural, and vibrated against her lips. That vibration sent hot chills down her spine. She pulled at him, but he tore his lips from her mouth, leaving her breathless and wanting more.

"You tempt me, Prințesă," he murmured as his mouth brushed across her cheek and over her jaw, his hot breath setting her skin afire, "to do more than kiss." His lips parted against her throat and sucked at her.

Jolan's body shook and her nipples hardened, pressing out against her clothes. Her sex burned for Raban's attentions, and for a moment, she'd forgotten her plan altogether, consumed instead by her desire and her body's demand. She reached between them, boldly pressing against his hard erection. His response was a low groan that made her feel heady with the power of wielding his desire.

"I have told you I have a weakness. I believe you use it against me now." One arm tightened around her while his free hand tugged at the cloth that covered her hair. When it pulled free and he lifted his gaze, she heard his sharp breath as he sucked it between his teeth.

Since she was a child, Cloelia had washed, brushed, and braided Jolan's hair, lecturing that a woman's hair could bewitch a man to care for her. It was long, well past her buttocks, and due to Cloelia's obsessive care, it always shone like dark silk. Even braided and pinned

so that none peeked from beneath her head cloth, Jolan could see her guard was affected by it.

Releasing him, she reached back and unwound the braided rope so that it hung over her shoulder. She wanted him to see its length. To her surprise, he took a step backwards, his arms suddenly leaving her. She stared at him, noting the flushed planes of his face, the way his nose flared with every breath. He desired her. Why did he retreat?

"I fear, Prințesă, your game is played unfairly and you have me at complete disadvantage. If we continue and are discovered, I will most assuredly hang."

She bit her lip as she smiled. "You think me no longer pretty?"

"I think you look good enough to eat." His words were spoken in a low voice, half growled. His eyes were darkened with desire reiterating the truth he spoke of his desire. Not many made Jolan truly wish to bed with them. Most men were either too set upon winning her father's favour if her uncle had not sent them away first, or too bent upon seducing her to allow her to play the part of seductress. Almost always, she lost interest in them after a few stolen kisses. This man's reaction to her, his adoring gaze, teetered on worship and she could not deny that she liked it.

Stepping down from the fallen log, she advanced towards the guard but he took a step backward for every one she took forward. "If we were discovered, we could run. I have no want to marry Count Dragomir. He is a monster and I know he shall try to bring harm to me." At those words the guard stopped his retreat, his gaze meeting hers as she continued, "I saw him for what he was but my father is blinded by Cloelia's words of vision and prophecy. I would run with you, guard, and give you as much gold as I could steal away from my father before we left."

"You saw..."

"Glowing eyes in the dark with the brightness of ten lanterns. His men killed my poor Ishild before my very eyes, licked at her blood and lay upon her dead corpse. They would not have told you what you deliver me to, for they refuse to hear what I saw with my own eyes. I tell you, these are not men that await our arrival." She reached up and caressed his face, lowering her lashes. "I see you are a brave man, a man of strength. Run away with me and save me."

"I am charged to protect you, Prințesă. No harm will come to you," he vowed dutifully.

She exhaled heavily. She'd thought perhaps she could lure him to assist with her escape but she saw now that she would have to stay with her original plan. While only a guard, he did seem to possess some honour and meant to do the work he was commissioned to do. Oddly, he'd not accused her of madness as others had when she spoke of what she'd seen of Count Dragomir that night. For that she was grateful.

"Then you shall have to contend with remaining my slave." She forced a smile. "I bid you kiss me again before we return to my father's home. And tonight, you will unlock my door and meet me in the stables so you may remember your weakness for women and succumb to my every desire."

His lips found hers again but he did not touch her and his tongue did not move to respond to hers. This time he simply kissed her softly then leaned away. She did not mask her disappointment, but rather pouted as she turned. She heard his step as he followed her back through the trees.

Chapter Two

Triangled face, feminine features, large eyes fringed in black lashes, and a mouth that begged to be kissed even before it parted to command that very affection. Jolan Lovasz proved more than just the beauty Viktor first thought when she entered the great hall that morning she'd bid him meet her in the stables. He'd remained at her side throughout the day as he'd been commanded by the servant man, Tibor, learning her routine and studying those around her.

Ewan Lovasz was the threat that Tibor feared and with one look at Aldarbern's younger brother, Viktor understood Tibor's concern. Ewan was a coward, spotted easily by those who knew the nature of men. Jolan had not seen the danger but Viktor recognised the kind of man by the way her uncle's gaze watched her every move. He was a snake, one that would not strike at a man, but would deliver its poison to one smaller and weaker; one like Jolan.

"I do not like him," Alger said from Viktor's side as they sat at one end of the great hall, sharpening their weapons while Tibor recited a tale of battle and lordship to the family. Jolan sat at her father's feet, his wife at his side, all three listening intently. Ewan's attention remained on Jolan.

"I like that one even less." Viktor nodded to the woman who stood behind Aldarbern's right shoulder. She was bone thin, dark hair threaded with grey pulled back tightly from her narrow face of lines and wrinkles. He'd noticed how the woman hovered over Jolan constantly and any time Jolan showed the slightest defiance in whatever she said, she would whisper in Aldarbern's ear. He would instantly instruct Jolan to do as she was told. His wife looked at the crone with hatred at times when Cloelia wasn't looking and always away when she was.

"The stable boy revealed her to be a witch," Alger supplied.

The noise Viktor made caused those across the room to look his way. "Forgive me," he murmured, then continued, "I have fought many battles and have never met a man so fearless."

Tibor smiled and did not seem offended by the interruption, "You soon shall, Raban, for I tell the tale of Count Mircea Dragomir when he faced the Mongol horde."

"No man is completely fearless," Viktor interjected. "If one fights, he fights for fear of something, otherwise what would fuel his bloodlust?"

Tibor seemed enthusiastic for the debate for his eyes lightened and he took several steps towards Viktor as he spoke, "Bravery and honour, qualities you yourself possess for your many years of service to Brasov."

Viktor forced a smile. "Fear that my belly might growl and I should be forced to sleep in the mud with the pigs." Alger chuckled beside him and nodded in agreement.

"The count fears having something of his taken from him," Jolan said quickly. "He told me that is why he fights so viciously." She glanced at Cloelia when the crone's head snapped around to stare at her, her gaze clearly an attempt to silence her but she ignored her. "I am certain he spoke the truth and would let no man...woman...or child stand in his way."

Viktor saw again the sadness in her eyes. He believed she had seen what she'd related earlier. Her offer to run away with him had been tempting. For half a moment he'd considered whisking her away, back to Kelemen Castle, and keeping her as his wife. Any woman who kissed with such fervour had much more to offer than her lips, and she'd offered it freely to him.

"You speak stupidity," Cloelia snapped and Jolan's gaze lowered to her hands. She spoke no more.

"It is not stupidity but in fact the very honour with which Tibor entertains us. The count fights for what is his and refuses to let another take it from him. That is to be respected," Adalbern corrected. "Though my daughter speaks as if there is no honour in that, she will learn, once she has settled as Countess of Drago, she too will feel the urge to protect what is her own. Be patient with her, Cloelia, she is young."

Jolan's lips pressed together momentarily. "I would fight for you, Father, and for my mother. But to fight for a piece of land is a waste. A home can be built anywhere and is not made of structure and timber but of those that inhabit it."

"Not so young or stupid," Viktor said as he slid his sword into the sheath and saw her look of surprise but turned his attention to Tibor. "But, I admit, I do know of another who fought against his enemies and won more times than he lost." Tibor's eyes glittered with interest and he waved his hand, nodding for Viktor to continue.

"His name was Dieter Kelemen and he lived in the west lands of Wallachia. He was a brave warrior, one who feared only the wrath of the woman he loved." Viktor glanced at Alger with a grin. "And her wrath could be mighty. Her name is Ilona." Alger laughed loudly.

Viktor faced his audience again, strolling forward as he spoke. "She was a slave to Dieter, but it was she who held his heart. He was married to another, one he did love, but not with the passion he had for Ilona. She was his strength...and his weakness." Viktor looked down at his feet as he recalled his father's gentle eyes when he looked at Ilona.

"Another man, younger but holding power of his own, came to Dieter one day in passing through on his way to his own lands. He saw Dieter's wealth and the devotion of his people as well as the passion between Dieter and Ilona." Viktor turned and paced back across the floor, his gaze locked on his brother's sad expression. "The younger was jealous and, despite Ilona's age, offered a number of his well bred horses for her. Any other man would have handed over his slave instantly but Dieter did not, refusing the offer and injuring the younger's pride."

"A fool," Aldarbern mumbled.

"Aye, perhaps," Viktor faced them again, "But as it is with men and the women they love, he would not part with Ilona any more than he would allow the man to take his wife, his sons, or his daughter. The younger was angry but moved on. Or so the Kelemens thought. That night however, like a coward in the dark, the man returned and murdered Dieter in his own bed. He sought the woman, Ilona, but she fought him as bravely as any warrior, for Dieter would not have loved a weak woman who bent to the will of others."

Viktor's heart ached but he continued, "And upon seeing her master, her lover, she screamed out so that three of those devoted to Dieter rushed to her aid. Just as cowardly as the man had entered, he escaped into the darkness."

"What happened?" Jolan whispered.

"Ilona spent hours cleaning her lover's body so his sons would not see his life's blood seeped from his body. She wept and her tears helped wash away the evidence of suffering. And only then did she call to his sons and her daughter to see that their father was indeed dead. The sons vowed to avenge their father, to seek out the man and kill him as coldly as he had their father."

"Did they do so?" Tibor asked.

"I don't know how the story ends, but I like to imagine that they succeeded."

"Where is the honour in that story?" Ewan asked.

"What is more honourable than keeping safe what he loved most rather than handing her over for a few horses? Or nobler than a slave who showed more courage and strength than a queen for those she too loved?" Viktor saw Jolan's smile.

"It is a beautiful story," she agreed.

"What of Dieter's wife?" Linza, Aldarbern's wife asked.

"She was a good woman to her family and cared for Ilona too. She died of illness when her sons were young." Viktor glanced back at Alger. "She too would have fought against any who meant to destroy her husband or her family."

"Dieter was fortunate to have so many to love him as he loved them," Linza agreed.

"I have heard the name Kelemen," Tibor revealed and Viktor's head snapped around.

"Kelemen Castle in the west. It is said the castle is surrounded by three sets of large stone walls and protected by an army as mighty as that of the Ottomans."

"I suppose if he or one of his sons had come to offer gold in exchange for me, I would have been sent there instead," Jolan snapped. Viktor's gaze narrowed when Cloelia reached down and grasped her arm.

"Enough stories. Come, we have work to do on my baskets."

Jolan sighed heavily but rose to her feet and allowed the woman to lead her from the room. Uncomfortable silence settled after their leave, thick and tense. Viktor studied them each. Linza's fingers curled against the wooden arms of her chair as if any moment she would leap to her feet. Aldarbern looked down at his feet, while his brother fought against a smile. Tibor looked to his master then breathed out heavily before facing Viktor.

"Thank you for sharing your tale, guard. I fear mine grow old and rehearsed." He indicated the door, "Let us go and make certain you have everything you need for the trek into Moldavia."

Viktor moved forward, waving for Alger to follow. He knew that Tibor wished to speak with him privately, for they'd already talked of what was needed for the trek and had been provided all they requested.

"My master regards you with respect," Tibor spoke as they stepped outside. "I could see it when I spoke of your previous employment. He might allow you more privilege because of that. Cloelia treats Jolan poorly, as if it is she who is mistress of this house, but she does not do it when others are present. If you remain at Jolan's side, help me devise reasons

for her not to be left alone with Cloelia, and we might spare Jolan some of her cruelty these last weeks before she is to go to Drago."

"Why does Lovasz allow the crone to rule his home?"

Tibor lowered his voice. "She has visions which have benefited my master many times since she came to be here. She knows of spells that keep danger away and can predict when illness befalls the castle and village."

Viktor frowned. Superstitions and illusion.

"I shall do as you ask," he conceded and Tibor beamed with approval.

* * * *

The door of the stables was ajar. As she'd bid him, he'd unlocked her door, wondering at why they locked her in to begin with. But he'd not been certain she would come to the stables as she'd suggested earlier. He stepped inside the darkness, the scent of freshly lain hay assaulting his nose. He stood still, his gaze darting around through the darkness.

"Prințesă?" His steps sounded loud as he walked deeper inside the structure.

A soft giggle drifted from the corridor of stalls. He moved forward. She was hiding from him. She wanted him to come for her. This was the kind of game *he* enjoyed. Tilting his head, Viktor listened to the soft pad of her steps as she moved quietly in the dark. Turning his nose up, he breathed in her scent as he moved towards the corridor of stalls, noting they all held an animal but one.

He saw her movement in the shadows as he approached the stall. She was hiding behind him but he didn't let her know he knew where she was. "You tempt me to chase after you, Prințesă. If I am made to do so, I shall take what I wish of you once I've captured you." He could hear her breath as she neared; his senses acute in the darkness.

"Then you are a savage slave and mean to ravish me as punishment for your capture?" She spoke softly from behind him and he turned. His throat dried. She wore only a sleeping shift and her dark hair was unbound hanging around her in thick waves. She was close to Godly in beauty and his cock hardened at just the sight of her.

Smiling, she slipped past him, her hand trailing over his shoulder and across his chest as she went. Opening the empty stall's door, she stepped in and turned, waiting for him to join her. A wool blanket lay across the hay beneath her feet.

He discarded the sheath and sword from his hip, tossing it to the ground before pulling his tunic over his head. She stood there watching him through the shadows as he unfastened the ties of his leggings.

"Undress," he told her.

"What good is your strength to me if you do not use it?" She didn't move. "I wish you to rip my clothes open, slave, and ravish me and take what you want as you threatened."

His breath quickened. He'd never ravished a woman in his life but her game warmed his blood and he obliged by striding forward into the stall and pushing her gently against the wooden wall behind her. He reached forward and grasped the collar of her shift. It ripped easily from neck to knee, revealing her petite, womanly body to him. Breasts, a handful each, topped in dark circles, pointed upwards for his attention. He watched them rise and fall with her quickened breath then his attention lowered to the flat of her stomach and the sweep of her hips. Dark hair curled thickly at the apex of her thighs and heat wound through him as he inhaled deeply.

"Why are you locked in your room at night?" His gaze continued to slip over her, admiring every soft curve of her body.

"They are afraid a man might steal into my room and do to me what you are about to do," she said between breaths.

He chuckled deeply and reached for her, his fingers resting around her waist. He lifted her and brought one dark nipple to his mouth, enclosing it completely between his lips before sucking fiercely. She gasped and moaned at the pressure from his mouth, bringing her hands to rest on his shoulders. He licked, sucked, and nibbled at her sensitive flesh, then moved to the other breast to apply equal attention.

Viktor felt her body tremble when he released her breast and lowered her back to her feet. Urging her down onto the blanket, he ran a hand across her stomach then curled his fingers into the hair below, tugging gently before running both hands back up her body. He pushed her arms above her head, capturing both wrists in one hand, pinning them flat against the blanket. Her eyes darkened in clear indication that she enjoyed his dominance.

His free hand delved between her thighs. "Open." Her legs parted and he clapped his hand over her sex. He moved his palm against her, in slow circles, watching her face. She was so responsive. With every touch he could see her pleasure, smell her arousal, sense her anticipation. Even without the acute sense of the wolf, her expression hid nothing from him.

He leant down and licked at her jaw as he continued to stimulate her sex with his palm. He turned his head to breathe in the scent of her hair deeply. Then, to his surprise, she leant forward and bit his shoulder gently.

Groaning, he turned his mouth to her ear, "Continue and your game will become very dangerous, Prințesă." He sucked in his breath when she bit again, this time slightly harder. Heat vibrated through him and the wolf inside of him awoke, pushed against his will. Her lips moved half an inch inward from his shoulder, tongue dragging moist fire in its path. Then she bit again, harder.

He jerked upward, away from her, gazing down at her in the dark while he dragged a ragged breath in attempt to steady his wolf. He pressed his finger against her cunt, finding her slick beneath his fingertips. He pushed inside. Tight but not virginal.

"Thank the Gods," he growled.

Her hips lifted, welcoming his intrusion. Her body clenched around him. He pushed his finger deeper, turning his hand so his palm rested against her sensitive flesh. She rocked against him, humming softly at the pleasure it brought her.

"I've never had a woman so eager to be ravished." He leant forward to lick at her jaw. "One would believe you liked what I'm doing to you."

"You like me to bite at you," she whispered.

"Yes, I do. Perhaps too much." He worked his finger in and out of her, using the same rhythm to stroke her clit. When her pants became soft whimpers, he quickened his movements and a second finger joined the first, stretching her as he continued to rock his hand against her. Her moans made him want to crawl atop her.

"More," her whispered plea shattered his resistance. He withdrew his fingers and settled between her legs, lifting them to his hips. He nudged her sex with his cock and plunged into her with a deep groan of his own. He rocked backwards then thrust again to the heart of her. Her cry muffled against his mouth. He slid his tongue between her lips to lick at the moist warmth behind her teeth. She lifted her hips, meeting each stroke with hunger that matched his own.

"Release my arms," she panted and instantly he lifted his hand from her wrists. Instantly she surged forward, grasping his shoulders, pulling at him as she leant forward and bit his shoulder. His hips jerked against hers and he planted both hands on either side of her. His sac tightened when her mouth moved to his chest and she bit again.

"By the Gods, if you do not stop, I shall lose control completely," he warned. When her teeth loosened, he ducked and captured her lips with his, kissing her passionately while his hips worked his cock in and out. She felt good and the muffled cries against his mouth sent him towards the edge. He fucked her with abandon while she bucked beneath him. Tension flared and heat consumed him. He grunted with every thrust then withdrew to spill onto the ground with a shout.

For several moments they both were still, their heavy breaths the only sound in the stables with exception of the occasional movement in the other stalls. He closed his eyes as she moved to sit up. He'd nearly lost complete control. Even now he still shook.

Suddenly pain exploded across the right side of his head. Viktor brought his hand to his temple as he struggled to open his eyes. She'd hit him with his own sheath, he realised as he saw her scrambling away from him, her weapon clutched in her hands. He swiped at her, trying to grasp her leg, but she struck him again.

"I'm...I'm sorry, guard." Her whisper found him through his dizziness. Through blurred vision he saw her swipe up a small bundle in the corner of the stall and dart past him. He shook his head as he heard a horse being led from the stall next to him. Anger began to push the pain aside and he stood, grasping up his clothes so he could quickly dress.

He stumbled from the stables in time to see her kick the horse forward, galloping full speed down the road. He swore under his breath, hand clutching the side of his head. The bitch had used him. She'd had a horse and pack ready, had planned the entire tryst. Heat pumped through his veins as he re-entered the stables and prepared his horse, Koen, so he could go after her.

Her cries of pleasure had not been feigned. He knew that for certain. Her body had been wet and responsive. As he led Koen into the night and mounted, he realised her plan would have left him looking the fool, perhaps even suspected of doing her harm. It would have ruined his own plans.

He kicked Koen forward, taking chase. Just outside of the village, he found her clothes in a heap in the middle of the road. He dismounted and took them up, stuffing them into the leather satchel on his horse. Stupid woman. She'd stopped to change her clothes, giving him more time to catch up with her. The road wound up over the ridge and down across a small valley, and at the edge of the woods, at the pass between the rocks, Viktor found her horse.

He tied the horse to his own and pushed on. It only took him ten minutes for her to appear in front of him on the road, dressed in boy's clothing and with her hair tucked beneath a wool cap. She turned as he rode forward and started to run when she recognised him. Leaning forward he scooped her up.

"I'll have you beaten from Maethi! My father will..."

"Most likely have *you* beaten for riding off into the night. Foolish woman. There are bands of men on this road who wait for someone to cross their way." He snatched the bundle she carried and tucked it with her clothes, then draped her over the horse in front of him.

"Settle yourself, lest you wish me to bind you and drag you behind me to Maethi," he warned as he turned his horse and rode back the way they'd come. After a moment of consideration, her fight settled.

"You used me."

"You don't understand!" She began to weep, further irritating Viktor. "The count isn't a man. I saw that as truth with my own eyes. He had his men kill Ishild." Her words tumbled from her lips as she tried to push herself up but he placed a hand on her back, roughly holding her as she was.

"You used me," he repeated. "I've no liking for being used. You will *not* attempt it again." He listened to her sobs until they quieted.

"You shall not command me." Her voice was weary and weak. Pulling the reins, he halted Koen, then hefted her up and turned her so that she sat, legs to one side, across the horse in front of him. He grasped her chin, forcing her to look up at him.

"You will *not* attempt to use me again."

Her eyes widened as she stared up at him. He released her chin when she offered no more argument and took up the reins again. She remained silent the entire ride back.

Chapter Three

Jolan sulked. She'd thought the guard a stupid oaf. She'd been wrong. She'd realised her mistake the moment he'd caught up with her on the road. When he began speaking it was in the tone of a man who was accustomed to ruling than of taking orders from another. Her only consolation was the red slash above the guard's left eye.

"You...what was your name...Raban, yes that's it. What happened to your head?" Cloelia was the one to ask about it.

He lifted an apple from those Jolan had picked that morning, examined it and withdrew a knife from inside his tunic. Slowly he began slicing it in bite-sized pieces. His gaze darted momentarily to Jolan and she waited for him to betray her and speak of what had happened the night before.

"I've a weakness for women," he finally spoke, directing his attention to Cloelia then Tibor, "and apparently for following one about an unfamiliar castle in the middle of the night. I tripped on the stairs in the north tower when returning to my chamber."

"You have made yourself quite comfortable in such a short period of time," Cloelia snapped.

"I adjust well." He lifted a piece of apple and popped it into his mouth as Tibor chuckled across the room.

"Too well. What if we had been attacked and Jolan was left unprotected?" Cloelia demanded. "Had that thought occurred to you as you entertained yourself?"

"Her chamber is far enough away from the main entrance, which is certainly where someone would try to attack first as it is the weakest part of this place, that I would have been able to return to her long before anyone could have gotten to her." He chewed slowly and spoke around the bite. "I am weakened by women, but I am not blinded by them."

Jolan's gaze swept to Tibor in time to see the slight twitch in the corner of his thin mouth. They accepted what he said as truth. She felt like hitting them all in the head with his sword.

"Pay attention to what you are doing. You are cutting the wick too long," Cloelia suddenly snapped and Jolan looked down. Quickly she shortened her mark and cut the wick. Her attention wandered to the guard, however, once she started rolling the beeswax.

He'd been big. She'd experienced soreness when she'd bathed that morning. And he hadn't been selfish, bringing her pleasure too. She'd almost regretted hitting him in the head.

Her gaze slid over him. He was dressed in only plain wool leggings, a loose white tunic, and worn leather boots. Worn, but they *were* leather. He was not as simple and poor as he might try to appear. Tibor was not stupid. He hadn't even blinked when she mentioned his boots and sword. Again, more lies.

"Stop." Cloelia's fingers closed over hers and the wax sheet was snatched from in front of her. "You are useless. Even a child can roll a candle." Cloelia's words would have hurt her if she *were* a child. But Jolan had long grown accustomed to her biting tone.

"Perhaps I can weave the baskets instead. I am better at that," she suggested.

"Not if you can't take your eyes off that ogre long enough to cut the strips." Cloelia's gaze was narrowed when Jolan looked at her. "You've been ogling him all morning. Remember, you belong to Count Mircea Dragomir."

Jolan looked away to find the guard's attention now directed at them. The slight curl in his lips made her wish she'd taken the sword from the sheath before hitting him.

"I do not ogle any man," Jolan argued. "And how can I forget Dragomir when you mention him every few minutes? Perhaps you should marry him in my stead since you already know of making candles." She made sure to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but rather feigned sincerity.

"Be careful with your tongue, girl," Cloelia warned.

Jolan smiled. She was already going to be punished. She could tell by the quietness in Cloelia's voice. Her gaze darted to the guard momentarily who continued to watch them in silence.

"Perhaps it's my tongue, and not these silly candles, that makes Count Mircea Dragomir want me so he is willing to part with so much coin." When Cloelia said nothing, Jolan looked at her to find her eyes hard and piercing. "I may be useful to him in other than wifely duties."

Tibor cleared his throat. "There is a family in the village that needs to be taken food. Charity is a quality that must also be learned when you become the Countess Drago. I shall prepare you a basket and you may take the food to them."

Jolan glanced at Tibor then nodded. He turned and hurried from the room. The guard still said nothing.

"Fucking a stable boy like a whore when you are thirteen does not make you much of an expert at anything. I can't imagine you would be any better at that than anything else you've attempted." This time Cloelia's crass words hit their mark. "You are fortunate Count Mircea Dragomir even wants you after having learned you gave away your value as you have. Were it not for his forgiving nature, you would have no such fortune with any other man."

Jolan looked at her hands, "I loved him."

Cloelia snorted. "You are not intelligent enough to recognise love. If you had truly loved him, you would have spared him."

Tears stung Jolan's eyes. She bit her tongue, thankful when Tibor returned with the basket. He'd offered her an escape from Cloelia and she would take it. Rising to her feet, she frowned when the guard accepted the basket, looped it over one arm and popped another piece of apple in his mouth. She wouldn't have complete peace with this hulking shadow following her around.

"Do not linger with those people. Return so you may learn something useful today." Cloelia reminded and Jolan nodded. She wouldn't speak for fear that her voice would shake and Cloelia would know her words had wounded her.

"Perhaps she can be taught how to muzzle a mongrel," Raban suggested around the mouthful and Cloelia's head snapped up. Jolan followed her stare to find Raban slicing another piece of apple. There was no mistaking that his statement was meant as an insult.

"What did you say to me?" Cloelia's voice was deathly quiet.

His gaze slanted up at her then darted to Jolan. He was standing up for her, Jolan realised, apparently not sensing the danger to himself by speaking. She licked her lips and quickly faced Cloelia. "There was a dog this morning, howling early. It woke me too."

Cloelia eyes narrowed, drifting from the guard to Jolan. "I heard nothing."

"Yes, but you always sleep so much more soundly than I. At the slightest wind I wake. You sleep through the worst storms. You know how ridiculously sensitive I am to such." Jolan spoke quickly.

"Then I shall have someone chase it away so you may sleep," Tibor offered.

"The only way to silence such a beast is to cut off its head." Raban tossed the core of the apple onto the table next to Cloelia's candles, sliding the last sliver of fruit into his mouth. "I'll consider doing so when it barks again."

Jolan's eyes widened and she heard Cloelia's sharp breath. He reached forward and grasped her arm gently, guiding her across the room and into the corridor. She stared up at his face as they wound their way to the main entrance of the castle.

"You are either stupid or *very* stupid." Jolan finally spoke. "Cloelia knows things...secret things. It is why my father keeps her. He believes she casts a spell of protection over Maethi. She can cast other spells too."

He grunted and released her arm. "Only a fool would believe such rubbish. The protection comes from the mountains that surround this village. She is nothing more than the proclaimed 'gypsy prophets' who plague the market fairs in cities such as Orastie with their tales of night creatures who can make a man live forever."

"Cloelia has spoken of such creatures," Jolan admitted and Raban responded with another grunt. He opened the door and waited for her to step from the castle, following her into the cool morning.

"Why did you involve yourself?"

His gaze slanted down at her. "I grow bored with nothing to do. It was an excuse to leave the castle. You will take the basket to the family Tibor instructed and afterwards we will ride to the countryside. My horse needs the exercise." He veered towards the stables and she followed watching his long strides. Inside, she was reminded of their joining the night before and her gaze darted to the empty stall.

"Don't even consider attempting your ploy again." He warned as he led his horse forward. She remembered how the great beast had carried her and the guard. The animal was twice the size of her father's own horse.

"Boy, prepare a horse for her," he ordered the boy that cowered in the corner. Instantly the youth leapt to do as commanded.

"He is rather young for you," Raban murmured as he readied his horse.

"He is not the boy Cloelia spoke of. It was years ago, and he and I were the same age. Regardless of what she said, I *did* love him."

"My first love was around the same age." Raban spoke after a moment. "She was older than I. I'd returned from battle with my brothers and she'd been one of the women that waited for our return."

Jolan watched the little smile curl in his lips as he pulled the straps tighter around the horse. "Was she pretty?"

"No." His smile widened.

"But you loved her."

He looked up at her. "For hours."

Heat blistered Jolan's cheeks. "That is not love."

"It felt so to me," he argued.

"I'm not so stupid to confuse love and lust. He and I were in love. We'd made plans to run away together." She waved her hand. "I do not know why I speak to you of it. You should not care of such things. Think of me what you wish. Everyone else does." She turned and accepted the horse from the stable boy. "The only thing that matters is it was the last time anyone ever spoke as you did today to Cloelia."

"I suppose you mean me to believe she cast some spell over him." Raban followed her from the stables, his horse in tow when she looked back.

"No spell. She convinced my father to have the boy beaten to death." Jolan revealed coldly. She watched Raban's attention lower to the stable boy.

"Boy, do you know of a family with children that have fallen ill?"

The boy nodded, keeping his gaze on the ground. Raban slipped the basket from his arm and held it out to him.

"Take this to them. Let them know it is from Jolan Lovasz and that she shall visit them soon to see how they fair." The boy took the basket and nodded again. "Do it now, boy." The boy hurried to obey.

"You intimidate him."

"Come. Koen's legs need stretching. He's not accustomed to being neglected for so long and last night's chase was too short to satisfy his need to stretch."

Jolan gasped when the guard grasped her waist and lifted her to her horse. Once she was settled atop, he turned and slipped onto his own horse. She followed as he kicked Koen forward.

Within a few moments, they'd left the village and were following the light path that she'd travelled the night before. Jolan turned on her horse and glanced behind them. No one came for them. No one followed. So easily he'd been trusted, Jolan thought as she turned her attention to the rocky landscape.

It was beautiful. Deep green interrupted occasionally by the bone white boulders that protruded from the earth. In the distance soft blue sky dipped down to taste the horizon,

blessing the patches of mountain violets with the warm rays of morning. She sighed softly without noticing when Raban looked back at her.

"Let me know when you wish to rest," he called back to her after about an hour and a half of riding.

"Never," she replied. "I wish to push on until the ground falls from beneath our horses' feet."

"Do not think of making me chase you as I was made to do last night," he warned. He pulled the reins of his horse and she didn't wait for him to help her down, sliding to the ground herself. She turned her attention to the view of the village from the ridge. Maethi looked mythically charming nestled within the green and trees. Jolan stared for several long minutes. It did not seem so serene when they were riding through it. Now, it was as much part of the landscape as the mountains behind it.

"Careful, Prințesă." Thick fingers slid against her stomach, urging her away from the cliff's edge. When his hand lingered, she looked up at him to find he too was gazing down at the village.

"It is easy to see why your Count Mircea Dragomir is eager for you to become his bride."

Jolan clenched her teeth. "Of course. Maethi's position is that which could be built into a fortress. It will allow his army of men a place to remain between him and his enemies."

"Yes, there is that as well."

When she looked at him, his gaze was locked on her. "You think there is something else?"

"You are a beautiful woman."

Her heart ridiculously quickened at the compliment but she frowned. "If I were not comely the arrangement would be the same."

"Perhaps, but he would not benefit so greatly. He might even offer less gold."

Jolan looked at him again and found him still staring at her. "Do not think that because I gave myself to you last night that you will be given similar privileges now. I had something to gain and, short of helping me to escape, you can do nothing to change my mind."

His lips slanted. "I understand, Prințesă." But the glitter of his eyes told her that he did not believe she was so unaffected.

"Why do you still address me as if I am a princess when you know the game of my being so had only been a ruse to lure you to the stables?" she demanded.

"It suits you."

"You think I am like a princess?" She sucked in her breath when his fingers slid across her stomach as he turned away.

"I believe you have been sheltered and do not know how to stand up for yourself." He lowered himself to the ground and leaned against a flat side of a boulder. He removed his sheath from his belt, laid it to the side, and stretched his legs out. "You gave me more of a fight last night, and the crone is just a wisp of a woman. You allowed her to speak to you as if you are nothing."

Jolan stared at him. "You are as stupid as I first suspected if you believe me to be weak. You do not know me or this place or the life I live here. I have little room to allow or disallow anything. My *sheltering* has not been of my own choice."

"I do not believe you are weak. I believe you leave yourself vulnerable," he corrected and tilted his head back, closing his eyes. "You allow those around you to have weapons against you but possess none of your own."

She studied his face. "What do you mean?"

He lifted an arm and tucked it behind his head without opening his eyes. "You were desperate to escape, as if you had nothing to lose, yet you allowed that crone to cut into you so that you were ready to weep."

"I told you that she is dangerous."

"Only because she has convinced you that she is." He turned his head against his arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting for silence so that I might rest. I received very little last night."

Jolan almost laughed. She stepped closer then kneeled between his feet. "Do you not leave yourself vulnerable now? While you lay here I could take your horse and keep riding." She watched his defined lips curl slightly.

"You could not make it to my horse."

Jolan chewed at her lip, inching closer as her attention dropping to the sword at his side. But when her gaze darted back to his face, she found his eyes opened and watching her.

"Your sword is within my reach."

[&]quot;It is."

Without taking her eyes from his face, she extended her hand until her fingers touched the smooth leather of the sheath. He didn't move. Hefting it, she stood and awkwardly unsheathed the weapon. Still he made no move to stop her.

"I have a weapon to use against you now." She would have pointed the sword at him but didn't quite dare.

"Part of your vulnerability is not recognising the strengths, and lack of, in others. You were clever to use my weakness for women against me but are foolish to think you can intimidate me with my own sword." He paused and crossed one leg over the other at the ankle.

When he continued, it was with a little smirk. "And had you any judgement of men, you would have known I was not one to be used. You would have chosen someone easier to manipulate, one who might fear your witch, Cloelia, enough to not speak of what had happened when they found you gone in the morning."

"You are not stupid."

"I am not. And I haven't the same fear of the people in your life because they are only a temporary part of mine." Raban let his arm drop from behind his head. "The stable boy should have been your first choice."

"The men of Maethi will not even look at me," she argued wondering why he would take such time to explain to her.

"Men are made to easily forget their fears in exchange from promises from a pretty woman." Raban's gaze roamed over her body. He made no effort to conceal what he was thinking.

"I know very little of seducing men. You were easier that way because I could see, as I still do, that you are readily distracted by me." Jolan watched his gaze lift to her face.

"Rather than attempting to escape, you should arm yourself for what you must face. You cannot spend the whole of your life running from that which makes you uncomfortable." He closed his eyes again. For a moment she just stood staring at him. Then she lifted the tip to rest just below his chin. His mouth slanted but he didn't open his eyes.

"That sword is too heavy for you to use."

"It seemed light enough last night," she countered.

He moved lightening quick, pushing the blade aside and grasping her wrist before moving to lay back on the ground, bringing her down with him. He smiled smugly as she found herself sprawled atop him, her hips caught between his thighs. She felt the hard ridge of an erection suddenly push up at her and heat blistered her cheeks. She tried to stand but his heavy arm draped across her, holding her where she was.

"Perhaps it is too heavy as you say," she conceded, wishing her body would stop trembling. Instantly she thought of the night before, his mouth on her skin, his body inside of hers. An ache bloomed inside of her.

"Where is your fight?" he frowned.

"Fight?" she murmured as she lifted her hands to his shoulders. Thick muscle stretched over solid bone, she remembered. He'd not an ounce of softness on him. His chest had been broad, dark curling hair that had reached down in a thin line to his navel.

"How can you expect to be a countess if you haven't the spine of a milkmaid?" He demanded and, while her attention rested now on his lips, she barely heard him. He kissed her deeply, swallowing her cries so that they were not discovered. She recalled the wet warmth of his mouth on her breasts and they pressed outward at the memory.

"Your eyes give away your every thought, Prințesă." His voice was softer and she lifted her gaze to his eyes to find their blue depths glittering with amusement.

"I have no desire to be a countess and would welcome milking over whatever Dragomir has in store for me." When she pushed against his chest, his arm slid away so she could stand. "Though I believe you not as poor and humble as you've convinced Tibor, you still know nothing of what choices I am given in life. I go to Drago under my father's will. My door is locked because they know I will attempt to escape if given the chance. They claim I am mad but wish to conceal their suspicions from the count because they wish the marriage and his coin."

She glanced back at Maethi. "I have no more worth to anyone there than the horses the stranger offered for Ilona in the story you told yesterday. But I have no Dieter to fight for my honour. I am a slave to the men in my life."

She didn't look back at him as he stood and said, "Not all are ignorant of your fears."

She snorted at that. "Name one who has concern for my marriage to the count. Tibor is concerned only with my uncle's interest in me because he has seen it in Ewan's eyes himself. He has not seen the danger I saw in the count and none will hear me when I tell them of it."

"Because of the crone." He touched her hip intimately but she didn't pull away. Oddly, the guard seemed to accept her more than her own family and she longed for someone's comfort. When he stepped closer, she closed her eyes to Maethi and leant back against his solid strength. She could not explain why she trusted him so easily. There was something, in his eyes, though, that told her despite the lies he'd told of himself, he was more honourable than many she knew.

"I am more slave than Ilona."

"Yet, you have the same choice she had," Raban spoke softly next to her ear. "Ilona could have gone with the bastard that killed her master. She could have succumbed. Even when she thought death might find her too, she fought." Both hands now rested on her waist and he urged her to turn and face him. "Arm and exert yourself. What is the worst that could happen if you defied the crone?"

"I know what you speak, guard, I am not weak as you may think. I have defied her. Her punishments are..." She stopped when his gaze narrowed. "I suppose they shall be no more cruel than those of the Count."

"I give you my word that while I am commissioned, the crone will not punish you again." He touched her chin, lifted her face so that she had to look up at him. "And in return, you shall learn to use a weapon so you might protect yourself in life rather than relying on a hired guard."

"I am no more stupid than I am weak. You are no guard by trade but I have learned to accept whatever lies those around me wish to press." She took a breath. "Cloelia shall punish you if you stand in her way."

"Just let the witch try. Unlike you, I look forward to putting the crone in her place." His eyes glittered as he spoke, as if he relished the challenge.

Chapter Four

"The day she arrives, I want men dispatched to Maethi." Count Mircea Dragomir gazed out the window of Drago castle at the slaves his uncle was herding through the doors. Filthy as animals, he thought with disgust, but without as much worth. They were disposable and his to do with as he wished. He would have them scrubbed and checked for disease and infections. Those that were contaminated would be put to work. Those that were not would be moved into the castle.

"You are so certain it will be this easy?" Behind him, Geld, his captain, voiced concern.

"Once I am wed and he is dead, the village will be mine. It is there I will build an army to finish what was started at Kelemen." Mircea touched his face remembering the slave's sharp nails. Her fight had stirred him more than he had expected. Most cringed when they saw him for what he was. The slave had not; she had stood straighter, her gaze never wavering. And he wanted her.

"And the woman?"

"The witch has assured me she's been made to remain obedient. She was groomed from an early age for me." He waved a hand. "If she is not pliable, she will be soon enough." He thought of Jolan Lovasz, her large dark eyes, and the mouth he'd been tempted to force open with his tongue. He imagined her bound in their marriage bed, those eyes filled with fear. He would take his fill of the weak woman, use her as he wished, and give her over to his men. If she lived, she would prove an obedient and pleasing wife.

He scratched at his beard as he slowly turned from the window and faced the three men who sat in the great hall. "Besides, who would know what was best for his bride's family but her husband?"

Geld laughed. "What of the other woman?"

"The slave, yes, I look forward to having her here. I will make her my own." His cock grew heavy with anticipation of changing the slave. "With Dieter dead, Kelemen is weakened. We shall have to build our army quickly so that we may strike while their sorrow is still ripe."

"What is this?" Cloelia demanded but Viktor did not look at the woman who glared up at him.

"You were commenting on what skills she must learn as wife to Count Dragomir. If he is as fearless as Tibor has said, I imagine he shall want a wife who knows how to use a weapon as well." Viktor glanced at the amusement on Aldarbern's face as he watched his daughter lift the sword and swing as Alger instructed. The crone wasn't the only one who could drop suggestions in the man's ear.

"Dressed as a stable boy?" the crone argued.

"Your stance is one that will have you toppling over at the first strike." He strode forward, ignoring Cloelia's gasp. He grasped Jolan by the waist and pulled her up straight. He slipped a leg between her feet and, using his foot, kicked her stance wider. He reached around her and grasped her hand around the hilt, lifting it while the other hand pressed flat against her stomach, shifting her weight to one foot.

"The sword is an extension of your arm," he spoke softer than he had meant to, but when she'd gasped and he felt her muscles contract beneath his hand, he couldn't help his reaction. He didn't release her hand and nodded over her head for Alger to advance. He'd had one of his men make the weapon for her the night before, lighter than those they carried, one she could handle.

As Alger moved more slowly than normal to deliver a strike, Viktor guided Jolan's arm and body to block the strike. "Did you feel the solidity of the strike?" She nodded and he doubted she even realised she was leaning back against him. "That is what you should feel each time you block. You take the full strength of the blow and block it with the strength of your entire body."

"Give us a demonstration," Tibor called.

"My sword," Viktor called to one of his men, who tossed him the sheath after he urged Jolan to step aside. He gave Alger a nod who in turned grinned.

"At last, after all these years, I shall show you once and for all which of us is the better swordsman."

Viktor laughed. "You are so certain?"

"You're not as young as I, and women and mead make you soft," Alger jabbed as he raised his sword and began stepping in a circle. "I shall lay you upon the flat of your back."

Viktor grinned when his brothers and men cheered. "Do so and I shall give you whatever you wish."

Alger's brows rose high before he turned and faced the maid servant who had just brought refreshment to the family. "A kiss from the beauty for the winner, what say you?" The woman looked up and, while she blushed prettily, she nodded. "Then you shall not only find yourself bested, but robbed of the affection of a pretty."

Viktor said nothing, waiting for his brother to advance. When he did, he blocked every swing, turning after the last to slap the flat of the sword against Alger's shoulder. Their audience cheered and Viktor glanced at Jolan as he backed away to find her watching, transfixed. Behind her the crone watched with a scowl.

Alger advanced again, this time his strikes quicker, stronger, but Viktor moved just as quickly and avoided injury. Once again the flat of his sword hit, this time the back of his brother's thigh.

"At this rate, you will have no limbs with which to use to fight me," Viktor taunted but he could not deny that Alger's attack did bring a sweat and he was breathing more heavily than before. Rather than wait, and knowing that he would have to strike quickly to save himself from being made a fool, he advanced. His brother blocked, blocked again, and when he turned to deliver a strike of his own, Viktor stuck his foot out, tripping Alger so that he went stumbling backwards. As his brother sprawled on the ground, Viktor levelled his sword beneath Alger's chin, smiling.

"I believe you lose."

"You needn't be a smug bastard about it," Alger growled taking Viktor's outstretched hand and using it to pull himself to his feet. Alger glanced at the maid when she stepped forward, her gaze glittering.

"Your prize," she said coyly and rose on her toes, pressing her mouth to Viktor's momentarily. "You are most obviously the best swordsman." She winked and turned to hurry away and back to her chores. The audience applauded and Viktor turned to find Jolan shaking her head at something Cloelia was saying to her.

"Your turn, come along now." He walked forward and took her by her arm, leading her away from the crone. "While he's cocky and too sure of himself, you can learn from him."

"I am not built like a man," Jolan shook her head. "I am not made like you to be a warrior."

"Indeed. Battle is a man's business," Cloelia chimed.

Viktor didn't look back at her. "And when her husband is struck down, who shall defend his lands that you feel are worthy enough for him to defend? It should be his woman who leads those that were so devoted to him to avenge his death. It is what I would wish if it was me and I know of no other who lifts a sword to want less."

"You would wish a woman to raise a sword for you?" Jolan looked back at him.

"For her to pluck it from my bloodied hands and drive it into the heart of our enemies, I would." He inclined his head. For a moment, she only looked at him, then turned and faced Alger. When he swung his weapon in a slow strike she blocked it as he'd told her to do then surprised him by retaliating with an attempted strike of her own. He backed away from the pair, allowing Alger to instruct her, and moved to stand next to Tibor as he watched.

"You should check your bedding for vipers before you sleep," Tibor warned in a low voice.

"I care not what that witch thinks to try with me. I have no fear of her."

Tibor leaned closer, "Perhaps not, but Jolan will be the one that suffers the most. She was already punished this morning for not returning before dark yesterday."

Viktor frowned, head snapping around so he could stare at Tibor. "Punished?"

"The baths. Cloelia insists that Jolan is given one each morning and night. It is a time when they are alone but the maid that just kissed you told me that this morning she added more heat to the water than necessary and that Jolan was reddened from her abusive scrub." Tibor shook his head. "It is not you I worry of, Raban. It is Jolan."

"If that were truth, then why do you not stand on her behalf and change her father's mind about marrying her to a man she is terrified of?" Viktor asked pointedly. He saw the colour rise in Tibor's face.

"I have protected her from her uncle these many years, saved her from his indecent lust. When she marries she will at last be safe from him. You will remember your place and not question my love for her ever again." Tibor's voice was harder than Viktor had heard it before and he heard the man's devotion ring true in his tone. "Do it not and no sword your men could make could stop me from burying my own weapon in your throat while you sleep."

Viktor looked at the man. He was aged, lean, and his hands were smooth from work. But there in those deep set eyes, he saw the threat was truly meant. Respect filled him. Jolan was not as alone as she suspected. Tibor's affection was equal to that of a father.

"I believe I underestimated you, Tibor."

"You most certainly have." Tibor moved away from him to clap and call out a cheer for Jolan.

Viktor frowned. The witch had punished Jolan after he'd promised her she'd never be harmed by the crone. He'd make certain that wouldn't happen again. Glancing at Adalbern then his wife, he found Linza watching him closely. He inclined his head only a bit and she returned the gesture before looking away.

The next morning, Viktor visited the maids' quarters before he planted himself outside Jolan's door. With only three days before their departure to Drago, and no time for Lovasz to find a new guard, Viktor had decided it was time for things to change for Jolan. He would put an end to the witch's control swiftly. It was the best way to deal with her, he decided.

He wasn't made to wait long. A few moments later Viktor scowled at Cloelia's determined step in the corridor. He regarded her with distaste. She was tall, too bony to be considered thin, and draped in drab grey. Her greying black hair was pulled tightly back into a knot, just as it was the day before, making her face appear more narrow and pointed than it might seem otherwise. Her lips dropped deep lines from their corners that reached down the sides of her chin, matching the crevice that stretched from lower forehead down between her eyes. Her mouth was pressed into a tight line but it was the dark, black gaze which glittered with unpleasantness.

"She has not risen yet?" Cloelia snapped as she neared him. Viktor refrained from responding and the line of her mouth pressed firmer, indicating she did not like being ignored. He lifted a hand, without facing the door and thumped a knuckle softly against the wood behind him.

"I am awake," Jolan called impatiently before swinging the door open.

"It should have been a task already performed." Cloelia folded her arms. "I have been waiting for you. Did you think you did not have to bathe today?" Before Jolan could answer, Viktor finally spoke.

"She has no time for your obsession with cleanliness today." He didn't blink when Cloelia's gaze swung up with surprise to his face, before narrowing.

"She bathes every morning," Cloelia snapped.

Viktor shrugged. "And afternoon and evening, as I've discovered. It shall not throw this castle or the village into turmoil if she misses doing so this morning." His attention slanted at Jolan and he found her staring at him with disbelief and fear. "Finish dressing, Prințesă, so that we may start the day."

"You forget your place, guard, and speak too familiarly to her," Cloelia warned but turned her attention to Jolan when he didn't answer. "Come. I do not wish to be kept waiting longer."

"And we all tire of your barking, woman. I *said* she will not go with you this morning and she will not." Viktor did not budge when her eyes went wide. "Be gone, witch, lest you try what little patience with you I have left."

"I warn you, only once, oaf. It is not wise to cross me." Cloelia lifted a bony finger and wagged it at him.

"Do not threaten me, old woman. I do not believe in your smoke and illusion. Take your spells somewhere else for I've not the time or patience this morning to listen to them."

Cloelia's jaw clenched and she looked as if she might say something at first. Instead she regarded him for several moments in silence, then pivoted on her heel and marched back the way she came.

"You are as mad as they say I am," Jolan whispered. "I told you she knows things..."

Viktor glanced at her, his gaze lowering to the sleeping shift she wore. "The maids will prepare your bath in your room from this day on. My sister has reached but her thirteenth year and has no one assisting her when she bathes. You are a woman grown and can bathe yourself."

"She will not stand for it," Jolan whispered but Viktor didn't care at the moment if the woman came back with a basket of vipers. He took a step forward and Jolan instantly backed into her room. He nearly smiled at the way her breath quickened and those large, dark eyes shone with her reaction to him. She was more dangerous than she knew, he thought to himself. Her desire for him made him want to face an army of gypsy witches on her behalf.

"I shall make this door secure for you. While you may be made to remain in your room, you will have control of who enters." He turned when he heard a gasp and found the maid he'd spoken to earlier standing behind him. He stepped aside so she could enter and six servant men followed, one carrying a large wooden tub, two carrying buckets of hot stones,

and the rest bringing in the water. Once the men filled the tub with water and stones they left quickly.

"Take your time. Though I know you will not admit it, I suspect your muscles are sore from your training yesterday." He saw her eyes widen and smiled. "I remember well the soreness when I first learned to lift a sword."

"Shall I remain and assist you?" The maid asked but Jolan shook her head. The maid stepped from the room but Viktor remained.

"Will...will you stay?" Those large eyes beckoned him.

Before he could answer, Alger arrived with three other men. "Quickly," he told them and stood back watching them secure the wooden brackets on either side of the door and one in the middle of the door. Alger set a long, thick piece of wood to the side, winked at Viktor and they left as quickly as they'd entered.

"What is that?" Jolan asked stepping to his side.

"I told you your door would be secure." He walked forward, pulled the door closed, and slid the wood into the brackets. "Even if the door is unlocked, no one will be able to enter without an army." He faced her to find her smiling, clearly happy with the new addition.

"You needn't have your men go through so much trouble. We only have three days before I will depart from here." She glanced at the steaming bath, then back at him. After a moment of obvious consideration, she reached down and lifted the shift over her head. Viktor's gaze dropped instantly to her body and he swallowed loudly as she lifted a leg and tested the heat of the water with her toe. Seemingly satisfied, she stepped into the wooden basin and eased down into the steaming water.

Viktor felt rooted. He could only stand and stare as she leant back and the long tendrils of her hair floated atop the surface. Her knees parted the water as she sank lower and he had the urge to crawl between them. Instead he remained where he was, in front of the door, cock painfully erect, watching her as she bathed.

Chapter Five

Jolan's heart pounded. She'd expect Raban to come to her after the first time they'd joined. But he hadn't. It was as if he wouldn't approach her unless she bid him to her. Even her father's servants made her do as they wished. Her guard however had only commanded her once—when he'd been angry at being used.

Every night since that first, she'd dreamt of him, of his mouth and hands. He'd been dominating yet gentle. She suspected she would not find such consideration from the count. Pushing Dragomir from her mind, she returned her thoughts to Raban.

"Tell me a story like the one you told before, a story of love worth fighting for."

"Love?" His voice cracked slightly and he cleared his throat. "Truthfully, I know very little about love, Prințesă, outside of familial love or friendship."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. He still stood at the door, his blue eyes darkened as he watched her. Why had this man never known love? Even she, in a life of few freedoms, had found love once.

"I know very little of love myself. The boy that I'd given myself to, Leobwin, he was poor. It was his pride in his work that first drew me to him." She closed her eyes again. "Leo had many siblings and told me that he worked hard to help feed them. I admired him for that."

"He sounds like he was a good boy."

Jolan smiled. "He caught me watching him one day when he was grooming the horses. Like you, he was not afraid of Cloelia. He called her the evil eye of ugly." Jolan giggled. "When he kissed me he was so gentle. It made me feel delicate and feminine."

"You fell in love with him at that moment?"

"It might not have been love as deep as that between Ilona and Dieter but it was love enough for me, and he was my friend. I've had very few friends outside of Tibor." Jolan sat up, and reached for the bathing brush that had been left. "Tibor knew of our affection. He pretended he did not but stood in defence of Leo when he was to be beaten. He could do nothing to stop it, though he did try. Cloelia had convinced my father that Leo would destroy the fate of our family if he remained alive. I imagine she was right about that. I would have married him."

"Even though he was poor?" Raban moved closer and this time when she looked at him, she found his gaze on her face.

"I cared of coin before I had Leo's kiss." She smiled. "But once I'd tasted his gentleness, his kindness, and friendship, I cared not of my father's wealth. I know now that Leo would have made a good husband. He was brave when he was whipped. He tried not to scream out but when he was too weakened not to, he screamed my name. I was locked in my room and could not go to him." Tears welled in her eyes as she remembered his screams.

"Then your story is far more noble than the one I told."

She looked up when he knelt beside her and touched her cheek. "A man, even a boy, who would love you till his death is one with the heart of a warrior." Raban's voice was soft, gentle.

"I would have a husband like that. A man like Leo would have become, like Dieter who would not part with one he loved for horses or gold, brave and strong of heart." Jolan smiled, brushing away tears. "What kind of woman would you have for a wife, guard?"

"In my youth I imagined myself with a woman like my mother, gentle, kind, patient, and obedient." She watched him rock back on his heels, arms resting on his knees. "I sought women like her."

Jolan tilted her head. "Yet you found none to marry?"

He chuckled. "I found many that I could have married but I grew bored with their soft voices and compliant natures. I was twenty when I realised what kind of woman better suited me. I was in battle against the Mongols and I saw her in the midst of the fighting. Her man had been struck down outside of his home, his family inside the cottage he was defending. His wife rushed from the cottage when he fell and as she kissed him, she took up his sword. I could see her children fearful inside through the windows as the Mongols set fire to the roof."

Jolan leant forward, resting her arm on the side of the basin, eyes wide. She'd heard stories of battle from Tibor but he never spoke of the true horror that happened. She knew that women and children perished but had never heard it actually told.

"I called to my brother to help her." He lifted his gaze, "I would have myself had I not been in the midst of swords. He went to her, taking up her fight but she would not go inside. She stood at my brother's side, over her husband's body, fighting like a warrior. And when the cottage burned bright, her children were made to join her, the smallest, a boy, armed with a broken chair leg."

"What happened to them?" Jolan whispered.

"I found her and her family once the fighting ceased. Her arm was ruined but she tended her husband with the other. Her eldest son had been killed, but the others were at her side." He nodded. "She is the woman I would have at my side."

"Did her husband perish?"

"I would have married her that day if he had." Raban smiled.

Jolan shook her head. "I cannot imagine being so brave."

"Were you not locked in your room, wouldn't you have gone to your stable boy's side to defend him?" he argued. "That was bravery for one so young, wouldn't you agree?"

Jolan met his gaze. "I was punished soundly for it."

"Yet you survived and have a story of bravery and love that could not be made untrue." He stood and set his sword aside. She stared at him as he lifted his tunic over his head then removed his shift. He turned, displaying the rough but healed skin of his back.

Jolan gasped. "You've been beaten." Not just beaten. Severely beaten so that his entire back bore scar tissue that would never be smooth again.

"I was taken prisoner and the attempt was to whip me into servitude." He turned and knelt again next to her. "I was beaten every day for longer than a week. The pain was so great I could barely move but I did not submit. When my men stormed the place and came for me, I was near death."

"How could you stay so strong through that kind of cruelty?" Jolan whispered.

"I had something to live for, something that I would not give up even in the face of death."

"Your family," she nodded.

"My freedom," he corrected. "You can be shackled and beaten, locked in a room and abused by someone. But freedom cannot truly be taken. Ilona, the woman I told you of, became Dieter's slave only by choice, so that she could be with him. But Dieter never took her freedom. And neither could the man who meant to take her."

Jolan settled back into the water and stared at the surface. "You wish me to fight against those that mean to rule me."

"I mean for you to know that no one can take something from you unless you give it to them." He leant forward. "They may not be the ones you want, but you always have choices."

Jolan stared up at him, her heart filling with warmth. She knew he meant to help her, to give her hope about her future. She kissed him before she even realised she was going to. It was a kiss of gratitude for his kindness, for his encouragement, and for the heat he filled her with.

For a moment he didn't move, then his hands found her waist, slid around her back. His tongue met hers and a moment later, the water sloshed onto the floor as he climbed over the edge of the basin and atop her.

Laughter bubbled up when his mouth moved to her throat. "There is no room for both of us. You are too big." She laughed again when he growled against her skin. "Get out before you bust open the whole thing!" He stood bringing her with him, then lifted her easily in his arms and stepped out of the basin. His mouth found hers again and she wrapped her arms around his neck as he kissed her deeply and carried her to the bed.

"No," she said breathlessly when he rose above her.

He stilled, staring down at her. "No?" Jolan nearly laughed again. He looked at her as if she were mad. Again, she had the feeling that he was not used to serving others but of being served himself, of commanding others and being unaccustomed to the word no.

"You are my slave, remember. I do as *I* wish with you." She did grin when she saw the relief in his eyes. In a flurry of movement, he rolled to his back and brought her atop him.

"As you wish, Prințesă, but I warn you that my appetite is ravenous." He reached up and touched her breasts but she slapped his hands away.

"You may only do as I command when I command it. Perhaps, I should bind you so that you remember you place," she teased and saw the glitter in his eyes. Leaning forward, she placed her palms on his shoulders as if she were pinning him down. It was absurd, she knew, he was too strong to be overpowered by her. But it filled her with a thrill when he lifted his arms and grasped the wooden frame of the bed behind him. He submitted to her without argument.

Sliding down between his thighs, she slowly worked the ties of his leggings until she freed his cock. Turning atop him, aware that he had full view of her ass and sex, she unwound the straps and pushed down his leggings. Scooting forward, she removed his

boots, then pulled off the leggings and tossed them over the edge of the bed. Circling back around, she grasped his erection in her palm and watched his nose flare and his jaw tighten. She wanted to give him pleasure, wanted him to know her appreciation for his kindness to her.

"Ishild told me once of bringing a man pleasure with her mouth." Jolan licked her lips as heat touched her cheeks. She'd never said anything so bold in her life. The sound that came from his throat chased away her shame, so she settled between his legs.

Slowly, she lowered her gaze to the hard flesh she held. Lowering, she licked at the tip and heard the intake of breath above her. She licked again, this time moving her palm down its length. She was thankful for Ishild's gossiping nature, for she would have never known of anything like this was it not for her friend's education.

Licking her lips, she slipped the crown into her mouth then withdrew. His gaze was locked on her, nose flaring with every deep breath. A thrill raced through her as she lowered again, taking more of him into her mouth. This time she sucked as she drew him back out through her lips and was rewarded with another guttural noise from his throat. His thick legs rose around her as he bent his knees, so she turned and nipped at the inside of his thigh.

It was a growl, low and vibrating from his chest, sounding more like animal than man. That sound sent hot shivers up her spine and caused her sex to burn. She returned her attention to his cock, slipping it once again between her lips. When she sucked, his hips rose slightly. This time she didn't remove him but slipped back down his length. Up and down, she moved slowly over him until she felt him shaking beneath her. When she rose to look at him, she saw his knuckles had whitened from his grip on the bed structure.

She felt heady and wanton as she realised he struggled to allow her the control of their joining. She wanted to push him, to draw out his wait for release. She leant forward and licked at the spot right below his navel, her breasts encasing his cock as she did. His hips surged upward against her in response and she felt the muscles of his stomach contract. Encouraged, she flattened herself against him and slid farther up his stomach licking again at the line of hair. Again his muscles contracted. She parted her lips and grazed her teeth across his hot skin, savouring the sounds that choked from his throat.

Higher, she used her teeth against his chest before running her tongue to make a path to his thick shoulder. This time when she bit, she did so hard. His body surged upwards against hers and he grunted as his cock ground into her sex.

"You are a good slave," she purred. "I should reward you for your patience. What prize would you like for your obedience?"

"By the Gods, woman, I feel you are wet for me and I want *in*." His voice was deep, husky, the words spoken between ragged breaths. She smiled, gaze washing over the flushed planes of his face. She rubbed her cunt against him and his lips parted for his breath and groan.

"Beg me," she whispered.

His gaze met hers as she rubbed herself against him again, stimulating her clit. "Please." It wasn't a plea, not really. It sounded more like command. Warmth spread over her, through her. Her hips moved against him in small circles back and forth.

"Again," she said between pants.

"Please." This time he commanded in a stronger voice but he moved his hips with her now, encouraging her to find pleasure. Her body trembled atop him and she rested her hands on his chest, allowing him to feel her weight as she continued moving herself atop him. She slid easily over him, wet now with her own arousal. She wasn't sure if it was just her physical reaction to him or a combination of that and the control she had over his need.

Shaking, she moved her cunt higher to his stomach, pressing flat against him. She leant forward so that her breasts fell above him. Her hands slid to his shoulders, then his arms, enjoying the feel of his taut muscles as she brought her right breast closer to his mouth.

"Show me how much you want me to grant your prize," she rasped down at him. He opened his mouth wide and took her sensitive flesh between his lips. He sucked loudly, groaning against her. He released her with a loud sucking noise then turned his head for the other. Jolan closed her eyes as he sucked fiercely, veining fire from the tips throughout her whole body.

When he released her, she slid back down and hovered over his cock. As slowly as she was able, she took him into her, enjoying every inch that slipped in to fill her body. She settled down, sheathing his entirety.

"This is what you want?" Her voice shook with her own need.

"Yes."

She rose slightly and pushed him to the core. "More?"

It was half growl, half laugh. "Please, woman!"

She leant forward and bit him hard on the chest. His hips surged up and his will broke. The entire bed shook when he released its structure and grabbed her hips. His fingers kneaded into her as he held her off of him and withdrew. He thrust upward sharply and her breath caught momentarily in her throat. In an instant, he'd rolled her to her back and settled between her legs, his large body covering hers.

"Yes, please," she whispered but despite the wildness in his eyes, he stilled.

"Do not plead for me, Prințesă. Command me."

She panted, her whole body on fire, wanting more. "You must move," she rasped.

She could feel him shaking, knew his body yearned as much as hers for release. Yet, he remained still inside of her.

"Must I?"

"Fuck me." She gripped his shoulder and used him to bring herself forward; biting down on his thick muscle, hoping it would drive him to move. His reaction was violent, hips jerking against her. His mouth caught hers when she released him and he kissed her roughly while his body slapped hungrily into hers. Rapture found them at the same time, sending her bucking wildly against him as she clung to his shoulders. He shouted into her mouth, his hot seed filling her as his hips jerked against hers. Even after he'd spilled, his hips moved as if unable to stop, riding out her orgasm until she collapsed back onto the bedding.

His hot breath was heavy on her face as he hovered above her. His arms shook on either side of her as he held his weight off of her and she swallowed several times between breaths. She was no more in control as she fought to catch her breath. She only realised she was crying when she felt the drops slide over her jaw and reached up to wipe them away.

Ishild had told her most men cared nothing of a woman's pleasure, that only a few would know how to make a woman shake from rapture. This guard was indeed one of those few. Her heart pounded in her chest as she gazed up at his broad features and she wished it was he that she was being sent to wed rather than Count Dragomir. She should not mind being bound in marriage to a man as passionate as this guard, one who would set her body afire then melt it into a thousand tingling flames.

"If you mean to make an escape, Prințesă, now is the time to do so. I don't think my legs would allow me chase for at least ten minutes." He spoke through a rough chuckle. She stretched beneath him, enjoying the warm liquid feeling in her limbs.

"I am no longer sore from my training yesterday, you shouldn't tempt me so. I know exactly where you left your sword."

He laughed at that and she liked the deep sound. "You needn't strike me with it. I'm as weak as a babe." He pulled from within her and collapsed beside her heavily. She rolled onto her side and placed her hand on his chest.

"When we arrive at Drago, you could remain with me as my guard. I might convince the count you are stupid and easily ruled by coin. I imagine he wouldn't mind someone he thought he could buy, then I would have some pleasure I could look forward to."

He laughed again as he tucked one hand behind his head and tilted his head to look at her. "Somehow I don't think the count would believe you. Men can look in one another's eyes and tell their true nature."

"That is not true. My father could not see Dragomir's."

"He is blinded by a need for safety of his home and the people here," he said softly. "If it were not for that, I believe he would see."

"You believe me when I speak of the count and what I saw." Jolan sat up, staring at him. "You aren't just being kind to me, you believe me when I say he is a monster."

"I have no reason to doubt you. You neither gain nor lose anything by lying to me." He shrugged, but his gaze slid away from hers.

Jolan studied him for several long moments. "You've met Count Dragomir before. You know him."

His head snapped around and he stared at her, then he shook his head. "I have never been introduced but I know enough of him that what you say sounds truthful to me."

A fear suddenly gripped Jolan. "Were you approached by the count or one of his men to come here and win my trust?"

"No." He met her gaze and she breathed out. "What man would send another to bed the woman to be his wife?"

She shrugged, allowing her fear to leave her. "I think the count capable of most anything. His eyes were yellow."

She watched the guard lift up on an elbow. "You know, there are many men who carry beasts inside of them, and not all of them are cruel." His voice was softer than before.

"You mean what they call Halflings." Jolan smiled when she saw the surprise on his face. "You think because I am kept inside these walls I do not learn of things like that?

Cloelia knows dark things. She told me of Halflings once when I was a child to scare me. It worked. But Ishild said that she'd met a Halfling once when she was much younger and had become lost in the woods. She said a stag approached her and transformed into a man. He led her back to the road before turning back to animal. She never told anyone of it but me."

Jolan shook her head. "That is not what I saw in Count Dragomir's eyes however. It was something evil, something cruel. I doubt there is much man at all inside of him. And I believe his men are the same as he, for I have never known any man who could lick at the blood of their victims and mount them during death."

"Moroi," Raban murmured.

Jolan's eyes widened. "They are real? I thought it just another story Cloelia told me to make me frightened of the night. She said they sent their souls out at night and devoured livestock. She told me I must always keep my windows and doors closed during storms lest I wish my body claimed and made unclean by the Moroi. She said they cannot die."

He frowned. "I know nothing of sending out their souls and that does sound more like the spells she claims to know, just made up. The Moroi drink the blood of their victims and I have heard tales of their mounting their dead, but I can tell you that there is nothing which walks that cannot be killed."

Jolan bit her lip, studying him. "You do not fear the Moroi?"

"I do not." He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"You said that all men fear something. What do you fear?" She watched him reach down for his clothes and began dressing. He shot a grin over his shoulder as he pulled on his leggings.

"I fear my neck wrapped in a rope if we are discovered."

She giggled and nodded, scrambling across the bed. "Yes, we should be more careful. I am surprised Cloelia did not return with my father after you defied her. It is not a good sign that she did not. Be cautious of her."

"She would be wise to be cautious of me."

Chapter Six

"Only five?" Alger asked when Mircea Dragomir's men presented themselves to Adalbern. "The count could spare no more for the safety of his bride?"

The one who led the five turned slowly, looking Alger up and down. "Who are you?"

Raban stepped forward and instantly the man's gaze darted to him. "He is one of mine, and I am to lead this party to Drago. And on behalf of her family, I would like to know who *you* are and why the count feels Jolan Lovasz is worthy of only five of his men when stories told indicate he has an army at his avail?"

Jolan glanced at her father but he did not silence the guard. She recognised the one who led the men. He was the very one who had held the knife which brought her friend to death. She wanted to call out to the guard, to warn him, but was too afraid to do so.

"I am Geld, the captain of the Count's army, and these are four of my best trained men. I was informed that I would be the one leading the party to Drago."

"You were misinformed and were I inclined to allow you to lead, that changed the moment I counted your numbers." Raban glanced at Jolan's father and received a slight nod of agreement. Raban took another step forward and tilted his nose to breath in deeply, a scowl pulling his lips. Geld's eyes narrowed slightly.

"You have an odd scent on you, Geld," Raban's voice curled around the man's name in a tone of clear distaste. "It is a smell that any who has seen battle does not forget. Should I guess that there were more of you dispatched but only five managed to survive the journey to Maethi?"

"There was trouble but we all survived, though outnumbered considerably," Geld answered coolly, his gaze sweeping the men that stood behind Raban. "This is your band of mongrels then?" Jolan's gaze widened when those who followed Raban stepped forward, every one of their hands dropping to their weapons. Raban held up his hand, stopping them from advancing further, a slow smile curled in the corner of his lips.

The tension in the room was so thick that Jolan found it difficult to breathe. For several uncomfortable moments, no one said anything or moved. Even Cloelia, who always seemed to have words to spit, kept silent.

"Your count shall be grateful for my mongrels if we are attacked during the trek to Drago. No matter how well trained or hungry for blood your four might be, there is no better protection against a horde of soulless Mongols than beasts trained to kill them."

Jolan held her breath then released it abruptly when Geld suddenly threw back his head and laughed. "You are as fearless as you are big. What are you called?"

"I am called Raban."

Geld stepped forward and clapped his hand on the guard's shoulder, obviously impressed with him. "Very well, Raban, you lead us and I shall tell Count Dragomir of your service. He may wish to commission you himself to our army." Raban's jaw clenched but he lowered his hand. His men fell back into their places against the wall and it seemed that everyone else in the room breathed out.

"We leave at dawn." Raban told him.

"Come. We must pack your belongings..." Cloelia began but Raban faced her.

"Her belongings were readied yesterday when I was told of the count's men's approach. She has had her bath. She also spent most of the night completing the candles and baskets you mean to take with us." His gaze never wavered from Cloelia. "With no more tasks, her last day of training will be completed." He turned his head only slightly and Alger stepped forward, beckoning for Jolan to step to his side which she did gratefully.

"You see?" Cloelia turned to Adalbern. "He commands me as if I am one of his men and disrupts Jolan's schedule. I have discovered he made her door to where she could bar it from the inside."

"I was commissioned to protect her, witch. Anyone with a mind to could lift the latch and enter her room. But it would take more men than I've got to break down that door to get to her were this castle attacked. I discussed this with her father beforehand and received his approval. Take your rattling somewhere else." Raban glanced again at Jolan's father but he did not interfere.

"His disruptions could change the way..." Cloelia began and Raban laughed coldly.

"My disruptions change nothing except your obsessions with his daughter and shall not make a difference once she is wed. Nothing I do here changes the future of Maethi. I grow weary of your screeching, woman, and the only reason you do not wear a muzzle is because Lovasz wishes your council. If you will not cease your noise, I will remove myself so that I

am not tempted to return his coin and gag you despite my respect for him." Raban turned and nodded to Alger to lead the way.

Jolan heard Geld's laughter and Cloelia's shriek of outrage as she was led from the main hall. "You push her too far, guard," she murmured. "I fear you will find yourself poisoned by nightfall." At the time, Raban only responded with a grunt, but she noticed when they were served their midday meal in the courtyard where she trained that Alger stepped forward and tasted the food before it was set in front of Raban.

"Do that again and you will be tending a severed arm," Raban warned.

"I will not take lightly the woman's warning, brother." Alger said in a low voice back to him. Jolan blinked but did not stop the swing of her sword. They were brothers. She had not realised, but it suddenly made sense. Her gaze darted to the others who were of larger build, feeling foolish for not having noticed the similarities also in their features.

"I will deal with the witch myself."

"Father often said your pride would be the death of you, Viktor. I will not allow you to fall before we finish what we have come here to do." Alger snapped. Again Jolan feigned deafness to their conversation. His name was not Raban. It was Viktor. Part of her felt betrayed even though it confirmed her suspicions that he was not what he seemed. But why would he hide his true name?

"Nor would I see you poisoned." Viktor said pointedly. "You are Ilona's favourite and while I do not fear the witch, I do fear Ilona's wrath." Alger laughed at that, the tension between them gone.

Jolan swung her sword, practicing the thrusts and blocks against an invisible enemy but her mind reeled. Ilona. Her throat closed. Dieter Kelemen was their father. The realisation hit her and she nearly dropped her sword. The story he'd told to them had been one of his own father. He had leather boots and spoke as if he commanded because he *did* command. She thought of how quickly his men had stepped forward at Geld's insult, like men who were not bought by mere coin but those who had been led by him and were devoted to him.

She let her sword lower, the tip resting on the ground. He'd spoken of Dieter's sons seeking to avenge their father but did not know how it ended. If they sought revenge, why were they in Maethi? Her father was not capable of the cowardice they described in the stranger that killed Dieter. Her uncle? Had her father commissioned them and in exchange for their protection, they were to kill Ewan?

She glanced behind her as Geld and his men joined them. "You train her to use a sword?"

"If we are attacked and all struck down, she should know how to defend herself," Viktor replied in a tight voice. "I imagine she would rather be killed in battle than taken as a slave."

"That crone is furious. She is still railing."

"Let her rail," Viktor growled, then his voice rose and he called to Jolan. "Will you eat? If not, you will continue your training. I mean for you to be a wife capable of defending herself," he called, but she didn't turn to face him. If he would so easily kill her uncle, perhaps he could be convinced to allow her escape after Ewan was dead. Her heart pounded as she realised there was still a chance to escape her marriage.

He was suddenly beside her. "You must eat, Prințesă."

She looked up at him and smiled. "As you wish." She sat and allowed the maid to bring her food. Alger's sword stopped her from beginning her meal.

"You are as suspicious as an old woman," Viktor snapped but gave him a nod anyway. Before Alger could move one of the other men stepped forward and knelt beside Jolan. He smiled at her and reached forward to taste the stew. He looked up and shook his head so Alger withdrew his sword.

"You think the woman would poison her?" Geld asked with clear astonishment.

"To spite and blame me, she might," Viktor conceded.

"Then I shall sleep with one eye open and will run her through if she makes an attempt. The count would not stand for it were his betrothed to become ill."

Jolan did not look at Geld. She would not. Her stomach turned remembering Ishild's face as his blade slid across her neck. He cared no more for her than the count. It was all a farce. Nothing around her was what it seemed.

* * * *

Viktor's eyes opened and he reached for his sword as he sat up. But then he froze. Linza Lovasz stood at the foot of his bed. She wore only her sleeping gown, her hair uncovered.

"You leave with my daughter tomorrow and I had not time today to speak with you. It must be now." She moved around the bed to stand beside it. "I want you to know that it was I who sent Tibor to seek you out. It was I who sent the coin."

Viktor said nothing, her words surprising him. Tibor had found him in the village and approached him with the commission as if impressed with his size. When he told of what he would be charged to do, Viktor couldn't believe his good fortune. Now he realised it had not been fortune at all.

"I know you seek to kill the man that killed your father. I had heard of what happened and made the way for you to do it." Her voice shook.

"Then I am indebted to you."

"Yes." She raised her chin, looking very much like her daughter when she did. "And you will pay your debt. When you leave tomorrow, my husband's brother, Cloelia, and Tibor will travel with you. I want you to kill Cloelia."

Viktor's brow rose with surprise at the violence in Linza's soft voice. "Kill her?"

"She poisons my husband's ear with tales of prophecy. This marriage arrangement is her doing. She has abused my daughter and strikes fear in all those around her. But you do not fear her, though I must warn you that she is more dangerous than you suspect."

"Spells and curses. Your daughter has delivered the same warning. I do not believe in the illusions of the gypsy witch." He waited for her to turn her back to him and reached for his leggings, pulling them on quickly and working the ties beneath his sleeping shift. Moving around her, he walked to the table where the maid had left the mead earlier and lifted the pitcher to his lips, drinking several swallows.

"Sometimes...the villagers whisper of a demon summoned in the night and the next morning there is nothing left of the person...but their bloodied clothes," Linza said jerkily. "I have seen the demon with my own eyes."

Viktor turned and looked back at her then reached to light the candle on the table. "When?"

"Years ago, when I first became with child. There was a storm and I could not sleep. I saw Cloelia outside my window and she was not alone. They went into the stables." Her voice shook but she continued, "I should have gone back to bed but Cloelia had just come to us. I suspected she was my husband's lover and hoped that I was wrong, that she was indeed meeting a lover that night who was not my beloved."

"I went to the stables and watched them through the crack in the door," Linza moved to the window looking out as if her memory was there below. "There was another woman there. I knew her from the village, a farmer's wife. She appeared drunken and I wondered then if she'd not been subjected to one of Cloelia's poisons. I felt uneasy but I was not prepared for what would happen next."

"What did happen next?" Viktor pressed.

"The man, he just bent down and...bit into her. Then again and again. Devoured her." Linza brought a hand to her mouth, shaking her head. "I could do nothing. I could not scream. I could not move."

"Cannibals," Viktor whispered but she shook her head again.

"Worse than that. When the woman was nearly dead, he climbed atop her and rutted her to her death." Linza's entire body shook. "Cloelia watched. It's the only time I've ever seen her smile, as if she enjoyed what he did to that poor woman. Her blood was on his face as he defiled her body and Cloelia stood there whispering encouragements to him."

Viktor watched her when she faced him. "I have never been so terrified in my life because as he came into her lifeless body, he looked at me. He *knew* I was there and looked right at me."

Viktor started to step forward but she moved away, continuing. "When he was finished with the farmer's wife, he climbed onto Cloelia, and she submitted to him as if he truly were her lover. And the whole time, his eyes were on me. When I could move, I ran. I was going to tell my husband of it but Cloelia met me in the corridor. She told me my child's destiny was sealed and that if I interfered, the child would die and the wrath of darkness would fall upon Maethi. I knew what she meant. She would kill Jolan and she would summon her demon to devour the entire village."

"No one, not even a witch, has that much power," Viktor argued.

"I said nothing to Adalbern and never saw that demon again until three months ago." She met his gaze.

"It was Count Dragomir," Viktor said suddenly understanding the situation.

Linza's eyes hardened. "I realised that had been the plan all along. Cloelia was here to ensure Jolan's marriage to him. You owe me, Viktor Kelemen, and I want you to kill that evil bitch."

Chapter Seven

Viktor groaned as he heaved again. Jolan stood at his side while his brother stood at the door. Alger had called for her and one of the maids and now stood watching with a frown.

"I warned you, guard, that this might happen." Jolan pressed the wet cloth to Viktor's face as he straightened. The maid hurried to empty the chamber bucket.

"How? We made certain you ate no contaminated food," Alger reasoned then glanced at the pitcher of ale on the table. He walked forward and looked inside, then snatched it up and sniffed it deeply.

"The ale," Viktor nodded then groaned as the maid hurried to return the chamber bucket but he managed to push his nausea down. "I drank of it last night. It did have an odd smell."

"It does now." Alger set the pitcher aside. "Shall I tell them there will be a delay in departure?"

"No." Viktor shook his head and forced himself to stand. "I will not give the witch the satisfaction."

"Be damned your pride! You cannot ride if you are ill," Alger argued.

"I have nothing left to empty. The poison has nearly run its course and I can feel my body fighting what's left of it. We will ride." Jolan could hear the strength returning to his voice.

"You are as stupid as I first suspected. If I had hit you in the head harder I might have shaken you enough that you could use your sense. You cannot continue to speak to her as you do and expect she will do nothing in return. You are fortunate she only meant to send you a message this time." Jolan set her cloth aside and tossed his leggings to the maid. "Help him dress, and try not to look so eager about it," she added when the maid's eyes glittered. The maid laughed but moved to do as Jolan told her.

"Come with me," she told Alger and he stepped into the corridor with her. "He will not hear me. He is your brother; I have heard you call him so. You must make him see that Cloelia is more dangerous than he wishes to believe."

Alger stared at her for only a moment then shook his head. "He will not listen. I have known him our whole lives to be as stubborn as our father was. He will not be bested by an old woman. He will step to her challenge."

"Take my sword and bash him in the head with it." Jolan stamped.

For a moment Alger had no expression then he threw his head back and laughed heartily. "I see why he likes you."

Jolan blinked. "He likes me? He said that?"

Alger continued to chuckle as he shrugged. "He needn't in those words. He spoke to me about wishing more time to teach you to hunt from horseback. Other than our sister, he has never wanted to do but one thing with a woman."

Jolan's cheeks heated and she looked away but Alger laughed again. "I know my own brother. There is no way he could resist a woman like you." Her cheeks grew warmer still.

"A woman like me?"

"He has a weakness for pretty women. It is no secret. There have never been any, though, who he meant to teach anything which required her to ride a horse. He likes you." Alger's voice softened. "I see your determination when we train. It is to be admired."

Alger's words caused her chest to tighten. "I dread when we part. I wish that we could remain here and continue as we have this past week. I've learned much from you and feel more confident in myself than I ever have before." She leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips to his bearded face. "Thank you for that."

Alger cleared his throat as she leaned back, but his eyes glittered as he held up a warning finger. "I am not as discreet as my brother. I should not care if the whole of your family saw our trundle. Do not give me too much affection for I am weaker than he."

Jolan grinned and turned to step back into the room. Her humour left when she saw the maid making more of a process of pulling on his tunic than it deserved. And Viktor was clearly enjoying the extra attention.

"By the Gods, move aside lest you mean him to heave while inside of you!" She ignored the maid's gasp and Alger's chuckle from behind her. She roughly jerked the tunic over Viktor's head and reached for the belt but he held up his hand, shaking his head. She realised his stomach must still feel unsteady if he wanted nothing binding around his middle.

"Not a word of this to anyone." She looked over her shoulder at the maid. "If he wishes to best her, then Cloelia must not know he was ill at all. Bring a piece of mint. It will help to settle the sick feeling in his stomach." She watched the maid hurry from the room.

"You will ready his horse so he will not be made to do more than what is required of him?" Jolan looked to Alger who inclined his head. "Attach his sword to his horse. They've not seen him ride and will not know it is not how he usually carries his weapon. Make it so it seems like easier access to the weapon and instruct the others to do the same so it appears commonplace."

Alger tilted his head. "You are a clever woman."

"If I were clever I would go to my father and tell him of Cloelia's poison. I am as stupid as he perhaps." She snapped but her irritation fled when Viktor caught her chin and turned her to look at him.

"You are not stupid, Prințesă, and had I not spent the last hour filling the chamber bucket I would kiss you for your quick thinking." His eyes showed his gratitude.

"Yes, well I thank you for the consideration." She smiled. "Now lean back." The maid returned with the mint leaf and he parted his lips so Jolan could place it against his tongue. His eyes glittered when his lips closed over her fingers momentarily.

"He's not overly ill if he can still think of his cock," Alger growled, making Jolan gasp with mock outrage.

Hours later, Jolan gasped again when Alger grasped her waist and set her atop her horse. He winked with a grin then held up a leather belt connected to her sword and sheath. He reached forward and secured it around her waist.

"And I believe no one should have only one weapon," he kept his voice low as the others readied to depart. He reached down and withdrew a dagger and smaller sheath from his boot, concealing it behind his hand. He produced another length of leather and reached beneath her clothes to tie it just below her knee. Heat burned Jolan's cheeks as he slipped the sheath beneath the strap.

"If you must use it," he spoke as he withdrew his hand, "do so with as much might as you can and bury it to the hilt, then twist. It matters not where you strike for the wound will not close."

She nodded that she understood and he turned from her to walk to his horse. Viktor rode his horse alongside hers while the others mounted.

"Stay close, Prințesă," he told her. She saw Tibor look back at the guard, his gaze narrowing.

"Why do you address her in that manner? She is not of royal blood."

Viktor slanted a smile that Jolan knew was not real. "Because she has a stubborn chin that she points at me when she commands me to do every little thing she can think of commanding me to do. Only a princess can look down her nose at someone so that he felt like a bug if he thought to disobey."

"I have never looked down my nose," Jolan argued.

Viktor only grunted in response before lifting his voice. "We ride."

Jolan turned and waved a last goodbye to her mother and father. Her father's eyes were teary but her mother's expression was stone. She gave Jolan a quick reassuring nod before turning to lead Adalbern back into their home.

They rode for hours, stopping close to midday to water the horses and eat. But their break was short before Viktor called for them to push on. By late afternoon, her legs had begun to ache. She looked to Tibor and he seemed to realise how weary she was because he called out to Viktor.

"Raban, we must stop."

Viktor didn't look back, "We do not stop until dark."

"I *demand* we stop." Tibor's voice rang with finality and Viktor turned slowly to look back at him, a brow arched. "She will not be able to ride tomorrow if she is so weary she cannot sit atop her horse."

Viktor's gaze darted to Jolan and she forced herself to straighten. "No, I can continue, Tibor." She would not slow them. He had spent a week attempting to make her stronger because he thought her weak. She would prove she was not.

"I have a cramp in my knee," Alger spoke up, "and would appreciate the stop."

Viktor pressed his lips together but nodded, calling for them to halt. One of his men called that there was an open space just inside the trees to set up camp.

Alger showed no sign of pain when he dismounted but before he could help Jolan from her horse, Viktor stepped forward. He reached up and grasped Jolan's waist, lifted her from

the horse, and set her to the ground. When he released her, her legs very nearly gave out beneath her and she reached out, grasping his arm for strength.

If he realised she was weakened he did not show it as he unsecured the leather bundle from her horse before his man came to lead the horse away with the others. "Do you wish to refresh yourself at the river, Prințesă?"

"Yes," she nodded as she gained her balance and released his arm.

"I will go with her," Cloelia stepped forward.

"You will not."

Cloelia's eyes went wide. "I have tolerated your insolence but you push too far now, Halfling. You cannot expect to watch her bathe!"

"Halfling?" Jolan repeated, her head snapping up to stare at Viktor. He was a Halfling? Her instinct was to step away from him but his hand rested on her shoulder, holding her where she stood.

"I concur." Geld stepped to Cloelia's side. "Count Dragomir would not approve of another having seen what is only his to see."

Viktor laughed suddenly. "Either your count has misinformed you of the situation or the crone has woven so many lies she cannot remember which ones she says to whom. I would not be the first to have seen whatever it is you are afraid I will see."

"What do you mean?" Geld's eyes narrowed.

"She is no virgin," Viktor said simply. "The witch said so herself and that the count was made aware of that fact."

Cloelia shifted nervously when Geld looked at her. "The count knows of no such thing," he said swinging his gaze back to Viktor, "and you cannot be certain what she said was truth."

"Oh, I'm certain," Viktor countered. Jolan wished she could sink into the ground and hide from those widened eyes.

Geld appeared shocked. "The count will not approve. He will..."

Viktor slid his hand to Jolan's back. "He will what?"

Geld glared at Jolan. "There will be punishment for the weakness and deceit." Jolan chilled all the way through her.

"You stupid girl!" Cloelia screeched, reaching forward to grasp Jolan's shoulders. "Do you know what you've done?" One swipe of Viktor's arm and he pushed Cloelia away from

Jolan and into Geld's chest. Geld shoved her away from him and turned to march away from them.

Jolan's gaze darted to Tibor. He didn't look at her but his mouth was pressed into a firm line. He was angry. She started to step towards him, but Viktor guided her away and to the trees. She glanced back to see Alger following.

"You are a Halfling." She spoke once they'd reached the river and his hand slid away from her.

He breathed out heavily and leant back against the trunk of a tree looking at Alger when he joined them.

"Geld and his men will have to be dealt with." Alger crossed his arms.

"Take Clodovech, Gerold, and Heinrich and rid of one of them tonight," Viktor said in a quiet voice. Jolan's breath caught. He meant to kill one of the count's men?

"They are Moroi. Geld is the one that killed Ishild," she told them but they didn't look at her.

"You want us to pick them off one by one?" Alger asked.

"It is the safest way to go about it. We'll blame the Mongols so we don't raise alarm." Viktor nodded. "We only have a few days before we reach Drago, so it'll have to be done quickly."

Jolan felt like the world was spinning around her. "Viktor."

His head snapped around and he stared at her.

"You are a Halfling."

"How do you know my name?" He pushed off from the tree and stepped towards her.

"I've heard your brother call you by that name before. I know that Raban is not your true name." She waved a hand. "I don't care of that. Why didn't you tell me you were a Halfling?"

"Do not address me by that name again. It wouldn't be safe for you if my name was made known." He ran a hand through his hair. "By the Gods, we're so close and it is all unravelling."

"What kind of Halfling?" Jolan demanded.

"We're wolves," Alger supplied. Jolan stared at him, then looked at Viktor.

"You are a wolf Halfling. Why didn't you tell me?" She stepped forward suddenly angry, weary of all the lies and having everything kept from her. "You said you hated lies yet it is all you've been doing since I met you.

"I didn't want to frighten you," he said warily. "You are already so fearful of everything else."

"I wouldn't be frightened if you would do what you are supposed to. You were commissioned to protect me, but you do not protect me or you would stop this marriage from happening. You heard what he said. The count will punish me. Instead you waste your efforts on Cloelia. I have suffered her abuse since I can remember. She is not the threat you should concern yourself with." Jolan shook as her anger grew. "Perhaps you don't care at all of what happens to me..."

"I do care..."

"Then go out there and kill my uncle and save me from this marriage!" She stamped her foot.

"Your uncle?" Alger echoed.

"Isn't it he whom you suspect killed your father?" Jolan stared at them.

"Your uncle is a coward and hasn't it in him to face another man much less kill one." Viktor growled.

"Then who?" Jolan shook her head but realisation kicked her in the stomach. Her throat closed and she took a step backwards. The count. Of course it was Count Dragomir. Her anger exploded as emotion rushed into her chest. She turned and grasped one of the stones at the river and hurled it at him. He moved quickly, raising his arms so that the stone did not strike his head. She picked up another and threw it and, when she missed, found a rotting limb. She swung it at him and it splintered across his shoulder.

"By the Gods, woman, what is wrong with you?" Viktor raised his voice as she swiped another stone and threw it. When she picked up yet another, he growled as he stalked forward and grasped her wrist.

"Stop!" he bellowed.

She kicked at him, used her free hand to pound at his chest until he caught that wrist too. "I could have escaped! You came after me and brought me back. That speech of not using you and the whole time you were using me to get to Dragomir!" She kicked his shins furiously. "I thought you were my friend! But you care nothing for me! I hate you!"

"Stop." But Viktor's voice had lost its harshness. "You cannot be forced to marry a dead man."

Jolan laughed coldly. "You are a fool, Viktor Kelemen. You cannot kill him. He is a demon. He is evil. You cannot kill that kind of evil. He will slay you and yours at the gates, and I will not be there to see it. I will not." She tried to jerk from his grasp, struggled when he pulled her to his chest.

"I need you." Viktor's words caused a new wave of fury to find her.

"You need to *use* me," she spit in his face. "I won't be used. I'll tell them all who you are and what you mean to do. You will *not* use me."

Viktor's jaw tightened but she didn't care. "My father was *gnawed* upon before he died. He was held down by a rope around his neck while he was stabbed and eaten of." Viktor's fingers tightened around her wrists. "Yes, I used you. I would have used my own mother if it would get me to that bastard. I would slit my own brother's throat if he tried to stop me."

"Viktor." Alger stepped forward pulling Jolan away from him by the shoulders. She stared as tears formed in Viktor's eyes. He released her wrists and covered his head with shaking hands. Alger guided her to one side then went to his brother as deep sounds strangled from Viktor's throat and he lowered to his knees.

"We'll get to him, Viktor," Alger said softly. "With or without her, we'll get to him and will have his insides strewn through the gates of his own castle. I swear it to you." Alger's large arm slid across Viktor's shoulder as he knelt at his side. Jolan swallowed as she watched Viktor wipe at his eyes. She'd thought him unbreakable but she'd broken him without even meaning to.

"Viktor," she took a step forward but stopped as a shout erupted through the trees.

[&]quot;Mongols!"

Chapter Eight

The world had turned into a deafening blur of clashing swords and blood. Jolan stared at the carnage in horror, her own sword clutched in her hands as Cloelia dragged her back into the trees. Viktor and his brothers had changed, teeth of the wolf bared, claws at the end of their fingers as they swung their swords. Their eyes were grey, shining with fierceness. Geld's men moved as if they had wings, slipping through the air at their enemies, viciously sinking their teeth into them. But the Mongols were many.

"Run, you fool!" Cloelia tugged at her arm. But they'd been spotted and one of the fearsome horsemen charged towards them. Cloelia's hand fell away from her as she left her to face the Mongol alone.

She lifted her sword as he neared. Offence. You are smaller so you must surprise your enemy with attack. Alger's words pushed through her horror and found her from her memory. As the Mongol reached down to grab her she whirled and swung the sword out at full arm's length. As she rounded to face him again, it struck and sank into the horseman's arm, slicing through muscle. She saw his dark eyes widen before his expression twisted with pain and anger. Before she could swing again, he knocked the sword away from her.

She turned and bolted but heard him take chase. A moment later, his fingers grasped her hair and she was jerked backward. She screamed as her feet left the ground, striking above her at the grip that held her. She saw the glint of his sword when it raised and she struggled to reach the dagger Alger had strapped to her leg. She found it and swung it up across the Mongol's wrist. His grip loosened and she jerked from his grasp, tumbling to the ground.

She rolled over in time to see the Mongol slide down from his horse. He leapt atop her and her head snapped to the side beneath the strength of his hand. He suddenly jerked to the side and the end of Viktor's sword plunged into his chest. Jolan watched the Mongol's body fall to the side then her gaze swung up to Viktor.

He held out his hand, waving for her to stand. She did, her attention turning to the others. The horsemen had retreated, but there were bodies everywhere. Her throat closed as

she saw Geld stand, his face covered in blood. His eyes burned yellow as he licked at the evidence of his kills.

"Don't look," Viktor took her by the shoulders, turning her but not before she spotted Tibor among those that had been struck down.

"No!" She screamed, twisting away from Viktor and rushing forward. She leapt over the bodies until she reached Tibor, dropping to her knees at his side. He was dead, the wound on his chest deep, his eyes staring upward and empty. Strong hands pulled her away despite her attempts to reach for him.

"He fought valiantly, took down at least five before he was struck down," Alger said from her side. Her gaze slid over the others. Two of Geld's men had been completely beheaded. At least half of Viktor's were dead. Ewan stood shaking in the midst of them. He didn't even hold a weapon. Fire burned through her veins, she shook from it as she stepped forward.

"Geld, I was no virgin before my guard came to Maethi. I was no virgin when I lay with the stable boy and it was not of my doing. It was this coward who will not fight who slipped into my room when I was but twelve and took what was the count's to take." She lifted her dagger and pointed at him. "My father, greedy though he may be, would not have stood weaponless, depending on others to defend him. You are a coward, Uncle, and I am ashamed you share my father's name."

Geld's yellowed gaze swung to Ewan. "She was meant for the count. You have betrayed him." His voice vibrated with the evil Jolan knew was inside of him but his words surprised her. She was meant for the count? Even at twelve? She realised her uncle had played a part in her fate, in the fate of those who lay dead around them. She looked back at Tibor and hatred rose inside of her for not only her uncle, but also for the man who awaited her arrival.

"If you still thirst for blood, Geld, his is yours and I give you permission to pick his bones clean." She faced her uncle as his eyes widened. "May your soul never find rest."

Geld stared at her and his lips curled. "You are as vicious as my master but my thirst is quenched. Count Dragomir, however, has an insatiable appetite and shall be pleased that you approve of the way he will dispose of your uncle."

Geld's gaze shifted behind her. She turned and found Viktor striding forward. His grey eyes swung in her direction, canines bared. She nodded. He would do it.

"While your bloodlust is sated, mine is not." He drew back his hand, claws spread, when he was within reach. With one powerful swing they tore through Ewan's throat before the man could scream. Jolan turned as her uncle fell and walked shakily back through the bodies. Numbness settled over her and her mother's voice found her memory. It was a song she remembered from childhood.

"Jolan." The voice sounded far away and she ignored it, listening to the words her mother sang to her. She was barely aware of the hands that found her. They were guiding her, warm and strong. She closed her eyes, her mother's voice drowning out everything around her. Slowly she slipped into the memory.

Viktor lifted her gently as she went limp beneath his hands. He frowned down at the bruise that discoloured the left side of her face, half concealed by blood.

"The crone is gone. Her horse is missing." Alger called.

"She fled," Geld answered.

Viktor glanced at his brothers then at his fallen men. "Clear the bodies and collect the horses. We will set up camp next to the river and be ready when they come back."

"You can't be certain they will return," Geld argued.

"They'll return." He turned and carried Jolan through the trees to the river. Alger followed.

"Her sword and dagger are bloodied," his brother observed.

"Because she used them both to fight. I killed him but he would have bled to death had I not." Viktor knelt and laid her gently on the river bank. He ripped a piece of his tunic and wet it then washed away the blood on her face. His gaze dropped to her stained clothes.

"Find her bundle. When she wakes, I don't want it to be in these ruined clothes." He reached forward and began ripping her clothes. Alger returned moments later and dropped the leather bundle beside him. Viktor didn't look up, washing her body clean of blood. He dressed her carefully then ripped another piece of his tunic to wash her hair with.

"When they come back?" Alger queried softly.

"We'll kill them all but one prisoner." He looked at Alger. "Have Geld in the trees so they can swoop in behind them. Have our men start digging a pit between the river and the road so we can knock them off their horses."

He looked back down at Jolan and smiled. "Collect some stones—ones that will hurt like hell. We'll rain those down on the bastards before we rip out their throats." He took up a

tendril of her hair and squeezed river water into it. Using his fingers, he began combing through the strands, washing away the blood.

"We lost a good many men," Alger sighed heavily.

"Their names and deaths will not be forgotten." Viktor knew them, every one. "And they will not have perished in vain."

He glanced behind him then lowered his voice. "You cannot betray someone if you have no relation with him. Ewan and Cloelia had arranged this union since before Jolan was born. No doubt the crone rides to Drago. When she tells Dragomir that there are Halflings bringing his bride, he will know we come for him."

"We'll not be able to get through the gates. They'll be waiting for us." Alger nodded.

"By the time he realises that his men have been killed and we have his woman, we won't need to get into his gates. He'll come to us." Viktor touched Jolan's cheek. "We'll send our men to return to Maethi so they can build up defences while we return to Kelemen."

Alger nodded and rose to his feet. "Shall I ready to dispose of the Moroi after the Mongols are dealt with?"

"No, we won't raise alarm until we are closer to Brasov. They must be made to think we mean to continue to Drago." He thought Alger might ask him why but instead he left him to tend to Jolan. His plan had changed and he meant to make certain all went the way he wanted if he was going to succeed.

Jolan would hate him as much as she said, for he would use her again. She may never forgive him. But when he was finished she would never have to fear Dragomir again.

Chapter Nine

Viktor awoke as hot breath swept across his face. He groaned at the ache in his muscle reminding him of their victory over the Mongols the night before. Squinting up into the morning sunlight, he stared at Jolan atop her horse, the beast's face inches from his.

"You mean to sleep away the morning, guard?" she asked.

He sat up and found his men readying to ride, Geld and his Moroi already on horseback. "What is this?"

"She roused us all," Geld grumbled.

"If I am to become Countess within the week, we shall have to ride now. Rise, guard, and let us be on our way. The count waits." She turned her horse and urged the animal forward. He looked to Alger who shrugged.

"Your prisoner escaped in the night," Geld told him as he rose to his feet. "I imagine you wanted as much when you fashioned such a loose bind around his wrists."

"What is the use of a victory if there is no one left to tell the tale?" Viktor took the reins of the horse Alger brought to him. He swung atop Koen's back and kicked him forward so he could ride along side Jolan. She'd not awakened even during the fighting. He'd feared she might have grown ill. He also expected a refusal to push on to Drago.

What he hadn't expected was her sitting atop a horse, chin set determinedly, her hair unbound and uncovered, dressed in clothes that were clearly belonging to one of his men. Leather wrapped from the top of her boots to her knees over a pair of leggings and a tunic, tied about the waist reached to her knees. Her sword and sheath swung from the leather belt and he saw her dagger tucked inside the belt as well. She looked ready for battle.

"Prințesă," he kept his voice low and her gaze slanted at him.

"My name is Jolan," she corrected sharply as Geld rode past them. She kicked her horse to a faster pace so she could ride beside the captain. "Geld, send one of your men ahead of us to Drago. I wish the count to know I mean to be wed as soon as we arrive. I'll need appropriate clothing readied and require twelve flower head wreaths made for the occasion."

"Twelve?" Geld echoed.

"Once we are wed and our marriage consummated, I shall want you to dispatch at least a dozen of your men to hunt down a Mongol each. Their heads will be piked at the gates of Drago, adorned with my wreaths, a clear message that not only should they fear the count but his new bride." She looked at Geld. "Can you see to that?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Count Dragomir suspects a meek and gentle bride. He shall be delighted to discover the change in you. Adolf!" he called over his shoulder and one of his men rode forward immediately. Viktor listened as Geld relayed Jolan's instructions with a frown then watched Adolf kick his horse forward into a gallop to do as he was commanded.

His attention returned to the back of Jolan's head. Did she think that Viktor's plan, the one she knew of, would fail and had accepted her fate in becoming Dragomir's wife? That was the only conclusion Viktor could come to and it filled him with anger. She was preparing herself to open her legs for the demon she had feared with no inclination to fight at all.

She allowed her horse to fall back beside Koen close to midday. "I wish to stop and water the horses. I must stretch my legs if we are to ride until dark." Viktor lifted a hand for the others to stop. He slid from Koen and noticed she did not dismount. Instead, she looked at him and waited. When he stepped closer, she leant forward and placed her hands on his shoulders. Lifting her from the horse he set her to the ground gently then stared at her when she waved for him.

"I would revive myself at the river. Though I doubt more trouble would find me, Tibor wished you to remain at my side until I am delivered to Count Dragomir, and so you shall." She walked spine straight towards the trees expecting him to follow.

"She is changed." Alger mumbled, his voice edged with sadness. Viktor didn't respond, striding forward to follow Jolan. He watched her as she knelt at the water and splashed its coolness on to her face, then stepped forward beside her.

"I know you are angry at me, Prințesă, but you must understand that my father did not deserve the death he met ..."

"Any more than I deserve to be forced to wed," she interrupted, "any more than Tibor deserved the fate that found him. Had I found escape from this union, Tibor would live still. There is nothing you can say to me to make that untrue. All you can do now is what you go to Drago to do."

She turned without allowing him to answer. "Once the horses are tended, I want to push on. Geld has told me that if we ride until it becomes dark each day we will reach Drago in three days instead of four. I shall see the gates of Drago in three days."

* * * *

Mircea stared at the woman that stood in front of him. "Halflings?"

"Five of them." Cloelia's head bobbed up and down.

He fisted his fingers. Kelemen. The bastards meant to stroll right through his gates! Damn Ewan Lovasz and damn Cloelia!

"You left her."

"The Mongols were everywhere. I had no choice. It doesn't matter. She is ruined. The Halfling guard has lain with her," Cloelia told him. Fury filled Mircea so quickly that his fangs pushed from his gums instantly. Viktor Kelemen meant to take *everything* from him!

"I trusted you, Cloelia. She was meant to be mine." He saw the fear in the old woman's face as her gaze dropped to his fangs. "You betrayed me."

"I have not! It was that guard!"

"You were to keep her clean for me. Not only did you fail but you led my enemies to me. That Halfling is no guard. He is Dieter Kelemen's eldest and he does not bring me a wife but means to bring a battle. You shouldn't have left her. You should have brought her with you." He advanced and she screeched. Whirling, she tried to run but he overtook her at the door and sank his teeth. He drank until he felt her body weaken, then thrust her away from him. She fell in a heap to the floor and he stood over her until he saw the life leave her eyes.

"Count Dragomir! One of our men approaches the gates!" A shout vibrated from outside the walls. Stepping over Cloelia, he swept into the courtyard. It could not be Geld. He was not due for another three days and unlike Cloelia, Geld would not return without his bride. He raised a hand when he saw it was Adolf and the gates were opened.

"Why are you here?"

"I bring a message under Geld's command." Adolf dismounted and smiled as he walked forward. "And from your bride."

Viktor called for break with the sun directly above them. "Water the horses and relieve yourselves. We shall eat now for we will not stop and ride on into the night to reach Drago before morning." Viktor swept Jolan from her horse and motioned towards the trees. As she'd done for the past three days, she walked ahead of him. He glanced back at Alger and inclined his head. Alger returned the gesture so Viktor hurried forward and stood next to her as he'd done before while she wet her face. When she stood, he handed her a piece of dried meat and waited while she ate it quickly. When she'd finished, he expected her to turn and head back to the road. Instead she touched his arm.

"After today, we may not have a chance to speak again." She licked her lips. "By morning you will be engaged in a battle I fear you will lose. I wish you to know, that if you do fail, I will not. Count Dragomir will meet his death the day of my arrival regardless."

Viktor frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If my wishes are carried out, by midday I will be wed and taken to his marriage bed. When he crawls atop me, I shall bury my dagger into his throat and twist it as Alger instructed. He may live long enough to end my life but not long enough to save his own."

Viktor reached for her shoulders. "By the Gods, you would give your life to end his?"

"I shall do it for Tibor, for Ishild, for your father. Those we loved are dead because of him." Her eyes welled.

His chest tightened. She *had* changed but not as he had expected. She'd lost someone she loved and her heart had become that of a warrior.

"You will not perish, Prințesă," he said softly.

"If he does not kill me, I will not make it to the gates before one of the others do. But they will do with the whole of Drago burning down around them. I broke open your pain with my words before but I did not understand that pain. Until Tibor died, I had never lost someone I loved." She lifted her face. "So kiss me, Viktor, so that if you do perish and I must go to his bed, it will be with your breath upon my lips, so I will have the taste and scent of you on me when I tell him that the sons of Dieter Kelemen await his soul with their father."

Viktor could only stare at her, his chest filling with warmth. He'd thought the sight of bloodshed had deadened her as it would have some, had turned her cold to emotion. He saw now, gazing into her large eyes, that instead it had opened her to a pain he would have spared her if he could and filled her with a need matching his own, a need for justice so that those they loved did not perish for nothing.

"If you do not kiss her, brother, I will." Alger's voice cracked from behind them.

Viktor did not release her gaze. "It is done?"

"It is." Alger cleared his throat. "Now kiss the woman before I take her from you and make her *my* wife." Viktor grunted as he lifting his hands to cradle her face. He kissed her softly, gently, until he felt her tears against his own cheeks.

"Do not weep, Prințesă. Things have changed since we departed Maethi and as with any plan of revenge, we must be ready to change it as needed." He spoke against her lips. "It is needed now and you will not go to Drago tomorrow."

She leant back, a small smile on her face despite her tears. "Geld will not allow you to turn back when we are this close."

"Geld is dead," Viktor saw the shock fill her eyes, "as are the other two that rode with him. We do not go now to Drago. We go to Kelemen."

She took a step backwards, shaking her head. "No, we go to Drago. Dragomir must be killed."

"He will be. But not tomorrow."

He watched her whirl and run through the trees. At the road, he found her staring at the three lifeless bodies that his brothers were dragging to the trees.

"No. No. No." Her hands shook. "No! Dragomir won't let us through the gates without him! What have you done?" She faced Viktor, her eyes flashing angrily. "I have to kill him. I have to!"

"Cloelia, if she is as I think she is, has already told him of us. He will know it is Kelemens that come for him. It would not work unless we took him by surprise." Viktor tried to explain but she looked frantic. "We can draw him out, make him come to us. We still have the advantage."

"I can still kill him. I can make it look as if I escaped. I can go to him and if I am bloodied, he will believe me!" She drew her dagger as if she meant to cut upon herself. Viktor strode forward and swiped the weapon from her.

"He will come for you, Jolan. We will kill him when he does." He shook her and finally her gaze lifted, clearing through her madness.

"I wanted it to be over," she whispered.

"He will come to me. I have something he's waited twenty years to have, something his crone groomed just for him. He will come to me, Jolan, and I will be waiting for him." Viktor wanted her to understand.

"And if you fail, he will punish Maethi."

"If I fail, he'll meet an army at Maethi. My men are preparing now to ride to your home and they will defend it with their lives. Clodovech and Gerold will lead them." He waved a hand at those already mounting. She looked at them then back to Viktor.

"But he will come to Kelemen?"

"He will come. You spoke his weakness yourself. He fears having something taken from him that he believes is his." Viktor nodded and felt the shaking ease from her arms. She took a breath. Then another.

"Then let us go to Kelemen, but this is the last time I will wait for his death," she warned. Viktor nodded and lifted her to her horse. They changed their course from east to north, the four of them riding at a much faster pace than before. Outside of Brasov their ride ended abruptly when a horde of Mongols blocked the road. Instantly, Jolan drew her sword and Viktor smiled as he urged Koen next to her horse. Reaching out, he placed his hand on hers and lowered her weapon.

"Not this time, Prințesă, though your eagerness to engage makes me heavy for you." He kicked Koen forward as the one who led the horde did the same.

"You are Viktor Kelemen?" The Mongol leader's dark eyes narrowed as he looked him over then behind him at those that waited behind. "It is a small band to have demolished so many of mine."

"We have a bit of an advantage, I'm afraid."

"I was told you are both beasts and men."

"You were not misinformed."

The Mongol glanced back at those he led. "Why did you use one of mine to bring me here?"

Viktor leant forward on Koen. "Though we are different, we now find ourselves with the same enemy. Count Dragomir. I believe we can come to an agreement that would satisfy both of us."

Those eyes narrowed. "Why would I agree to anything?"

"There are but two cities you've been unsuccessful at destroying. Mine, of which you will continue to fail," Viktor straightened, "and Drago. Drago is yours to do with as you wish if you ally with me and defend another from his army."

"I have lost many men to his. They are not men."

"They can be killed."

"Why should I believe you?"

"You will find the heads of three of them on the road to Maethi where two of my kind and my own men await your arrival. Your swords are no good unless you behead the enemy. By nightfall tomorrow one of Dragomir's armies will march to Maethi, another will depart for Kelemen. I mean for you to defend Maethi before you come back and raid Drago. While you do that, I will be killing Dragomir."

"What is to stop me from waiting until the two are well on their way and taking Drago instead?"

Viktor smiled. "Because you have not known fear in battle until you have an army of angry wolves coming at you."

The Mongol studied him for several long moments before inclining his head. "Your terms are acceptable."

"You know my name. I will know the one that destroys Drago."

"Mongke Burilgi."

Chapter Ten

Jolan stepped through the door of Kelemen Castle, thankful at long last to be out of the rain. Viktor strode ahead of her and opened his arms to the girl that squealed and raced to him. She watched him embrace her, lifting her off her feet while Alger and Heinrich stepped past her to join the reunion.

"I thought you would never return!" the girl exclaimed after hugging each of them.

"How could we keep away from you, Kata?" Alger patted her head.

"Where are Clodovech and Gerold?" She looked past them and stopped, her gaze resting on Jolan.

"They shall join us later." Viktor turned and waved for Jolan to come forward. "Come and meet my only sister, Katarin." Jolan smiled at the girl as she stepped forward. There was little resemblance for Katarin was petite, her hair much darker, and her complexion far lighter than that of her brothers.

"You come back to me in one piece I see."

Jolan turned to see a woman on the stone stairwell, an older version of Katarin. The woman's dark hair parted only once at her right temple for a streak of grey, the only hint of her age. It was her voice that was most matured, full bodied yet feminine, soft but of strength.

"We all are whole." Viktor nodded.

"Then Mircea Dragomir is dead?" She folded her arms beneath her bosom and descended the stairs. "I know he is not for I can see in your eyes you've not been sated. Why do you return if he lives?"

"Events we could not control thwarted our plan to enter Drago." Viktor explained. "So instead we will bring him to us."

Jolan watched the woman move across the floor to Viktor. She did not even seem to step but rather glide. She held out her hands and Viktor took them instantly, her gaze then flicking to Jolan.

"You took his woman."

"I did."

"You were always a clever boy." She smiled then, those full lips pulling back to reveal her white teeth. "Alger, come to me boy, you are thinner." Alger instantly went to her and embraced her roughly. Heinrich did the same.

They stepped aside when she craned her neck to look at Jolan. "This is the one he chose to wed? She is very small but then it should not surprise me that he would choose someone so easy to overpower."

Jolan lifted her chin. "One cannot overpower another with a blade in their gullet."

The woman's eyes lightened and she inclined her head. "One cannot. Kata, bring a warm blanket before she shivers right out of her clothes. And bring her something dry to wear." She waved her hand for Jolan to move closer to the hearth which she did gratefully.

"You are not bound so I can only assume that you come willingly with one of Dieter's sons." She indicated for Jolan to sit in the chair closest the hearth and settled across from her in another. "Shall I guess which one?" Her gaze slid to Viktor and she made a tsk sound against her teeth.

"Why do you assume it was I?" Viktor removed his cloak before settling into one of the larger chairs.

"Heinrich only has eyes for his wife and Alger should not care for the look of a woman to bed her." She chuckled. "You, Viktor, would not be able to resist one so pretty however."

"You cut me, Ilona." Viktor chuckled.

Jolan stared at the woman across from her. *This* was Ilona? She had imagined a woman of large build, one who looked as solid as the castle they occupied. But she was thin and feminine, almost seeming delicate. She smiled at Katarin who returned with dry clothes and a blanket. Jolan accepted them and thanked her.

"Let us go, daughter, and bring them food. If we do not, Alger shall perish before Dragomir's arrival." Ilona rose and reached for Katarin's hand. "Alger, Heinrich, come. I wish to know the details of this plan...unless she wishes more than Viktor's assistance." The two followed her as she swept across the room and through a door, leaving Viktor and Jolan alone.

"More?" Jolan echoed.

He shrugged. "She knows me and my brothers well. There have been women in the past that more than one of us desired."

Jolan stared at him as heat rushed to her cheeks. He meant that they'd shared a woman before. She looked away from him, embarrassed by the sudden images that found her thoughts of Viktor and Alger touching her. She began to undress but then stilled when Viktor rose and walked towards her. She looked at him when he reached forward and began to peel away her clothes.

"I wish to continue training with the sword while we wait to kill Dragomir. I did poorly with it against the Mongols." She watched him kneel and began unwinding the leather from around her legs. "When I return to Maethi I will teach my mother. She is weaker than I was when you first arrived."

"Neither of you are weak at all, and she has less vulnerability than you think." Viktor gently urged her to lift her leg so he could remove one boot then the other. "Before she left, she came to my room."

Jolan's eyes widened and she kicked at him causing him to look up startled. "You lay with my mother?"

He suddenly grinned. "She is very beautiful." He laughed when she kicked at him again and caught her leg, before sliding his hands up her calf. "Calm yourself. I am not *that* weakened by a woman. She did not come to me on her own behalf but rather on yours. Your eyes reveal everything you think, Prințesă, and jealousy does not rest well in their depths."

Jolan lifted her chin. "It is not jealousy that you see but the threat of using my dagger on your throat had you taken advantage of my mother," she snapped.

"Do you not wish to know what she came to me to say?" He rocked forward onto his knees, his hands sliding up and over her hips, his fingers seeming to burn through the chill on her skin. She nodded when he looked up and listened as he relayed her mother's command.

"Cloelia and Dragomir made the arrangement while I was still in the womb?" Jolan pushed his hands away when they lifted to her breasts and turned to face the fire. "Cloelia had no feelings at all for me. She never did. I have been a fool."

"How could you know her plan?" Viktor argued as he rose and stepped behind her.

"I regret you did not kill her when you had the chance." Jolan frowned at the flames. "If she ever returns to Maethi, I will have her beaten to death."

"You grow more vicious by the passing hour," Viktor murmured as he bowed his head next to hers and kissed her ear. "I fear your bloodlust is stronger than my own." His tongue sent a hot shiver down her spine as he licked at her earlobe.

"You are using me again," she turned her head to look at him, "to draw Dragomir to you."

"I am."

"Yet you refused to be used yourself."

Viktor turned his face into her hair and breathed in deeply. "Have you not used me too, Prințesă? I bore a witches brew to save you her abuse. I wait for your command to have you rather than taking what I burn to have as I wish. You know that you control whatever we do when we are together and I am not a man to give over such control. Is that not enough to ease your anger at me?"

"It is not." She faced him.

"What more do you want?"

"I want your protection." She watched his eyes lower to her breasts, distracted by her.

"You have always had that, Prințesă. Even as I use you now, I will not allow you to come to harm."

Jolan shook her head. "I do not mean for me. I mean I wish you to protect Maethi as if it were your own family that lived there. Your weakness is not women. Your weakness is your family and it makes you stronger. I want that strength for those of Maethi."

His gaze lifted. "My brothers, ten of my own men, and a horde of Mongolians will not allow any army, Moroi or man, to bring harm to your home. As I am charged to protect you, I protect every extension of you."

Jolan suddenly breathed out. He'd not told her what was said to the Mongolians to allow them pass without bloodshed. Now she realised his plan fully and relief filled her. She sank to her knees as the sobs she'd stifled since Tibor's death erupted abruptly. Instantly, Viktor was at her side but she could not stop. Her cries became harder as she released her sorrow.

"What have you done to her?" Alger's voice boomed across the great hall as his heavy steps carried him quickly to their side.

"I've done nothing," Viktor snapped.

"She is weeping."

"I can see that, brother."

"She is naked," Alger continued.

"Also something I am aware of."

"Then why is she weeping unless you have forgotten what to do with a naked woman?"

"I have not forgotten....By the Gods, brother, if you do nothing but accuse me then you are of no more use than an old woman!"

Through her heartache laughter formed. "Stop." She spoke between chuckles. "He has done nothing but what I have asked of him." She looked up at Alger through her tears as he knelt next to them.

"You are certain? I will run him through myself if he has brought you pain."

She reached up and touched his beard. "Underneath all your fur, you really are just a gentle wolf, aren't you?" Alger slanted a glance at Viktor when he laughed, then stood. He turned quickly as if embarrassed and stamped back the way he came.

"If you do not be careful, Prințesă, you will bewitch him into believing he wants you for himself," Viktor warned.

"And what do you want?" She wiped her eyes and watched his gaze lower to her breasts.

"I want in you."

Jolan's breath caught but he did not touch her. "Then take what it is that makes you burn." She gasped when he moved lightening quick, grabbing her and pulling him to him. His mouth captured hers and his tongue thrust between her lips. Her body forgot its chill when he pushed her to the floor and he pulled at the ties of his leggings. His urgency ignited her, brought an ache to her sex to fill him inside of her. He settled between her knees and he pushed his fingers into her. His need for her had wet her and she could see the surprise and gratitude in his eyes as he removed his hand and nudged his cock into her cunt. She squeezed her muscles around him, enjoying the deep groan that vibrated in his throat.

"By the Gods, woman, you shall make me mad for you." He thrust deeply and she arched against him.

"Fuck me, Viktor," she commanded and slid her arms around him when he leaned over her. His hips rocked back and forth, pushing himself in and out of her while his eyes remained locked with hers. Heat bloomed inside of her and reached down to pull tension taut in her sex. Leaning forward, she bit at him hard, again when he sucked in his breath. She knew he liked it and his movements quickened as he thrust into her.

"Harder," he rasped and she obliged that half growl arousing her to the brink of rapture. She bit down as pleasure exploded over her, crying out against his skin. He shouted as his hips jerked against hers and she released him, body rising against his as she fisted her hands in his hair. She was aware of the change in his eyes, saw his canines extend over his lip but lost in pleasure, she didn't care. Wave after wave fell over her, trembled through her whole body. His hips continued rocking into her, never losing rhythm as he threw back his head, baring his teeth. The muscles of his neck tightened and she felt him release, the heat of his seed filling her.

He fell forward, his weight on his hands at either side of her head, labouring breath pumping his chest. If she had been a Halfling she was certain she would be no different than he, for her whole body throbbed from the aftermath of pleasure. Her fingers loosened from his hair and she slid her hand to his cheek, then to his mouth, brushing her fingers against the sharp points of his teeth.

"You are not frightened, Prințesă."

"I would not have been if you'd told me in Maethi." She lifted one of his hands to examine his claws then settled them between her breasts. "I have never feared you, Viktor."

"I must warn you, Prințesă, when you bite me as you do it makes me want to claim you as my own. I wish to bite you back and if I did so it would bond you to me for always." He shook his head. "You weaken me so that I am lost inside of you and cannot think to slow. I warn you now in case I lose myself again."

Jolan blinked. "Bite me back?"

"Yes."

"With those teeth? I certainly would stab you in the throat if you tried that. I do not wish pain."

He laughed deeply. "Pain only at first, then the most exquisite pleasure you could imagine." His tongue slid over his teeth. "But you would have no freedom to choose another afterwards. It would make you mine forever. I wish to spare you that when you've had so very little freedom in your life."

"Have you bitten many women like that?"

"I have not bitten any woman like that."

"Then why do you wish to bite me?" She rested her hands on his chest. "Alger told me you liked me. Why would you wish to do that to me?"

"Because I lo..." he stopped, then lowered his face to nuzzle her neck. "I do like you very much, Jolan. It is why I warn you of me."

She slipped her arms around him and held him to her. She knew he was going to say love. It had been there on his lips, in his eyes. But she could not accept his love. Not as long Dragomir was alive and Maethi threatened. He seemed to know that and had stopped, and she was grateful for his understanding—for sparing them both her rejection.

"Let's get you into your clothes before Alger comes back convinced he must show me what to do with a naked woman."

Jolan bit her lip as he pulled from within her and readjusted the ties of his leggings. She stood and allowed him to dress her then wrap the blanket around her. She sat when he guided her to the chair next to the hearth but her body had been warmed so that no chill lingered.

"Do you mean to share me with him before Dragomir arrives?" She asked and his brow rose as he settled on the floor and took up her feet so he could rub at them.

"I mean to have you any way you will allow me to have you before I kill that bastard." He leant forward and kissed at her toes. "If it is not your wish, then I will take my fill of you alone."

"If I gave my consent?"

She saw his nose flare slightly. "Then we shall both take our fill."

"You do wish to share me with him." She pulled her foot from his hands and leant forward. "Why?"

"We are brothers as both man and wolf. Our appetites are the same and when we share, the pleasure is higher." He lay back on the floor, tucking his hands beneath his head. "I am man but the wolf leads my senses. As brothers we feel—deeply—of one another's pleasures and pain."

She tilted her head. "You mean he knows when you and I have lain together?"

He nodded. "Because he, as have my other brothers, felt my pleasure."

Jolan leant back against the chair, not knowing how she felt about that. It was as if she'd been shared anyway. She looked to the door and her eyes widened.

"Just now?"

"Heinrich has most likely found his wife and some poor serving maid was dragged into a corridor by Alger." He chuckled.

"And your sister?"

"She's too young yet. And she is not of the same mother. Though we love her as much as if she were, her bond with us is not as pure."

She chewed at her lip. "And you feel your brothers as they do with their women what we have done?"

"I do." His lips twisted with a grin. "There is that jealousy again." She nudged his thigh with her toe in a mock kick.

"It is much to realise. If what you say is true, it is almost as if I have lain with your brothers already. Have you no secrets of your own?" Jolan watched him shake his head, still grinning. "That is why you say you do not like lies. You never knew any in your family. I envy you that. It seems everything I ever believed was not truth at all."

A clap of thunder vibrated through the walls and Viktor growled, "I hate the rain."

"I am often fearful of storms. Cloelia used to tell me they carried evil that could taint my body." She frowned as she remembered the scrubbings she'd received the morning after a night storm, of how her skin would burn and remain reddened for hours after the bath was over.

"Come," Viktor rose from the floor and held his hand out. "You should eat something for if Alger doesn't finish with that woman soon, I'll be dragging you to my bed on an empty stomach." She slid her fingers into his and allowed him to lead her through the castle to the kitchen where Ilona and her daughter were waiting.

Ilona made no mention of what she surely knew had taken place, rising to serve them each a hot bowl of stew. "It is rabbit," Ilona beamed. "Kata has become a better hunter than even you, Vik."

"That is because she has the eyes of a raven." He winked at Kata and she smiled. Jolan watched the girl wait for her brother to taste the stew and smiled when Viktor made a production of how good it tasted. He was softer than she'd known him to be and she was thankful to see him with his family. Her gaze rose to Ilona to find the woman watching her.

"Alger said you fought against Mongols."

Jolan shook her head. "Only one and poorly."

"She struck him with her sword and her dagger and both blades bore his blood." Viktor spoke around a mouthful.

"That is where you received that bruise?"

Viktor nodded when Jolan touched her face. She'd forgotten how discoloured her face must be, since the pain of the strike had long left her.

"Right before I ran him through."

Ilona looked at Viktor. "How many of ours perished?"

"Eleven," Viktor answered and Jolan stared at him as he began naming off those that had perished. "I'll go to their families in the morning."

"That was only ten." Kata shook her head. "You said eleven."

"Tibor was the eleventh that fell," Viktor took Jolan's hand. "And his already know that he fought bravely."

"How many of Dragomir's perished?" Ilona pressed.

"None by Mongolian sword. All by ours except for one who rode ahead. Eckkhard, Odo, and Geld." Viktor named them.

"And Ewan." Jolan saw his fingers fist on the table's surface.

"Yes, and Ewan, though I wish I had not spilled his blood so quickly." He pushed his bowl away. "I would have Tibor live so that he could have run Ewan through with his last breath." Violence shook through his words, surprising Jolan.

"I am grateful Tibor did not know what he'd done."

"Had he known he would have killed him years ago himself," Viktor countered. "Had I known, I would have handed him to your father in pieces."

"It happened long ago," Jolan whispered though she did appreciate his anger against what had been done to her. "And while it was unwanted he was not cruel."

Viktor shot to his feet and stepped back, grasping his sister and pulling her forward. "Look at her. She is the same age."

Jolan's throat closed as she looked at Kata's young face, watched her look up at her brother then back to Jolan, clearly confused. She had been a girl like Kata.

"Would I hate any less just because he did not strike at her when he did as he wished?" Viktor demanded and Jolan shook her head. "Would your father cared that it was his own brother had he known?" Again she shook her head. Satisfied, he returned to his chair, allowing Kata to return to hers.

"He deserves a thousand deaths and I hope that crone found her way to Dragomir to tell him that I had lain with you, for if she did, your mother will not worry if I killed the bitch or not. I will wager my life she had not a drop of blood left in her veins to give strength to another thought she had of you before she died."

Silence followed his words and Jolan could no longer swallow stew over the lump in her throat. She rose from her chair and moved to stand behind Viktor. Her hands shook as she touched his shoulders, feeling the rage tensed in his muscles. She bent forward and kissed the top of his head. Instantly he reached up and grasped her arms, pulling them down around him.

"As long as I have breath in me, no one will ever again use you as they did," he murmured.

"You needed to be a wolf, Viktor. Your heart is too big for just a man," Jolan spoke against the top of his head. Ilona smiled and nodded.

"That it is."

Chapter Eleven

"This is your last chance to run, brother. I warn you, she bites." Viktor grinned. Alger pushed the door closed and moved into the room.

"I have suffered long enough because of you two. You could not beat me from this room." Alger tugged his tunic over his head as Viktor chuckled. Already shed of his clothes, Viktor's gaze moved to Jolan and she turned to watch Alger discard his quickly. Her gaze dropped to his cock then darted to Viktor.

"More similar than you suspected?" He arched a brow.

"I do not know what to expect," she admitted. Her heart pounded in a mixture of nervousness and excitement. Viktor rose to stand behind her, pulling her hair around so he could kiss her jaw while Alger reached for her hand and brought her palm to his lips. His beard scratched against her fingers. The air in the room seemed to thicken as he worked his way up her arm. Still holding her wrist, he leant forward and licked at her nipple. Her sex burned when he caught the peak between his lips and rolled his tongue against her sensitive flesh.

"If you don't want this, you only need say so, Prințesă. Neither of us means you to do anything you do not want. You command us as you will," Viktor reminded her but she leant back against him, moaning softly as Alger suckled. Viktor caught her free wrist with one hand and the other cupped her beneath her chin, tilting her head back. His lips brushed over her bottom lip and sucked gently.

She swayed as Alger slipped his hand between her thighs and rubbed against her, his mouth moving from one breast to the other, laving attention to each equally. Every draw of his lips sent a new spiral of heat through her and his hand stroked at her sex gently, slowly knotting tension just beneath his fingers.

Viktor's hand slid down her throat as his mouth moved over hers. She parted when his tongue met her lips and that wet heat slipped against her teeth, seeking her response. His large hand slid over her shoulder and down her back before sweeping around her waist and flattening against her stomach, pulling her back against him so his erection pressed against her lower back.

"You have a mouth that can make a man forget his own name," Viktor murmured against her lips. The vibration of his words caused her to moan. She did so love the sound of his voice.

"Then make me scream it lest you forget who you are," she whispered, then sucked in her breath when Alger's chuckle vibrated against her nipple, sending a thousand pin pricks of sensation across her skin.

"Sit down with her, brother, and I'll attempt to make her forget yours so that mine is the only one drunk from her lips."

Viktor guided her backwards so he could return to his chair, positioning her so that her legs draped over his arms and he lifted her in front of Alger. Her back slid to the side so he could lick at her lips.

Alger's breath was hot against her sex and she gasped when he rubbed his beard against her. "Oh, that feels..." she didn't finish for his tongue darted out against her and she arched back against Viktor.

"I'm not here to serve you," Viktor growled and Alger's hands slipped to her hips, lifting her so that Viktor's hands were free to roam and she slid down his chest a bit. Alger's chuckle rumbled against her and she hummed as her breath quickened. Viktor's cock pressed against her while his hands found the peaks of her breasts and he rolled the hard tips between his fingers. She tilted her head back for more of his kisses and he obliged, thrusting his tongue against hers. When he released her mouth, she panted and tried to move her hips to encourage Alger. She moaned softly when his tongue dipped into her before flicking against her clit.

Viktor's fingers brushed her mouth and she looked up at him as she closed her lips around one finger. When she sucked, his eyes darkened with arousal. She dragged her teeth over the pad of his thumb and bit down. He sucked air between his teeth and Alger made a sound against her before releasing her from his mouth.

"Did she just bite you?"

"I warned you. She is wild." Viktor's lids dropped heavily when she bit again and Alger pressed his fingers into her, slowly moving them in and out of her cunt. His rhythm quickened when she bit again, as if he could feel her teeth himself, and he leant down and clamped his mouth over her sensitive nub sucking fiercely each time her she applied pressure with her teeth.

She reached up and grasped Viktor's hand, bringing each finger to her lips to suck and bite until Alger had her on the edge of rapture. "I have you on my mouth, Jolan. Kiss me, woman." Alger rose and bent forward as Viktor dropped his hands to lift her onto his cock. He slid into her cunt as Alger thrust his tongue into her mouth, his beard tickling her chin.

Viktor pushed deep and while she felt full, her clit still throbbed. She didn't expect Viktor's light slap against that sensitive flesh, nor did she expect the spread of white hot pleasure that followed the slight sting. She gasped as Alger released her from his kiss, whimpering when Viktor's fingers slapped against her again. With every strike, she felt herself tighten around him and he drew a deep breath.

"Open for me, Jolan," Alger said huskily as his hand dropped to his cock and slipped up and down its length several times. "Give me your mouth." She licked her lips, turning towards him to grasp his cock in her palm. She brought it to her lips and cried out against the hard head of it when Viktor slapped her clit lightly. Both of them groaned and Viktor angled his hips beneath her so he could withdraw then thrust again. As he buried his cock, his fingers left their sting. She moaned and Alger's hands delved into her hair, winding the length around his fingers. His hips moved in the same rhythm as Viktor's, guiding his cock between her lips.

"You are close?" Viktor breathed against her ear and she hummed against Alger's cock. "You want release?" She hummed again, then squealed and succeeded in bringing a growl from Alger's chest as Viktor's fingers slapped repeatedly against her clit. Tension bolted through her, heat winding with every thrust either of them delivered. She bucked as pleasure exploded beneath Viktor's fingers and shook her whole body.

"Turn around here, woman, and let me see you." Viktor lifted her despite her protest, flipped her around and settled her back onto his cock. His mouth caught hers and one hand cupped the back of head as his tongue danced against hers. His other hand, lifted her so she rode his every stroke.

She gasped against his mouth when she felt Alger's cock bump the opening of her ass. He did not push into her until she relaxed again then eased himself gently into her, the hair of his chest scratching at her back. She heard his groan as he sheathed himself entirely. She felt stuffed and filled completely. Then they fell into a rhythm and she pulled from Viktor's kiss to drag in ragged breaths.

She felt crazed and wild with need as they worked their cocks in and out of her. "Give me those teeth so I know how deeply you like this." She reached forward and snaked one hand around Viktor's neck and lifted the other behind her to Alger's pulling at them both as she bit into Viktor's hard shoulder. Both of them thrust deep into her, their hips jerking forward.

"Harder." Viktor ground between clenched teeth. She released him and moved an inch inward then bit again, moaning from the hot friction their reaction brought to her body. She moved and bit again. And again. Harder each time until she was trembling.

"Stop her, Alger." Viktor's voice didn't even sound like his own.

Alger's response was only a grunt, his hips meeting her ass with every thrust. She looked up at Viktor and found his canines extended, head thrown back. Alger's nails scratched against her hips and he pulled her back roughly into their thrusts. A fleeting thought found her and she knew he wanted to bite her but that thought fled as tension tightened inside of her. She panted, her voice lifting. Alger's hand found her throat, the tips of his claws brushing against her skin as he surged forward and filled her with heat. She screamed as she found her own pleasure, and Viktor drove deep into her with a shout of his own. Her body shook beyond her control and neither of them stopped, both growling as they continued to pound into her. They rode out every ripple of pleasure and didn't slow until she collapsed forward against Viktor's chest. Bodies slick, they pulled from within her and the room was silent but for their breaths.

"Your agony is suffocating." Alger was the first to speak.

"I feel no agony," Jolan whispered and straightened on Viktor's lap. She stared at him, head back, arm thrown across his face, his taloned fingers curled so that the tips bit into his palms. He shook beneath her.

"Get her off of me," he growled and Alger gently urged her to her feet and away from Viktor.

"What...what's wrong?"

"It's not what's wrong. He fights against what feels right." Alger said softly next to her ear. "He wants you, Jolan."

"Again? So soon?"

Alger's palm slapped her ass playfully. "In a few minutes, yes, but I mean he wants to give you his bite." Jolan stared at the strain on his face when Viktor looked at her with those

grey eyes. His canines had extended so that he could not close his lips. His chest pumped with every breath and for a moment his pupils dilated and he looked as if he would leap forward. Then he tilted his head back again, and groaned.

"Viktor!" Katarin's voice carried from the corridor and Jolan could hear the girl running towards the door. Moments later her palm pounded against the wood.

Viktor took a breath, his voice shaking. "I am here."

"Are you hurt? Let me in, Viktor!" Katarin called pounding again.

Viktor pulled himself up in the chair, gazing over Jolan's head at Alger. "She is too young to feel..."

"Even a babe could feel you right now, brother. I am nearly to the point of illness from it." Alger said softly. Viktor's head snapped around to the door as Katarin continued slapping her palm against the other side then rose to his feet and strode across the room to the window. He pushed open the wooden shutters and leaned out into the rain, dragging deep breaths. Jolan watched him, glancing at Alger only once when he urged her to lift her arms so he could pull her sleeping shift over her head before reaching for his tunic.

When Viktor pulled his head from the rain, his canines were retracted, his eyes blue again, and his claws gone so Alger tossed his tunic at him. Pulling it on, he went to the door and lifted the latch. Throwing it open, he reached for his sister and pulled her to him.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Kata. Are you hurt?" he murmured.

"I thought you were," she whispered embracing him. "You are not hurt?"

"I am not." He took her by the shoulders and stood her back from him. "I am well. Go back to bed now." Katarin glanced at Alger and Jolan before looking up at Viktor.

"I was afraid. I had a sense that you were dying. It frightened me," she whispered. "If she hurt you, brother, I will scratch out her eyes."

"Leave her eyes as they are, Kata, and go back to bed now." He gave her a little push and after some reluctance, she obeyed. He swung the door closed and leant his head against it.

"I...I'm sorry," Jolan whispered.

"No more sharing." Viktor spoke without looking back at them. "I can't bear that again."

"Then give her your bite," Alger said and Jolan's head snapped around so she stared at him. "Why do you fight what you know you want?"

"I won't do that to her." Viktor straightened and turned to face them, his gaze meeting Jolan's. "She deserves her freedom and I won't take it from her."

Alger stepped forward, looking as if he would say something but Viktor raised his hand and his voice. "I will *not*."

"Then you are the biggest fool I've ever known, Viktor." Alger snatched up the rest of his clothes. "If it were my teeth bared, I would have sunk them into her happily. She stood ready to give her life and take Dragomir's with her, partly for our father. What more in a woman could a man want for?"

"I would want her to choose it and not be made to accept it because it was a desire I indulged without her consent," Viktor said softly.

"Both of you lust so deeply for Dragomir's blood that you're blinded against what is obvious to the rest of us. A woman who did not want what you had to offer could not stir you to want it so deeply, brother. If you let her go, neither of you will ever find happiness with another." Alger moved past Viktor and left them, the door slamming forcefully behind him.

Jolan stood staring at the door, hoping for it to open again and Alger to return. He did not and she heard his angry shout moments later before something splintered against a wall.

"His temper will cool," Viktor said when she looked at him and smiled. "He can never hold his anger with me for long." He stepped forward and ran his palm along her cheek.

"I feel as if I am to blame..."

"Perhaps if you were not so pretty, I would not lose myself so easily when we are together?" He grinned. "If your breasts were not so eager for attention and if your cunt did not embrace me so tightly?"

"That is not what I meant." Jolan shoved at his chest and he chuckled.

"Despite my lack of control, you enjoyed the two of us." He turned his hand so that his knuckles brushed across her jaw.

She bit her lip, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "I did."

"Your pleasure was intense," he purred.

"Very." She nodded. "I still feel the shaking in my limbs."

"I want you again."

Jolan blinked as his hand slid to cup her chin. "So soon? I don't know if I have the strength."

"Let us find out." His eyes glittered as he walked her backwards to the bed. "This time, keep your teeth to yourself."

It was nearly midnight when Jolan fell asleep against his chest, her body spent from their lovemaking. But she was awakened hours later just before dawn when the door slammed open and Alger rushed inside.

"Come, brother, victory approaches on horseback and we shall have our vengeance this day."

Jolan sat up as Viktor rolled from the bed and reached for his clothes. "Dragomir?"

"Coming for his innocent bride." Alger grinned. Jolan threw back the blanket and crawled from the bed. She reached for her clothes, dressing quickly, her heart pounding. She'd not expected his arrival so soon. She'd hoped to train more first with her sword.

"You will stay here." Viktor told her when she reached for her sword and sheath.

"I will not." Jolan met his gaze. "Pray you get to him first, for I will rob you of your vengeance for my own if given the chance." She readied for his argument and was surprised when it did not come. Instead he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him so he could kiss her mouth roughly.

Chapter Twelve

The Moroi moved as if they were not earth bound, gliding in formation around Dragomir so that they could attack, sink their teeth, then retreat into their tight circle. Their bites were vicious but Viktor's wolf was strong and healed his wounds quickly. It was the loss of the blood which the Moroi took with them with each bite, that started to weaken him. He could not get to them as man. Dropping his sword, he lunged forward onto his knees as they retreated. Pain ripped through him as he gave himself to the wolf. Bones popped and his structure shifted, stretching. Looking at his sides, he saw his brothers doing the same. His men rushed forward around them allowing them time to shift completely.

New strength veined through him as he lunged at the first Moroi to advance. He felt the bite but the wolf didn't care. As the Moroi pulled his teeth from Viktor's shoulder, he bit back, ripping through the demon's throat viciously. What felt like a thousand points of pain assaulted him and put him to the ground.

"Retreat or they will drain him!" Dragomir sneered down at him when he raised his head but that sneer twisted slightly as a blade ripped through his shoulder. Dragomir shouted and turned as Ilona withdrew the sword and thrust again into his side.

"My sweet." Dragomir's voice shook from the pain she inflicted but reached out to grasp her by the throat. Her sword fell from her fingers as he lifted her from the ground. Viktor would have smiled when he heard his brother's warning growls if he'd had the strength but those that held him with their bites were slowly draining him, swallow by swallow. Dragomir must have sensed his mistake as well for he glanced back at them and her feet touched the ground again.

"Release her." It was Jolan's voice. She stepped into Viktor's view, an arrow drawn taut against a bow.

"Or what, Jolan? You have no stomach for blood..." Before he could finish, her arrow zipped past him and landed in the temple of one of those that hovered atop Viktor. He felt that set of teeth leave him.

"I shall not tell you again to release her," she grasped another arrow and readied it, this time pointing it at him.

Dragomir stared at her then unwrapped his fingers from around Ilona's throat. She dragged air loudly, staggering backwards. Dragomir held up his hands with a smile.

"Now command them off of him." Jolan jerked her head back towards Viktor. After a moment he inclined his head and Viktor felt the Moroi leave him.

"He is too close to death for you to save him." Dragomir folded his arms. "He is almost completely drained." Jolan glanced at Viktor and Dragomir chose that moment to reach for her, snatching her bow from her.

"I almost respected you, wife, but then you prove you are as weak as I first knew you to be." Dragomir gritted but he didn't see the dagger appear from beneath her tunic. He wasn't aware until that blade burned through his neck and twisted.

"Then know it was a weakened woman, Jolan Lovasz, who spilled your blood today, you cold bastard, and remember these names as you take your last breaths. Ishild. Tibor. Dieter Kelemen. May they take mercy on you in death, for you will have none from me while you die. Ilona, cut his fucking head off."

Ilona's sword swung and she grunted as it connected, slicing cleanly through. Viktor did smile before his eyes closed. He heard his brothers' howls and the men advance. They would taste victory.

* * * *

"He must drink before his body starts to cool," Ilona spoke as Heinrich and Alger settled Viktor's body on the stone floor. He'd already transformed back to man and Jolan understood Ilona's urgency without explanation. She did not wait for Alger to offer his arm, slicing her own with her dagger. She knelt and put her wound to his lips but he did not move.

"Drink, Viktor. By the Gods, drink!" She parted his lips with her fingers and pressed the wound again. "Do not die. Do not! I love you..." Her breath caught when his lips moved. She felt his tongue and at the taste of her blood, the tightening of his mouth around her cut. The draw of his lips caused her to gasp. She felt it throughout her body, as if he were sucking pleasure into her as he fed. It caused her breath to quicken.

His hand rose to grasp her arm and his mouth opened wider before he sucked hungrily. She whimpered as her eyes closed, swaying slightly at the headiness that swept over her. Her lips parted and she trembled.

"Enough." Ilona's voice was far away. "Enough!"

Alger's hands found her shoulders and in the next moment she protested as she was hurled away from pleasure's edge. Her vision cleared—though she couldn't remember when it had blurred—and she looked at Viktor as he sat up from the floor and put his hand to his mouth.

"What have you done?" He looked at Ilona then Jolan, moving quickly to her side.

"I will not lose another Kelemen so soon." Ilona told him. "Not to the same hand."

"He lives?" Viktor's voice rose.

"One cannot live without one's head." Ilona smiled and looked at Jolan. "You are starting to feel stronger?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"Why are you weakened?" Viktor whispered. He looked at her arm and she saw the realisation in his face. His head snapped around so he could stare at Ilona.

"What does this mean?"

"It means you are both wolf and Moroi. It means you live." Ilona released a heavy breath.

* * * *

Four months later

Maethi

Jolan's breath caught as she stepped through the doorway. Her father had summoned her to the great hall and her gaze rested instantly on the largely built man that stood in the centre of the room. Slowly, he turned, revealing his broad face, a thin layer of hair sprinkled across his wide jaw and chin. A smile pulled at his lips as his blue gaze locked with hers.

"What...what are you doing here?" Jolan rushed forward. "Ilona said you were away defending Constantinople."

Viktor laughed as she embraced him. "The city is a fortress and needs no extra defence. It will not fall." His fingers tightened around her waist. "You grow softer, Prințesă. I like that."

"What news from Kelemen? Have you seen Ilona?"

"It is not news I bring to you today, Prințesă." His arm tightened around her. "Instead I bring gifts."

Jolan smiled and touched his face. She'd missed him. It had been nearly a month since she saw him last and was happy he'd returned. She'd found her heart ached when he was away as if it were a very part of her missing until they were in one another's arms again.

"I do not want for your gifts, Viktor Kelemen. You know it is you that I wait for," she admitted softly.

"Is it? With the walls that have been built around Maethi, I wondered if you meant to keep me out." He chuckled. "This place shall be a fortress by the time it turns colder."

"And Maethi shall be protected from those that wish to bring harm." Jolan nodded. "I shall no longer need a guard's protection then."

"Then my gift today is the last I will bring." He inclined his head.

Jolan's heart grew heavy. She'd hoped he would still wanther once the walls were built. The Moroi had changed him. She'd seen the shift in his eyes as he and his wolf grew accustomed to the differences. He was stronger than he'd ever been and when he shifted to wolf his capabilities seemed limitless and tales of his fearlessness travelled fast. Women whispered of him with lust and Jolan imagined he was given his choice of any he might desire.

"You have that look again, Prințesă," he interrupted her reflections.

"What look?"

"The one that accuses me while you tell me you are not jealous."

Jolan rolled her eyes. But she was jealous—of every moment he was away from her. How many nights had her mother sat with her while she wept for his return? How many times had she hoped for him to tell her that he desired to make her his own and keep her?

"I want no gift from you, just your kiss before you leave me to return to Kelemen." Her voice betrayed her attempts to mask her sadness and his gaze narrowed before he leant forward and brushed his lips against hers.

"As you command me, Prințesă, but I will not leave this time without taking what I came for." He spoke against her lips and she laughed despite the heat that rose to her cheeks.

"I would not deny you." She stepped back and reached for his hand. When she started to turn, to lead him to her room, his fingers tightened around hers causing her to look back at him.

"I mean for you to come with me this time to Kelemen."

It took her a moment to realise what he meant. "With you?"

"As my wife."

Her heart leapt in her chest. "Your wife? Why?"

"I cannot breathe without you, Prințesă, and though I vowed I would not take your freedom I must if I am to have any peace of my own. From the moment you cracked me in the head with my own sword I have loved you, and I will not leave here without you."

His gaze reflected the truth of his words and she rushed back to his arms, laughter finding her throat. She kissed him, joy filling her completely.

"This means you will come willingly?"

"As long as you promise to continue my training," she bartered, "and know that I shall not be obedient and always of a gentle voice. Just because I am yours does not mean I am your slave." She watched him smile.

"Whatever you wish I shall I agree to, for I am the slave, Prințesă, to your warrior heart."

About the Author

Sable Grey resides in the deep south of the United States with her wonderful husband, three very spoiled dogs, and three crazy cats. She spends her time writing, designing cover art, watching moves, and reading.

With favourite authors like Stephen King, Piers Anthony, and Iris Johansen, it's no mystery where the inspiration to write tales of love, adventure, and mystery come from. An avid reader and storyteller at a young age, Sable began writing small stories as a child for her mother. However, it wasn't until she was well in to her twenties that she realised that her calling was sharing her stories with a larger audience than just family members and friends.

Now, Sable is dedicated to her craft and to bringing her readers quality fiction with unforgettable characters. For her, writing a story means writing a story meant to touch the mind, body, heart, and soul.

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