

## GUEN CRANPBELL FRONTIERS OF LOVE SHADOWFIREPRESS

This book was published by Shadowfire Press 2121 Canyon Blvd, #103 Boulder, CO 80302

Where My Warrior Leads A Frontiers of Love Themed Story

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By Gwen Campbell

# CHANTER ONE

A sentry paused on his circuit, peered into the darkness, sniffed the air. He'd walked past this clump of trees twice tonight. Each time, something had made the skin on the back of his neck quiver. Each time, he'd seen nothing. Heard nothing. Muttering an obscenity, he stormed off back to the encampment, to the smells of fires dying down as dawn approached. He stubbed his toe on a root, swore again, and kept walking.

When he was gone, the shadows between the thick, pale tree trunks moved.

"Strike now."

The speaker was a giant of a man. Almost seven feet tall, he was thick with sinuous muscle. The two men with him were huge but he eclipsed them. He was older although he hadn't reached his thirty-fifth cycle. Moving away from the trees, Raull led the way to the enemy encampment, finding smooth paths despite the near darkness, stepping around dry leaves and fallen branches that would alert the sentries to their approach.

Or maybe not. Their enemies this night were mercenaries. He and his companions were Warriors. Trained, disciplined, marked from birth with that rarest of genes that singled them out as the finest fighters on their world.

The three moons, hovering near the horizon, dipped beneath a mountain ridge in the distance, throwing the forest into total darkness. The Warriors continued to move. Not even their breathing was audible. Even the act of pulling their swords from their scabbards made no sound.

Behind them, Raull sensed the movement of their own soldiers. They were well back, as ordered, but Raull heard the soft music of a ladify flower as a leg brushed past it, a leaf rustle out of synch with the movement of the air, the scrape of a boot over rock. No matter. The soldiers were their perimeter defense. If any of their enemies got past the Warriors, they'd be caught before they escaped into the foothills.

Raull and the two Warriors with him formed a loose circle around the enemy encampment. It was a rough thing. The ground was littered with the remnants of a lavish meal, empty jugs

of gyrus wine, dropped boots. Mercenaries, wrapped up in cloaks, slept on the ground near fires that had been left to burn all night. It had been no challenge to find their campsite in the dark. Despite the snoring, Raull heard a faint gurgling sound then a quiet thump, then another as the two sentries were dispatched. He stepped into the faint circle of blue-green light cast by one of the fires and kicked the closest sleeping mercenary. Not hard, but no love tap either.

The man snorted, swore, dug his fingers into his eyes then swore again when he saw Raull towering over him. He got to his feet quick enough and when he did, there was a sword in his hand.

"You attacked a village on the outskirts of Tarmig-Lun yesterday morning." Raull's voice was deep and even. There was a sub harmonic to it, a subtle pulse of sound that echoed in the head, built on itself, rolled gently like surf against sand. His voice-inflection carried a compulsion, a deliberate and practiced tool that ensured any listener would heed and obey. As his voice washed over the encampment, mercenaries

woke, reached for their weapons, jumped up and looked around frantically.

"I am Raull. Captain of the Prince of Tarmig-Lun's army. If you tell me who paid you to raid the village, your life will be spared. If you do not speak, you will die." These men were paid scum but he would allow them the dignity of choice instead of forcing them to comply. Or perhaps it was as simple as wanting them to die.

"Oy," one mercenary, perhaps less besodden than the others, called out. "Why should we die? We was just raiding. A man's got to make a living."

Ignoring the man's foul breath, Raull pulled his lips back in a parody of a smile. "I have seen the results of your...raiding. I have heard the cries of the widows, seen the bodies of dead children, knelt at the side of their graves."

The mercenaries glanced at each other nervously, looked at the knees of the Warrior's leather pants.

Like any Warrior, Raull was dressed simply. Black leather pants and a vest that was more strapping than clothing. It left large patches of his massive torso bare and had a number of loops and fastenings designed to hold weapons. Most of them were full. His clothing was clean except for the unmistakable reddish smudges of dirt on his knees.

"It was a man named Eferus," one of the mercenaries called out. He was young, not even twenty cycles old.

"Eferus," Raull repeated quietly, then with a quick jerk of his head, sent the boy running. His soldiers would catch him but they would also release him, unharmed, after the battle that was now inevitable.

Two, then three mercenaries bellowed. Their fierce battle cry rang out, echoed across the encampment. As one, the twenty-five mercenaries attacked. It should have been no contest. It was them against three.

It was no contest.

Raull lunged, thrust his sword through the heart of the closest mercenary, pulled back, swung, opened up a second then a third with the same swipe. He rolled, pulled a knife from his vest, aimed to kill and threw. On his feet again he thrust, parried, turned to the side to evade a blow, ducked his head when someone tried to cut it off, threw another knife and used his sword to protect the back of his neck.

The sounds of battle grew louder. Metal on metal. Men's grunts, cries, screams. From the corner of his eye, he saw one of his Warriors leap clear of a ring of falling bodies, spin in the air, use the momentum of his body to stride out with his sword, land lightly on his feet and open an opponent's belly with a dagger. The smell of sweat grew around him, blood, rage then terror.

Two mercenaries ran off. Raull spotted them race around his third Warrior, giving the killing machine a wide berth. Seconds later, he heard their screams as his soldiers meted out their own justice.

His breathing slowed, became deeper. His senses seemed to expand yet focus at the same time. Some inner voice told him where his next opponent would come from, what angle he'd strike at. Perhaps it was the air rushing past a blade or a grunt and rustle of clothing. Raull had never known. He only knew he had been born for this, trained for this. Bodies continued to fall

around him. So many that the few remaining opponents rushing toward him slipped on the earth that the blood had turned to mud. The sounds of battle grew quiet then stopped.

Straightening, Raull looked around the encampment. The horizon was a dark aqua now, heralding the rising of the sun. Blue and green flames flickered, then, one by one, went out in the fire pits dotting the clearing. The other two Warriors straightened as well, glanced around, stepped back and started cleaning their weapons.

#### \* \* \*

Sitting on an overturned log, Raull examined the evidence his soldiers had gathered. A bill of lading, clearly identifying a case of sweet nylind fruit as the property of a merchant named Ethgil. His shop had been one of the ones raided yesterday. A satchel of coins with the image of the Prince of Tarmig-Lun stamped on them. The amount was only slightly less than what had been stolen from a banking house. He rubbed his forehead before he examined the other evidence.

Tarmig-Lun was the largest kingdom on their world but its power was failing. Their prince was old, his heir more suited to horticulture than politics, and their Sibyl hadn't predicted anything useful for almost two cycles now.

Every kingdom had a Sibyl. Crones, they served as political advisor, seer, priestess, pagan prophet. Theirs was old, ancient, and hadn't been seen outside of her rooms in months.

Tarmig-Lun was rich enough to employ not one but three Warriors to lead its army. But even three Warriors could only do so much and the vultures had been pecking at their borders for some time, causing unrest, inciting fear, searching for weaknesses.

"Dispatches from Tarmig-Lun have arrived, Raull."

He accepted the satchel from a young soldier, his clerk, and undid the leather bindings. His clerk sat beside him, produced a sheaf of paper and held a sharpened heshnel stalk at the ready if Raull needed to write out replies. He wrote quickly but neatly, recording his captain's summation of the battle. His heshnel stalk paused when Raull dictated the name Eferus.

"Wasn't he—?"

"The man identified as paying for the raids on two other villages? Yes," Raull interrupted quietly. He rubbed his forehead again. "It's not general knowledge but we traced his movements back to a low-level civil servant. There was someone higher up pulling his strings."

"Was?"

"Yes. The man was murdered the day before yesterday. That trail's gone cold."

His clerk pressed his lips together as he again sharpened the tip of his heshnel stalk. Raull had accepted the man as his clerk because of his discretion and gift for keeping his mouth shut. Also, his father had been a Warrior and his loyalty was absolute.

"There's a personal note in here for you," his clerk said when Raull remained silent. He fished out a piece of sealed paper.

"Huh. Well this is unexpected," Raull said. "One of the Warriors I trained, a friend of mine, has invited me to a bonding ceremony. At the Sibyl's colony no less." Raull sat up straight, read the note a second time and grinned. "I've never

heard of anyone who's ever *seen* the inside of the Sibyl's colony. Thain was always unnaturally lucky. Says here that he's now the Prince of the Kingdom of Jareb-Phar and he's marrying a Sibyl."

His clerk snorted. "Don't see how *that* part's lucky. They're all crones."

"Don't let appearances fool you. We all start out as babies."

# CHRYTER TUC

Two Warriors rode out of the forest, side by side. On the road behind them, unburdened jacos appeared, led in two, neat rows. More Warriors on jacos followed. The mid-morning sun beat down on broad, bare shoulders, shone off long brown hair. The sky above was clear, a shimmering aqua. Pale, stringy ladify flowers alongside the road caught the breeze, trembled and hummed delicately.

The jacos moved forward at a fast walk whenever a Warrior touched his heels to the animal's flanks, guiding it with the movements of his legs. The first two jacos were females and larger than the others. Their heads were broad, flat and large and their mouths were overly wide with fleshy lips. Their dark eyes had a pretty slant to them. The animals' cheeks, neck and shoulders were covered in a soft pelt of long, curly brown hair. Shorter, stiff, brown fur covered the rest of their bodies, except for the white feathers at the back of each of their four legs from mid-joint to fetlock. Their split hooves were broad and when

they lifted them, the ends grazed the packed reddish earth in long, graceful strides.

With dark, canny eyes, the Warriors scanned the fields as they emerged from the forest. Pair after pair, no less than forty emerged. To a man, they were freakishly huge, heavily muscled, well armed.

One of the Warriors, Thain, riding near the middle of the procession saw a farmer working in a nearby field. The farmer looked up, stumbled backward. Grinning to himself, Thain could practically read the thoughts behind the farmer's reactions. A Warrior was a rare enough sight but to see them in such numbers was unheard of. Holding up his tilling implement defensively, the farmer turned his anxious face toward the fortified, stone wall at the end of the road.

The rider beside Thain, smaller than the others, almost elfin in comparison, raised a hand to catch the farmer's eye. He blinked and looked closer. The small rider was a woman. Her pale reddish hair glowed in the sunlight. A Sibyl. The anxiety drained from his face and instead of preparing to fight, to add what strength he had in defense of their beloved Sibyls' colony, he trailed

along in their wake as if to see for himself why so many Warriors were required to accompany just one Sibyl.

"Are your people always this nervous?" Thain asked the woman at his side. He was tall even for a Warrior. His leather pants and vest were as austere as the rest of the men's but he wore a patch over his chest that the others didn't. Woven from silver and periup ore, it was a crest, an intertwining of the Warriors' and Sibyls' symbols, over a representation of the foothills of the Kingdom of Jareb-Phar.

"They wouldn't *be* nervous if you didn't scowl," the small woman riding beside him replied tartly. "Smile, Thain. You're really cute when you smile."

"Yeah, Thain. Smile for the common folk," a warrior behind them piped up. This one was young and not quite as broad in the shoulders as Thain. Handsome, the scar dissecting his brow and cheek saved his looks from unnatural beauty. "You're a prince now. You've got to learn to commune with your subjects."

"These are not my subjects," Thain growled, turned his head and bared his teeth at the

younger Warrior. The other Warriors around him laughed. There was nothing they enjoyed more than seeing one of their own goaded into dropping that legendary Warriors' discipline.

"Don't even start, woman," he growled at the Sibyl beside him when she opened her mouth.

She grinned up at him and his heart warmed. Jessica had been his consort less than two weeks now. He still couldn't believe this incredible woman shared his bed every night and ruled a kingdom at his side. As the tilled fields spread out around them, as the farms and homes grew closer together, more and more people came out to watch their procession. Thain imagined every one of them would want to witness this public joining ceremony his consort had insisted on—a sort of sanctification of their union that the Sibyls insisted on. It seemed foolish and a waste of resources to drag his friends all the way out here, but because he knew it would make Jessica happy, he hadn't protested.

The road was familiar to him and he recognized the town they rode through on their way to the Sibyls' colony. Not so long ago, he'd laid siege to that massive, walled fortress perched on the rise beyond the town. He'd been unsuccessful. Even from this distance, his military-trained eyes told him that it would be impossible to take the colony by force. The only good thing that had come from it was that it had brought the beautiful woman riding at his side into his life.

Thain figured a failure in battle was nothing compared to what he'd gained.

Despite their good mood, he sensed the rising alertness in the men around him as the fortress loomed on the horizon. Warriors were a genetic sub-species, rare, large, strong, intelligent and brave. From a young age, they were schooled in warfare, survival skills, voice-inflection control, politics. No one on the planet was their equal in battle. Only the richest could afford to hire them to lead their armies, protect their kingdoms. Sibyls were a sub-species too. Perhaps even rarer than Warriors. They were formidable women with powers the rest of the population could barely comprehend. Despite their penchant for isolation, a Sibyl served in each of the thirtyseven kingdoms on Caspiun. Warriors were formidable. Sibyls were just...scary.

If Thain remembered correctly, today would

be a market day. Sure enough, on the far side of the town, stalls and tents had been set up. Merchants from as far away as the Near Desert hawked their wares. Fresh nylind fruit, distilled sea oil for lamps, carpenters and other tradesmen offering their services for sale. The press of people on either side of the street increased, the road narrowed as they passed through the market, their progress slowed.

More and more people started following them.

At his side, his consort grinned briefly. He didn't know she was hearing voices in her head. Voices she'd grown up with, as familiar to her as her own.

"No. No harmful intentions."

"Say, that one's cute."

"Hush, Thea, concentrate!"

"I knew we shouldn't have let the young ones out."

"Hush! Has anyone identified their captain?" "No. I sense no danger from them. Other than

the fact that they're freaking huge and there's over three dozen of them."

The voices quieted, like the stilling of a collective breath.

*"It is him. The very large one on the dark jacos. Yes, the third man behind Jessica."* 

The voices fell silent.

The crowd around the Warriors pressed in, shifted, moved aside as best they could. They were in the thick of the market now and people jostled for a look. Thain turned in his saddle to gauge the crowd, as did the Warriors around him. The press of so many civilians cut off many defensive maneuvers if this was an ambush. An old woman was pitched into the path of one of the jacos. Her arms pin wheeled, her long cloak tangled in her legs, the stoan fruit in her basket spilled onto the road. The Warrior closest to her held out his hand, she grabbed it but her fingers slipped through his. She fell to the ground.

The massive Warrior on the dark jacos leapt off his flat, leather saddle and knelt beside her.

"Are you injured, mother?" he asked. Her cloak was badly fitted, too large for her and all that could be made out was the rough shape of her body, a few wiry wisps of gray hair sticking out from the cowl that enveloped her face. She started rubbing her head through the cowl.

"No, just my dignity," she groused in a voice that cracked with age.

"Are you able to stand?" he asked.

"Yes, yes," she said. Thain and the other Warriors had stopped and were watching them.

"Does she require assistance, Raull?" Thain asked, ready to dismount his jacos. He offered out of politeness. Raull was the most powerful Warrior on their world and had for many years now been Thain's teacher, mentor and friend.

The massive Warrior waved Thain and the others off. "Ride on," Raull said in a deep, authoritative voice. "I'll catch up." They obeyed.

"Don't fuss, Warrior," the old woman said, drawing his attention back to her. He slipped a hand under her arm. "I'm...*ouch*," she groaned and started rubbing her knee. "Not only has my dignity been hurt but so, apparently, has my ability to walk without making a spectacle of

myself." She sounded more annoyed with herself than anything else.

"Let me help," the Warrior said.

By now, the crowd around them was thinning, moving away to follow the Warriors. A few lingered, anxiously watching the old woman, perhaps too nervous to approach a Warrior and offer help. After a moment, it seemed they were satisfied that he would tend to her without assistance. They moved off after the others.

Gently, he lifted the woman and seated her on his jacos. She was heavier than he expected but he knew better than to comment on that.

"No, no," she protested when he tried to pull back her cloak and look at her knee. She gave his hand a sharp slap. "I'll go to one of the healers in the colony. They'll fix me up in no time."

"Then I'll take you," he replied in that same deep, calm voice, wove his fingers into the long curls beneath his jacos' neck, gave a gentle tug and the animal walked along beside him.

Up ahead, the procession stopped when it reached the closed colony gates. Thain looked

up at the fortifications then at Jessica. "How do we get in?"

She grinned. "When you arrive at someone's home, it's customary to knock."

"Oh." He doubted it would have opened to him so easily the first time he'd been here.

One of the Warriors at the head of the procession jumped off his jacos, landed neatly on his feet and strode up to an elaborate knocker. The sound of it resonated around them. At the first knock, the gates swung outward. An inner, metal grating, forged from thick, heavy iron, was slowly raised. The Warriors could hear the hum of the mechanism that lifted it but saw no sign of it. They rode into an open, gravel entryway. It was large, held a few outbuildings and on the far side, there was another, identical gate leading further into the complex.

Except for some old women slowly making their way toward them, the place was deserted. A few, small children darted between the buildings, sneaking glances at the Warriors, giggling behind their hands.

Thain's brow furrowed. The colony was huge,

covering hundreds of parcels of land. The few inhabitants he saw didn't warrant nearly that much space.

"Where are they?" he grumbled, shooting Jessica a look.

"Oh the Sibyls are here all right. Just give them a minute," she answered with a grin. Warriors shifted in their saddles, glanced around. Some laid their hands on their swords without drawing them out of their scabbards.

"I'm fine." The old woman with the sore knee grumbled as the jacos she was perched on was led through the entryway. "Just take me there," she said, pointing to one of the larger outbuildings, "and I'll be fine. Then you can go back to worrying about being attacked by old women and children." She slapped her thigh and cackled, clearly delighted with her little joke as the huge Warrior led the jacos in the direction she'd indicated.

His back stiffened but other than that, he didn't acknowledge the quiet laughter from the other Warriors. After a moment, the corner of

his mouth twitched like he was holding back a grin, then it stopped.

Once they were inside the building, he came to a sudden halt. They were in a barn.

"Yes, yes," the old woman barked down at him. "I know for a fact that that stall over there is empty. Now, be a good lad and help me down and let me get on with my business." He fit his hands around her and lowered her gently to the ground. "Yes, yes," she started again, slapping ineffectually at his arms. "If it's the Sibyls you want to see then..." She pulled back her cowl. "Look no further, Warrior."

Her face was young, her cheeks bright with energy and health. Her hair was long, thick and a pale golden-red. A color, it was rumored, only Sibyls possessed. It mesmerized him. Intense blue eyes looked up at him with equal parts intelligence and disdain. She was tall, just under six foot but she was still short compared to him.

He watched with growing interest as she unfastened her cloak. A few gray hairs had been glued into the hood. Beneath the robe, she wore a finely woven yet practical gown that skimmed the tops of painted leather boots. Her clothing revealed a lush and obviously powerful body. His smile widened.

The Warrior looked at his hand and flexed it. "What is your gift, seer?" he asked. His brown eyes darkened and regarded her cannily. "Although I suspect it is one that required you to touch me."

Smiling up at him, the Sibyl pushed her cloak back. The movement disturbed her hair and a thick tendril stirred and came to rest across her breast. He looked down at it, licked his lips then lifted his eyes back to hers.

"I am what you label me, Warrior," she answered. Her tone said she hadn't taken offence at his bold perusal. Her only response was a deliberate look at his powerful body. She seemed pleased by what she saw. "I'm a seer. I can glimpse men's futures. See their thoughts sometimes." Lifting her hand, she looked at it. "And I must touch you to see what the fates have in store for you."

"And what *is* my future, Sibyl?" Something passed between them. An understanding, an expectation of truth. One of the reasons each of their groups had thrived was that they'd always dealt fairly and honestly with others. Despite that, Raull had a sense she'd left something out. He'd ask her later. Now, when they were forging this fledgling trust between Warrior and Sibyl, was not the time.

"Tell me your name, Warrior, and I will tell you your future."

He laughed quietly. It had been ages since anyone had dared face him with such audacity. He found it refreshing.

"Raull." One of his brows lifted in anticipation. "And your name is?"

"Keira."

"And you saw...?"

"I saw you holding an infant. A girl, perhaps no more than two months old." Keira grinned. "You were giving her a tummy zupper."

"A what?"

"A zupper. You know." She pursed her lips and exhaled. They made a wet, buzzing sound.

Both his brows came up then furrowed. He looked at her like she was insane.

Keira realized she must be using an old Earth word, not a Caspiun one. Three hundred cycles earlier, her female ancestors had arrived on this world, bringing their language and technology with them. Rounded up by the male-run military on Earth after the Third World War, the border skirmishes and the psi war, the sick and the psychic had been shipped off-world. One of the spacecraft had carried her female ancestors here, where they'd blended with the indigenous population—sort of. This was the first time they'd invited outsiders into their colony in number.

Raull bristled. He seemed to get taller, his chest broader. His eyes darkened and his gaze bored into hers. "Speak plainly, Sibyl." His voice was dark and commanding. Few could resist the pull of his trained inflection. "I asked you, in good faith, to reveal what you have seen and you speak words I cannot understand. I was more than willing to come here for the sanctification of a marriage. To enter a hostile compound in peace. But my willingness is fading quickly." He laid his hand on his sword.

"If the word is not in our shared vocabulary,

Warrior," Jessica shot back and her voice was just as dark, as compelling as his. "...then I must show you its meaning. Although you will have to remove your sword belt."

Raull smiled but it was cold.

"I did not say you must divest yourself of your weapons," she huffed. "Just the belt. Please, keep your sword in your hand." Smiling up at him, she chewed on her lower lip then pouted prettily. "I am a fearsome thing and it will comfort you to be armed in my presence." Smoothing her hands over her hips, letting her leg swing out just so, she showed him her best, coquettish pose.

Raull threw back his head and laughed. His coldness and focus faded. Without further prompting, he removed his belt, sword and all, and hung it on a nearby post. He turned back to her and stood very close.

"This, Warrior," Keira said, holding up an index finger, "is a tummy zupper." She eased his tunic up, revealing the heavy undulations of his abdomen. Then, very slowly, she leaned to one side and lowered her mouth to his skin.

Raull inhaled sharply, aware of how close her

mouth was coming to his cock. It shifted in his leather pants. He caught her scent. Flowers, sweet hisian root and some herb he couldn't name. Something inside him trusted her intuitively and he let her come closer.

When she buzzed her lips against his belly, Raull jerked forward then to the side. He laughed hysterically and rubbed his skin after she leaned back.

"And this is what you saw, Sibyl?" He grinned and rubbed his stomach again. "Me?" Raull stood up to his full, impressive height. "Holding an infant with these?" he added, holding out his powerful, scarred hands. "Tickling her stomach. And here I expected the turning of a crucial battle or my victory over a worthy adversary. Besides," he added, laid his hands on Keira's waist and turned her slowly. "How do you know it was a she?" He backed her up until her shoulders nudged one of the thick, wooden posts that supported the barn. Standing very close, he placed his hands on the wood, on either side of her head, capturing her in place. Raull looked down at her with delight, enthrallment *and* amusement.

"Because she was wearing pink."

"And what would be the significance of that?" His voice was softer now, warm, seductive. His gaze moved over her face.

Keira grinned and held onto the post behind her, near her hips. "It is an old custom we Sibyls have. Infant girls are dressed in pink, boys in blue."

Again, he looked at her like she was crazy.

"Do not ask anyone to explain a custom, Warrior," she laughed quietly. "They make little if any sense when analyzed as their only purpose is the comfort of continuity."

Raull grinned in agreement then turned his head when he heard other Warriors approaching.

"Raull," one of them called out as he entered the barn. "They are nowhere to be found. What is taking you so...?" His voice trailed away as Keira stepped out from behind Raull, revealing herself.

"Ah," the second Warrior breathed. "Well at least we know where one of them is." The Warrior looked at her face, her body with open admiration.

"Shall we?" Raull said, holding out his hand and inviting her to leave the barn with him. She walked beside him and had no trouble keeping up.

When they emerged, Raull spoke louder so the other Warriors could hear. "Sibyls have always cloaked themselves in secrecy and, within their walls, we will respect that. They will reveal themselves to us when they are ready." He glanced up at Jessica, still sitting on her jacos at Thain's side, then over at Keira. For the first time, he noticed the resemblance between the two women. He wasn't the only one looking at Keira. Like the Warrior who'd entered the barn, the others were looking at her with great interest. Raull couldn't blame them. Besides having a Sibyl's unique, intriguing coloring, Keira was tall, strong and she carried herself with the pride of a Warrior.

Raull continued. "I do not believe there is any danger here for us. It is a sanctuary, much like our compound." Taking Keira's hand, he lifted it, kissed it then lowered it. "Although it smells much nicer."

While the Warriors chuckled, Jessica

dismounted and walked up to Keira. Hands on hips, Keira looked over Jessica's husband, still sitting on his jacos, dismissively.

"They're not overly bright are they?" Keira asked wryly. "And *you*," she added in a loud voice, pointing at Thain," are particularly gullible."

Thain's cheeks reddened. He was obviously remembering how his consort-bride had snuck up on him in the middle of an army he was leading, wearing only a simple brown cloak as a disguise. He should have suspected something was up as soon as he realized there were a lot of people outside the colony but none inside. Despite his training, he glanced back at the open gate nervously.

Keira took a step toward Jessica, smoothed the shorter woman's hair back from her face, looked down at her intently then hugged her tight. "Are you well, sister?" she whispered and hugged harder. The movement shifted her cloak, revealing the weaponry hidden within its folds.

In the full sunlight, the resemblance between the two women was unmistakable, although Keira seemed more mature and a command presence rolled off her in waves.

Bent and cloaked women started coming in through the gate. They walked slowly with the stiffness of ancient joints. As they passed beneath the inner gate, they straightened and pulled back their cowls. None of them were old and most of them had pale hair and eyes. Sibyls, all heavily armed—revealed when they opened their cloaks. None of them acted aggressively but by the time they'd all made their way inside, the inner courtyard was filled with about onehundred fifty of them.

"Welcome, Thain," a middle-aged woman with golden-red hair called out. She held up her hands in greeting. "Welcome, Warriors." Except for her age and the gray streaking her hair, she could pass for Jessica's twin. "Thank you for coming to attend the sanctification ceremony for Thain and Jessica's marriage. Please, let us take care of your needs while you are our guests."

Some of the Sibyls approached the Warriors. They smiled, introduced themselves, offered to stable their jacos. Some Warriors accepted graciously. Some with hesitation and asked if they could see to the stabling of their animals

themselves. Their requests were met without comment.

Jessica stepped out of her sister's embrace and into her mother's.

# CHRYTER THREE

"That is the pump house." Keira pointed as she led Raull through the complex. "For drinking water, we have over two dozen wells throughout the colony. Most of our irrigation water comes from rainwater, gathered in a series of basins and pipes that run around the walls. And off the roofs," she added, indicating a neat, rectangular building.

Raull had been told what he was looking at was a home but he'd never seen anything like it. It was taller than wide and, so Keira assured him, actually had stairs *inside*. The slope of the roof was a straight pitch, not curved and the gardens were out front, not in a middle courtyard. She showed him a school, a library, something she called a park and, climbing an inner section of the protective wall, showed him parcel upon parcel of farmland all sitting inside the high, formidable fortifications.

The colony was completely self sufficient and could withstand a siege forever. He shook his

head in shocked admiration. Nothing in his military training spoke of such things.

In the distance, on the highest point within the colony, tall towers stood with what looked like great paddles on top, turning in the wind. He wondered what their purpose was.

It didn't escape his notice that she skipped over a few thick-walled buildings that had been built into the ground rather than sitting on it. Weapons caches likely, but he didn't want to alarm her with his curiosity. He was content to watch her profile, listen to her voice and follow her to their gathering hall. He'd never met a woman as enthralling as Keira. Oh, he'd met Sibyls before but the ones they let out in public were old. In fact, his people were convinced there *were* no young Sibyls. He'd been pleasantly surprised when he'd been introduced to Jessica. He was intrigued by her older sister.

Raull was not a vain man but he knew his worth. Others might be more handsome, younger, but since the age of twenty-five cycles, he'd never met his equal in battle. Now thirtythree, he served the Prince of the Kingdom of Tarmig-Lun, the largest kingdom by far on their world. The kingdom was so wealthy that it could afford to employ two other Warriors in addition to Raull. They served as his lieutenants, affording him the luxury of time to pursue his interest in reading—and an opportunity to leave his duties behind for a time and attend a friend's joining ceremony.

Keira led him into a large, domed building. "The washrooms are through there if you'd like to clean up a little after your journey. I'll wait out here for you if you like and take you into the flower garden for the ceremony."

"Only if you'll observe the ceremony at my side, Sibyl," Raull said with an engaging smile, kissed her hand and followed two other Warriors into this washing room she'd pointed out. Inside, he found cubicles, basins but no pitchers of water. Not even a hand pump to draw it from. He could smell water near the basins. He just couldn't see it. Other Warriors were pacing the room, looking just as confused as he felt.

One of them started exploring a basin, grunted when he realized the decorative spout above it moved, then started when water gushed out.

"They are rumored to be wizards," he

murmured, shrugged and splashed water over his face and neck.

Within minutes, Raull was refreshed and again at Keira's side.

The ceremony was simple. The guests sat on rows of benches and Thain and Jessica stood in front of them, under an arch decorated with flowers. She wore a circlet of flowers on her head and Raull thought they looked lovely on the young Sibyl. Prompted by an older Sibyl who smiled constantly, they made promises to each other to be faithful and caring. To Raull it was all a bit unnecessary. A Warrior's devotion to his woman, once he found her, was unshakeable. Despite her age, Jessica looked at Thain the same way he looked at her. The women, however, seemed to place great significance on this public exchange of vows. Even Keira, who he took to be too tough to give in to tears, inhaled raggedly once or twice and blinked hard. He held her hand and she squeezed his.

When the ceremony was over and the effusive hugging died down, Keira led him into their gathering hall. It was a cavernous space directly beneath the domed roof. Sunlight streamed through colored-glass insets and he stared in wonder at the facets and angles of light and shadow. He and Keira were directed to a table in the middle of the hall, where Jessica, Thain and Jessica's mother were already seated. They were soon joined by two other men. The older one looked to be about fifty cycles old. He was tall and powerfully built despite his age. Jessica's mother greeted him with a kiss and an embrace.

Raull immediately noticed the man's resemblance to Keira. The man was introduced as her and Jessica's father, as well as the father of the twentyish man sitting beside him. The older man was not introduced as their mother's husband and Raull made a mental note to ask about that later.

Servers appeared with platters of cold brisket, cut into thin strips and wrapped around epol fruit, along with brine-cured berries, squares of toasted bread drizzled with fragrant honeyvinegar. From a raised dais opposite the entrance to the hall, musicians began to play. Their music was sweet, soft and alien to Raull's ears, but no less beautiful because of it. Gyrus wine was served with roast fowl, an assortment of vegetables and greens. A singer added her voice to the musicians' playing. Her song praised love and even Raull's disciplined heart was warmed by the looks Thain and his bride exchanged.

It also didn't escape his notice that the Warriors, outnumbered by more than three to one, appeared glutted, almost drunk from the press of so many lovely, intelligent, gifted women. It didn't seem to matter how old the women were. The Warriors simply seemed enthralled by them. He wondered if it was some spell the Sibyls worked then realized they were as enthralled by the men as the men were with them. Sibyls, he recalled, didn't get out much.

He was eavesdropping on a heated conversation two tables over, about the care and handling of ancient documents, when one of the older Warriors called out.

"Zareth. Don't let it be said that Warriors don't contribute to the entertainment when they're invited to a feast. Show them your stuff, lad, and do us proud."

His request was taken up by other Warriors until a young man, no more than a few cycles

older than twenty, stood. He was as tall as the other Warriors although not yet as thick through the chest and arms. And like the others, he had brown hair and eyes. His face had the simple, uncomplicated beauty of youth. The smile he gave the older Sibyls flanking him as he excused himself with obvious regret, only made him more handsome. As he stepped up to the dais, he produced three yellow balls from a pouch slung around his waist.

The Warriors roared their approval as Zareth began to juggle. The musicians ended their song then took up a new one. This one was lively, a perfect backdrop for the balls' leap into the air, the complexity of their turning, shifting, the speed of Zareth's hands. The Sibyls applauded as loudly as the Warriors roared.

After a time, a very short Sibyl approached the dais. There were three red balls in her small hands. Hers rose into the air, levitated then started to move in imitation of Zareth's.

The Warriors were stunned into silence.

"Hey," Zareth blurted out. "No fair. Do you know how long it took me to learn how to do this?"

"And you think my gift took any less work to hone?" the Sibyl bit out, obviously reserving most of her concentration for the levitating balls. She made a small sound of surprise when Zareth sent one of his balls into the path of hers, leaving himself with two to juggle and her four. Sweat beaded her forehead and her brow furrowed in concentration then a corner of her mouth quirked up. Her balls began to move easier, rose with more grace. The musicians started up another tune, this one even faster. She gritted her teeth, grinned and kept pace before lobbing one of her balls into Zareth's space.

Soon the two of them were laughing, struggling at times to track the movements of six balls, arcing them back and forth, shuffling their feet to stay under the balls' paths.

Zareth finally called out, a great cry of exultation, stepped into the Sibyl's space, caught up all six balls, held them, kissed her with undisguised enthusiasm and guided her back to her seat. Again the Warriors roared their approval then settled back to enjoy the next course of sweet nylind fruit, stoan fruit poached in syrup, cheese and a variety of nuts.

As the feast progressed, the light outside dimmed then faded entirely. It was replaced by the gold glow of lamps although Raull, for the life of him, couldn't remember seeing them being lit. Even the colored glass dome overhead continued to glow, backlit by some light he was unfamiliar with.

Throughout the meal, Keira and her family had talked amongst themselves. For the most part they seemed to be catching up on what was happening in their lives. Raull got a sense they didn't get to spend much time together. Only after their conversation began to wind down did he lean into Keira.

"Why do we never see young Sibyls?" he asked, adding another piece of nylind fruit to her plate. He'd noticed her fondness for it.

"We are...cloistered," she answered. "Wary of the outside world. We're different and that could make us targets."

Raull wondered where that fear had come from. Although there had been no mention of the Sibyls in the written records before threehundred cycles ago, he knew that, since then, they'd enjoyed peaceful autonomy. After seeing their fortifications and glimpsing some of their skills, he knew anyone would be a fool to try and challenge them. Only one person had, the former Prince of the Kingdom of Jareb-Phar. But then he'd been insane and deposed for being unfit to rule.

Keira continued. "We send our oldest out because they are past breeding age so can no longer contribute to the colony's health in that way. They are also our wisest and most experienced Sibyls. It is that wisdom and experience that we are privileged to share with others in this world."

His brows drawing together, Raull wondered why she referred to her kind as outsiders. A joining ceremony, however, wasn't the time for intrusive questions. He settled on something he hoped was less sensitive. "But surely you get out. I mean how do you get, um, how are little Sibyls, um...don't you mate?"

Chuckling, Keira added another splash of gyrus wine to his glass then to hers. "A typically male question but an understandable one." When he grinned ruefully, she grinned back. "When our training is complete after our twentieth

cycle, we leave the colony on a Seer's Quest. We travel incognito through the land for as long as we wish, although a Quest typically takes half a cycle. We experience life out in the world until we have decided if we wish to remain abroad, or return to the colony and spend our lives here in service." She nodded at her sister. "The day Jessica left on her Seer's Quest was the day she met her husband."

"And did you ever meet a man you wanted to wed?" Raull's gaze moved over Keira's face, her beautiful, shimmering hair.

"Yes."

Feeling his expression harden at her response, Raull summoned his discipline and forced himself to smile politely.

"I thought so at the time anyway," she added and his smile became genuine. "He was a farmer and a kind and funny man. Life with him and his family was peaceful."

At the tables closest to them, more and more Warriors turned to listen. They were obviously as curious about the Sibyls as Raull was, although

a part of him resented their interest in *this* particular Sibyl.

Keira continued. "But one day, as I was harvesting grain near the road, a Warrior rode by. I had never seen one in person so I walked up to him, bid him good day, asked if he'd like some water and asked for an answer to a question in return." She grinned. "He was amused by my boldness but agreed. I asked him where he was going then gave him my water skin so I could touch his hand." As if sensing her growing audience, she looked up, showed them her palm. "That is my gift, you see. I can see men's futures although I must touch them to do so."

"What was his destiny?" one Warrior called out excitedly.

"What great battles did you see?"

"What glories?"

"What rewards?"

Some women would be taken aback by so much interest, especially from Warriors and shy away from them. With approval, Raull noticed that the strong woman beside him did none of those things.

"I saw something I didn't expect to see," she continued in a low, melodic tone that carried throughout the hall. "I saw his thoughts. He was thinking how much he missed his old jacos. He had retired it the previous season and had yet to get used to the gait of the new one. His backside was sore from being in the saddle all day."

The crowd stared at her in disbelief then erupted into laughter.

"*Hey*," one Warrior, sitting a few tables away, yelled. He was older than the others, at least in his fortieth cycle, and his muscles were sinewy and sharp-edged beneath his skin. "He was a great jacos, the old one was. I still miss him."

Keira stared at the Warrior then recognition dawned on her face. She laughed, stood and made her way over to his table with her arms outstretched.

The others, still laughing, watched her step up behind the Warrior, wrap her arms around his shoulders and tuck her face in beside his. She hugged him with open delight. What the other Warriors missed was that she also wrapped a hand around his head, laid her palm on his forehead.

"And what else, Seer?" the older Warrior whispered close to her ear. "What else did you see?"

The laughter and conversation around them meant that no one else heard their exchange.

"Your death," she whispered gently. "It will be a good death," she added when he stiffened. "I see family around you. A grandson with your nose and chin, telling you an amusing story."

"Is he strong?"

"Heisstrongand commandingand handsome," she assured him. "He's a Warrior, like you. Your bed is comfortable and your chamber holds many trappings of wealth. Mementos of a life well-lived. And your backside does not hurt."

The Warrior was grinning when he leaned away from her then kissed her hand.

Keira made her way back to her seat.

"Why did you leave your farmer and return here?" Raull asked when she sat back down beside him. He handed her wine cup to her.

"Because of the Warrior." Again, the conversation around them died down.

Raull realized the men weren't just interested, they were hungry for information about these unique women.

Again, Keira pitched her voice so her audience could hear. "I saw in him a life well lived in the service of others. His was a full, rich life. I knew that, even though a part of my heart wanted the peace and comfort that life as a farmer's wife could bring, a part of it would always want more. I left because I could not bear to deceive him. Or myself," she added with quiet honesty.

When she fell silent, the conversations around them picked up again. Raull stared in amazement as two different Sibyls made things levitate off the tables they were seated at. The Warriors seated with them stared too.

Thain stood and, with his bride at his side, thanked their guests for coming, thanked her mother for arranging the feast, and left the hall with Jessica. The party started to break up after that as other Sibyls stood and offered to show their guests the accommodations that had been arranged for them.

Raull turned when the beautiful Sibyl sitting beside him touched his forearm.

"Are you confirming my future, Seer?" he teased and glanced down at his arm. "Or is the vision of me tickling infants simply too amusing to resist a second look?"

She chuckled, rubbed his skin briskly and withdrew her hand. "My gift is a little more precise than that," she said. "Your future came to me with that first touch. After that, only when I actively seek it. Usually," she added with a wry grin. "I'm lucky that way."

"Lucky? How?"

"Well imagine seeing the same things over and over every time you touched someone. It would get very distracting. Life would become boring. Many cycles ago, there was such a Sibyl. Every time she touched one of her sisters, she saw a vision of an exceptional hisian root harvest in their future."

"That's not a *bad* thing."

"Not unless you dislike hisian root. Which, apparently, she came to." Keira grinned again. "The Sibyl took to wearing gloves all the time. The story says she went a bit mad in the end."

Raull's mouth thinned as he considered the

story. As he did, servers began taking away the gyrus wine and replaced it with tea.

"If your day was as long as mine," Keira said and glanced at two Sibyls making their way to the exit, "you're ready to call an end to it too. May I show you to your chamber for the night? Have you had enough to eat?" she added, perhaps as an afterthought.

"Yes. Thank you." He took her arm and helped her to stand. Not that she needed steadying but for the simple pleasure of touching her. As they made their way out of the hall, exchanging a few words with some and nodding to others, Raull thought that he'd follow this woman out of the hall even if he was starving...for food.

Outside, she led him down a street that was paved with some hard, compressed substance. He was distracted by the twitching of her pert behind, the sway of her dress as she walked. It was no wonder that, at first, he didn't notice the glass bricks along the edge of the road. They glowed with an internal light and when he did notice them, Raull stopped and stared.

"Is this magic?" he asked, crouched down and touched one of the bricks. It wasn't hot.

"It's a unique energy source," Keira answered with a vague wave of her hand, indicating the rise in the distance with the high poles and spinning blades, discernable by the light of the three moons. "If you're interested, I'll show you tomorrow. It's too late now and I'm tired."

When he stood and resumed walking beside her along the lit street, Raull slid his arm around her waist without asking. She matched her pace to his and led him to a house. He was impressed by how tidy it appeared and even though he found the gardens out front odd, the scent of the flowers was welcoming. Horizontal planks of painted wood clad the exterior of the building. He stepped inside after her and looked around. The place was softly lit and like the exterior, the furniture inside was unique. Not just the seats but the backs and arms of the chairs and reclining sofas were upholstered. The fabric was colorful, woven to represent flowers, birds, even complex and overlapping squares. The house smelled fresh yet vaguely of Keira too. That unidentifiable herb scent she carried was here as well.

Stepping up to a tall, rectangular box in what he took to be a kitchen, she opened the door. Light spilled out and again, Raull stared in wonder as she produced a pitcher and filled it with small, clear cubes.

"Ice," she said when she saw his interest.

He felt his brow furrow.

"It's harmless, like me," she added with an obvious tease. "Well, far *less* harmless." Grinning, she picked up one of the cubes, sucked on it then held it out to him.

"It's all right not to trust something you're not familiar with. I don't take it personally," she said when he didn't take the cube into his mouth. "Many things here will seem alien to you. I understand you're wary not just for yourself, but for the other Warriors inside these walls. Perhaps it was unwise to separate you all for the night but we wanted to offer your men shelter inside our homes instead of our barns." Her grin turned into a gentle smile. "Decide what's best for you, Warrior. You wouldn't be their captain if you weren't good at your job."

Persuaded by the humor in her pale eyes, the hint of a dare, he closed his mouth over the cube and the tips of her fingers. The cold surprised him then he concentrated on the warmth of her skin, the softness of it. He'd been wrong to distrust her. The cube was simply ice and, his gaze on hers, he licked the trails of water sliding down her fingers, pooling in the palm of her hand. Still watching her, enthralled by her sharp intake of breath, the way her soft mouth parted, he took the ice from her and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Is this your home?" he asked after he swallowed. The room contained pictures in small, decorative frames. They weren't drawings or paintings but some strange, perfectly accurate rendering of people. Pictures of Keira, her mother, Jessica, the men introduced as the girls' father and brother, standing alone or in groups with their arms around each other.

"Yes," she answered, smoothed her hand over her hip and, carrying the pitcher of ice, led him up the stairs that ran inside the house. "My mother's and mine. Jessica's too before she left." They reached the top of the stairs and turned to the left. "Jessica and her husband are in her old room," she added, pointing in the other direction. "They're on that side of the landing although we probably won't see them before morning."

Chuckling quietly, Raull followed the Sibyl without reservation.

"The room you'll stay in is in here." She opened a door, touched something on the wall inside and the interior lit up, revealing a bedchamber. Like downstairs, the furnishings were lushly upholstered, the colors bright and fresh. He was surprised to see his satchel sitting on a small table. Keira's scent was stronger here and she led him through to a smaller chamber, lit that one up like she had magic that captured the sun, tilted the decorative spout over a basin and filled the pitcher with water. After setting it aside, she explained that the Sibyls had something they called indoor plumbing, showed him how to operate a waste-disposal unit, how to regulate the temperature of water coming out of a high spout in a tall glassed-in bathing chamber.

Back in the bedchamber, he removed his sword belt and hung it up. There were a series of pegs on the wall. Many of them already held weapons, some he didn't recognize. He picked up a small, flat metal disk with protruding points around its perimeter. When he touched one, he found it sharp enough to draw blood. Hiding his

wince of pain, he replaced the disk carefully and licked his finger clean.

"What else did you see?" he asked suddenly and turned to face her.

Her brow furrowed.

"When you touched me in the barn, what else did you see?" He closed the outer door then took a step toward her, then another. "You told me the truth, yes, but you left something out. I felt it in you. I feel it in you now, Seer."

Whatever else, Keira knew she must always be honest with this man. Her training required it. Her nature demanded it. "Your daughter," she said and took a step backward when he closed in on her. "Will have red hair. Like mine." She felt hunted, cornered and took another step back until her shoulders touched the wall. It was an uncomfortable feeling but she liked it anyway. The predator she sensed in Raull followed her retreat. Like in the barn, he braced his hands on the wall behind her, on either side of her head, holding her in place. Her lips felt dry and she ran her tongue over them. He watched with unmistakable hunger. Without asking, he dipped his head and took her mouth.

His scent resonated in her head, her nostrils flared and her mouth was suddenly full of the taste of him. He was the strongest, most confident man she'd ever met yet his scent was a light, heady mixture of warm skin, virility, fresh air and the faint scent of wood smoke. Leaning into her, he touched his chest to the tips of her breasts, made them feel full, sensitive, needy. Her cleft grew damp and he groaned like he could smell her response, leaned into her and drove his tongue into her mouth.

The warm heaviness of it touched hers, slid over it, twined around it, moved away and encouraged hers to follow. Weaving her fingers in his hair, she used her strength to keep him close. Instinct told Keira that the Warrior could pull free of her grasp with a twitch of his neck but he let her hold him where he was, even growled seductively when she pulled him nearer.

Full, firm lips moved over hers, shaped them, warmed them then slipped across them as delicately as breath. And when he did breathe, his chest nuzzled her breasts.

She moaned in protest when he pulled

back, feathered his mouth away from hers then touched his lips to the base of her ear.

"Be warned," Raull whispered. It was a deep rumble of sound that made her quiver. "When a warrior finds a woman he wants he won't give her up until he has purged his need for her." The tip of his tongue flicked over her lobe, found the convolutions of her ear, slid inside then withdrew. "It may take days. Weeks. Cycles." Again he caressed her ear, fucked it with his tongue until Keira moaned and arched into him. "Say yes now, woman, or refuse me."

His brow furrowed and he leaned back to look down at her when Keira chuckled.

"Not exactly the reaction I was hoping for," he grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Raull. I really am." Keira wiped the corners of her eyes and leaned her head against the wall. "Do you understand the word *lame*?" She grinned when one of his brows arched wryly. "That line was really, really lame. Did they teach you that one at the Warriors' Compound? Really?" she added with a laugh when his expression darkened. "Honestly, you guys need better material."

"I'll have you know, Sibyl, that women have been known to tear their clothes off in fits of lust when I say that to them." Lifting his hands off the wall, he wrapped them around her waist and eased his body into hers.

"Fits of lust, huh?" Keira shook her head dismissively but she also ran her hands over his arms, caressed his back through the gaps in his weapons vest. "You sure it wasn't fits of laughter?"

"Now you've done it," Raull growled, grinned down at her, bent forward and hoisted her over his shoulder like her weight was nothing. He carried her into the bathing chamber. "I gave you fair warning." She yelped then groaned when he slapped her ass, twice. Without setting her down, he turned on the water in the bathing chamber, tested the temperature and adjusted it. "I gave you a chance to say no but you chose to make fun of me, hmm?" Digging his fingers into her ribs until she was laughing and making ineffectual attempts to push him away, Raull let her slide back down onto her feet and continued to grin at her. He grabbed her dress, pulled it up and over her head, then tossed it aside. Next

he began undoing the clips that held his vest in place. "I'm a civilized man, Keira. A man of learning but you've stripped that civility from me. I'm claiming you like our barbarian ancestors claimed their women. Your acceptance or denial is no longer required," he added and his voice was a sultry purr as he opened his leather pants, slid them and his boots off then pulled on the scrap of material that served as her panties so hard that it tore. The shredded remnants fluttered to the floor at her feet.

He watched her eyes, saw the intense blue of their focus sharpen as he wrapped his hand around his jutting cock, slid his palm down the length, gave the head a hard squeeze then moved his hand back to the base.

"You're mine, Keira," he whispered, kissed her ear, her cheek, drove his tongue into her mouth then feathered his mouth over her throat. "Tonight and every night until we tire of each other or the moons cease to rise."

"Then may they never cease to rise," she groaned, held his head between her strong hands and pulled his mouth back to hers. After a time, she slapped his hand until he let go of his cock

then replaced it with her own. "And if I'm yours, Warrior, then this is mine," she said with a fierce snarl.

Raull groaned into her mouth when she withheld her strength and gently slid her fingers up and down his length. Later, he would ask her when she'd mastered voice inflection and if it was a skill all Sibyls possessed. For now, all he wanted was to touch her and be touched. She caressed the bare skin at the base of his cock. Like all Warriors, the only hair on his body was on his head and brows. His hips began to move in counterpoint to the brushing of her fingertips. He cupped her breast, squeezed carefully then stepped back.

"Bind up your hair, woman," he ordered.

"Why?" she asked but stepped away, opened a drawer near the basin and withdrew a length of ribbon.

He felt his eyes flare as he watched the sway of her breasts when she pulled her hair back. "Because you're going to bathe me and after, when I take you in your bed, I want to be clothed in the warmth of your hair, not the wetness." Raull couldn't help licking his lips and staring at

her strong body as she walked past him, stepped into the bathing cabinet and cocked a finger at him. He followed eagerly.

The flow of the warm water felt good on his arm and his shoulder as he crowded her into the small space—small but still large enough for them to turn around in. Used to soft soaps, he was puzzled by the bar she picked up but only for a second. The scent of flowers, herbs and Keira filled the air as she rolled the bar in her hands and raised a lather. Bracing his arms against the smooth walls, Raull spread his legs and sighed with contentment when she began soaping his neck and chest. He let her touch him. Let her caress his skin, manipulate his muscles, turn his body any way she chose as she washed the dust from the road off him. When her small, pert breasts brushed his arm, he grinned down at her, gave her a fleeting kiss then again submitted to her touch.

Submitting to a woman was something he'd never done. A leader and aggressive down to the very center of his bones, Raull was used to women who submitted to him. Used to women who were drawn to his strength, position, wealth.

The woman touching him now was drawn to his strength, that much he could tell by the flaring of her eyes as she stroked him, the growing scent of her arousal. She was also enthralled by him if the heaviness of her eyelids and the adorable way she kept chewing on her lower lip were any indicators. Even though she was a woman, she was also a Sibyl. Raull reminded himself not to forget that. He also sensed she was as much a Warrior as he was. Through temperament and, judging by the array of weapons she kept in her bedchamber, through training, Keira was a formidable woman.

Grinning, he thanked the gods that it had been his hand she'd chosen to touch today, and no one else's.

# CHRYTER FOUR

Keira grinned as she ran her soapy hands down the Warrior's back. She'd never seen such a body, let alone be privileged to touch one. Even among Warriors he was huge, thick with muscle, blessed with perfect proportions, supple and warm all over. She turned to re-lather her hands and the water sprayed across her chest, teased the nagging arousal in her nipples. Giving in to the sensation, she trembled, smiled, rolled the soap between her fingers then set it aside with more haste than discretion.

"By the gods you're beautiful," she murmured, kissed a soap-free section of his triceps and slid her arms around him so she could tease his nipples like the water had teased hers.

Raull chuckled. He also reached behind her, pulled her forward so her belly cradled the hard curve of his ass. "I never would have taken you for a foolish woman, Sibyl." Taking hold of her hands when they drifted down over her abdomen, he pulled them back up to his chest, held her fingertips between his and rubbed the pads of her fingers over his nipples until he trembled. "I'm not beautiful. I never was, not even when I was young."

"There are many things that make a man beautiful, Warrior," she said. The breath that carried her words tickled his ear and he leaned closer as if to feel it again. "Strength, courage, intelligence, a body that makes a woman ache just to look at it." Again she grinned. Again he angled his neck so his ear dipped closer to her mouth. "Besides, you are handsome in my eyes."

"Then your eyes need a physician."

"They need no such thing," she snapped, annoyed by his self deprecation. Pinching his nipples, hard, she let go only when he hissed and tried to tug her hands away. "You should learn to take a compliment and not question a Sibyl's feelings."

Raull was quiet for a moment. "I apologize. This is...new for me."

"New? How?" she prompted and washed his shoulders, the wide spread of his lats.

Resting his hands against the wall, Raull

leaned his forehead against the cool, smooth surface. "Women respond to me enthusiastically but they do so because of what I am, not who I am. If that makes any sense."

"I think I understand." Keira started washing his hair and smiled at the low, satisfied rumble he made when she massaged his scalp. "Your training puts barriers between your Warrior side and your sensual side. You can allow those barriers to come down but at your core, you're still a Warrior. You control every situation, and every encounter I imagine."

His only acknowledgement was a wry shrug.

"There are women who would find that incredibly erotic. I'm only sorry none of them bothered to look deeper."

"And you can look deeper inside me than anyone can, Sibyl." When she tugged gently, he faced her and tilted his head into the flow of water. Again, he made that quiet, rumbling sound when she coaxed the soap out of his hair.

"There are other Sibyls who looked deeper inside you today than I did, Warrior."

He straightened, towered over her, looked down at her with dark intensity.

"A few of us are able to probe men's minds. More than just thoughts, they see memories, emotions, motivation, character. That power is formidable and before you get too bent out of shape, those women learn to discipline their gifts ruthlessly. We respect people's privacy and your mind was probed today only after it was determined that you were a leader amongst Warriors. We had to be sure you and the rest of the men meant no harm."

Still looking down at her, Raull's aggressive stance softened as did the intensity in his eyes. "Bent out of shape?" he asked and a corner of his mouth quirked up. "What an...eloquent description."

"I try my best," she drawled and soaped his hips, thighs then the supple skin between them. "Now, can we get off the topic of Sibyls and get back to this?" Gently, she cupped his balls, rolled the skin between her fingers with a delicate touch, smiled when he groaned and rocked his hips forward.

"Only if you promise to call me beautiful in the morning."

Chuckling now, Keira used her other hand to soap his cock then let the tip slide over her belly as he moved. "Deal," she said and trapped the head between her palm and abdomen, loving his snarl of arousal as he squeezed his rod in and out of the tight space. He cupped her breasts, thumbed her nipples, let his head fall back and snarled again.

"Enough, woman. My turn." Pushing her hands aside, Raull soaped her quickly, almost indifferently but the brusque movement of his strong, rough hands was arousing nonetheless. Keira's skin was tingling by the time she was rinsed and he slapped the water controls off. She wouldn't mind if they started all over again. Rubbing Raull's big body was just about the most intriguing thing she'd ever done but he obviously had other plans. When he grabbed the thick drying cloth hanging outside the bathing chamber, she didn't protest.

He dried them quickly then marched into her sleeping chamber. The confidence he exuded told her he had no doubt she'd follow. Well, how

could she not? With the hard, deep curve of that delicious ass rolling in front of her, Keira was drawn along in his wake like a jacos after a piece of stoan fruit. When he held up the linens and shot her a smoldering look over his shoulder, Keira leaned forward, dropped her hands then knees on the mattress and started to crawl onto it.

"Hmm. Perfect," he growled, grabbed her hips and started licking her cleft. Hard.

"Wait," Keira blurted out, trying to squirm away. "It's too much. Slow down."

"Slow down?" he asked incredulously but lifted his face away from her. His thumbs brushed over her ass. "I couldn't have hurt you. Did I?" he asked and the hesitation in his voice sounded unnatural for him.

"No you didn't hurt me," Keira assured him quickly. Despite his too-rapid assault on her tender bits, it felt very sensual to be propped up on her knees with her breasts skimming the sheets, her backside swaying high and exposed. "I'm just really sensitive there. I'll respond a lot better if you take your time, arouse me slowly,"

she added and, tipping her head to the side, flashed him a sultry smile.

"Slowly." Raull said the word thoughtfully, like he was rolling it around in his head like it rolled off his tongue. "Well they say Sibyls are wondrous and unique. I think I'm going to enjoy acquainting myself with this...sensitivity of yours." Growling again, his breath washed over her wetness before he smoothed his cheek across her ass. He kissed her, grazed her skin oh so gently with his teeth then kissed her again. Moving to the other cheek, he greeted that one just as tenderly.

Keira sighed, grinned and dropped her head onto the mattress.

Thorough and creative, Raull aroused her patiently. His big hands squeezed her hips, slid across her belly, stroked her back. Shivering then grinning, she felt the tip of his nose stir the curls on either side of her slit, felt him exhale over her deliberately then exhale again when she murmured and sighed.

"Hmm. You *are* sensitive. Even my breath is enough to arouse you."

"You're enough to arouse me," Keira assured him and let her head drift back down when the tips of his fingers replaced his nose. He brushed her slowly, softly, each pass bringing him a little closer. Finally he nudged her labia, paused as if waiting for her reaction and nudged it again when she rolled her hips into his touch.

"Gods but you're wet," he whispered as he trailed his fingertips down her cleft. "From no more than my breath and the barest caress. Or is it because you really enjoyed being bathed?"

"That helped." Squirming, Keira rocked back into him gingerly, letting this Warrior know what she wanted.

He kissed her ass again then bit her gently. "Do you want me, Sibyl? Want the touch of a Warrior? His hands on you." Running his palms down her thighs in long, firm strokes, Raull straightened, leaned the impressive length of his cock against her slit and rubbed slowly. "His shaft in you?"

Reaching behind her, Keira stilled his movements with the pressure of her hand on his hip, leaned forward to put some space between them. "I don't want just a Warrior, Raull. I want

you," she answered with quiet candor. "If that's too bold for you, tough."

He chuckled, kissed her back then maneuvered away from her ass so he could run his fingers over her again. "It's been a long time since anyone, let alone a woman has challenged me. Even my own mother holds her tongue around me."

"Your loss. I'm sure she's a remarkable woman and you could learn a lot from her, even at your age." She heard him grind his teeth together in response to her audacity and grinned.

"I'm hardly in my dotage, Keira. I'm a formidable Warrior," he swirled the tip of his finger across the mouth of her sheath, "respected, feared and it has been cycles since I've met my match in battle. You'd do well to remember that and not goad me about my mother." Slowly, he sunk his finger in her, paused at the first knuckle, withdrew then pressed into her again.

"Hmm. That feels good. And if you expect me to back down from you, that's not going to happen. If you want a submissive woman, get out of my bed because you're wasting your time here." She tipped her head and looked back at him coolly.

Raull's thumb grazed her anus and he licked his lips as he slowly fucked the mouth of her pussy. "I thought I wanted a submissive woman but perhaps that was all the choice I was presented with, before now." He probed her a little deeper. "It appears I want a Sibyl who's bold, strong," his thumb circled her puckered rosette, pressed lightly then circled it again, "who wants me as much as I want her." Again he leaned forward, kissed her back and pressed a second finger into her.

"Now you're talking," she murmured and deepened the arch in her back when Raull slid his fingers into her with exquisite slowness, stopping only when his knuckles grazed her nether lips.

"Is my touch satisfactory?"

"Fantastic." Grinning like a drunkard, Keira let her chest drift down onto the bed.

His mouth replaced his fingers and this time when he licked her, Keira shivered and leaned back into him. Delicate sweeps of his tongue across the mouth of her sheath, her anus, nudging her clit made her clutch the bed linens. His breath was warm, rhythmic and he punctuated the gentle movements of his mouth with nips at her backside and the pressure of his fingers on her hips as he eased her back into him. When he speared her channel with his tongue, she groaned. It felt wonderful, warm and soft being loved by this Warrior, even more wonderful because she knew how powerful he was, how focused and disciplined. Yet he tempered everything in consideration of her.

Keira gasped when he sunk his tongue into her, again and again, drawing out her juices and swallowing them with audible relish. Then he arched his neck, moved his talented tongue over her clit and licked it rhythmically. She gasped again when his thumb sunk into her, swirled inside her wetness then drifted back to press against her anus.

"Ah, gods," she sighed then yelped when he penetrated her.

"Don't refuse me, woman," he growled against her, eased the tip of his thumb back then sunk it in slow and gentle. "You've given this body to me. Trusted the pleasuring of it to me. I will show you that trust is well placed." He left her clit, licked the puckered skin stretched around his invading digit until she squirmed and made

a quiet sound of need. Then he licked a slow, torturing path back down to her swollen bud. His thumb continued to move gently, pleasuring her with patient seduction.

Keira thought she'd explode. No man had ever touched her ass, had the audacity to breach her. Pity. Raull made her feel things she never expected to and her belly clenched when the pressure of his tongue increased, when his seductive licking turned to flicks that made her whimper. Soon she was shaking, sweat broke out on her back and she groaned.

"Hmm. Delicious," Raull murmured, kissed her then straightened. "Spread yourself for me."

"Wh-?"

His thumb continued its steady, shallow penetration. "Use your hands. Pull that beautiful pussy open for me. Invite me in, Keira. Show me you want me."

Show him? Oh like her raging horniness wasn't enough. His high handedness should have annoyed her. It made her feel sexy instead. Like the Warrior caressing her nether lips with the tips of his fingers, Keira was a disciplined

soldier. A general in the Sibyl's army, she was always on her guard, always responsible, always ensuring the safety of others before seeing to her own needs. For tonight, Raull let her shed those responsibilities and she loved this feminine, sensuous role he demanded she play.

"Gods yes," he snarled when she reached around her hips, replaced his caressing fingertips with her own then spread her pussy wide. "No man alive deserves to own such perfection."

She felt the head of his cock slide against her wetness, nudge her clit, rub it by drawing his length across her slit.

"Please," she begged. Her voice sounded ragged, foreign.

"Please what?"

Lifting up a little, Keira rubbed her face against the bed linens in frustration then dropped back down onto her chest. Damned Warrior. She yelped when he slapped her ass above her hands, hard enough to sting, first one cheek then the other.

"Please what?" he repeated. His voice was deep, measured but there was no anger in it.

The movement of his thumb stopped and she squirmed anxiously. The spanking had been unexpected, humiliating. It was also hotter than hell. Appalled then strangely aroused, Keira felt warmth spread through her ass in the wake of the pain. She tugged on her labia even harder. "Please, Raull," she said, trying to sound meek. Being with a man this powerful, this determined made it easy to set aside her tight control and let him pleasure her however he wanted. "Fuck me. Now."

"No."

"What?" How *dare* he? How dare he bring her to the point of begging then refuse to satisfy her? No Sybil would allow a man to deceive her. Never again. Enraged, she spun, rolled, wove her arm around his and used the leverage to pull him onto his back. Tucking her muscular legs behind his knees, she took away the leverage from his lower body, laid him out on his back and held him there with her weight. Her forearm pressed into his throat.

Raull offered no defense. Instead, he held his hands up at his sides. "I will not fuck you," he choked out, using the air that was left in his lungs.

She felt his thick neck muscles shift beneath her arm as he spoke.

"I will make love to you. If you don't like it, tough."

Keira blinked. Immediately, she lifted her arm. Inhaling sharply, Raull looked up at her and his eyes were dark, focused but also shone with approval.

"I take it you no longer object," he drawled and slid his hands up and down her back then hugged her to him, multiplying her weight on his torso. Despite that, his chest rose and fell in an easy, effortless rhythm.

"Um, no. Sorry for going off on you like that."

"Going...going off. Hmm. What an inventive vocabulary you Sibyls have." He brushed her hair back and held her face in his hands. "I've never met a woman like you. Your strength, cunning, fierceness, *especially* your fierceness enthralls me. You're a match for me in every way except that you *are* a woman. My woman." When her brow arched, he arched his. "When a Warrior finds a woman he wants, he keeps her. I know you remember me telling you this so quiet that rebellious look in your eye. I will make love to you. I will learn what pleases you. You will learn what pleases me. But you are a woman and I will never unleash my strength on you by simply fucking your body."

"How about unleashing your lust?"

"That I'd be delighted to do." He grinned, kissed her mouth then held on as he rolled them over. "I'm hard and want to be inside you, woman," Raull added, leaned back, rolled her again then lifted her back onto her knees. "But first, there is a matter of disciplining my woman that requires attending to." He pressed down on the small of her back, holding her in place.

"Don't you *dare*," she gasped and tensed before the first swat came down on her upturned ass. Sting. Burn. Heat. She gasped again and jerked, dragging her nipples across the bed linens, adding another layer of sensation to everything she was feeling. Another sharp crack as he brought his hand down on her other cheek. This time she moaned. Heat spread across her ass, licked her

cleft then faded. It rose again, hotter and more arousing as he continued to spank her. One side then the other, never hitting the exact spot twice, never hitting her thighs or her back. Rhythmic, strong strikes, delivered with diabolical slowness, five on each side then he stopped.

Tears ran down Keira's cheeks but she never protested. She squirmed but she didn't evade. The heat was so shocking, the arousal so wicked that she was stunned into accepting this punishment he'd chosen, then groaned after every strike as her body processed the pain as pleasure and endorphins flooded her. She'd never felt so free. Her tears freshened when he caressed her burning backside then smoothed his face against it, kissed her delicately.

"Now," he murmured, knelt behind her, used the pressure of his knees to spread her legs. He stroked her ass gently, keeping the burn fresh. "Spread yourself for me, woman. Offer yourself then tell me what you want."

"I want," Keira sniffled then took a deep breath. The storm was passing but in its wake she felt empowered, free of the tight control she always exercised over her emotions. With the demands of her job, that wasn't usually a good thing but here, in the sanctuary of her room, with this powerful man watching over her, adding his strength to hers, it felt okay to let go. Reaching around her backside like before, she pulled on her labia, exposing herself fully "I want you to make love to me. Pleasure me. Let me feel yours."

"Hmm," he breathed, leaned forward to kiss her back then slid his fingers over her clit. "You'll come to own me, woman." His shaft slid against her spread pussy, got wetter and wetter with every pass. Slowly at first, he rubbed his fingertips against her clit, then faster when she gasped, harder when she trembled.

When he pressed the head of his cock into her, she sighed and deepened the arch in her back.

By the gods he felt big! Breathing slow and deep, harnessing her unease, Keira willed herself to relax, to accept the stretching then embrace it. His fingers continued to rub her clit, making it easier. Raull entered her carefully, like he knew she needed a moment to adjust. He pushed gently but inexorably until the head slid past the tight outer muscles she was holding open,

paused, pushed again then pulled back just as gently.

When she groaned, he chuckled and sounded pleasure drunk when he did. "You're so beautiful. Your ass red from my hand, your pussy swollen, even darker than your ass, shining with your cream, stretched around my cock, holding me tight." This time when he pushed into her, he moaned, "Gods, Keira." His fingers moved faster. "Let go of your crease. Lean up and take your weight on your hands. Use your strength to press back into me."

She complied and loved the way he trembled when she did. It seemed she wasn't the only one who found it easy to let go of their tight selfcontrol this night.

"Ah, perfect," he hissed, pressed deeper, withdrew. "Take me, all of me, just like I'm taking you." He pressed again.

Keira rolled her back, experimenting with the arch in it. Raull felt huge and discomfort danced at the edge of delight. He continued to fuck her with slow, shallow strokes, flicked his fingers across her clit, leaned forward and growled his pleasure in her ear. Press. Pause. Withdraw. Going deeper each time, he reached around her with his free hand, cupped her breast, squeezed her nipple then pulled it carefully. When she pressed it into his hand, he took the hint and squeezed harder.

He continued to move slowly but she felt his strength in the flexing of his thighs. When the thick root of his shaft finally penetrated her, when his hard loins finally nudged her ass, she stiffened. She expected the contact to hurt her abused backside. Instead, his skin felt cool. smooth and he eased into her gently, not adding to her bruising by slapping against her. When he pulled back, he settled both hands around her hips, paused with the head of his shaft stretching the mouth of her sheath, rolled his hips in a way that made her gasp and fling her head back. Then he pulled her into him. His smooth balls were heavy and cool against her clit, emphasizing the feel of his body against hers when he rocked her back and forth. A subtle shifting of his thumbs let them pass over her burning backside, reminding her how exquisite that sting of pain had been.

After a time, when sweat gathered between their bodies and they were both breathing hard, he leaned over her, cupped her breasts, scraped his teeth across her shoulder then licked the tingle away. Still he filled her slowly, held his strength back until she was tossing her head and moaning. When she did, Raull chuckled—a sound of pure male pride. Still holding her breasts, he straightened and drove his cock into her hard, ground his loins into her ass, paused then withdrew with a slowness that had her on the verge of begging.

When he drove into her just as hard for a second and third time, Keira whimpered but leaned back to meet his strength. Her ass felt raw and bruised but the hurt focused her pleasure.

He slid his hand around her hip, pressed it between her legs, rubbed her clit furiously. "Come," he murmured. The sound rolled in her head, built on itself, receded then returned in a rhythm as steady as a heartbeat. She had the discipline and the training to resist his compulsion but she didn't want to.

"Yes," she breathed, gasped then bucked when a fist of sensation squeezed her belly, made her loins drive back into his, made her sheath convulse around him.

"Yes," he repeated. "Gods yes." His voice inflection was gone, replaced by a rawness that communicated his need, his desire.

His fracturing control made Keira feel sexier than she ever had. Grinning savagely, she rocked back into him, kept pace with him, matched his strength and made him show her more. She did this to him, made this powerful Warrior lose control, made him want her. And he did this to her...made her shake, moan, sweat then cry out when sensation again fisted her belly as she came.

*"Raull,*" she gasped then couldn't say anything else as she tensed with her pussy tipped up, wholly open and needing him. Hot shards of sensation pierced her, claimed her, created sparks that tingled. Waves of release pounded through her.

Behind her, Raull roared, rubbed her clit even harder, thrust into her so hard and deep she barely kept from toppling forward. He grunted, over and over in time with the twitching of his cock inside her. His grip was bruising and she had to slap his hand away from her over-sensitive bud. One last thrust, one last grunt then he shivered

delicately, rolled her onto her back and collapsed on top of her with his head between her breasts.

Blinking, she struggled to catch her breath. Raull's breath was hot and ragged on her sweaty skin. Instead of pushing him away, she combed his hair out of his eyes, ran her palms over his thick shoulders. He was heavy but she knew she could endure the weight of his torso on hers for awhile. As languor softened every part of her body, Keira liked this vulnerability he showed her. Liked that she'd taken his strength and that he had enough confidence to let her see that. When his lips pursed and pressed a gentle kiss to the curve of her breast, she smiled.

He lifted his body off hers just as it was becoming difficult to draw in a full breath. Rolling onto his back, Raull sprawled beside her and watched her get out of bed and pad into the washroom. When she returned with a wet cloth and a towel, he propped his head up on her pillow, grinned then sighed with contentment.

"It's warm," he murmured and caressed her arm when she sponged the sweat off his torso, cleaned his deflated cock, balls and thighs.

"Cold water would be a terrible payback for your exceptionally enjoyable lovemaking."

"Hmm. True." His grin broadened when she toweled him dry, caressed him through the thick cloth, touched him far longer than necessary. She poured them each a cup of cold water and he drank his down thankfully.

Keira carried the cloths back to the washroom, gave herself a quick sponging, switched off the lights and climbed back into bed. Raull arranged the linens around them, spooned his warm body behind hers and held her breast.

"Does your backside hurt if I hold you like this?" He brushed his hips against her ass.

"No," she answered, lay her head on his arm and let herself fall asleep.

When she woke up, Keira sighed and arched into warmth and pleasure. She opened her eyes, blinked twice then focused on the face of the man leaning over her. His dark, shaggy head was propped up on his hand and he was lying on his side. Wearing a smug expression, he caressed her abdomen, traced the rise of her ribcage, held her breast. Slowly, watching the progress of his hand, he teased the reddish curls on her mound, visible now in the pre-dawn light then cupped her pussy and squeezed it gently. He kissed her mouth, her cheek, her throat.

"Good morning, beautiful," she murmured and felt a smile shape his mouth.

"Good morning," he replied and nuzzled her breast. "A very good morning." One long battleroughened finger slid between her legs, traced the convolutions of her sex then circled her clit. His hips shifted and a splendid morning erection slid against her thigh.

Reaching down, she caressed the head, ran her palm over the shaft, pulled on him with a gentle, steady rhythm.

"Like I said...a *very* good morning," Raull growled, suckled her breast and continued to torment her pussy.

After what felt like a long time, he rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him. Like last night, the casual way he maneuvered her body and his strength impressed Keira. She'd never met anyone this big or this powerful.

He urged her to sit up, settled her on his thighs, cupped her breasts. When she yawned and stretched voluptuously, he stared at her body. His mouth fell open then pulled back in a feral grin when she ran her fingertips over the head of his cock.

"He's happy to see me this morning."

"All of me is happy to see you this morning." Still grinning, he let his hands wander over her body, tracing her nipples, rubbing his thumb across her navel, caressing her thighs, arms, shoulders. "All of me will be happy to see you every morning from now on."

Her brow furrowed.

Raull shrugged lightly. "You're coming with me to Tarmig-Lun when I leave here."

"No, I'm not," she said as gently as she could. "I have responsibilities here. I've really enjoyed being with you and I'd like to see you again but please understand, that's all there can be."

Shaking his head slowly, he grinned crookedly. "For such an intelligent woman, your logic leaves something to be desired in this matter."

Her expression darkened.

"You saw a child in my future. Our child."

Keira nodded grudgingly.

"Like all men, I drink the distilled juice of the poppel flower every day to suppress my fertility. Last night's lovemaking would not have made you pregnant. And seeing as the political unrest in Tarmig-Lun will only increase during my absence, I cannot stay here more than another day or two. Hence..." His voice dropped off and he looked up at her pointedly.

"Hence the inevitability of me going with you. Or," she added, "we'll hook up in the near future."

"Hook up," he deadpanned then shook his head. "If that means we will seek each other out for lovemaking in the future, that is a possibility. But you're discounting the obvious. You saw me holding our daughter. I will be part of her life, spend enough time with her to be comfortable handling such a fragile creation that I'd, what did you call it? Zupper her."

Again, Keira nodded grudgingly only this time she grinned too. "That makes sense. The

women of my race, if they choose to live their lives in the colony, seek out local men to father their children. There is often friendship, even great affection between them but the women raise the children here, on their own."

"Is that the way of it with your father and mother?" Raull teased his fingertips through the bright curls on Keira's mound.

"Yes." Tracing the broad head of his cock, she tipped her head to one side. "He's the local blacksmith. The grandson of a Sibyl." When Raull's brow arched, she explained, "At the age of ten or so cycles, male children are sent to live with their fathers. Only girls are allowed to come to adulthood within the colony."

"Why?"

"Because it is an oddity of our genes, um, of our offspring that the gifts of a Sibyl are passed only to female children. In the past, when we kept our male children with us, some of them came to resent their sisters' abilities. And with such a limited population within our walls, there was always the fear of inbreeding."

He seemed to consider that for a moment.

"Well that won't be an issue with us anyway. Now, back to the question of you accompanying me to Tarmig-Lun."

"That cannot happen," she said with quiet certainty. "Perhaps a visit in the future but there can be nothing more."

"Hmm. Why are you so sure of that? Last night, you said that you'd seen the worth of a Warrior's life, lived in service of others. What is it you have found here that fulfills that need within you?" He held her breast gently in one hand. The other slid beneath his head and propped it up.

She glanced around her bedchamber, at the variety of weapons then caressed the taut ridges of his abdomen. "I'm the colony's military leader. Like you it's been many cycles since I've come across my equal in battle. From a young age, I had a talent for strategy. That, coupled with my height and strength—"

"Makes you as formidable a Warrior as I am." He tested the long, defined muscles in her arm and shoulder. "Then it was the best possible coincidence that you touched my hand, for we are the same." His brow furrowed. "Or *was* it coincidence?"

"It was not," Keira admitted baldly, slid off his lap, turned so that her head hovered over his cock, her pussy hovered over his mouth.

"I take it this discussion is over?" Raull deadpanned. He groaned when she took his rod into her mouth, lifted his head and ran his tongue over her slit.

# CHANTER FIVE

"Give that a hard turn to the left for me please."

Raull gripped the large, metal wheel and turned it slowly. The day had dawned bright and sunny. The sky was a clear aqua and a few, shimmering clouds drifted high overhead.

"Another turn. One more." Mary Ellen, Keira's mother waved her hand in the air as she spoke, encouraging him as she kept an eye on the flow of water coming out of a central irrigation pipe. "Good. Stop there." She turned back to him, smiled and shaded her intense, blue eyes from the sun.

Her eyes were so like Keira's that Raull stared and grinned down at her. "Keira was surprised you were gone when we got up this morning," he said, unable to come up with anything but idle talk. Like all Sibyls, it seemed her daughter wasn't the only one capable of bemusing him.

Mary Ellen grinned wryly, wiped her hands

off on her serviceable, cloth pants and gathered up her tools. "Let me guess, Keira tried her hand at cooking breakfast. It's a wonder you're not laid out with indigestion."

He tried not to but Raull knew his wholehearted agreement showed on his face.

"Getting any sleep," she said, "was a problem because both my daughters, it seems, have settled on men who are, shall we say, vocal? My bedroom is on the first floor, beneath theirs."

"Ah," Raull nodded and looked properly abashed.

"I eventually gave up and spent the night at their father's home."

Raull's eyes narrowed. "You left the safety of the colony, at night?"

Laughing delightedly, she handed her toolbox to Raull and led the way back to her greenhouse complex. "You and Keira are well matched. She tries to tell me what to do too. Besides, the sentries kept an eye on me and Gell's home is not far."

"I apologize for my thoughtlessness. It won't happen again."

"Hmm. Yes Keira mentioned you'd be staying another night or two. And that you're convinced she's going with you to Tarmig-Lun."

"I am."

"Well, if my daughter has foreseen it, it'll happen. Just let things play out as they're supposed to."

"You're very confident of her abilities."

"I am. She and I have the same gift." Mary Ellen held up her hand, showed it to him then started shoveling compost into seedling trays.

Leaning against a sturdy, wood table, Raull crossed his arms over his chest and watched her work. "There is a problem with our Sibyl."

Quite suddenly, Mary Ellen stopped working, turned and stared at him. "Why haven't we heard about this before?"

"Because our Prince does all he can to make sure it isn't common knowledge. There is an... affection between them. He's very protective of her."

She brushed back a lock of reddish-blonde hair, shot through with gray, that had fallen out of the ribbon at the nape of her neck. "Define this problem."

"Our Sibyl hasn't predicted anything useful in two cycles. Hasn't been seen outside of her rooms for months."

Mary Ellen's generous mouth flattened. "I'll bring it up at the council tomorrow morning."

"Council?" He lifted the filled tray out of her way, put it on the table she indicated then replaced it with an empty one.

"A general meeting of all Sibyls within the colony."

"Are outsiders permitted to attend? My men and I, we're intrigued by you, how you live. We'd—"

"You'll attend," she interrupted with a surety that was almost casual, then grinned up at him. "Sorry. Sometimes I forget that outsiders don't know what it's like to be surrounded by women who can see the future."

He returned her smile and carried the bucket

of compost closer so she wouldn't have to reach so far. "Perhaps I should try and persuade *you* to come to Tarmig-Lun as well. You could be our new Seer."

"Sorry. Won't happen," she grunted and added a shovelful of rich, reddish soil to the new seedling tray.

"What—that you won't let me use you to circumvent Keira's will? Or you'd rather stay here and shovel...fertilizer."

She flicked a few grains of dirt at him and laughed when he grumbled. "I happen to be a botanist. My job here is to ensure the health and vigor of our crops, keep the soil rich, keep the colony fed," she added pointedly. "Shoveling shit is just something I do for fun." Her expression said she was serious. "Look, Keira might be coerced into going with you if I was going too. Problem is, women like Keira and I don't make suitable seers."

"I don't understand."

"A woman needs a gift like Jessica's, precognition, to be a seer."

"Pre cog..." His voice failed as he struggled with the word.

Sighing, she shot him an apologetic look. "Sometimes I forget that too. That there are words we use that aren't in our shared vocabulary."

"Like indoor plumbing."

"That's a big one, yes. Anyway, Jessica is able to see the future. Like random pictures in her head. Important things, information that will allow her to shape present events, advise and warn others."

"But Keira saw..." He looked down at his hand.

"Yes Keira saw *your* future. A moment of it anyway, something that was important and would impact her. It's likely she'll never see anything beyond that, as far as *your* future goes anyway. Oh and by the way, thanks for the beautiful granddaughter you're going to give me."

"Um, you're welcome."

"No problem. Her father was excited too." She sighed. "That man's got a thing for babies. Loves having them around. Hmmph. He even tried to talk *me* into having another one last night. Imagine, at my age. Anyway, he said if the subject came up to mention to you that he'd be grateful if you'd consider not stopping after just one. The first one's going to be a girl but he's itching for a grandson. Or two."

Blinking, Raull watched her hustle around the greenhouse, gather up small trays of tightly packed seedlings, separate them out and replant them in the bigger trays.

"Now you're wondering how Keira might be persuaded without my help," she said, glanced back at him then resumed working. "It doesn't take a psychic to figure that one out. All I can tell you is that my daughter takes her responsibilities very seriously." The quick, sure movements of her hands slowed. The look in her eyes softened. "If Jessica is heart, Keira is head. Jessica is impulsive but the bravest woman I've ever met. Keira is the fiercest. You'd do well to remember that, Warrior. She'd die for any of us. But she forces us to be strong so that none of us force her to make such a sacrifice and weaken the colony through the loss of a gifted soldier. We're better, stronger with her. She knows that."

"So convincing her to leave will be difficult."

"But not impossible if her vision is correct. And her visions are *always* correct."

"There she is." Mary Ellen led Raull into a large building. They entered a broad, rectangular hall. A number of Sibyls were inside. They were all tall, although none were quite as tall as Keira, and muscular. In groups, they practiced with long swords or hand-to-hand fighting techniques. Raull stared in astonishment as they deflected blows, redirected the inertia of their opponent's attacks, kicked with a fluidity and grace that almost disguised the crippling potential of their strikes.

Keira stood near the middle, in front of two rows of children. In slow motion, she led them through an exercise with blunted stabbing sticks.

"I'll leave you here then," Mary Ellen said quietly before she left.

Joining a loose grouping of other Warriors who were watching just as raptly as he was, Raull couldn't stop staring at the way Keira moved. Her strength and balance riveted him. He realized he was breathing deeper as he watched the flexing of her long leg muscles inside her battle leathers, watched the sun light up her hair. Like yesterday, the calm, deep modulation of her voice as she instructed her students and praised them, made him want to drag her off to bed and keep her there for hours.

"They say she is their general," one of the Warriors said casually. "You wouldn't mind if I asked to spend time with her, would you Raull?"

Growling, Raull turned on the younger Warrior without thinking, bared his teeth, closed the distance between them.

"Oh damn," the second Warrior breathed then held himself at the ready. "Just don't damage my face. "A couple of the Sibyls said I was cute."

Raull became aware of restrained laughter around him and lowered his fists. "Keep that up and you're next," he barked at the rest of the men. The other Warriors laughed even louder. There was nothing they loved more than seeing one of their own lose that legendary Warrior control.

Especially Raull because that simply didn't happen.

He cuffed the young Warrior on the head and turned back to watch Keira. Her class was coming to an end and she was making sure her students put their sticks back in a storage trunk.

"So I guess *that* particular Sibyl is off limits for the rest of us, hmm?" another Warrior, this one a few cycles older than Raull, taunted. He grinned and chuckled when Raull shot him a dark look.

"Are you going to practice too?" A small girl, no more than eight or nine cycles old, stepped out of the tight cluster of children who'd moved closer to the Warriors and were staring up at them. Like the others, she had pale eyes and hair. Obviously braver than the rest, she looked them over curiously, planted herself in front of one of the young Warriors and seemed to be waiting for an answer to her question.

"Yes," he said after glancing back at Raull. "If we are invited."

"Well come *on* then," she said, grabbed his hand and tugged. She led him over to the soldiers who paused in their exercises and watched the Warriors with smug amusement. "Plant your feet here. And here," she ordered, grabbed his ankles and arranged his body to her satisfaction then stood beside him in an identical pose. "Bend your knees. Not too much. And watch out for Isobel's left jab. It's wicked fast."

"What does wicked fas—?" He got his answer when the left hand of the adult Sibyl standing in front of him jerked forward. It stopped just before her knuckles hit his chin. "I believe I understand its meaning now," he drawled as the Sibyl patted his cheek, flashed him a taunting grin and stepped back to bounce lightly on her feet.

Raull chuckled, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back as the Warriors divided themselves amongst the Sibyls, asking to be taught their fighting techniques while the children ran around offering advice or just giggling. When Keira stepped up to his side, he looped an arm over her shoulder, held her close and continued to watch. After a time, he felt a soft tapping on his leather-clad thigh. Looking down, he saw a tallish, skinny girl staring up at him.

Her voice broke with nervousness when she

finally spoke. "Lift me up so I can see. Please," she asked and held out her arms.

Seeing no reason to refuse, Raull lifted her onto his shoulders and let her find her own balance before anchoring an arm around her shins.

"Wow. You're tall," she blurted out then fell silent.

Raull laughed and felt the small body perched on top of his relax.

"Would you like to try?" Keira asked and held out her hand, indicating the groups of fighters.

"Only if you'll teach me." He started to lift the child off his shoulders.

"Janice can stay if she likes. Our rule is no contact during training exercises. I'm sure you'll be able to stay on your feet and Janice can point out what you're doing wrong."

The girl giggled when Keira reached up and tickled her ribs.

Keira taught him how to balance his weight without having to compensate for a sword in his hand. How to kick without overextending, how to punch so the power and momentum flowed from his core, to start his thrust from his shoulder, let it travel through his arm and out the straight line of his fist. Next she taught him basic deflection, that it wasn't about strength but re-direction, applied precisely and at the right time.

When it was time for the children to go to their next class, he said good-bye to his small passenger and turned back to Keira. "How good are you at this deflection?" he asked and circled her slowly.

Keira faced him, matched his slow, predatory pacing. "Very good. Go ahead. Take your best shot, Warrior," she taunted, grinned and beckoned him forward with the fingers of both hands.

Movement around them slowed then stopped. Soon there was a loose grouping of watchers surrounding them. He heard boasts and wagers being exchanged.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You'd have to get past my defenses to hurt me. Which you won't."

Raull's laugh was low, almost taunting. "As you wish, woman," he replied, planted his feet and took a swing. He controlled the punch precisely. The momentum of it would have halted before he got close to her cheek. It just never got a chance to get that close. Keira's arm came up, pressed his arm just enough to redirect his aim. She shifted her head to the side at the same time. Raull stood very still, looking at his fist, now hovering in the open air beside her head, replaying her move in his mind.

"Let me watch once more," he said quietly, drew his fist back then punched again. Again his hit was redirected. Grinning down at her, he closed the space between them, kissed her soundly then said, "Teach me how."

The practice lasted well over an hour. When it was done, the Sibyls left to clean up before going on sentry duty. Raull and the other Warriors wandered around the hall, examining the unfamiliar weaponry.

One of them opened a case and touched a flat, spiked disc, similar to the ones that hung in

Keira's bedchamber. He winced when the razor edge of one of the spikes cut his finger.

"What are these?" he asked, turning to Keira and sucking on his fingertip. "Unless they're meant to be used with a handle, how do you thrust with them?"

"Throwing stars," Keira said, stepped up to the case, picked up one of the discs by holding onto the flat side. "Heads up," she shouted, and her arm shot forward. The disc spun out in a straight line and sank into the middle circle marked on a wooden target on the far side of the hall.

The Warriors growled their approval then lined up to try the new weapon. She handed out small, leather pouches meant to loop over a belt.

"Carry them in these," she said. "Take them with you. The design is simple. Any blacksmith should be able to replicate them. My father made these," she added and walked up and down the line of Warriors, stepped in to offer instruction where it was needed.

Again, Raull watched her with quiet approval and smiled to himself whenever her gaze

wandered back to him, sought him out despite the overt friendliness of the other Warriors.

That evening, they ate in Mary Ellen's home. Gell and their son, Laird, were invited as well. Raull, Thain and Keira discussed the unrest filtering throughout the continent. The violent downfall of the previous regime in Jareb-Phar, and the weakness of the current leader of Tarmig-Lun were causing a ripple effect. Peace would eventually be restored but in the meantime, the defenseless were being preyed on.

Jessica spent much of the time talking with her parents and brother. In the morning, she and Thain would return to Jareb-Phar. It wasn't certain how often she'd get to see them after that.

After dinner, Mary Ellen said good night to her daughters and mentioning something about a good night's sleep, left with Gell and their son. She promised to come back early enough to make breakfast which earned her Raull's gratitude.

"Have you given thought to which Warriors

you will hire?" Raull asked as he helped Thain load up his jacos an hour after sunrise the next day.

"Some. Why do you suggest more than one Warrior?"

"Jareb-Phar can afford more than one. These are uneasy times," Raull said as he adjusted the weight of two food packs then secured them with rope. "Two pairs of Warrior eyes ensures your kingdom is watched over, and adequate rest for them."

Nodding, Thain considered the older Warrior's words. "Are you sure I can't hire you away from Tarmig-Lun?"

"I thought about it. I miss beating the hell out of you during jousting practice. But the political climate in Tarmig-Lun is unstable right now. Because of its size and influence, that's impacting just about every other kingdom on the continent. Besides, the climate suits my old bones."

"Hmmph. I wish my bones were as tough as yours...even on my best day."

Chuckling obligingly, Raull grasped Thain's forearm, then held Jessica's jacos steady when she

climbed onto her saddle. Raull and Keira walked with them to the main gate, lifted their hands in salute and watched them and their guard ride away.

When the woman at his side sighed quietly, he hugged her and kissed the top of her head. From deeper within the colony, a bell began to ring in a slow, deliberate rhythm.

"That's the signal that the council is about to start." She took his hand and led him out of the entry courtyard.

The council was held in the same hall as the feast had been. The tables had been removed but the benches remained, arranged in concentric circles. Keira found them a place close to her mother. Most of the Warriors had stayed following the joining ceremony and they were scattered throughout the hall, paying rapt attention to everything going on around them. The bell rang out once more and when it was silent, an old Sibyl, likely in her seventieth cycle, stood and slowly paced the open space at the center of the benches.

"Our people have not seen things like this since we arrived three-hundred cycles ago." Her

voice was scratchy but carried well. She looked up and scanned the crowd. "For the first time, we welcome outsiders in number and I for one am glad to see so many handsome, intelligent faces joining us today." Her smile lit up her thin face. "I would remind you though that only Sibyls have a voice at this council. You are invited to listen and any of us would welcome discussion following the end of this meeting. But for now, we ask that you listen in silence." She looked around the crowd as if making sure her words were understood, and continued. "I've listened to the questions we've all been asking these past few days. There are changes in our lives, some subtle, some not. Is it good? Bad? Some just plain don't like it." She sat down, arranged her long, simple skirt and took a sip of water.

Another Sibyl stood. "Was Jessica foolish in accepting Thain?" she asked and didn't sound apologetic for her directness. "For going with him in the first place?"

Yet another Sibyl stood. "Perhaps but what would any of us risk for such happiness?"

"Or such folly," the first Sibyl asked, paused then sat back down.

The discussion carried on for some time after that. More questions were asked than answers were given. It became clear to Raull that they were struggling for solutions. Eventually, the gaps between speakers lengthened and he got a sense they'd just about talked themselves out. From the look on many of their faces, he suspected answers would be a long time in coming.

Finally one young Sibyl stood up. She was the tiny woman who'd juggled balls with her mind at the feast. "Keira," she said quietly. "You haven't said anything."

Raull felt Keira's shoulders shift as she inhaled before standing. She looked around the room. "Jessica is the bravest of us all. Impulsive maybe, but she did what she did out of love for us and this colony." Like it always did, her calm, deep voice resonated through the crowd. "No woman here will ever again say otherwise in my presence."

A collective shudder ran through them. Many dipped their heads, like they were unable to look at her.

"However," she continued and the repressed violence in her voice was gone, replaced by a gentler, softer tone. "We live in isolation. With

reason of course. The women who came before us needed sanctuary. Needed the protection of these walls and this secrecy to heal their spirits. They were forced to create a home out of nothing, one that allowed them to survive. Then to live. Then to thrive." She glanced down at Raull then stepped away from him, pacing slowly. Her battle leathers creaked so quietly the sound was almost inaudible. "But I have wondered for some time if we still require that healing. Or whether it is simply...custom." Again she shifted her gaze to look at Raull and this time it was obvious, deliberate. She grinned at him then returned her attention to the group. "We've lived among these people for over three-hundred cycles. We've taken their men to father our children and their blood is our blood. I have a brother who lives within a few minutes of this colony and I don't think of him as alien from myself."

Stepping up behind her mother, Keira rested her hand on Mary Ellen's shoulder and squeezed gently.

There was silence for a moment then she continued. "I will be guided by my sister's courage. I will no longer let my ancestors' fears

guide me. They birthed me, yes, but they did so that I could flourish. That we could thrive. The time has come for us to evolve."

She returned to her seat, took Raull's hand and sat with her leg touching his.

"Will you leave us, Keira?" an anxious voice asked. "I can't speak for the others but I know I sleep better knowing you're inside these walls."

"Yes." Keira looked directly at Raull when she answered then looked back at the assembly. "And I will no longer allow anyone to use me as a crutch against our ancestors' fears. We must grow past them if we are to truly live. Otherwise, what's the point of all the work that came before us?"

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. I cannot know until I spend some time living the life I hear calling to me from beyond these walls."

Her answer seemed to satisfy them. After that no one stood and whispers of conversation floated around the hall. Raull knew these women lived by the concept of a seer's quest. Although it was unusual, he overheard again and again, it was

not unheard of for a woman to go on more than one in her lifetime. He squeezed Keira's hand, kissed her knuckles and waited with her for the council to wind down and a signal to leave.

The next morning, he led his four jacos and Keira's three out of the stable.

"We've asked Keira to report back to us on the welfare of the Sibyl in Tarmig-Lun." The speaker was the old Sibyl who'd started the discussions at yesterday's council. Two other Sibyls, equally old, walked with them and nodded their agreement. "For a Sibyl to sequester herself is not standard operating procedure. Thank you, Raull, for bringing the situation to our attention."

The old women said good-bye to him, wished him a safe journey and one handed him a small sack of honey-dried stoan fruit to eat on the road, mentioning something about an old family recipe.

Raull smiled at the women's retreating backs then turned to find Keira surrounded by her parents, brother, and a number of other Sibyls. Nodding to the other Warriors who were also preparing to leave, he walked up to her and stood behind her, waiting.

"No, Isobel," she was saying to a tall, muscular Sibyl dressed in plain battle leathers.

Raull remembered the woman from yesterday's training exercises.

"I don't doubt your courage but I won't let you or any of the other soldiers cling to me just because I'm familiar. You need to decide your own path. I've given you the launch codes so you know everything you need to see to the colony's defenses in my absence."

Raull didn't understand some of what she was saying but knew he didn't need to.

Keira hugged the other Sibyl, brushed her hair back, kissed her forehead then moved on to say good-bye to her family. When she was finished, she mounted her jacos with a smooth, powerful movement, then touched its flanks with the tips of her tall, leather boots.

Raull rode at her side proudly.

He raised his hand to the few Warriors who were staying. They didn't have steady employment and wanted to take the opportunity to study under the Sibyls while they could. Some, like him, had started relationships with Sibyls and wanted to pursue them. A few Sibyls were leaving with Warriors. Some for romantic reasons but most because they were interested in the lives the Warriors led. What work they did. Two were even heading for the Warriors' compound on the far side of the continent, to study and learn with them first hand.

"Will your colony survive such a depletion of its numbers?" he asked after they cleared the outer gate and headed down through the village.

"They will," Keira answered with calm surety. "I meant what I said about our need to evolve. For some time I've thought our isolation was hurting us, maybe even hurting the political stability of the continent. No one else lives in isolation and we've set a precedent that may have encouraged distrust, the formation of factions. I realized yesterday that if some of us left, and if the rest keep our doors and their minds more open than we have, it might herald the fulfillment of a long-standing prophecy."

"Which is?"

"The day will come when my people will be fully integrated into the general population."

"Your people?"

"Let's just say we're not originally from here." Keira glanced around, made sure no one was close enough to overhear, and said quietly, "My ancestors came from another world. We were driven off because of our abilities."

Raull digested her words. "These other people were frightened of you?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. Even Warriors find Sibyls frightening. Personally, I'm scared to death of you, although I wouldn't kick you out of my bed because of it."

Keira laughed and the sound was sweet and clear.

"Well," she said eventually, "we're leaving so we'll find out if I'm right."

"And what if you're wrong?"

She shrugged. "Then we'll have to work out

a visitation schedule because I'll be living in the colony and you'll be in Tarmig-Lun."

After they cleared the town, she touched her heels to her jacos' sides and it took off at a steady trot. Raull decided to let the discussion rest, and settled for admiring her ass as she rode.

There were eighteen Warriors and ten Sibyls in their camp that night. As the day progressed, their numbers had dwindled as others took different roads to return to jobs, homes, or to seek new challenges.

With three large pots of terup fowl stew simmering over the blue and green flames of an open fire, Raull and the other Warriors tried not to stare as the women walked down to the creek they'd camped beside, stripped off their clothes and laughed as they splashed and bathed. Two of the Warriors, younger and more impetuous than the others, joined them. They weren't rebuked. Raull wasn't all that surprised. From what he'd seen, a Sibyl's discipline was as great as a Warrior's, drilled into them early and practiced throughout their lives. It seemed to him that, when they chose, Sibyls could resist lust of all

kinds. Fortunately for him, Keira didn't feel the need to resist him.

The Warriors weren't rebuked but the pots of soft soap they were carrying were snatched out of their hands. Raull heard a chorus of admonishments about inert compounds and dead fish or something like that, and chuckled at the expressions on the Warriors' faces when withered, brown leaves were slapped into their hands. But the leaves, when wet and rubbed between the hands, produced a thick orangetinted lather that appeared to clean as well as soap.

Still chuckling, he made sure the jacos had been fed and watered, then quietly asked Keira for some of the dried leaves before he took his own bath. It was one thing to be yelled at by his woman in private. It was another to be set on by a group of them in public.

After dinner, sitting around the fire on overturned logs, he listened in on a heated conversation between one of the Sibyls and the two young, impetuous Warriors. The Sibyl, Meara, was one of two traveling to the far side of the continent to study at the Warriors' compound. From what he'd seen, she was a disciplined and studious woman, quiet whenever those two Warriors weren't pressing her to attend a jacos auction with them instead of going right to the compound. Again they were trying to dissuade her from studying something as dry and academic as ancient scrolls. Somewhere in her thirtieth cycle, she rebuffed their teasing, cajoling, even their not-so-casual sexual interest in her with more patience and kindness than they deserved.

Leaning back, drinking the last of his hisian leaf tea, Raull watched with pleasure as Keira ran a brush through her long hair, drying it close to the fire. He also wondered at the foolishness of the two young Warriors. Keira was formidable but something about the quiet, restrained Meara unnerved him.

When Keira finished, put her brush away and sat beside him, he let himself forget about his worries, his troubles, looped his arm around her shoulders and kissed her before returning his attention to the conversations around them.

"Alone at last."

"Alone at last," Raull parroted as he turned his jacos at a fork in the road after raising his hand in farewell to the remnants of their original traveling companions. The foothills that formed the backbone of the dividing line between Jareb-Phar and the eastern half of the continent lay ahead of them. "We could detour and visit your sister and Thain," he suggested casually, glanced at the beautiful woman riding alongside him, scanned the grassy plains around them out of habit.

"We could," Keira said then grinned crookedly. "But we won't."

"Are your gifts increasing, Sibyl?" he teased. "Can you now predict the future? Does this mean that I can keep you as a prisoner at my side because you're now able to serve as Tarmig-Lun's seer?"

"Funny," she deadpanned. "I see the worry in your eyes when people talk about the unrest in the east. You're anxious to get back to Tarmig-Lun and get to the bottom of it so that you can devote yourself to spending some...quality time with me afterward."

"Hmmph. A Warrior is never anxious,

woman," he huffed but grinned despite that. "He is guided by instinct and training. He identifies trouble, prepares for and meets it."

"Yeah. Uh huh. Thanks for clearing up the subtleties. And speaking of predicting," she glanced up at the sky. The sky south of them was still a clear aqua but to the north, greengray clouds were gathering. "It's going to rain tonight."

Raull grunted in agreement. "There's a small lake not far from here. Good fishing. I don't know about you but after four days, I'm getting tired of dried meat. I wouldn't mind making camp early. If for no other reason than to start in on this...quality time you spoke of."

About three hours before sunset, they stopped for the night. For the first time since they'd left the Sibyls' colony, Raull tethered the jacos instead of letting them wander to graze. Lightning was rare this time of year but the noise of a good downpour could spook them. Pack animals, they liked being near their people but if they ran off in the night, he didn't want to waste time rounding them up in the morning.

Keira started a fire, put on water to boil. He

politely but firmly took the food pack from her hand.

"You are many things, woman, but a good cook is not one of them," he said evenly, laid out a few purplish, hecei roots which he liked with fish, and the last of the fresh greens before taking his fishing gear down to the lake. Keira seemed resigned to his rebuff, perhaps even expecting it. It didn't take him long to catch enough fish for their dinner. While he did that, Keira tended to the jacos, checked their hooves for stones, groomed them then rubbed the soap leaves over their fur. The coming rain would rinse the residue and dirt out.

She praised his skill with a camp-grill pan, licked her fingers and sighed voluptuously as she ate the food he'd prepared. Raull was pleased with her reaction. After cleaning up, they left more water to boil for tea then walked down to the lake. Wordlessly, he turned her to face him, removed her battle leathers then stood still while she removed his.

"I like your hands on me," he whispered. With the storm coming, birds in the small stand of trees on the other side of the lake were quiet. There

was a breathless silence in the land around them. Sighing, he dropped his head back as his Sibyl ran her strong, gentle hands over his shoulders, his chest, his hip. She touched his skin like she was enthralled by him. Raull had never taken his size and strength for granted but they were simply tools to him. When Keira touched him, when she looked at him, he felt cherished. It was as unfamiliar to him as it was poignant.

Her breath was warm when she dipped her head to kiss his arm. The softness of her cheek on his skin was lulling. When she took his hand and led him into the water, he followed willingly then stood still as she cupped water in her hands, drizzled it over his skin, rubbed some of the dry leaves together and smoothed lather over his neck. He'd had lovers but none of them had touched him like Keira did.

Still saying nothing, she bathed him gently, manipulated his muscles as she soaped them and made him grin and sigh when she washed his hair. That relaxed feeling dissipated when she soaped his cock, tightened her hand around it, ran her fingers up and down his growing length. He growled his approval when one hand drifted lower, manipulated his sack then pet the sensitive strip of skin behind it. When she moved behind him to squeeze his ass, he tried to pull her back.

"No," he said in that quiet, authoritative voice that came to him as naturally as breathing. "Don't stop."

Keira's soft, teasing laugh made him grit his teeth.

"My lover's impatient. It's not like we haven't enjoyed each other's bodies every day since we met."

"Yes but making love in camp, surrounded by other people so that we have to put our hands over our mouths to stifle our groans dims some of the pleasure."

Scooping up water, she began rinsing him off. "Poor Warrior," she cooed and urged him further into the lake so he could dunk under the surface. "How about tonight I take advantage of you and all this delicious, clean skin? Would you let a woman dominate you? Control your pleasure?" Grinning, she ran her fingers over the head of his cock, traced the long line of his thigh. "Touch

and taste you all over and you can scream to your heart's content. Hmm?"

"Don't tease me, woman."

"Oh I'm not teasing. I'm promising."

# CHRYTER JX

When they returned to their campsite, they were no longer in the mood for tea. Covering the now-boiling water and setting it aside for the morning, Keira watched the firm globes of Raull's backside as he ducked into their tent carrying their clothing. He returned with drying cloths, had her stand near the warmth of the fire. Tingling from head to toe, she stood still, let him rub her body through the cloth, felt the controlled strength in his hands as he dried her.

Not sure if it was his training or an innate gift, she reveled in his ability to touch her with just enough restraint to stir, enough gentleness to seduce. When he was finished...and he took a long time finishing...she picked up a dry cloth, ran it over his head then dragged it down his chest. Again, Raull stood still, let her touch him at will, held her elbows lightly. He didn't direct her touch, he kept her close and murmured his pleasure whenever her body brushed his.

Cool wind from the north stirred their hair,

raised gooseflesh. Lifting his gaze, Raull scanned the dark green horizon. "Time to pack up for the night." He kissed her briefly then moved around the camp with stark efficiency, closing up the food pack and putting it under a storage tarp. Keira anchored it down just before the trees on the far side of the lake trembled. A line of rain traveled toward them, disturbing the surface of the water. The first, cold drops sizzled when they touched the rocks around the fire. With his hand resting on her back, she ducked into the tent and lit the lantern she'd set out earlier.

"What is that?" Raull said. His brows drew together. "Why does it glow that way?"

It was the first time she'd used the lamp on their journey. "We call it LED light. It's a tool we brought from our home world. When you turn the hand crank, it stores mechanical energy and gives it off in the form of light. Very efficient," she added and watched Raull's face as he looked at the clear, white light. She knew he'd never seen anything but yellow, green or blue light.

"Sibyls have hidden many such tools from us since their arrival," he said with quiet discernment and looked up at her. "Perhaps it's for the best. If we'd known you possessed such advancements and I suspect that applies to weaponry you keep hidden in your colony as well." His brow arched. "My people would have been frightened by you. You would not have been safe."

Keira's mouth thinned and she nodded slowly.

"But seeing as it's been three-hundred cycles and you're as Caspiun as I am now, perhaps it *is* a good thing that you're moving out from behind your walls, sharing some of these tools with us. I think if you feed them to us slowly, Sibyl, people will see you as even greater wizards than they do now."

She nodded again, picked up the damp towels and hung them over the tent ribs to dry. Raull had already hung up their battle leathers to air and he lay back on the blanket she'd spread out earlier. It rested on a thick mat, woven from epol leaves. He and the other Warriors had been fascinated when the Sibyls had weaved them their first night on the road, pleased with the dryness and comfort of them.

Drops of rain splashed on the oiled tent stretched over their heads.

"You promised to take advantage of me, woman," he purred, grinned and ran his hand over his taut belly. He spread his legs comfortably and watched her with visible anticipation.

Wearing a grin of her own, Keira fished out lengths of rope from his pack. "Do you trust me?"

"In all things."

"Good. I've wanted to try this but I've never found a man brave enough to let me. Are *you* brave enough, Warrior?"

His cocked eyebrow told her he was offended by her question, but not too much. He watched her loop the rope around his wrists, tie it and test the tightness, make a slight adjustment to one then secure the ends around the base of two metal poles that anchored the tent to the ground. His arms were stretched up and out.

"Is it strong enough to hold you?"

Raull gave a tug then another, harder one. "Strong enough."

She secured his ankles, kissed his shins then

tied those ropes to the two opposite poles, leaving him spread and immobile.

"Gods you're beautiful," she breathed and touched his leg. When he pulled against his bonds, tested their strength, his thick muscles flexed, bulged in ways that made her heart beat fast. Every inch of him was delicious, primal male and he watched her with a hunger she could practically taste in the air around them. Flicking her damp hair back, she leaned into him and drew her tongue up his shin.

When water was scarce, Caspiuns bathed by licking themselves. It was a primitive throwback but they saw nothing distasteful or unnatural about it. Perhaps he was right and she was now more Caspiun than Sibyl because she reveled in the taste and texture of his skin. Drawing her tongue over him in long, sensuous strokes, Keira breathed him in. She kissed his knee, scraped her teeth over the heavy cap of muscle just above it, let the tip of her breast graze his leg.

The ropes creaked and his shoulders bunched but other than that, Raull held himself still for her. Not that he had much choice. She was very good at tying knots.

With a boldness that made him groan and lift his hips to her, Keira drew her tongue up his cock, circled the head then breathed over the wetness. He lifted his hips again. The look in his eyes begged for more. Reveling in her power to seduce, to arouse, she ignored his unsubtle pleas, crawled around him and smoothed her lips over the heavy muscles in his forearm. Raull grumbled, tried to capture her breast in his mouth, grumbled again when she eluded him.

"This body belongs to me," she purred and ran her forefinger down the deep valley that separated his pectoral muscles. "Until we have purged our need for each other. Isn't that what you said?"

Again the ropes creaked as Raull tried to reach her. "Yes dammit," he growled and his frustration showed in every straining inch of his body.

As she caressed his fingers, smoothed her cheek over the soft skin in front of his elbow, the rain fell harder and wind made the tent tremble. Knowing it would hold, Keira resumed her intimate exploration of her lover's body. The skin on his inner arms was taut, stretched over firm muscle yet surprisingly smooth. Bunched by their position, his shoulders were a sensual delight for her fingers and she shut her eyes, knelt beside him, discovered him with a languid exploration. She touched his face, caressed his lips, smiled when he nibbled on her fingertips. When she moved down to his chest, she opened her eyes. Her strong hands looked small on his body. Warm and solid, she caressed him over and over, teased his nipples, pinched them until he bared his teeth, flicked her tongue over them then bit him gently.

The ropes creaked again.

Avoiding his hard cock, she licked his belly, ran her fingernails down the sides of his body, gripped his hips and rubbed her palms over him.

Raull snarled, lifted his head and watched her with an expression that communicated his frustration and lust. He didn't ask her to stop though and, smiling, she continued.

Outside, the rain fell harder, eased up then settled into a soft, continuous beat that heralded a long storm. Inside, Keira breathed deeper as she drew her breast down Raull's thigh, mouthed the curve of his knee, rubbed her thumbs over the

soles of his feet in slow, firm sweeps. His snarls faded when he inhaled deliberately, relaxed and let his head drop back.

"No woman has ever owned me like you do," he murmured then, with obvious effort, slowed his breathing rate.

His words moved her more than they should. As much as she embraced this second seer's quest, as much as she embraced the opportunity to leave the colony for awhile, Raull was supposed to be nothing more than a means to an end. She was at an age where she was expected to bear a child, to contribute to the colony's future. As far as she knew, no Sibyl had ever taken a Warrior to father their child. Raul would be the first and she would cherish him for that but, ultimately, she and her daughter would return to the colony without him. She led their military. There was no one capable of replacing her.

Leaving at this time was a good decision though. She was sure of that because leaving would spur the Sibyl's sociological growth. As a group, they'd been stagnant for too long, relying on the old ways, hiding behind the fears of their forbearers.

Like the men who had come before him, Raull would resign himself to her leaving or he would follow her, live in the village that had sprung up around the Sibyls' colony over the cycles, see her when her duties allowed her to spend a night outside of its walls.

"I own you tonight, Warrior," she breathed against his skin. "Beyond that, I stake no claim on you."

His brow furrowed and he stared at her. Other than that, he gave no voice to what he was thinking.

Returning her attention to the tempting body stretched out in front of her, she smoothed her cheeks over his shins, bit his inner thighs just hard enough to leave white marks then licked away the sting. The ropes creaked again when she crouched over him, looked up at his balls and moistened her lips. He moaned and lifted his hips to her when she ran her tongue over his sac, drew one orb into her mouth, rolled it gently, wet it thoroughly then released it with a loud pop. The other was treated the same way and when she was finished, she blew on his wet skin. He shivered, grinned and his nipples

got very hard. Kissing them gently, laving them with a gentle touch, she soothed them as best she could then turned so her head was facing his feet, settled her knees on either side of his head, lowered her bottom over his face.

Raull lifted his head. His neck muscles bulged and his face got red as he strained to reach her. Keira eluded him and, inches from his face, ran her fingers over her pussy.

"Give that to me," he growled and she was almost compelled to obey. Not because he used voice inflection but because of the raw need behind his words.

She stroked herself again, spread her outer lips gently then let them slide back into place. "When I'm ready, Warrior," she cooed and grinned when he huffed and dropped his head back hard enough for it to thud on the epol mat. Stretching forward and leaning her weight on her elbow, she took hold of his cock, pulled the head to her mouth and slid her lips over it.

"Fuck," he hissed. This time the metal tent pegs creaked at the same time as the ropes. "You know I'll pay you back for this." His voice was dark, sexual. "Someday it will be my turn and you'll find yourself stretched out on your back, immobile and at my mercy. I promise you'll be begging long before the sun rises. After it rises too."

"I like the sound of that," Keira grinned, "but not tonight. Tonight, you're all mine." Slowly, she swirled her tongue around the thick cap of Raull's cock. He tasted of salt, smelled like clean skin with a hint of male musk. His balls twitched, drew up then lowered after she sucked him into her mouth. Outside, the wind picked up, made the ropes anchoring the tent hum. The heat from their bodies kept the air inside warm. Keira stretched out even more, reveled in the feel of his hard body beneath hers, ran her fingers through the tuft of hair on her mound. Again Raull strained and tried to reach her. She teased him a little longer.

Finally, giving in to her growing need, she slid her mouth down his shaft as far as she could, bobbed her head up and down, tightened her lips around his girth. Raull's groan was cut off when she lowered her hips and settled her pussy over his mouth. A deep hum of pleasure vibrated in his chest as his tongue moved over her. He probed the mouth of her sheath, drew out her wetness, licked it off her nether lips. Circling her clit, pressing chaste kisses to it then stroking it gently with the tip of his tongue made her sigh and lean closer.

Breathing through her nose, she gathered saliva in her mouth then swirled it around his length violently, fluttering her cheeks in and out, creating a strong vacuum. When he groaned against her slit in response, Keira bucked and almost smothered him before remembering that he needed to breathe too. She eased the pressure in her hips, backed off and grinned at his very male, very satisfied chuckle. Again his pelvis lifted to her. Again she ran her tongue over his length, swallowed him up, swirled and sucked.

Ah gods but the man had a mouth that could tempt a celibate. Fortunately for her, she had no intentions of giving up the pleasures of the flesh and soon his wicked tongue and curious lips had her squirming, shaking all over. She dug her fingers into his hips one last time, probed the end of his cock for more of his taste, licked him from head to base then spun around, straddled him,

held onto his thick shaft and impaled herself slowly.

The ropes creaked again, even louder this time. A light sheen of sweat covered Raull's chest, highlighting the deep curves of his muscles. His eyes were darker and he stared at her breasts, her swaying torso, between her legs to watch his cock slide into her.

Stopping when the pressure became too much, Keira panted, deepened the arch in her back, bore down on him when she was ready. They groaned at the same time. When she was full of him, when her ass lay flush against his loins, she leaned forward, pulled his head toward hers and kissed him. She tasted herself on his mouth, smelled her musk and trembled, remembered how wonderful it felt when he loved her.

Lifting her hips slowly, she liked the way his girth stretched her when she sat back down. As much as she wanted to prolong the feeling, Keira's patience was near its end. Slow and easy gave way to harder, deeper. Pausing when the head was just ready to slip out of her, she rotated her hips just enough to make them both moan and grin then she took him in to the hilt. Her breath hitched, then his.

Driving her tongue into his mouth one last time, Keira sat up, leaned back, rested her hands on his thighs and used the muscles in her legs to ride him. Breathing harder now, she tossed her damp hair back, rose and fell with growing desperation. He snarled and lifted his hips, moved them in counterpoint to hers, added his strength to their lovemaking until they were both sweating and groaning.

Raull filled her so perfectly and the friction of his rod inside her was delicious. Every time her body slammed down on his, he twisted his hips, ground his hard, smooth pubis against her clit, made her gasp, lean her weight into him then lift up so it could start all over again.

The tent poles began to creak in time with their lovemaking. His shoulders bunched and he clawed at the ropes binding his arms. When she fell onto him, tucked her face into his neck and humped him furiously, Raull grunted then punched his hips up hard and fast.

Crying out, shaking all over, Keira gave in to the ecstasy snaking through her. Her nipples drew up hard, ached and her pussy convulsed around him. Deep inside her, muscles clenched, released, clenched again. Trembling, sweating, she couldn't stop her fingers from digging into his shoulders, couldn't stop the white light exploding behind her eyes, couldn't stop driving her loins into his to make the pleasure go on and on.

Beneath her, Raull groaned. His hips came up hard, stayed there, punched his cock into her and kept it there. She felt it throb inside her, jerk in time with the harsh pulses of his release.

When her own pleasure began to ease its sharp grip on her, Keira's muscles relaxed. She stretched out over him, loved his warmth and size against her bare skin, smiled when the wind outside howled. It couldn't touch them. Not here, not now. After a time, she took some of her weight onto her arms, kissed his chest, rotated her hips slowly to intensify the feeling of his shaft in her. Grinning contentedly, he stretched out beneath her, growled and the corner of his mouth quirked up.

She wanted to stay where she was and continue to enjoy the delightful bed that Raull's

body made but he'd been tied up for awhile now. Sighing, she lifted herself off him, untied the knots at the base of the tent pegs, loosened the ropes and massaged his ankles and wrists. Raull didn't move. He watched her, loved her with his eyes as she tended to him, and accepted the cup of water she lifted to his lips. He drank it all, refilled it and offered the cup to her. When it was empty, he set it aside, grabbed her around the waist and rolled her onto her back so fast Keira didn't have time to react. He kneed her legs apart, threw one over his shoulder and sunk his still-hard cock into her.

Groaning, arching her neck back, Keira squeezed her eyes shut and felt him fill her. He felt so potent, powerful. No man had ever mastered her physically and she loved him for being able to.

"My turn, woman," he growled, kissed her soundly, hoisted her other leg over his shoulder as well and drove into her so hard she grunted.

She clutched his shoulders, scratched his back, panted then gasped with pleasure. His body pounded into hers, ground against her clit and with each punishing stroke, Raull's shaft felt

bigger, harder. He grinned down at her, let go of her legs only so he could wrap them around his back and arched so he could mouth her breasts. Tongue, lips and teeth moved over her, loved her, and suckled her endlessly. Only when she tensed, when the need rose in her again, tightened her muscles, made her thighs shake did he leave her breasts and drive his tongue into her mouth. He forced her breath to match his, made her kiss him back just as hard then groaned against her lips when she gasped, arched and came. He thrust hard, sunk his rod in deep, ground his body against hers until she was sweating, shaking and crying out.

With his mouth still on hers, he groaned again, drove into her hard and stayed there. Grunting in time with the pulses of his release, his heavy, powerful body rocked against hers. He held on hard, sucked her breath into his lungs, trembled then, slowly, the tension in his muscles eased.

Keira held him close for a long time, caressed his back, tightened her pussy around him until he grunted and kissed her again. He looked down at her face, smoothed her hair back, held her breast and smoothed his lips over her brow. Eventually,

he rolled off her, threw a blanket over their cooling bodies, switched off the lamp, wrapped her in the cage of his arms and legs, and buried his nose in his hair before they fell asleep.

The next morning, Keira sat beside the fire, brushing out her freshly washed hair. It had been a disaster that morning, kinky instead of wavy with bits that stuck up at odd angles from being slept on while still damp. She sipped her hisian leaf tea and watched Raull measure out a precise amount of distilled poppel flower juice. He, like the other Warriors, performed this ritual every morning. Adding water to his cup, he diluted the juice enough to make it palatable then drank it down slowly.

"My vision showed a child in our future, Raull," she said quietly, without condemnation. "You'll have to stop drinking that some time."

He grinned, rinsed his cup out carefully then repacked it and the skin holding his supply of poppel juice. Like all men on Caspiun, he controlled his fertility by drinking the juice every day.

"Your vision didn't say *when* I'd father your child. Only that I would. Perhaps I'm becoming so enamored of you that I want to keep you with me as long as I can. Don't tell me it hasn't crossed your mind to leave me as soon as you're pregnant."

The way he looked at her made her lower her gaze. He was right. She just didn't feel like talking about leaving this morning. Not when the sky was so clear—a vast, aqua canopy over their heads. The air smelled clean, the breeze was fresh and cool and the rising sun was warm.

Raull didn't press the issue. Instead, he untethered their jacos, led them down to the lake to drink then left them to graze while he helped her take down the tent and pack up their camp.

#### \* \* \*

"This trail isn't the easiest but it is the shortest route through the foothills." They'd left the lake behind two days ago. The vast plains that led down to Jareb-Phar were behind them as well and they were heading into rougher, higher country. "I'm not sure I'd risk taking any other woman on this route but I think you're equal to the challenge." He grinned back at her, ducked and pushed a low, white branch aside before touching his heels to his jacos' sides.

From the expression on her face, he knew Keira had felt the sincerity behind his tease. The longer they were together, the more he was impressed by her intelligence and strength. He'd never wanted a woman like he wanted her. He hadn't exaggerated when he'd told her that. Still, he sensed the hesitancy in her. She wasn't ready to commit to him and instinct told him he'd have to work to earn her love. Fortunately, hard work had never deterred him from anything, especially those things he really wanted.

He checked the position of the sun. "There's a tough rise just ahead but the plateau beyond is a good place to rest for lunch. Good grazing for the animals." Keira nodded and he watched her check the positioning of the jacos, their spacing and she pulled back on the tethers on two of them, making the animals walk in single file instead of side by side as they preferred. He watched with approval as she dropped behind just enough to keep an eye on their progress

but still close enough to step in if any of them stumbled.

A good woman indeed, his mother would say if she was here now but a quiet snort then a twitch of the head of one of his favorite jacos drew his attention. This one was a little older, strong and experienced. It was also a female and had senses that outstripped the others'.

He held up his hand, sat up straight and sniffed the air. There was nothing at first and he was about to continue on when the jacos moved her head from side to side as if scenting the air. She slowed her pace, pulled lightly against her tether although she kept moving. Glancing back at Keira, he saw her pull her sword from its sheath. They slipped off their saddles at the same time, urged the jacos to keep walking. He and Keira disappeared into the shrub brush on either side of the path.

It turned just ahead and one by one, the jacos disappeared from sight.

Raull's first instinct was to protect Keira, take her away from possible harm then return to deal with it himself. His training, every instinct in him as a man and a Warrior rebelled when he allowed her to approach the crest of the path with him. But she was Sibyl. Whoever was on that plateau had more to fear from her than they did from him.

Swallowing his unease despite his confidence in the woman at his side, Raull crept the last few feet up the hillside, crouched and scanned the grassy clearing at the top.

Mercenaries, six of them, shouldered the jacos aside, looked at each other in confusion, touched the two empty saddles and frowned when they felt the residual warmth in them. The jacos walked on, unconcerned, and started pulling at the lush grasses, nosed around the untidy camp, drank noisily from two buckets of water that had been left unattended.

"Where the hell is he?" one mercenary hissed.

"Quiet."

It required no great skill for Raull to overhear their entire conversation.

"If he took another route, we've missed him. One of the other groups will claim the bounty."

"I said *quiet.*" The speaker was a little taller, a little less dirty than the others. He sheathed his sword. "Bastard knows we're here. Act like we aren't waiting to ambush him...like we're taking a break for lunch." Pushing one of Raull's jacos out of the way, he sat down on an overturned log in front of a cold fire pit, pulled out a piece of dried meat, bit off some and started chewing. The others did the same.

Moving silently, Raull slipped back onto the path and walked up and onto the plateau. "I didn't expect to meet anyone on this trail. Most commercial travelers go by sea."

"Oh," their leader yelped dramatically, turned around fast and stared at Raull. "You gave me a start. We weren't expecting anybody either. Have a seat, friend, and join us. We were told the hunting was good up here."

"Catch anything?" Raull asked casually and walked closer.

"Just a few terup fowl. Maybe our luck'll improve now that you're here. It's not every day you meet up with a Warrior out in the middle of nowhere."

"Hmm. Lucky, yes," Raull said then fell silent. A sense that was as much a part of him as his size and coloring told him that Keira was moving through the underbrush, circling around to the far side of the camp.

The mercenary held out the dried meat in his hand, offering it to Raull with a smile and a nod.

"It's good, I promise," he said. "Got it from a merchant on the outskirts of Tarmig-Lun." His expression froze then he paled.

Raull shook his head slowly. "Would that be when you raided his village or after when you snuck in to steal what the other mercenaries hadn't?" He drew his sword and assumed a fighting stance when the six men jumped to their feet and surrounded him. "This can be easy or difficult," he drawled. "Tell me who paid you to ambush me or die. Quite simple really, even for you."

Two of the mercenaries snarled, raised their swords and charged. The other four turned and stumbled when a woman leapt out from nowhere, grinned and cocked her finger at them.

They swallowed hard then their mouths dropped open.

"Gor. A Sibyl," one of them hissed. "Ain't she a beauty."

Raull growled when their eyes moved over Keira's body, over her fitted battle leathers, down the length of her legs, back up to her pale, reddish hair that shimmered in the sunlight.

"Well, answer the man," she said conversationally and held her sword at the ready. One of the mercenaries that had charged Raull was already dead, sprawled at his feet. The other was hacking away at Raull. Every one of his slashes was deflected with an ease that told Keira he was toying with the man, giving him an opportunity to answer, to live.

The four that had focused on her, backed away. Keira resisted the urge to roll her eyes. The Sibyls' mystique was more than enough to dissuade anyone in their right mind from harming one. She broke into a run, skirted the pack closing in on Raull, stood with her back to his and raised her sword. The mercenary fighting Raull backed off, joined the others. They circled him and Keira in a slow, predatory march. "We don't want to hurt her," their leader spoke up, pulled a dagger out of his belt, held it in his free hand. "We *won't* hurt her. We'll be nice to her, treat her good. But you've got to die, friend. Plain and simple."

"Why?" Raull asked. His voice was deep, patient.

"We've got no choice, see?" He and the others continued to circle. "He knows who we are, knows our families."

"Who is *he*?"

"Dunno. Don't care. All we know is he pays good—real silver. If we take you up on your offer, give you the name of his middle-man, walk outta here with you still alive, we're dead anyway. That's simple enough to understand, ain't it? Even for you."

Raull grinned ferally when he heard his insult repeated back to him.

"Yes." He straightened, glowered down at them, held his sword high and back with the tip pointing forward. "Last chance to consider."

"Appreciate the sportin' chance, friend,"

the mercenary nodded and crouched, ready to spring. "Can't oblige..."

Whatever else he was going to say never made it past his lips as he jumped forward, used his sword to deflect the downward thrust of Raull's, jabbed with his dagger. Raull slammed his fist down into the man's wrist, spun to the side, used the momentum to bring his sword around. The tip sliced through one mercenary's neck, opened up a deep gash on the arm of the man beside him.

Behind him, he heard metal on metal, felt Keira's hair whip against his back, heard her soft grunt of exertion just before a body—not hers hit the ground.

Grabbing a short sword out of one of the loops on his vest, Raull stepped to the side, made a quarter turn when Keira did, brought his sword back up and around. Another mercenary fell dead. He punched his short sword into the chest of another. Spinning, he stood at Keira's side. They faced the two remaining mercenaries.

One, still alive but bleeding, bellowed, ran at Raull with his sword raised. It was a suicide move and he nicked Raull's hand before the Warrior

cut him down. The last mercenary jumped, paled then ran, making sure Keira's body was between him and Raull.

"Tell me who hired you or die," Raull yelled.

"No," the man screeched, turned and hurled his sword at Keira.

She dove, rolled and had just flipped back onto her feet when Raull reached into a small, leather pouch attached to his vest and aimed a throwing star at the mercenary. The man lurched to the side, dropped to his knees and stared stupidly at the two, spiked metal discs sticking out of his chest. Bubbles of blood escaped out of the side of his mouth then burst. He collapsed and didn't move again.

"He might have answered you," Keira said quietly and without condemnation. She began cleaning her sword.

"I don't talk to men who are trying to gut my woman," Raull growled, fetched an oiled cloth out of one of their packs and ran it over the blade of his short sword.

"Nothing in their packs," Keira pronounced just before she tossed them over the edge of the plateau, into a dense stand of shrub trees. "Whoever they were, they were careful not to leave behind any trace of who hired them." When she walked back to him, she had to step around the pile of rocks they'd buried the bodies under. She doubted the mercenaries would have shown them the same courtesy.

Raull was untethering the jacos they'd found hidden off the path above the plateau. He removed their saddles, bindings, and set them free. "Unfortunate but not unexpected," he said and accepted the tether to his own jacos when Keira held it out to him. He touched her face, let her make sure the edges of the field dressing around his hand were secure, then mounted his jacos and rode further into the foothills with her behind him.

# CHANTER SEVEN

"We can't ride into the capital city together." Beneath a stand of thick trees, screened by a large patch of ladify flowers, Raull crept back to Keira's position on his belly. Once he was out of sight of the roadside tavern, he straightened and brushed himself off. "Because they're looking for me, not you," he answered the look in her eyes instead of the question he sensed on her tongue. "That's a scouting party," he added, pointing in the direction of the three men sharing a table and a pitcher of ale outside the tavern. "Just like the one we spotted two towns back. And before you say anything, yes my chances will be better if you're around to watch my back. Trouble is, these scouts have been placed along my route to report on my whereabouts. If they see me with a woman, there's no way I'll be able to sneak you into the palace and have you spy for me."

Leaning back on her heels and looking up at him skeptically, she crossed her arms over her chest. "And how did you propose to sneak me in?"

"As a serving woman." He eyed her body critically. "You're strong. You'll be able to carry several bowls at once and they like to keep the courtiers' plates overflowing. And you're beautiful," he added. "They also like their servers to be easy on the eye. The only problem is your hair."

"I can take care of that."

"How-?"

"Never mind how, Warrior. Just know that my kind have experience traveling in the world and nobody's ever seen one of us and suspected we're Sibyl."

Raull frowned but nodded grudgingly.

"Now," she said and her voice was soft, "kiss me, hold me tight then go. I'll wait until noon to follow you. Tell me who to ask for when I reach the capital city."

"Ask for Erand," he said and wrapped his arms around her. He cradled her head against his chest. "He's the younger of the two Warriors who work with me. If anyone asks, tell them you're his cousin. His older cousin. He's two cycles younger than you."

"Hmm. Is he cute?"

"Ugly as jacos dung," Raull answered curtly, gave her a squeeze then tipped her face up to his. He touched his lips to hers, breathed in deep like he was memorizing her scent then slid his tongue into her mouth and twined it with hers.

Keira gripped his shoulders tighter than she should, absorbed the feel of him, the taste then forced herself to step back. Raull looked down at her. Regret, love, anger, maybe even fear touched his eyes then were replaced by a calm that he slipped into place like she'd slip on a cloak. He leapt onto the back of his saddled jacos, gathered up the tethers of the others and rode out onto the road without looking back.

#### \* \* \*

"There's a girl. You can handle two pitchers can't you? Right then. Out you go and mind the Minister of Culture. He'll pinch your arse black and blue if you give him half a chance."

Nodding to the wine steward, Keira stuck her hip out, used it to shove the scullery door open and carried her two pitchers of gyrus wine into

the main dining hall. She nodded to two other servers who were carrying their empty pitchers back for refills. The smaller women only carried one each but she didn't mind. If she did more work for the same pay as them, there was little chance she'd lose this job. Not that that was apt to happen unless she was a hopeless klutz. Palace administration tended to be lenient toward Warriors' relatives.

She moved around the hall deftly, chose tables where the men had their heads bent together and were whispering, and often had at least half of their cups refilled before anyone noticed her presence. When they did, she smiled quietly, leaned her weight on her back foot so she could pivot out of the way if any of them tried to touch her. None of them did but a few of the courtiers looked at her body with obvious interest. It was no wonder. Serving women were required to wear fitted dresses that left their cleavage and much of their legs exposed. Keira had added tall, fitted boots to her outfit. The wine steward hadn't approved at first but even he admitted that Keira's long, shapely legs were meant for boots

She liked them because she was able to hide a dagger in one and two throwing knives in the other.

She smiled again, stepped away from the table and moved on to the next.

"No idea. None," a gray haired man was saying quietly to the others at the table. His robe was simple and thrown over his shoulders, revealing the tailored tunic and the crest of the house of Tarmig-Lun sewn over the left side of his chest.

"Well I for one am happy he's back. This unrest is reaching deeper and deeper into the kingdom."

"Soon we won't feel safe in our own beds."

"Don't let fear mongering rule your tongue," a third man admonished. "It's true someone paid assassins but—" His words stopped abruptly when he noticed Keira hovering near the end of the table. He and the other men watched her for awhile.

She smiled, nodded and reached for the next empty cup.

"We're being impolite, gentleman," one of

them spoke up. He was younger than the rest, perhaps only forty cycles old. He was handsome enough and his pale-brown hair was cut short. "You're new I believe?" he asked Keira and his smile was friendly.

She nodded. "Yes."

"What's your name?" he asked politely. "Are you new to the city?"

Matching her smile to his, she answered, "Keira. I arrived just this morning."

"Just this morning? We are fortunate indeed that you found employment here. I don't care for spreading stories but our last server was..."

"Inept."

"Clumsy," a third man added. "You're not clumsy, are you?" he asked coldly and drew his cloak around himself like he expected her to dump the contents of her pitcher on him.

"Absolutely not," Keira assured him with a smile, walked behind him, picked up his cup and filled it. "Not a drop spilled," she proclaimed, nodded to the others and stepped away as quietly as she'd arrived.

As she walked to the next table, she felt the eyes of the brown-haired man on her but knew better than to turn and meet his stare. Here, she had to appear meek, be innocuous—all ears and no discernable presence.

When her pitchers were empty, she carried them back into the scullery for the wine steward to refill.

"Keira's a lovely name. I've never heard it before."

She turned away from the drying rack where she was arranging freshly washed tea pots and looked at the man leaning against the open doorway.

"It's a family name," she answered readily, and smiled at the man with the pale-brown hair. A surreptitious glance told her his clothing was cut from expensive cloth, well tailored and that his boots alone would cost the equivalent of one month's salary for the average Caspiun.

"I'm Hosander by the way," he introduced himself, stepped forward and held out his arm.

Keira grasped it politely then stepped back.

"I'm sure I'm interrupting but I wanted to ask what you think of our city so far." His manner was pleasant, his voice well modulated. "I'm the trade minister for what it's worth and I'm always interested to know why people decide to move here. More importantly, what keeps them here?"

"Is that your job?" she asked, trying not to sound too dim, uninformed, even star struck. She assumed that members of the high cabinet didn't often start up conversations with serving women.

"Part of it, yes," he answered and took another step toward her. "I and the people around me work to attract businesses to Tarmig-Lun, increase trade, lure in a talented work force," he added with a grin.

She returned his smile. "I like the city very much. I come from a small village so I wasn't sure I'd like it here, but I do."

"Why?"

He leaned on the counter beside her, selected a piece of sweet nylind fruit out of a nearby bowl and started to peel the husk back.

"I suppose I like that there's always something going on. Interesting people to talk to."

Grinning, he offered her a piece of the fruit then ate one himself. "Dare I delude myself and hope you're including me in that generalization?"

"Absolutely," Keira said and accepted the second piece of fruit he held out to her. "My first day here and already I've learned what a minister of trade does and that the royal wine steward gets grumpy when his lunch isn't served on time."

"Oy! I heard that," the short, round steward called out from a back room. He stepped out, flashed Keira a look then locked up the wine storage closet. "Cheeky tart. You watch yourself or I'll have you serving down in the nursery. The kids down there will eat you alive." Chuckling to himself, he raised his hand in farewell and left the scullery.

Hosander laughed too, drawing Keira's attention back to him. "He's just teasing."

"So I assumed," she said and started wiping down the counter.

"Well I have to get going. A pleasure meeting

you, Keira," he said, disposed of the nylind fruit husk then rinsed his fingers off under a hand pump. "Ifyou're working tonight, I'd be delighted if you'd drop by my table so I can introduce you to some of the other men who're glad you're not going to spill anything on us," he added with a wink then turned to leave. "Ladies," he said, raising his hand to the other serving women working in the scullery before he left.

"Hey. Cheeky tart," one of the other servers called out in a stage whisper. She glanced at the open door and when she saw that it was empty, threw a towel at Keira. "He's a fine catch that one is," she informed Keira sagely. "Wife's been dead going on four cycles now. Why'd you get all the beginner's luck when the rest of us tarts have been trying to catch his eye." She grinned and lobbed another towel at Keira.

Keira caught that one, spun it, aimed and flicked the end at the woman's backside. "Because I'm a bigger tart than the rest of you put together," she teased, dodged a towel that another server was aiming at her bottom and danced around the scullery with them as they laughed and played a game of strike and evade.

"Are you married, Keira?" One of the men she was serving gave her a friendly smile.

She smiled back. He was older, with gray hair and when he wasn't whispering about how unsafe the kingdom was becoming and the need for more soldiers, maybe even another Warrior, he was kind and soft spoken.

"Yes," she lied and set a bowl of greens and one of grilled fish on their table.

"Did he come to Tarmig-Lun with you?" Hosander asked politely.

"Oh no," she answered with deliberate haste then hid her pleasure when they leaned in to listen. "He's a blacksmith and he likes sneaking around with other women more than he likes being married to me."

"Useless sod."

"The man's obviously an idiot."

She smiled at their ready support. "I decided I was better off without him and moved here. I have a cousin who lives nearby and he said he'd find me a job if I wanted one."

"Well your husband's loss is our fortune," one man piped up, patted her hand and thanked her for taking care of them.

Still smiling, she returned to her cart, retrieved more bowls and distributed them.

"Such a beautiful smile." Keira set down the bowls she was holding and turned slowly when she felt a body brush against hers. "Tell me, what does a man have to do to earn such a smile, hmm?"

"Minister Benar," she greeted him coldly and stepped back. He didn't take the hint. Reaching out, he ran his palm over her hip. Keira thought about snapping the Minister of Culture's wandering fingers off but knew it would attract too much attention. Instead she leaned her weight back when his hand slid over her butt, shifted the foot in front and set the heel of her boot over his toes. She looked at him pointedly. This time he took the hint and withdrew his hand before she *accidentally* crushed his foot.

"Benar my friend."

The minister jumped when a man stepped up behind him and clapped him on the shoulders.

"Everything all right here?" Hosander asked pointedly, shot the minister of culture a dark look then led him away from Keira. "Wanted to talk to you about a new contract we're working on to import fragrant wood from the Near Desert." Hosander's voice faded as they walked away.

"Hosander did you a favor, he did," another server whispered as she sidled up to Keira and collected the empty bowls in the bottom of her cart. "You've got to watch out for Benar." She glanced around then added quietly, "He's not the sort you want to let yourself get close to if you catch my meaning."

"How far is it to your home?"

Keira smiled at Hosander as she stepped out of the main dining hall. The sun had set earlier and the light of two of their three moons reflected off the brightly polished, stone floor.

"Not far," she said and didn't rebuke him when he fell into step beside her. Lamps set into the walls had been lit but the place was far dimmer at night than it had been during the day.

It would be appropriate for a woman, new and on her own, to welcome a familiar face.

"Good. Because I've been waiting to ask if I could walk you home. If you have no objections, I wanted to continue our conversation about what attracted you to Tarmig-Lun."

"I have no objections," she said, smiled at him and stepped through a door that two soldiers held open for them. "And I want to thank you for interrupting Benar's, er, friendliness."

Hosander's expression tightened. "That's one way of putting it," he said and made no attempt to hide his displeasure. "And if you'll glance to your left..." he added as he steered her out of the palace complex, "you'll see the gathering room where some of our courtiers like to congregate and drink as much of the prince's wine as they can get their hands on."

Keira spotted Benar standing just inside the doorway. When he saw her, his brown eyes lit up in a way that made her skin crawl. He looked away as soon as he recognized Hosander at her side.

"Ah. Thank you," she said to the trade minister and started walking faster.

"My pleasure. So tell me, is the pace here different than what you're used to?"

They continued to walk. Hosander made polite conversation, asked questions, listened intently to her answers. He walked close to her but didn't touch her and followed Keira's lead as they navigated the stone-paved streets.

"It's just down here," Keira said, turning off onto a narrow boulevard.

"I know this street," Hosander said and despite the dim light, she saw his brow furrow. "It ends just down here. There's a gated courtyard that opens onto..." His voice trailed off. "You didn't tell me that your cousin was a Warrior."

"No. I didn't," she said and nodded to the soldiers who recognized her and opened the gate so she and Hosander could enter. "People tend to treat me differently when they find out I'm related to Erand."

"With good reason," Hosander huffed. "It's a wonder your husband's still in one piece after cheating on you."

"That's because I didn't tell Erand the real reason why I left," she whispered then turned toward the sound of a female voice.

"But I missed you while you were gone. I would have gone with you."

"The invitation came for me alone, Aline,"

Keira hid her reaction when she recognized Raull's voice. She saw two shadows near the doorway of one of the homes that opened off the courtyard but nothing more.

"Aline's never been one to waste time," Hosander said and steered Keira to Erand's house. "Raull's been back less than a day. I wonder what excuse she gave her parents this time to get out of the house unescorted after dark?"

The woman's sultry voice drifted over the courtyard again. "Invite me in. There are things I've been dreaming about. Things I want to do to you."

"Er, it's right here," Hosander said, louder than necessary. He sounded uncomfortable, maybe embarrassed having to overhear the woman's blatant attempt at seduction. He plied

the knocker, stepped aside when Erand opened the door.

The Warrior gave the trade minister a suspicious look but when he spotted Keira, his coldness morphed into a smile. "Welcome home, cousin," he said effusively and held out his arms. "How did you like the job? Anybody give you trouble?" he asked and lifted a brow in Hosander's direction. "Any heads I have to pop off in defense of your honor?"

"Hardly," Keira huffed, gave him a quick hug and stepped inside. She turned back to Hosander. "Thank you," she said with a smile, "for walking me home. I'd invite you in but it has been a long day."

"Of course," he said, returned her smile and stepped back. "Perhaps some other time. I enjoyed meeting you."

"Me too," Keira said, nodded and turned after Erand shut the door.

Erand stood where he was, crossed his thick arms over his chest and looked down at her. The usual dark, leather pants all Warriors wore had been replaced by comfortable cloth ones and he was bare chested. He was tall of course, about six and a half feet in height but still a good six inches shorter than Raull. His thick, brown hair was darker than Raull's and his nose had a quirky little bend to it. Like it had been broken at some point and hadn't been set right. Oddly, it only made him more handsome.

When she slipped off her cloak, he took it from her and hung it up. When she'd arrived that morning, she'd learned that the open, gravel courtyard outside was guarded and gated and that the three Warriors in the employ of the kingdom of Tarmig-Lun lived in houses surrounding it.

"Hosander, hmm? From the way he looked at you I'd say you made quite an impression on him, Sibyl." There was no condemnation in Erand's voice, just a simple expression of fact. "He's connected, listens more than he talks and is intelligent. He *could* be the mastermind behind this unrest, although I would have said it wasn't in his character to betray his prince." He led her into his house, poured her a cup of gyrus wine and offered her a seat in his living area. The house wasn't large but it was richly furnished, meticulously clean.

"Keira?" The front door slammed and Raull's voice boomed through the house.

"Back here," Erand called out and grinned like he was anticipating something entertaining.

"Keira, wh...?" Raull's voice died and he stared at her as she stood and faced him. "What the hell did you do to your hair?" he blurted out, crossed the room in two quick strides and touched her head, the soft, glossy, brown waves of hair piled on it.

"Boiled tree sap," she snapped. "It's not permanent. It'll fade after a couple of washes. And who the hell was that woman?"

Raull's head rocked back. His mouth dropped open. Erand chuckled and sat down in a chair conveniently situated for him to watch from.

"Four days," she yelled, advanced on Raull, waved a finger in front of his nose. "It's been four days since we were together. What, you couldn't keep it in your pants that long?"

He blinked, obviously trying to process her unusual turn of phrase.

"What was I? A diversion to keep you

entertained while you were on the road? How many other girlfriends do you have that you didn't bother telling me about?"

When Raull grinned, she was a second away from pulling her dagger out of her boot and using it on him. She shoved at his shoulders, screeched when he picked her up, spun her around then kissed her soundly.

"You're jealous," he said with quiet surety then laughed.

"So what if I am?" She smacked his shoulder.

"You have feelings for me, Sibyl. You're becoming attached to me. Falling in love with me," he said smugly. "Admit it."

"I'll admit no such thing." Anything else she might have said was cut off when Raull kissed her again. He backed her into a wall, used his strength to hold her there and begin a slow, seductive rediscovery of her mouth.

"Er, touching as this reunion is," Erand said. He stood up and headed for the front entrance. "We're still no closer to finding the man behind this civil unrest, I would like a good night's rest and you should take your woman to your own

home." He opened the door and looked at them pointedly.

Chuckling, still carrying Keira, Raull wrapped one of her legs around his body and walked out of Erand's house. The door shut behind them.

"So I take it your mousy little girlfriend has left for the night?" Keira asked and looked around the courtyard. Because of a recently invoked curfew, the city beyond the courtyard was quiet. The sharp report of Raull's boots on the gravel echoed against the high, stone walls. Night-blooming flowers scented the air.

"She is not my girlfriend. She never was."

"But she was your lover."

"Yes. But never again. I'd tired of her long before I left. She knew that but she's young, spoiled and doesn't accept rejection. Her family is also rich and well connected so I've been hesitant to completely sever our relationship in case she can provide useful information. Now, prove *yourself* useful and open the door so I can take you to my bed and reacquaint myself with the woman I've really been missing."

He'd stopped in front of the third house

opening up onto the courtyard. Like the others, the façade was simple brick although the door was wood, obviously carved by a master's hand. Keira reached down, thumbed the latch open and Raull kicked the door shut behind them after carrying her in.

"I wasn't really jealous you know," she murmured, tucked her forehead into his cheek, tightened her hold on him.

"Liar," he rebuked her gently, grinned and walked faster.

Like Erand's, Raull's house wasn't large but it held many trappings of wealth. The lamps hanging from the walls were filled with expensive, distilled sea oil. The floor was covered with handcast tiles and the carpets covering them were thick and richly patterned. Not just the entrance but every wall seemed to be paneled in fragrant wood from the Near Desert.

"Are any of your servants here?" she asked.

"No. They don't live here. Neither do Erand's or Johnis'. It is a security protocol we've established but it also affords us privacy if we need to discuss sensitive matters."

"Hmm. And to *entertain* women without being overheard."

Grunting, Raull shouldered open the door to his bedchamber, set her down and started unfastening his weapon vest. "Understand this, Keira. You are the only woman I will ever *entertain* here. From now on and for the rest of my life. Four days apart from you was almost more than I could bear." He grabbed the hem of her short dress, yanked it up and off, tossed it aside then hugged her tight.

When his warmth sunk into her, when she sensed the fervor of his embrace, Keira relented. Logic said that he had to have had lovers, lots of them. Warriors were a hot commodity and Raull was the hottest man she'd ever met.

Leaning back, she unlaced the short corset that Caspiun women traditionally wore, shimmied out of it then slid out of her panties. When she sat down on Raull's tall, oversized bed to take off her boots, he watched her with rising intensity. She didn't laugh at him when he fumbled with the ties fastening his leather pants. Instead, when he was naked, she beckoned him forward with a finger, smiled up at him, caressed his hips

and smoothed her cheek over his impressive erection.

"Hmm," she murmured. "I think he missed me."

Chuckling, Raull touched her shoulders, held her breast. "He's been aching for you for days. As has my heart."

Blinking, Keira dipped her head so she wouldn't have to look at the naked desire, the love on Raull's face. She didn't want to love him. Didn't want to bind herself to him. For all her grand talk of Sibyls opening up their colony, of becoming a real part of this world, she had too many responsibilities to leave permanently. Too many Sibyls relied on her. Turning her back on that so that she could bind herself to just one other would be selfish, perhaps even immoral.

Leaving her troubling thoughts, she kissed the base of his cock, savored the scent of his skin, took the head of his rod into her mouth and swirled her tongue around it. Raull hissed and rocked back on his heels.

"No," he said, pulled away then eased her back onto the bed. "I've missed you too much. Want you too much to deny myself the pleasure of touching you for a second longer." He kissed her belly, ran his tongue around her navel and grinned against her skin when she sighed with pleasure. "I've missed that sound, the scent of your skin," he murmured and settled himself comfortably between her legs. Sliding further up her body, he kissed a path up her chest and nuzzled her breasts.

She wrapped her arms around him and held him close.

The house was silent except for the sound of Raull's breathing, her soft gasps. Light from the three moons filtered into the room, adding to the glow of the lamps. Raull's room smelled of fresh air, rich wood and him. Keira sighed again when he left her breasts, scored her throat with his teeth then smoothed his lips over her jaw.

His hands covered what his mouth didn't. Holding her breasts, he squeezed them gently, thumbed her nipples then pinched just hard enough to make her gasp. One hand drifted lower, caressed her belly, slipped between her legs. Using the backs of his fingers, he stroked her curls, tugged gently then pet her nether lips.

When she lifted one knee, allowing him easier access, he growled his approval.

Finally reaching her mouth, Raull kissed her with a passion that left Keira deliciously light headed. She stroked his broad shoulders and gripped his back with more strength than discretion. He didn't seem to mind. Gently, he sunk two fingers in her as if testing her readiness. Humming with contentment, he pistoned her slowly, spread her juices over her clit, rubbed it with a light touch.

Keira's need rose quickly. She'd missed him and she couldn't lie to herself about that. Even if she was destined to be with him only a short time, she'd enjoy that time and carry the memories forever. "Please," she whimpered after he'd touched her far too long without satisfying her.

"Please what?"

"Please make love to me." She squirmed beneath him, trying to heighten the contact between them, drive his fingers deeper inside. He had no trouble resisting her strength but he did kiss her mouth, claim it as his, rasp his tongue

over her palate and groaned with pleasure when she came back at him just as hard.

"With the greatest pleasure, tonight and always," he growled, licked his lips as he watched her pull her legs apart for him. Taking hold of his cock, he rubbed it against her slit until she was moaning, calling him foul names, even bringing her fist down on his shoulder. Then he slid into her slowly, shuddered, pressed deeper.

She trembled when he set a slow, grinding pace, held her so tight her breasts were crushed between them, kissed her with a tenderness that made her ache until she tensed beneath him. Until she arched into him, gasped then whimpered as her body squeezed down on him in time with the pulses of her release.

#### \* \* \*

"It's fortunate you caught Hosander's attention. He has more influence than most and he'll be able to introduce you to many courtiers." Johnis, the third Warrior, helped himself to another serving of grilled meat and soft bread. A few inches taller than Erand, he was possibly the

most handsome man Keira had ever seen. His brown eyes were intelligent, rimmed with thick lashes and his cheeks and jaw were beautifully sculpted. She'd met him that morning when he'd returned from night patrol duty.

All three Warriors and Keira were sitting in Raull's kitchen, eating breakfast, planning the day's strategy. The sun would rise soon and, after drinking down the last of her hisian leaf tea, Keira tucked her weapons into her boots. Noticing Raull's disgruntled expression, she winked at him when Erand and Johnis admired her legs.

"Hmm. When this crisis is over, I think I'll take some time off, Raull," Johnis said, shook his heavy hair back and grinned mischievously. "Visit the Sibyl's colony. Bring back a woman of my own. Or two. How about you, Erand?"

"I'd take two," the youngest Warrior quipped and refilled his tea cup.

"Two would kill you," Keira said earnestly, stood and smoothed her short dress.

"Probably," Erand acknowledged. "But it would be a glorious death."

Laughing with the others, Raull stood. He sobered when he cupped Keira's shoulders in his hands. "Be careful today, woman. Despite Johnis' opinions, keep some distance between yourself and Hosander."

"Are you questioning a Sibyl's abilities?" Johnis taunted. "Or just her fondness for you?"

Raull grinned at the other men, refusing to be baited. Instead, he hugged Keira, smiled contentedly when she hugged him back then kissed the top of her head. "I saw the way he looked at you last night when he entered our compound. I didn't like it but I couldn't blame him. Oh and the soldiers on sentry duty at our gate now have orders not to admit anyone unless one of us gives permission."

"Does that mean no more, er, unannounced female admirers?"

"Yes. It also means no more opportunities for my Sibyl to express her jealousy. It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

She slapped his arm gently, kissed him once more then stepped back. "Think about me today," she said as she turned to leave.

"How could I not," Raull called out, watched her walk away then, resignedly, turned back to the others and helped clear away the remains of their breakfast.

#### \* \* \*

Entering through a servants' passage, Keira went directly to the palace kitchens. She sniffed the air appreciatively, introduced herself to the baker who was almost finished his work for the day, put two small loaves of fresh bread on a tray and carried them into the scullery. There, she lit the lamps, added wood to the cook stoves and prepared a plate of fresh fruit, bread and tea. Following directions Raull had given her, she made her way to the Sibyl's chambers.

On the way, she met two other servers coming into work. They greeted her, congratulated her on getting an early start but didn't question her. Neither did the few courtiers and guards she passed. The courtiers were dressed for exercise and heading for the stables at the rear of the palace. She nodded to them, smiled at those she recognized, greeted them by name if she knew

them. Again, no one questioned a serving woman carrying a breakfast tray at that hour.

The door to the Sibyl's chambers wasn't guarded but she knew it wouldn't be. The Sibyls' mystic reputation was enough to keep the uninvited away. Besides, the door was heavy and the locks were sturdy. The master key Raull had given her opened it easily enough.

The first rays of the sun filled the ante-chamber, making the polished stone floors sparkle. She smelled flowers, fresh air and felt the warmth of a low fire burning in a hearth set off to one side of the room. Keira walked on. The chamber opened up onto a gracious reception area, furnished with comfortable chairs, elegant tables and thick rugs. The hall beyond opened onto a smaller, formal meeting room, a sitting room, a kitchen and a library. The door beyond that led her into the Sibyl's private chambers. Another sitting room then two grand bedchambers. She followed the quiet sound of a man's voice into the one on her right.

"We could use more rain but it's been a beautiful summer so far." The man speaking was elderly, at least eighty-five cycles old. He was running a brush through the long, white hair of a woman sitting in front of him while she stared blankly out the window. Her head rocked gently in time with the slow, gentle movement of the brush.

Without making a sound, Keira set down the breakfast tray. She recognized the man from his image stamped on the local currency. Prince Casus of Tarmig-Lun. The old Sibyl was harder to recognize because Keira hadn't seen her in at least twenty cycles.

"Hello, Wanda," she said softly and walked toward the couple.

The prince turned, shot her an unhappy look then stood up with the stiffness of age. "Leave it there," he said curtly, waving in the direction of the breakfast tray. "You're new and were obviously given poor instructions." He tried to herd her out the door. "The Sibyl is not to be disturbed. Someone else will see to her meals."

Keira noticed the half-empty tray already in the room. The two cups of tea, still steaming, sitting on the table closest to the ancient Sibyl and the prince. Skirting him, she took another step into the room. "Hello, Wanda," she repeated

and this time let the gentlest of inflection carry her voice.

The other Sibyl sat up a little, turned. At first she looked confused, frightened. She kept looking at the prince as if seeking comfort, maybe reassurance from him. Finally, a smile lifted the corners of her mouth and she peered at Keira more intently. "Muriel," she said. Her voice was scratchy, thin but there was no mistaking the happiness in it. "Is it time for me to go on guard duty? I...I must have lost track of the time. Where are my battle leathers?" she asked, looking at the prince.

He returned her smile but his eyes were sad. "You've got plenty of time before your shift, beloved," he said then turned to Keira. "Who are you?" he hissed.

"My name is Keira. Muriel was my greatgrandmother. I'm the splitting image of her, or so they tell me." She sat down beside Wanda. "Like me, Muriel was also a general."

"You're a Sibyl," the prince said and took a step toward her. The sadness in his eyes turned to anger. "Leave us. Leave this city and never come back."

Keira stood and her brow arched. "Why?"

To his credit, the old prince didn't back away from the taller, imposing woman. He took a step forward, raised his hand then lowered it quickly when Wanda began making soft, plaintive sounds.

"What is it, Casus? What's wrong? Who are you?" she added, turning on Keira. "What do you want?" Fear and anger rose in her voice. "Make her go away!" She picked up one of the tea cups, threw it at Keira. It smashed on the floor when Keira side-stepped it.

Deliberately calming herself, Keira walked toward the trembling Sibyl. "I have come from the colony, Wanda. Give me your hand."

"*No*," the old woman shouted.

"Give me your hand," Keira repeated patiently, knelt and held out her hand.

Wanda looked up at the prince yet again. Then, hesitantly, as if she was expecting to be hurt, she touched her palm to Keira's.

Keira jumped and couldn't control her reaction. Random images, frightening because

they came so fast flashed through the old Sibyl's mind, disorientating her as she tried to hang on to one, place it in context, failing every time. Wanda as a young soldier, standing watch on the walls of the Sibyls' colony. A young man, handsome, strong then two small girls who looked just like him, playing in the sunshine. Wanda as a child herself, learning about Earth, where they'd come from, who they were. Whatever was wrong with her now, Wanda's gift had lost none of its strength and she easily projected her confusion and terror into Keira's head. Mastering herself, Keira distanced herself from the emotions pouring into her, sorted through them, examined them. Slowing her breathing, she dug beneath the scatter being thrown at her, used the bridge Wanda's vast talent had established.

"Wanda?" she whispered in her head, not sure if there was enough of the Sibyl left in this old woman to answer. Her only answer was more confusion, more random noise. "Wanda," she tried again, quietly insistent this time. This time, the confusion parted like window coverings that slowly let in the morning light.

"Muriel." This voice the old Sibyl projected

was younger, although still hesitant. "No," she said and for a moment, Keira was alone with her own thoughts. "No you're not Muriel but you are descended from her. Through your father," she added and the confusion receded a little more. Her voice became more confident. "You are Keira."

"Yes."

"Am I insane?"

"No. But you do have a sickness."

"A sickness. Yes. It came on slowly. I get confused. I don't remember things, yet some things I remember clearly." Her subconscious thoughts paused, moved in a beautiful, colorful arc then floated back to Keira. "I remember the smell of my mother's hair. Sitting up in bed at night, snuggled next to her while she read stories to me. I remember the sound of my lover's heartbeat when he held me, the movement of our child in my belly. But so much of everything else is new, frightening and I lash out."

Through the Sibyl's eyes, Keira saw the prince's lined, loving face watching them.

"I hate myself for lashing out at him."

"*Wanda*?" Keira asked as she felt the woman drifting away, felt her tire, felt the confusion regain the parts of Wanda's mind it had been driven out of. She let go of the old Sibyl's hand.

"Wanda," Keira repeated, whispering aloud this time. She gathered herself and looked directly into Wanda's rheumy yet still beautiful, green eyes. "Be at peace today." Power and compulsion rippled in Keira's soft voice. "Nothing will harm you. You are safe, warm and comfortable."

Wanda blinked, looked at her, at the prince then back at Keira. The lines around her mouth eased and her frail back straightened, just a little. "Muriel," she greeted Keira warmly. "Is it time for me to go on guard duty?"

"You have earned a rest, Wanda," Keira replied, smiled, picked up the hairbrush and handed it to the prince who'd stood hovering over them the whole time. "Relax today and enjoy the beautiful flowers Casus has brought you."

"Casus," Wanda said. Her voice wasn't pinched when she spoke to him, when she looked at him. It was calm and loving like her eyes. When he sat beside her and resumed brushing her hair, she turned to look back out the window.

"Can you help her?" Casus asked.

"No," Keira answered sadly. "Her dementia is too advanced. Perhaps when it first started, the healers at the colony could have helped but now all we can do is make sure her last cycles are comfortable."

"I will not let you take her from us."

Keira wasn't surprised by the vehemence in the prince's voice. "You mean take her from *you*, don't you?"

Despite his age, he flushed when he nodded.

"She loves you," Keira added. "I saw it in her head, what lucid part of her that remains. She has for many cycles now."

"I love her too," he admitted, continuing the soothing strokes through Wanda's hair. "From the day I met her. I never told my wife but I think she always knew. In a perverse way, I think she was happy for me. Ours was an arranged marriage. A political liaison between kingdoms. She was one of my best friends and closest advisors up until the day she died. She gave me two beautiful children and I'll always be grateful to her for that."

"Hmm," Keira murmured and looked out the bank of tall windows. "There was something tied into that memory in Wanda's head. Something about a garden. She likes it very much, especially on warm days like this one." She didn't tell Casus that within the next cycle, Wanda would fall asleep in one of the comfortable chairs out there, warm, peaceful and content in the sun, and not wake up again.

"We'd hoped but we weren't sure..." Casus' voice trailed off when he noticed Keira's confusion. "My son is a gifted gardener. He designed and planted the gardens outside of Wanda's rooms two cycles ago. She would get so sad sometimes and..."

"And the gardens your son created for her did bring her happiness when the first stages of her dementia tormented her. They still make her happy. How long have you been sheltering Wanda?" she added abruptly.

"Ever since the first symptoms appeared," he answered without apology. "I didn't want to tell the Sibyls because I couldn't bear to have her taken away from me. My wife had died the previous cycle. Wanda and I had just started our

lives together, touched each other for the first time." His breathing hitched with anger then settled when he resumed brushing his lover's hair.

"She won't be taken away," she assured him. "I make you that promise. Her sickness is too far advanced. She needs to be in familiar surroundings, with people who love her and after twenty cycles, that's here, with you. It's obvious she's calmer with you than without, otherwise why would you refuse to let anyone but yourself tend her?"

"Wanda was like you. Intuitive. Smart as a whip. I never could get anything past this woman," he added with a smile, stroked Wanda's hair and continued brushing it. "Will you be our new Sibyl?"

"I cannot. I don't have the talent she does. But," Keira sighed, "Tarmig-Lun definitely needs a new Sibyl. I'll send a dispatch to the colony but it will take some time for one to arrive. You do know that your house is on the verge of being overthrown because you've spent the past two cycles tending to her instead of governing your kingdom's affairs."

He sighed, made a dismissive sound then, grudgingly, nodded.

"Well I don't expect me showing up will drag you out of your self-imposed retirement, Casus," she growled. "All I ask is that you not tell anyone what I am. There are enemies within your palace, stirring up civil unrest, seeking to replace you with a ruler of their choice. I and others are doing what we can to find out who they are and stop them. If you won't help, don't hinder us."

"Agreed," he answered.

Keira looked at him critically. She noticed the thinness of his body, the bowing of his back. His hands were bony and the flesh was pale, thin, stretched too tight over knotted, blue veins. Old and frail, he was long past the age to rule effectively. His heir should have stepped up cycles ago and taken on his burdens, let him live out his life in peaceful dignity. Instead, the prince had hidden himself away to play nursemaid to a woman he loved but who probably didn't recognize him half the time.

"She likes it when you brush her hair," Keira said quietly, remembering one of the stronger images she'd seen in Wanda's mind.

"I know," the prince said with quiet affection and offered his Sibyl another sip of tea from the intact cup when Keira turned and left the chamber.

# CHAPTER EKAHT

"You don't mean to say that you traveled here alone!"

Keira smiled at the old courtier as she added more hot hisian leaf tea to his cup. Hosander was meeting with his council, reviewing the past week's work, planning the next's. He'd specifically requested that Keira bring their refreshments.

"I did. I admit I didn't know there'd been raids on Tarmig-Lun's border towns or that people thought things were a bit unstable here," she lied. "Maybe that would have changed my willingness to travel here." Setting down the cup, she patted the courtier's shoulder gently and moved on to the next man. "But I didn't have any trouble on the road. The inns were clean, the people pleasant."

The old courtier, Darsh, didn't look convinced. He shot her a look worthy of any outraged parent. "Well I certainly hope you'll be more cautious now, young lady. Hmmph. In my day families took care of their own, especially pretty young

women who know how to pour tea without scalding everyone around them. This cousin of yours, whoever he is, should be—"

"I'm sure Keira is more than smart enough to take a few simple precautions," Hosander interrupted the old courtier smoothly. "Now, we were discussing the village of Kingas and their new glass-cutting cottage industry. Keira, you must have ridden through Kingas on the way here. What did you think of the place?"

Setting down her teapot, Keira thought about her answer before she spoke. "It was pleasant enough. Perhaps a bit larger than some other villages. There was no shortage of merchandise in the shops."

Hosander nodded, seemed to digest her opinion then moved on. While she served tea and sweet bread, he discussed the uniqueness of Kingas' new glass, whether the village was large enough to support a stable worker pool, applications for the new product and whether he should send a representative to convince the village to remain allied with the kingdom of Tarmig-Lun and not seek the protection of another.

#### \* \* \*

"I'm very annoyed with you, Raull."

Carrying a tray of roast stoan fruit wrapped in grilled meat, Keira circled the grand meeting room and feigned disinterest in the beautiful, young woman fawning over Raull. All the courtiers were assembled. The morning's general assembly had been productive, and spirited. Older courtiers had demanded to know when the raids and unrest would be dealt with. Younger ones had grumbled about the lack of powerful leadership. A few, looking to make a reputation for themselves, proposed leading roving patrols in a proactive defense against these mercenaries. As the leader of the prince's army, Raull had been centered out again and again, asked when they'd see results, when people would start feeling safe in their homes. Trade was being affected. Ships weren't docking in their ports like they used to. Unrest was bad for business and business wanted answers.

Now that the assembly was over, the members had gathered to mull over the morning's discussions while they waited for luncheon to

be served. Some had family members join them and the talk was as much about politics as it was about personal interests.

Aline, the daughter of a rich, connected family was using the opportunity to corner her favorite Warrior. "I wanted to pay you a visit last night and I was refused entry by those foolish soldiers guarding your gate."

When Aline caressed Raull's bare arm, Keira had to grit her teeth to keep from pulling a knife out of her boot and cutting the woman's hand off.

"They refuse entry to all by my order and with good reason," Raull growled and moved subtly to evade the woman's touch. "These are dangerous times, Aline. You shouldn't be out at night alone. There's a curfew which you flout and whenever you're caught, you threaten the soldiers with reprisal from your family to keep them from reporting you. That is going to stop."

Aline pouted then flicked her long, black hair back imperiously. "Oh pooh," she huffed. "The streets are so full of soldiers a girl can't get into trouble even if she wanted to. Which is why I—"

"Aline. Darling," one of her uncles interrupted. "I'd like you to meet our new Junior Minister of Finance."

Raull stepped away after murmuring something unintelligible. Keira hoped he was glad to give up his spot at Aline's side although nothing in his predatory walk hinted at it. She looked away from him and made a point of not looking at him for the rest of the gathering, and didn't serve at his table.

"I see Hosander felt the need to accompany you home. Again," Raull growled even before she set her foot inside his home. He pulled her inside, pressed her up against a wall, tucked his face into the side of her neck and breathed her in. His chest expanded, brushed her nipples then crushed them. "What does he want from you? As if I can't guess."

"Hmm. Seems I'm not the only one who can succumb to jealousy," Keira purred and wrapped her arms around her lover. "Other than being unfailingly polite, he asks me questions."

"Questions?" Leaning away from her, Raull kissed her then led her into his living area.

The two other Warriors sitting there greeted her warmly. They were still dressed in their serviceable leather pants and weapons' vests and it was obvious by the empty dishes littering the room that they and Raull had been talking for awhile.

"On the surface, Hosander is interested in the experiences of a recent arrival but his questions have become more...pointed."

All three Warriors watched her, waiting for her to continue.

"We spoke about blacksmithing—the occupation of this fictitious husband of mine," she added. "I chose that because it's what my father and brother do. If required, I can carry on an informed discussion about the business."

Erand and Johnis nodded approvingly but said nothing.

"Hosander was subtle but I knew he was probing for holes in my story. I suppose it was foolish of me to say I traveled here without being aware there was civil unrest."

"Well," Johnis spoke up. "That's either good or bad for us. Good if Hosander has taken it upon himself to search for malcontents within the palace. Bad for us if he's one of the ringleaders and he's recruiting palace staff."

"Especially palace staff with daily access to us," Raull added in a dark tone. "Our list of suspects keeps getting bigger and I'm getting tired of doing nothing while we wait for the insurrectionists' next attack." He exhaled, pulled Keira down into his lap, hugged her then let her sit up straight. "What did you find out from the Sibyl?"

"Wanda has an illness that cannot be cured. It has robbed her of most of her memory. She has been unable to function for almost two cycles and the prince spends his time tending to her, sheltering her instead of paying attention to the needs of his kingdom."

"We suspected something like that," Erand huffed, raked back his brown hair and refilled his cup with gyrus wine. He filled another one and handed it to Keira.

"Your prince is old," Keira continued, "and should have been allowed to step down cycles ago. He loves Wanda and, as a man, made a

selfless decision to care for her. As a ruler, he made a poor one." She took a sip of her wine, touched the ends of Raull's hair then set her cup down. "He is too old to rule effectively and, I believe, would not even try if it meant spending more than a minute away from his Sibyl."

"Choosing love over duty. Would that we all had that freedom," Johnis said quietly, stood, walked over to a window and stared out at the darkness. Even reflected by the glass, his face was still impossibly beautiful. He drank down the contents of his cup in one swallow then turned back to them. "Give us a plan for tomorrow, Raull. Surely three Warriors and a Sibyl can solve any problem we put our minds to."

"I'll draw up a dispatch to the Sibyls' colony," Keira piped up. "They need to send a Seer to replace Wanda. And before you ask, no, I do not have the talent needed to fulfill that role."

"Put your dispatch in my hands within the half-hour, and I'll have it out of the city and on its way before dawn," Johnis assured her. He turned to Raull and looked at him pointedly.

"There's more traffic in and out of the city these days," Raull said speculatively. He rubbed his hand over Keira's back as he spoke. "Especially, Hosander inadvertently let us know, considering how much trade is down. I want a random selection of men stopped, ones between twenty and twenty-five cycles. Ones who look like they're more used to handling a blade than selling produce."

"You think mercenaries are trickling into the city," Erand said and leaned forward in his seat.

"I do," Raull answered. "I want them held for interrogation by one of us. It's not much but it's a start. Questions?"

There were none and the other two Warriors left soon after.

Each morning for the next several days, Keira visited Wanda's chambers at sunrise. Sometimes Wanda spoke of her childhood, other times she was content to sit with her prince while he tended her. Keira always left the old Sibyl with a compulsion to feel contentment, peace, not fear.

Each morning she was more convinced that

the Casus would never give up his place at his beloved Sibyl's side.

Raull was discouraged by this news but not surprised. Every evening upon her return, Keira told him what bits of information she'd overheard. With the increased army presence at the gates confirming their fears, the courtiers were becoming more secretive. They no longer talked openly but conferred in private, except to repeat rumors of impending attacks. A popular server because of her discretion, quiet manner and strength, Keira often came and went during meetings without being noticed. Unfortunately, she heard nothing more useful than growing talk of unease. Whenever she could, she'd touch a courtier. Her days were filled with images of the future. Someone's happy retirement. The announcement of a long-anticipated grandchild. The moment of someone's death.

The only positive in all this was there seemed to be a continuity in the general lifestyle of the ruling citizens of Tarmig-Lun. She never saw anyone cast into poverty or mourning the violent death of a loved one. Her visions made her believe there'd be no violent, civil uprising.

Keira and the Warriors found this encouraging but, again, not helpful.

Raull told her they were having some success with the interrogations. The name Eferus had been replaced by that of two other mid-level civil servants. Problem was, they had no family ties, worked for different branches of the government and the only thing they did have in common was a sudden influx of cash that had wiped out pressing debts. Raull had them arrested, questioned but whoever was controlling them knew how to do it while keeping his identity a secret.

"Why are you working as a server?" As he did every night, Hosander walked her home despite the regular street patrols. "You're bright, young, pretty. I've seen men admiring you and not just for your obvious, er, assets. You could do any work you set your mind to."

Keira smiled. "The work is undemanding and I need that right now. I need time to sort through my feelings, feel the ground under my feet again. For now, I'm content just being somewhere new and meeting new people. Soon I'll be ready to take on new challenges too."

"But for now you need some peace." Hosander laughed dismissively. "You've picked a poor city if you're looking for peace right now," he added as they passed a group of sentries on a street corner, ready to enforce the curfew as soon as the sun set.

"It'll return. I'm sure of that," Keira said as they turned down the alley that led to the Warriors' walled courtyard. "Besides, haven't you ever felt the need for peace? To get away from the demands on you? Make a new start?"

"Of course," he answered perfunctorily, slowed then looked at her earnestly. "No, actually," he laughed. "Never." He threw his hands up in the air. "I like my life. I've worked hard to earn my appointment and I like being able to make a difference in people's lives. Hopefully for the better."

They laughed quietly and kept walking.

"The only thing I do regret is losing my wife." His pace slowed even more until he was almost standing still. "She died in childbirth, along with our baby girl. But," he added and his sudden cheerfulness sounded forced. "She left me with a beautiful son. He's five now and terrorizes the servants, although they love him despite that. I haven't spent much time with him lately. Perhaps you'll join us for dinner some evening when all this talk of unrest is behind us."

Keira opened her mouth to answer when an annoyingly pert, familiar voice called out from behind them.

"Hosander! What a marvelous surprise running into you here. Tell those silly guards to let me in, will you?"

Aline strolled up the alley with feline grace. At five-five, she was much shorter than Keira but every inch of her was voluptuous curves. Her dark eyes shimmered with seductive intensity in the dimming light.

Keira read annoyance in Hosander's expression before he turned back to greet the other woman.

"Aline," he said coolly. "It's too late for you to be out unescorted. You know better. Keep this up and I'll make sure the next guard who catches you receives a reward instead of a threat."

"Oh pooh," she huffed and wound her arm around his. "Now you're sounding just like

Raull. Honestly, I wish you men would get to the bottom of all this raiding and put an end to it. He's no fun at all these days."

"Neither am I."

*"You* never were." She flashed the trade minister a flirty smile and pressed her impressive breast into the side of his body. "Now, are you going to take me inside with you or not?"

"Not," Hosander replied firmly, disengaged himself then took hold of her elbow and steered her away from the gate. "I'm taking you home and I'm going to tell your parents where I found you." As they left, he raised his arm to Keira in farewell.

Fortunately, Aline was too busy arguing and pouting to notice that a mere serving girl was admitted to the Warriors' courtyard without question.

#### \* \* \*

"Sit down, Aline."

The young woman's defiance melted under the force of Raull's voice. He pulled out a chair, planted his massive hands on her shoulders and pushed her down into a sitting position.

"You ate with your parents an hour before sundown." His voice was ripe with dark undercurrents that rippled the air like living, breathing things. Johnis stood in the shadows as witness to Aline's interrogation. They were in a stone room in one of the palace's basements, close to the holding cells. Those cells were currently full of questionable travelers who were being questioned by Erand. Although the youngest Warrior amongst them, Erand's voice inflection skills were almost as impressive as Raull's.

Raull planted himself in front of Aline and continued. "By sundown, you were on a public street at least fifteen blocks away. How did you get there without being seen?"

Aline trembled visibly as Raull's voice rolled over her. She picked at the cuff of her finely woven dress, scuffed the sole of her hand-painted shoe on the stone floor. "There is a tavern on Hanear Street."

Raull glanced at Johnis. Hanear Street was popular with the city's criminal element. A young

woman of privilege like Aline had no business going there alone.

She continued. "If you pay him a few coins, the tavern keeper will let you through to the back alley. From there, it's a simple matter to follow the marks on the walls to various parts of the city. Many of the alleys interconnect, although some do so underground and you have to be careful when you cross the few open intersections but from there, you can get to the palace, the market, close to one of the gates out of the city. Even close to your home, Raull." She chewed on her plump lower lip and looked up at him hopefully. Lifting her hand, she tried to touch him and seemed confused when Raull stepped out of reach.

His expression unreadable, Raull looked down at her and said, "Thank you, Aline. Wait outside. I'll be with you in a minute."

After she'd stepped out obediently, he turned to Johnis. "Go with her. Have her show you this route. Take soldiers and have this tavern keeper brought here for questioning."

Grinning ferally, Johnis said, "That's our first real clue. Perhaps this civil unrest will end soon.

"But what I want to know is who in their right mind would send someone as bubble-headed as Aline into that neighborhood. Any tavern keeper down there would oblige her once or twice if he was paid, but he'd soon realize there was a lot more profit in stealing her then ransoming her back to her family. Or even robbing her for that jewelry she wears like it was paste."

Johnis nodded then left with palpable excitement.

#### \* \* \*

"Keira." One of the stewards came into the scullery just as the serving girls were clearing away the breakfast things. "The trade minister would like a word with you in his office."

Smoothing her skirt, Keira checked her reflection in a mirror. "Did he want tea or—?"

"He didn't say," the steward huffed and maneuvered her out the door. "Ask him yourself."

Keira didn't dawdle. She stopped outside Hosander's suite, knocked and entered when his undersecretary told her to come in. With a grin, he waved her directly into the minister's office.

When she opened the door, a gangly child with Hosander's eyes ran up to her, grabbed her hand with both of his and dragged her inside.

She hid her smile when she saw an image from the child's future.

"Keira, right? I'm Rainor. Hi. My dad talks about you." He continued to tug on her hand.

"What my son lacks in manners," Hosander scolded as he stood up from behind his desk. "He makes up for in enthusiasm. Rainor's governess brings him by this time every week so we can spend time together during the day. Remember your manners, Rainor, and offer our guest a chair. Then you can talk her ear off."

While he watched, his young son bombarded Keira with questions about her home, told her what his father did, told her about his lessons, his friends, the games he liked and asked if she'd like to come to their house and visit sometime.

She looked up at Hosander warily.

"The invitation will always be open," he said

and moved to the door when his undersecretary popped his head in and handed Hosander a sheaf of papers.

"Well?" Rainor prompted in what she guessed was supposed to be a whisper. Although only five, he had his father's directness as well as his blue eyes. "When can you come?"

"I do not know," Keira answered honestly then, after checking over her shoulder, added, "But in the meantime, promise me that, in a few cycles from now, when your father's remarried to a nice lady with brown hair and your little sister accidentally throws your favorite toy jacos out the window, don't be too mean to her about it. She was only jealous because you were playing with the toy instead of her."

Rainor's brow furrowed then something in his expression grew serious. He nodded. "I promise."

Unease prickled the back of Keira's neck. She turned toward the door and found Hosander watching her. There were bright spots of color on his cheeks and his eyes were cold. Without a word, he zagged around her, grabbed his son and

stood him on the far side of the desk, using it as a shield between the boy and Keira.

Hosander moved again, quicker than she would have thought a politician could. It required no gift to see what was coming next. Despite that, Keira didn't fight back—there was a child in the room. She felt a strong hand on her shoulder and didn't resist when she was pulled to her feet, spun around.

"Who the hell *are* you?" Hosander demanded coldly and called for a detachment of soldiers to take her to the prisoner cells.

# CHANTER NINE

"When Raull finds out he's going to tear this cell block apart with his bare hands." Erand paced outside of Keira's cell, raked his fingers through his short, dark hair. His polished boots echoed on the stone floor.

"First things first," Keira whispered, grabbed the young Warrior's arm on his next pass, made him stand still and listen. "You get out of here. Hosander thinks you're my cousin. He'll arrest you next."

"The man's an idiot. Trying to arrest a Warrior will make the unrest in the city explode into violence. We're the line in the sand that can always, *always* be trusted."

"The man's impassioned and frustrated. He's making bad judgment calls but he's too close to all this to realize that."

"What about you? I can't just leave you here."

"You're going to do exactly that. Wait for me

in Raull's home. And on your way out, tell a guard I want something."

"What's that?"

"I want to wash my hair."

The water in her cell was cold so it took three washes to get all the dye out. Wrapping herself up in the guard's plain, brown cloak, Keira compelled him to take a nap on her cot. She had him turn his face away from the door, tucked a blanket around him, and slipped out into the hall. Raull had told her about the few secret passages and bolt holes that were part of the palace's defenses. Using them whenever she could, she made her way to the Sibyl's chambers. It was now about mid morning and Casus was surprised to see her. Even more surprised when she threw back the cloak she was wearing, revealing her pale red hair and started rummaging in Wanda's closets.

"What are you doing with that?" he barked when she pulled out one of Wanda's traditional, Sibyl's gowns. It was a high-necked straight coat designed to disguise the body. This one was plain and unceremonious.

"Doing my part to prevent your kingdom from exploding." She fastened the coat and glared at him. "You are still prince. Carry out one last duty and I will see that you are honorably relieved of your duties."

His mouth thinned into a tight gash. "Who're you to tell me what to do, woman?"

"I'm a Sibyl. I represent the Colony. Screw with the colony..."

"Die by the colony's hand." Wanda's thin voice drifted up from a chair set near the windows.

Casus balked then looked away when Keira stood up to her full, impressive height and bristled.

"Tell me what to do, Sibyl," he said and sighed.

"Good answer," Keira snapped. "I want you to summon your family to the central meeting hall. All of them but I want you to make sure your heir arrives within the hour. I want you there too. I'll arrange for a woman to come and tend Wanda in your absence."

Nodding grudgingly, Casus turned away to tell Wanda he was stepping for a little while.

Keira left the Sibyl's chambers openly. With the cowl pulled up, no one could see her face. True, she was taller than Wanda but as Wanda hadn't been seen out in public in almost two cycles, people weren't apt to notice. Instead, they all stared in her wake in amazement as their Seer walked through the palace. When she entered the kitchen, she raised a hand and beckoned one of the young serving girls to follow her. Keira knew this girl. Although she hadn't yet reached her twentieth cycle, she was kind, good natured and knew how to keep her mouth shut. She followed Keira after only a second's hesitation.

In the Sibyl's chambers, she jumped when Keira pulled back her cowl.

"Keira? What're you playing at? You're... gor...you're a Sibyl," she gasped then, tentatively, touched Keira's hair. "Oh the rest of 'em are gonna split when they find out. Are you our new Seer then? Checking out the place before taking on the job, huh?"

Keira assured her everything was all right but that the old Sibyl was sick and needed tending for a few hours. The girl nodded obediently. It was general consensus that there was something wrong with their Seer. A sickness was as likely an explanation as any. Before she left, she saw the girl kneel in front of Wanda, adjust the blanket across her lap and offer to make her a fresh cup of tea.

Keira left the palace without talking to anyone and went straight to the Warriors' homes. The soldiers on duty opened the gate when she told them to then closed it up tight as if she'd never been there. Pulling her cowl back, she walked into Raull's home.

"Tell me you've got a plan," Erand groused as he followed her down the hall to Raull's sleeping chamber. "Because if you don't—" His words were cut off when Keira put her hand on his face and pushed gently. He backed away instead of following her inside and waited on the other side of the closed door.

"We're going back to the palace," she explained while she stripped off her dress and soft boots, exchanged them for her battle leathers. "The prince and his heirs will be putting in an appearance today." With her sword belt in place

and wearing the array of weaponry she'd come for, she donned her own Sibyl's gown. The hem cleared the ground and the gown hid what was beneath. "Whoever's behind this," she said as she opened the door, "wants his house overthrown. We're going to put a new, young, rightful ruler in place and see who blinks."

Erand followed her out then ran into his own house to load his vest up with weapons. "I guess you've never met the prince's son, huh? This should be interesting," he said as he reappeared and, side by side, they headed for the palace.

#### \* \* \*

"You did *what*?" Raull bellowed. His voice boomed through the crowded, central meeting hall. A tray of cups smashed on the floor and several servants scurried away in fear.

"I had a serving girl arrested. My men are hunting for Erand now. He got her a job here right under our noses. She was accepted without references because he said she was his cousin. She's a spy, I'm sure she is. I checked...Erand has

no cousins and no one in the village she says she's from has ever heard of her."

Raull advanced on the much shorter minister. "I want her brought to me. *Now*." The force of his voice shook the room. Soldiers scurried off to carry out his order without being asked.

"That won't be necessary, Raull."

He looked up and felt the tension in his shoulders ease when Keira entered the hall. Erand was at her side and he scanned the crowd with a practiced eye. Raull could almost hear him mentally cataloguing what few threats there were, then dismiss them. She stepped up to him.

"Sorry for making you wait, Warrior," she said and drew back her cowl. The crowd gasped when they saw the color of her hair, realized they were looking at a young Sibyl when they'd never known such creatures existed, then gasped again when they recognized the servant Hosander claimed was locked in the prisoner cells beneath their feet.

"Arrest her," Hosander yelled. "Traitor!"

Every soldier stationed around the room froze

in place when Raull lifted a hand, gazed at them then lowered his hand slowly.

"Since when has a Sibyl ever been a traitor?" Raull asked reasonably. He touched her hair, smiled then spoke to the crowd. "It has come to my attention that our old Seer has an illness. It came upon her slowly but it has rendered her incapable of carrying out her duties. The Sibyls have sent one of their own to see if a replacement is needed and to procure one if necessary. After spending time among us, Sibyl, what is your decision?"

Hosander shut his mouth slowly. Understanding then annoyance crossed his face.

"Your Seer is ill," Keira answered. "We're sorry we weren't aware of this earlier. A replacement has been sent for. Your present Seer will spend what little time she has left here, where she is comfortable and familiar with her surroundings. She will be tended by the man who turned his back on power to care for the woman he loves."

"And you couldn't have told me this when we met?" Hosander fumed. He put his hands on his hips and tapped his foot impatiently. "With all this unrest, I look at every new hire with

suspicion. Either you were working with the Warriors or against them."

Keira shot him a sympathetic look then turned her attention back to Raull. She took his hand, turned him toward the main entrance and copied his bow when Prince Casus entered. Dressed in rich but understated clothing, he was followed by a man and a woman, both in their fifties, and what had to be at least two younger generations of family members.

Keira and Raull stood aside while the prince climbed a small dais at the head of the room.

"I've been absent for too long." His voice was scratchy but it carried nonetheless. "Our kingdom has been left without central leadership and has suffered for it. I accept full blame for that. I'm here today to step down as your prince and appoint my heir, Prince Pouroth, as my successor." With that, Casus left the dais, clasped the arms of the courtiers extended to him and walked out of the central meeting hall.

The eyes that followed him turned to their new prince. Pouroth gulped, clutched what Keira assumed was his wife's hand, and approached Raull.

"I...I cannot accept this. But I have to," he dithered then inhaled slowly. His wife wrapped her arm around his waist and looked up at him. A few inches short of six feet, Pouroth had his father's hazel eyes and straight nose, but he had none of the old prince's fire or presence. He held out his hands. "I love my family and my home above all things. I'm a descendant of rulers but I am not the man you want. Although I keep myself aware of what's happening in the kingdom, I have no interest in ruling. Nor do I have the temperament or talent for it."

Many of the courtiers started grumbling amongst themselves.

"It's true I was trained for it but I'd be a sham. I'm a gardener, plain and simple. It may not be my birthright but it was what I was born to do." Pouroth hugged his wife. "The only thing I love more is my family. I wouldn't want to sentence them to life in a kingdom with a weak ruler, not in this current political climate."

Raull crossed his arms over his chest, set his feet apart and looked down at the prince for a moment. "Very well," he said at last. "Pouroth

has refused his right to succeed his father. Who is next in line?"

There was a great deal of discussion after that. Groups of courtiers huddled together, broke up, formed other groups. The volume of their collective voices rose and fell. Raull stood in the middle of the hall with Keira at his side, watching and listening. Erand and Johnis circled slowly, never getting too close to make it appear they were eavesdropping on any particular group. Keira noticed them paying attention to body language and the movement of individuals instead.

Pouroth had three children, all girls. They were old enough to rule but the claim of a male in the line of succession would outweigh theirs. Besides, they hadn't been trained to assume control of the kingdom. It would be best if someone else took over immediately while one of them learned how to rule. At least that was one of the more popular scenarios.

The discussion eventually broke off for lunch although conversations around the various tables were lively and not much was eaten. Following the meal, the courtiers returned to the central meeting hall.

Raull sent out orders that the military presence at the city gates was to be doubled and no strangers were to be admitted into the city until the dinner hour. "I am sure we will see what needs to be seen by then," Raull whispered to Keira just before they returned to the hall.

Raull and Keira took up their place in the middle, saying nothing, listening and watching while a detachment of soldiers guarded the doors. If he was wrong and all the raids and unrest weren't meant to soften up the population to accept a quick and perhaps shady takeover of power, he'd pulled a lot of soldiers off the streets for nothing. If the raids were just that—attacks on a shaky kingdom—he'd left them vulnerable.

He prayed to the gods he wasn't wrong.

For the first time in her life, Keira was angry with her gift. What she wouldn't give for just a moment of Wanda's old power. If she was a Seer, Tarmig-Lun wouldn't be in this mess. She would have ferreted out the malcontents her first day there. Instead she had to settle for stumbling around blind, touching people when an opportunity presented itself and begrudging the waste of time.

"If worse comes to worse, you could line them all up and I could touch their hands," she whispered to Raull.

"We could. But you admit yourself you're as likely to see a tender family scene as a bloody coup."

Keira wanted to disagree but couldn't. Like the Warrior standing beside her, she summoned her patience, paid attention, sought flow and consensus in the conversations.

After a time, she heard two names being repeated. Benar and Darsh. Benar, the minister of culture who was a little too free with his hands around women, puffed up with undisguised delight whenever his name was mentioned. Darsh's reaction was the opposite. The old courtier who served in Hosander's cabinet was as quick to shy away from reminders that he was a member of the royal family, as he'd been to fret about the city's unrest.

When it became clear that the two men were the forerunners, Hosander jumped onto the

dais Prince Casus had vacated. He called out for silence.

"For the past hour, I have heard two names again and again," he said. "Benar and Darsh. Both have solid political backgrounds. The question Raull posed was who is next in the line of succession. Not who has the better character, more family connections, younger, older...even which member of the high cabinet each man may be privileged to serve under," he added with a wry grin. The crowd laughed. Hosander was a member of the high cabinet and Darsh served under him. "Is Raull's question valid? All things considered, is this the criteria we should be examining?"

There were more murmurs, more conversation then a growing chorus of a solemn "Yes."

"Agreed," Hosander said and inclined his head. "Benar's connection to the royal household is through his aunt's brother. Darsh's comes from his grandfather, through his father." He didn't need to point out that Benar's claim came through a female relative, weakening it. The courtiers figured that out for themselves.

Benar jumped onto the dais beside Hosander,

opened his mouth then closed it slowly. He could not refute what they all knew. Not today. "Hosander speaks the truth," he bit out and slumped away.

"No, there must be someone else." Darsh's voice trembled when he spoke. He clasped the arm someone held out to him perfunctorily then looked up at Hosander. "My claim is a weak one at best. There are others with more skill."

"But none with your caution, Darsh," Hosander called out and walked up to the nervous, old man. "Caution is a good thing, my friend."

"Well, perhaps...but you must promise me that Prince Pouroth's daughters will begin their political training immediately. Just because they are girls doesn't mean they cannot be good rulers. I will accept the throne only if I have assurances that one of them will step onto the throne when they're ready."

"Any disagreements?" Hosander asked the crowd. No one spoke. "Well then, Prince Dar—

"I do not disagree but I do have a question."

Raull's deep, resonant voice echoed through the hall. His expression was calm, his smile gentle as he looked around the room then focused on Aline who was standing with a few younger members of the royal household. "Aline," he said, "who told you about the secret route through the tavern on Hanear Street?"

Aline balked and her brown eyes got bigger. "N-no one," she stuttered.

"I believe you," Raull said gently. "Who then," he continued, "spoke of the tavern within your earshot?"

"M-my uncle."

"Which uncle, Aline? You have many relatives."

"Why is that important?" she asked nervously.

"Because it is." Raull turned to look at the crowd. "For all her beauty and intending no offence to her parents who are both pleasant, intelligent people, Aline is pampered, spoiled and a bit witless because of it."

Aline colored, shot Raull a furious look but didn't deny what he was saying.

"What person of intelligence, of discernment would speak of a covert route through one of the city's most crime-tolerant areas, within earshot of a young woman such as Aline? She would only use the information to her advantage. Sneak out of her parents' house despite a curfew. Search for intrigue, a good time, even show up uninvited at the home of a former lover. Twice. Despite being warned how dangerous it was for her to be out alone." His brow cocked and he glared down at her.

If anything, her fury grew.

Raull had the crowd's rapt attention and he knew it. "Such a person would divulge that route for only one reason. He wanted Aline to use it. No one who knows her would ever think otherwise." Heads started nodding in agreement. "Let us examine this scenario. A young, rich, foolish woman passing through a tavern on Hanear Street on a regular basis. Paying the tavern keeper to slip out through the back door of his establishment into a little-known alleyway. What do you think would happen eventually?"

The crowd was silent for about a second before someone called out, "She'd be taken, hurt. Held for ransom. Or worse."

Another voice, a woman's added, "We love you, Aline, and we always have but you had to have known that's what would happened to you. Shame for being such a foolish, foolish girl."

"Yes," Raull said, stemming the tide of comments. "All this is true. Then why would a man pass this information on to her?"

"Oh gods," someone gasped. "They *meant* for her to go into the tavern, knowing that, eventually, she'd be taken. With the unrest in the city in the state it is now, the taking of a daughter from one of our most important families would be like setting a spark to dry tinder."

"Who told you about this tavern, Aline?" several of her relatives demanded at once. "Tell us!"

Aline trembled, looked up at Raull, swallowed then pointed to her uncle. "Darsh," she said.

The room fell silent then several of her male relatives closed in on the gray-haired man. A curt

wave from Raull had a group of soldiers around him in seconds.

"Take him to the prisoner cells," Raull growled. "I'll speak with him later."

"Why? *Why*?" several of the women cried out.

Keira stepped into the soldiers' path, stopped them then brushed her hand over Darsh's blotchy cheek. When they led him away, she turned back to Raull.

"He knows that, if it came to a debate, he would be declared next in the line of succession," she said in her clear, deep, Sibyl-trained voice. "In a second scenario, knowing Pouroth's temperament, when Prince Casus died, again, Darsh would be declared next in the line of succession. His fine speech about ensuring that one of Pouroth's daughters eventually succeed him was just that—a fine speech. When Casus stopped ruling, Darsh saw an opportunity to gain control of the kingdom. His plan would have worked except he became impatient. He paid for and organized the mercenary raids on your border villages. He spread rumors of insurrection, instability and lawlessness.

The population became desperate for central leadership. He turned Tarmig-Lun into a ripe environment for a bloodless coup without anyone ever realizing it."

Raull inclined his head in acknowledgement of his woman's discernment. Spoken in the clear, ringing tones of a Sibyl, no one but him seemed to notice that her words were the product of logic and a quick mind—not the result of any mystic powers.

"And what did this assembly fail to take into account, Sibyl?" he asked her. One corner of his mouth quirked up.

"That we could follow Jareb-Phar's example," someone piped up excitedly before Keira had a chance to answer. "Thain, a Warrior, is now their prince, "We did not consider asking Raull to take the throne."

The crowd looked at Raull then broke off into more discussion.

"There is something else you didn't consider." The speaker was a woman. Her brown hair was shot through with silver, her bearing was regal and proud as she climbed onto the dais.

"Although my brother declined the throne, I did not."

Turning, Keira recognized Princess Pirima, Casus' daughter. Even at fifty-four cycles, she was still a striking woman.

"Traditionally, men's claims to the throne have always superseded women's. I honor that tradition but today's events have shown all of us that grasping for a successor because of the panic Darsh instilled in us would led to disaster. We should take a step back and look again at the one, key question Raull asked. Who is next in the line of succession?" She held her arms out and scanned the crowd.

"You are," voice after voice murmured.

Finally, one spoke up loud enough to be heard over the rest. "Do you want to rule, Pirima? Forgive my bluntness, princess, but you've never committed yourself to politics."

"True," she answered without hesitation. "And given the choice I would choose not to rule. My brother has stepped down. Family honor—my father's honor demands that I put my selfish concerns aside and take on this role."

The crowd parted as Raull walked up to her. He knew Pirima, respected her but the speaker had been correct. She'd never exhibited any interest in politics and had no experience in them. He motioned Keira forward. Without fanfare, she touched Pirima's fingers, paused then looked at him. She shook her head slowly before backing away into the crowd.

Raull considered his next move carefully. By training, talent and intellect he was fit to rule this kingdom. The woman standing before him had a strong, legal claim to the throne and although she had the training and intellect, he suspected she would, ultimately, prove as disinterested in ruling as her father had become. She was devoted to her family and the many profitable businesses she ran. Those things took up all of her time as far as he knew. Pirima was offering to set aside the things she loved to accept a duty she had no interest in. Was it pride that made her assert her claim?

She had much to be proud of. Before he became old and distracted, Casus had been a good leader. But right now, Tarmig-Lun could

not afford another ruler who was torn between duty and love.

In that instant, Raull made his decision. He would rule Tarmig-Lun. Perhaps not forever but at least until one of Casus' heirs was prepared to accept the role wholeheartedly. If one ever was.

"Princess Pirima," he addressed her formally, inclined his head. "I accept your legal claim to the throne of Tarmig-Lun. What I cannot accept is a new ruler with no political experience, not in the current state of civil unrest. I challenge you for the right to rule." He drew his sword and waited.

Two bright spots of color appeared on Pirima's cheeks then faded slowly. He could see her weighing his words, see emotion battling with intellect behind her turbulent hazel eyes. She could refuse his challenge. The basis for it was flimsy at best but it offered her dignity no matter which way she choose. If she was really serious about ruling, if she was prepared to give up all that she loved and had worked for, she could rule Tarmig-Lun and rule it well. If she was simply feeling forced to step up and fill the spot her brother had refused, she could accept his challenge. If she did, there would be no question about who would win a physical fight between them, and she could step away from the throne without shame.

Pirima lifted her chin and said to no one in particular, "Give me a sword."

Keira stepped up, pulled back her cloak, selected a light blade and handed it to the princess hilt first. "May the gods favor the just," she said and stepped back. The crowd followed her lead, opening up a wide swath of space.

Raull moved first. Circling slowly, knees bent, he moved to one side of the dais, giving Pirima clear access to the level floor below. She jumped off the dais, displaying an agility and strength that was admirable in someone her age, turned and began circling him. Pirima struck first. Using her lack of height to her advantage, she opened with a low swipe, up, turned her wrist, scraped her blade across Raull's when he blocked her, then pulled sharply to the side. Raull leapt back before the tip of her sword nicked his wrist.

Grinning ferally, his body fairly hummed with controlled power. Towering over her, he raised his sword then brought it down in a smooth

arc, centering it on the side of her neck. No one commented on the fact that the Warrior was moving slower than usual, that the metallic echo of their swords meeting wasn't overly loud. Almost as if there hadn't been much strength behind the blow that Pirima deflected. Pirima leaned back, centered her weight, kicked out and caught Raull square in the belly. He doubled over then fell back, rolled on one shoulder and rose neatly to his feet. When Pirima spun, used the inertia to multiply the force behind her sweeping slash at his midsection, he lifted the hilt of his sword, angled the tip down, redirected the force of the blow in a harmless direction. What Raull didn't do was follow up with a kick of his own once her weapon was no longer between them, sending the princess flying back into the crowd and likely crushing her sternum in the process.

Instead he centered his weight, bent his knees then planted his feet, one forward and one back. Shuffling steps forward, one after another, never overbalancing, he brought his sword down again and again on Pirima's. She gritted her teeth, her arm shuddered with every blow but she held him off. The crowd scurried to get out of her way. With a savage bellow, Pirima slashed wildly at Raull. She almost succeeded in breaking the rhythm of his attack when she overextended, had to take a stutter step to stay upright. In that instant, Raull reached out, crushed all ten of her fingers that were wrapped around the hilt of her sword, and forced it down. When he wretched it out of her hands, she roared in anger, glared at him and dove to regain her weapon.

"*No*," a man in the crowd yelled when Raull raised his own weapon, aimed it at Pirima's belly and waited.

Raull knew the voice. It belonged to Pirima's husband.

Pirima stopped moving. Hanging onto Raull's forearm, breathing hard, face glistening with sweat, she looked up at the massive Warrior.

"Concede, princess," Raull growled.

"Yes," she said after a moment's hesitation then stepped back.

As one, the crowd sighed with relief. Quickly, Raull sheathed his sword and tucked Pirima's into one of the loops on his vest. He walked up to her, cupped her face gently then lifted her hands to his mouth. He kissed each one in turn, held them then lifted his face to the crowd.

"This is a noble woman," he said and his voice resonated through the hall. "Proud. Strong. Worthy of her lineage. If only one person out of a hundred in this entire kingdom has even part of her quality, I will be proud to call myself ruler of such a people."

Pirima blinked and it looked like she was going to say something. She didn't get the chance. Her husband burst out of the crowd, took hold of her shoulders and, flashing Raull a dark look, led his wife away.

Keira stood still as the crowd around her rushed forward, eager to take Raull's arm and congratulate him. Sliding her cowl up, she slipped into the shadow beneath an alcove, watching.

Erand and Johnis joined her and stood on either side of her.

"And now the fawning starts," Johnis said drolly. The three of them watched courtiers jockey for position so they could be among the first to talk to Raull, ask for his opinion, invite him to various social functions. After that came their wives and many of them pushed their daughters forward, making sure Raull knew their names, their family connections and that they were single and available.

"Think his head will fit through the door after this?" Erand asked.

"Only if we enlarge it," Johnis answered. "The door, not his head that is."

Erand chuckled obligingly. Keira didn't have the heart to. She saw Raull's future rolling out before him. Oh she'd stay in Tarmig-Lun for a time, conceive the daughter the colony demanded and she wanted. But her Warrior's life was here now, his destiny tied to these people's. They were lucky to have a man like him for their prince. She watched Aline cleverly elbow two other young women away, step up to Raull's side, snake her arm around his and press her impressive breast into him as she said something witty, no doubt.

"One good thing to come out of this," Johnis said. "I'll now be the general of Tarmig-Lun's army."

"Says who?" Erand complained then shot the

older, larger and more experienced Warrior a hard look.

Grinning, Keira turned to leave. She stopped when she felt a hand on her arm.

"I owe you an apology." It was Hosander. His blue eyes were sheepish as he looked at her.

"You were trying to protect your people, the government. I don't fault you for that."

His hand was still on her arm and she felt the movement of his thumb through her cloak.

"Thank you for saying that, Keira, but I'd like to try and make it up to you. Rainor said he liked meeting you, although he—and I—were confused about your prediction that I'd marry a brown haired woman." Hosander looked at her pale, reddish hair with undisguised admiration. "He asked if you could join us for supper some— "

"As my first official act as prince," Raull's deep, measured voice rang out as it came closer.

Keira looked up and saw him striding toward her.

"I'm ordering you to take your hand off my

woman, Hosander," Raull said, grinned and gently slid her arm out of the trade minister's grasp. He tucked Keira's hand into his and held it.

"Your woman?" Hosander choked out. "So it was you, not Erand who planted her in the palace." One corner of his mouth curved up. "I think you'll do better than I thought, Prince Raull. You obviously have a talent for political intrigue."

"Like I was born and trained for it," Raull agreed, touched Keira's face and looked up at the Warriors flanking her. "Don't you two have anything better to do? Like get back to work?"

"First day on the job and he's already pushing us around," Erand huffed as he turned to leave.

"At least we don't have to compete against him for the affections of the city's daughters anymore," Johnis said. "Not that he was ever much competition anyway. Oh and I want a raise," he added as he followed Erand out of the hall.

"For?" Raull asked dryly.

"For taking on the duties of general. You can

congratulate me properly on my promotion later." He was still chuckling when he disappeared beneath an arch.

#### \* \* \*

"You've been quiet since this afternoon," Raull said as he shut the door to his sleeping chamber. Walking up behind Keira, he unfastened her cloak, slid it off her shoulders and hung it up on a peg. He ran his fingertips over her bare arms.

"People expect dignity from a Sibyl. They confuse quiet with mystic contemplation."

"Which you used to your advantage." Raull removed his weapons' vest then brushed her hair back, admired the brightness of it in the lamplight, brushed his lips over her neck. "I could sense how carefully you were listening throughout dinner and the impromptu cabinet meetings. I'll enjoy hearing your insights in this and all future matters." His fingers moved over the fastenings on her leather vest. "No prince has ever had a consort as exceptional as you."

Keira brushed his hands away, stepped out of his reach.

"I cannot—"

"I know what you're going to say, woman," Raull sighed and rubbed his forehead. "You think you cannot stay. The colony needs you more than I do. The vision of a child brought us together but that's all there'll be. Well you're wrong."

One reddish brow arched.

"You're going to stay here with me. Rule at my side," he added firmly, walked up to her, stroked her hair. "Trust me, our daughter will be the first of many and not only does your father want grandsons, I want sons. With you. End of discussion."

Keira planted her hands on her hips. "You'd try and force me to stay?"

"I won't have to," Raull said smugly. He loosened his leather pants and took them and his boots off. "You'll choose to stay on your own."

"And how do you propose that'll happen? What, you'll keep drinking poppel juice behind my back so I'll keep coming to your bed in an effort to get pregnant?"

Shaking his head solemnly, Raull lay on the bed, stretched out in all his glorious nakedness, and propped himself up on his elbows. "I have never deceived you and I won't start now. Tomorrow morning I'll stop taking the juice. It'll take a few days for it to clear my system and my, er, potency to get up." Grinning, he looked down at his cock which was getting longer, lifting off his thigh, rising over his belly. "And while we're together, you'll fall so madly in love with me that you'll never contemplate leaving again."

"A bit full of yourself aren't you?"

Raull's brow furrowed like he was digesting her words. "If you mean am I confident that our strengths are compatible, that I am already in love with you and will do everything in my considerable powers to persuade you to stay, then yes."

Rolling her eyes, Keira turned to leave then yelped when a thick arm wrapped around her waist, pulled her down onto the bed. Rising above her, Raull smoothed her hair off her face, kissed her temple. "For now, Sibyl...for tonight," he whispered, "let me love your body like I did that first night in your room." His fingers traced the rise of her breasts then moved over the fastenings on her vest. "Before we had the weight of civil unrest and political backstabbing on us. Before jealousy clouded your eyes whenever another woman showed interest in me. Before it clouded mine." Opening the vest fully, he pressed a line of kisses down the middle of her chest, circled her navel with the tip of his nose.

"You're jealous? Of whom?"

"Of every man who dares look at you, touch your hand."

"That's a pretty long list of men, Raull." Lifting her shoulders, she let him slip the vest off her body then tipped her hips obligingly so he could undo the laces on her leather pants. "If I stay and that's a big if, men are always going to look at me," she said without vanity. "And hand touching comes with the territory. My talent requires it," she explained when he looked at her blankly.

After a grudging nod, he stripped off the last of her clothing, lay beside her with his head propped up on his hand, and held her breast with the other. "For tonight, we're just a Warrior and his woman, loving each other," he whispered. "Tomorrow, we move into the royal apartments. After that, we'll face each day as it comes so long as we face it together, and you sleep in my bed every night...no matter where that bed might be."

When her brow furrowed, when she opened her mouth to protest his high handedness, Raull kissed her. He tasted of warmth and lightly spiced gyrus wine. The soft ends of his hair slid against her cheek and he smelled faintly of musk, leather and honey-vinegar soaked stoan fruit. His mouth was gentle but firm as it moved over hers, parted so his tongue could trace her lips. When she gasped, inhaled, he ventured inside. Soft flicks against the roof of her mouth, a slow, sensual slide as his tongue wove around hers.

She inhaled again, deliberately this time, breathed him in, tasted the man beneath the fine wine and liked the man far more than the drink. His hand moved over her breast without haste, like he simply needed to hold her and was sure of his welcome. A battle-roughened thumb grazed her nipple, circled it, rubbed it with slow intensity.

Sliding her leg over his, Keira pressed her mound into his belly.

"Hmm." The sound of Raull's pleasure rumbled in his chest. "You always know how to make me ache for you. It's time I returned the favor." Sliding away from her, he opened a tall chest beside his bed and withdrew lengths of rope—the same ones he'd carried in his pack during their journey from the Sibyls' colony. "And I remind you that you've already agreed to being bound in repayment for binding me." His eyes darkened with passion as he looked down at her.

"Well, if you put it that way," Keira huffed then arranged herself comfortably in the middle of the bed. Chewing on her lower lip, she watched with growing anticipation as Raull looped rope around her wrists, stretched her arms up and out and fastened the ends of the rope to the top posts. He bound her ankles next, kissed her feet and caressed her shins as he worked, then levered her legs wide apart before tying the rope to the bottom posts of his bed.

Keira tested the strength of his knots. They held, no doubt about that but he'd left some

slack in the lines. Lifting her knees a little, loving the lust in his expression when he stared at her pussy, she grinned and waited.

Raull didn't make her wait for long. Kneeling between her thighs, he caressed her belly, mouthed the sharp rise of her ribs, dragged his teeth over her nipple then pulled back when she squirmed. Her legs moved restlessly, again drawing his eye to her cleft. Keira felt sensual, even wanton. Like Raull had said after she'd bound him, she loved the freedom it gave her. A participant in this lovemaking without choices, she could revel in everything he did to her without having to reciprocate. Wholly hedonistic, she even reveled in the anxiety as she wondered how he'd touch her, when, what he'd do to make her come.

Despite that, a devil inside her made her lift her hips, contract her pelvic floor muscles. She felt the mouth of her sheath flex and sighed when Raull groaned and pressed two fingers against her.

"Again," he growled.

Grinning now, she obliged. Raull growled again, eased his fingers into her wetness, curled

them so he could pet the front wall of her core them pulled them out.

"Hmm, delicious," he murmured, flashed her a dirty grin and started sucking on his fingers.

Keira flexed her muscles again, lifted her hips to him. "Please," she whispered. "Don't stop."

"Stop? I haven't even started." Wearing that same, nasty grin, he lay down on her, held most of his weight on his elbows, wrapped his hands around her breasts and began to slowly, methodically, lick every inch of them.

"Ah, gods," she sighed and forced her shoulders to relax. The pressure of Raull's torso on her mound was erotic, pushing just hard enough to ignite a slow burn of need in her pussy. His tongue moved around her, his cheek smoothed over the sides of her breasts, his breath tickled her wet skin, his teeth grazed and his lips soothed. He loved her for so long that she was begging and covered in sweat even before he touched her nipples.

When he did, he lifted his head, watched her face intently and with thumbs and forefingers, squeezed.

Keira's back arched clear off the bed as the pressure increased. Still watchingher, he squeezed harder. She panted, groaned but didn't tell him to stop. The pressure remained steady until her nipples felt swollen yet somehow numb. When that happened, all at once and without warning, Raull released her.

The blood rushed back into her abused nipples and she screamed. He suckled her gently, licked her and at first it only hurt more, then the pain morphed into an erotic pleasure she'd never experienced before. Her breasts fell full, exquisitely sensitive and she reveled in their shifting weight as she moved as best she could. Every touch and kiss was more intense, more exquisite than before. Slowly her breathing returned to normal and she mourned the heightening of the sensations as they faded to normal.

"Again?" Raull asked quietly. His fingers were poised over her nipples but he didn't touch her.

Exhaling, she shook her head. "I don't think I could take it," she answered with blunt honesty. "Once is enough for tonight. Do you mind?"

He kissed her breasts gently before lifting his

head and stroking her cheek. "Everything I do is for your pleasure," he said, rose up so he could take her mouth and sunk his tongue in slow and deep.

Groaning against his lips, Keira fought to take hold of him, hug him close, intensify the feel of his hard, warm body against hers. The ropes defeated her and she yanked at them in frustration.

Nothing she did would hurry him and she moaned when Raull continued his hot, thorough exploration of her mouth. Her lips tingled and felt swollen. His must have felt the same but he kept on going, tasting every inch of her and holding himself so she could taste him right back. Long minutes dragged out with only the sound of their breathing, the creak of the ropes and the bed audible above the songs of night birds outside. She trembled and jerked her head up, trying to recapture his mouth when he finally ended the kiss and slid his lips over her jaw, nipped her throat, caressed the long, straining muscles in her arms with his fingertips.

Ah gods the man was a magician in bed.

Grinning, Keira laid back and absorbed the

feel of Raull's mouth and hands, the slow slide of his belly against hers, the pressure of his chest. He kissed her breasts, suckled her, anchored his hands around her hips and pressed them deeper into the bed. It felt so erotic it startled her but when he stopped, she groaned in protest. Raull looked at her face like he was judging her reaction, grinned and pressed again, even harder this time. He looked pleased when her knees flexed and tried to spread wider.

His teeth scraped her belly, his tongue soothed the sting. When he kissed her mound—a long, moist closed-mouth kiss—she bucked and groaned.

"Sadistic bastard," she hissed when he quickly switched to mouthing her thigh, licking the inside of it then kissing her knee. His fingers trailed over its mate.

"Perhaps. But you like that about me," he said with enough cockiness to make her stomp her foot against the bed. Or at least try to. Grinning, he leaned back on his heels, looked at her body with open lust and fisted his cock. Rough, hard strokes that made him bare his teeth, groan. His

cock got even harder and the tip slapped his belly, leaving smears of pre-cum on his taut skin.

When he hissed and pumped faster, Keira's mouth dropped open. "Don't you dare," she screeched.

"Don't dare what?" Raull asked. His voice was deep, seductive and the glimmer in his eye told her he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"Don't you dare come without me."

Giving the head of his cock one last, hard squeeze, he grunted and grinned down at her. "Why would I deny myself that pleasure, hmm?" he teased, kissed the tight line of her mouth then lay down between her legs. He looked up at her, winked and said, "I just like seeing you riled up. You're a match for me in so many ways that I like making you lose control."

Still grinning, he spread her folds with his fingers then ran his tongue over her nether lips. When he nudged her clit, Keira sighed. "I think I forgive you," she murmured and relaxed into the exquisite things he made her feel. He nudged her again then nipped her inner thighs, lapped up her juices with long, slow passes of his tongue,

slid a finger into her and rubbed her clit with his thumb.

Unable to move, Keira could only feel and what this Warrior made her feel was wonderful. His tongue replaced his thumb, starting with gentle flicks then firmer ones. Up and down, side to side. Another finger joined the first, reached deep into her, fucked her so gently, Keira groaned.

Panting, covered in sweat, she gave in to the inevitable. When her thighs started to shake, Raull moved his fingers faster, rasped his tongue against her and looked up at her as she exploded in orgasm. White light, shards of exquisite sensation pounding through her, lifting her hips. Crying out, Keira grabbed onto the ropes binding her wrists and hung on tight. Her pussy throbbed around his fingers, needing him deep and her clit pulsed beneath his tongue. When it was over, too exhausted to even murmur a word of thanks, praise, she lay helpless, limp, drenched.

Raull wasn't finished with her. His fingers moved in her wetness, pumping slowly. His tongue nudged her tenderly, barely touched her as he drank down her spent juices. Twice more he made her come. The man seemed tireless, focused only on her pleasure. Keira loved him for it.

When he finally rose over her, when he finally took hold of his cock and slid it against her opening, Keira trembled. "Please. Oh please," she begged. His mouth had been wonderful but she needed him. Needed to feel his strength and weight pressing down on her, to know he found as much pleasure in her body as she did in his. Wanted to feel owned, worshipped, claimed. When he slid into her, Raull bared his teeth, growled then grabbed her bound wrists. He held her torso immobile with the weight of his while his hips moved subtly. He forced his way into her willing body inch by slow, grinding inch. Pulling back, pausing, looking down at her face with a lust, a joy that Keira had never imagined seeing on a man's face. Then he'd squeeze his way back into her tightness. The squelching of their bodies joining, the creaking of the bed ratcheted up her pleasure and she was soon moaning, trying to lift herself to him, rocking her head back and forth.

His stamina seemed endless. He tipped his

hips, let the head of his cock rub the front of her sheath, bared his teeth when she spasmed around him in release. Leaning back, he let the thick head of his shaft massage her opening then drove in slow and deep, fucked her rhythmically, and grunted when she came yet again. Their slick bodies moved together easily. Keira's breasts felt full, her nipples got hard when his chest rubbed against them. He lifted his weight from her, stirred his cock in her wetness then punched into her, fucked her hard and fast then leaned back to stir up her juices again.

Panting, Keira knew she couldn't take much more. She was exhausted, her mouth was dry, her shoulders and ankles ached. Maybe he sensed she was nearing the end of her strength. Maybe he recognized the wildness in her eyes. Whatever it was, Raull settled into a hard, grinding rhythm, reached between them, rubbed her clit and kept rubbing until she stiffened beneath him, cried out and yet again, convulsed around him.

Even then Raull didn't stop. If anything, he drove into her harder, tucked his head beside hers, growled ferally then grunted in time with the harsh jerking of his rod inside her.

Keira had never felt so wet, so full as when Raull came inside her. Wetness spilled out around the mouth of her sheath, spread to the bed linens beneath them. When it was finally over he trembled, exhaled and lay still. Despite her exhaustion, she loved his weight covering her. Neither delicate nor weak, she reveled in the fact that, in this as well, they were well matched.

Finally, Raull stirred, wiped the sweat from her temples, nuzzled her ear. Holding himself up on his elbows, he kissed her breasts, suckled her gently then, with a low rumble of displeasure, slid his cock out of her.

At once Keira felt empty, naked. The only thing that made up for it was the look on her lover's face. He looked at the wetness still seeping out of her and seemed content, even proud.

Kissing every inch of her he could reach, Raull undid the ropes on her ankles and wrists, massaged her bruised skin until she was practically purring. Keira felt boneless but Raull managed to get her under the covers. Spooning his body behind hers, he wrapped his arms and legs around her, sniffed her hair then tucked his face into the wild mass.

"Of all the things that have happened today," he murmured sleepily, shifted so that his hips nuzzled her backside, "making love to you, sleeping with you in my arms means more to me than anything, beloved." His voice trailed off and soon he was breathing deep and slow.

Sleep eluded Keira. This powerful Warrior, this prince loved her. How could she make him see how determined she was to leave him, when he was equally determined to have her stay?

# 

Every morning for the next week, Keira spent time with Wanda. The old Sibyl's memory was precarious but occasionally, Keira was able to break through into Wanda's subconscious. There Keira saw sparks of the intelligence, patience and gentleness she remembered from her childhood. She also saw the vestiges of Wanda's gift, a glimpse of a powerful redheaded Warrior assuming the throne after his father's retirement. The Warrior looked so much like Keira's own father that she had to blink back tears.

Despite the evidence in Wanda's mind, Keira still resisted Raull's attempts to bind her to him permanently. The future of the colony was in flux. There were many who would need reassurance, need Keira's strength, her presence and leadership to support them as they worked their way through this time of transition.

In Wanda's mind, she also saw a reordering of Tarmig-Lun's finances. Saw more taxes being used

to benefit the general population, not just the wealthy few at the top of the social hierarchy.

"What is this new law you're proposing, Prince Raull?" one of the older courtiers barked when Raull stepped into the central meeting hall just before the luncheon break.

Raullhadbeen in cabinet meetings all morning. Although he missed his Warrior duties, missed practicing the arts of war, spending much of his time with Johnis and Erand, he had resigned himself to this politician's life. There were far more opportunities to serve his kingdom and serve it well.

"The balance sheet shows that the palace spends a lot of silver on perks for courtiers and their staff. This meal we are about to eat for example. It is custom, not law that says we are all fed three times a day at taxpayer expense. I propose to redirect that money into feeding programs for the poor."

"If the poor spent more time working instead of stealing—"

"If a man has food in his belly," Raull roared. "If his family has food in their bellies, he is not likely to steal to feed them." He ramped his anger back. Looking at Keira as she walked into the room and stood at the back, watching and listening, helped. "I am not so naïve that I think a free loaf of bread will stop all crime. It is a token effort by our government but a necessary one."

"That's all well and good," another courtier piped up. "And I applaud any efforts to ease the burdens of the poor. But my time is valuable. Going home for a meal means that I spend less time working."

"True," Raull acknowledged. "That is why I'm not proposing that meals be stopped. I'm just proposing that you pay for what you eat." When rebellious murmurs broke out, his expression hardened. "Is there anyone in this room without the financial resources to buy their own food like so many outside of these walls?" he growled. "Is there anyone here who wishes to tell the general population that you are not paid well enough for your services?"

None of the courtiers met his eye. They were all very well compensated for their time. While some held hereditary positions, most were elected. They couldn't afford to alienate

the public. Raull turned away to greet Keira, leaving the courtiers to debate the issue amongst themselves. As prince, he had a legal right to pass any bill he wanted without their approval. In practice however, it was political suicide to make use of that privilege too often. Raull knew enough of court life and politics to recognize that. He was banking on the courtiers' unwillingness to have their avarice exposed publicly.

When the doors to the dining hall were opened the courtiers filed in, took their seats, glanced around nervously when the usual, sumptuous spread was brought out.

"How to you propose to enact this new law?" Hosander stood up and looked at Raull with open curiosity.

Raull nodded, set down his cup and spoke loud enough for the whole room to hear. "A modest deduction from each of your monthly stipends. The treasury will take only enough money from each man to pay for an equal percentage of the average cost of food consumed. Food only," he repeated firmly. "The staff costs will continue to be met by the royal purse."

"Well, Goarin will do all right," one of the

courtiers called out, laughed and slapped the very round belly of the man sitting next to him. "He eats enough for three and will only have to pay for the share of one." The other courtiers laughed while Goarin made a mock swipe at the back of his neighbor's head.

When the laughter died down, Raull continued. "The bookkeeping will be made public. The money collected will go into public feeding programs. The palace will hold nothing back in the way of administrative costs."

Still standing, Hosander said, "Why don't we start now?" Reaching beneath his fitted tunic, he pulled out a coin purse.

"That is not necessary, although I admire your commitment to the welfare of our people," Raull answered. "Today's meals have been paid for. They are a gift. Please enjoy them. You can start paying tomorrow."

"Paid for by whom?" Hosander asked.

"By me," Raull answered with enough firmness that every courtier raised their cup to him, thanked him for his generosity then tucked into the delicious food the serving women were setting out in front of them. After the food was served, he had his recording secretaries circulate copies of his new bill. In front of their peers, while eating a lavish free meal, no courtier had the courage to refuse to sign. It passed without further debate.

That afternoon though, at a meeting of the high council, it was obvious that the honeymoon stage, good will of many of the members had dimmed. They'd known Raull would be a strong leader. They just hadn't realized how savvy a politician he would prove to be.

"I see a request for a temporary increase in military spending," Benar, the minister for culture, growled. His gray eyes flashed as he tried to stare down their new prince. "With Darsh arrested, we assumed he couldn't continue paying for thieves and raiders to stir up civil unrest. I'd also assumed we no longer had to pay your, er, handsome salary as the general of Tarmig-Lun's army." He threw the sheaf of papers in his hand onto the table.

"You are correct on both counts," Raull acknowledged. As always, Keira was at his side. She was often quiet at these meetings but he

enjoyed discussing them afterward with her, in private. Her insights and clear thinking were always helpful. The mythic presence of a Sibyl also contributed to his cachet. "Although my former position as general and the accompanying salary now both belong to Johnis. The additional money will pay for a temporary show of force throughout the kingdom. The population is still frightened, trade is still off. People need to be shown that Tarmig-Lun is again a safe, secure place to live and conduct business."

"And you think to fix that by throwing money at the problem?" Benar huffed imperiously.

When Raull bared his teeth, the minister of culture sat down quickly. "Your new general, who has control of all military activities, has sent invitations to twenty-five hand-picked Warriors to come to Tarmig-Lun. They will each be given three-months employment."

"T-twenty-five?" Benar stuttered. "Warriors? Paid on staff? Why the cost will be—"

"The cost will be recouped within two cycles once normal trade is restored," Raull barked, stood quickly, leaned over the table so that his shoulders bulged dramatically. He towered over all of them. Every minister tipped their face away from him and drew back. "During those three months, a Warrior at the head of a detachment of soldiers will visit each village in the kingdom no less than four times. More in the larger towns. Our people will see that their safety and prosperity is this administration's chief concern." He brought his fist down on the table, emphasizing his point. "Does anyone here question Johnis' judgment in this matter? Or his right to make this decision?"

The members of the high cabinet were silent until Hosander got to his feet. "I don't question our new general," he said quietly. "But I want to know if our prince, if another Warrior endorses it."

Raull looked down at the much shorter man with open approval. "I do. The proposal has the added benefit of giving Johnis the finest selection of Warriors from which to choose a replacement from. Tarmig-Lun is large enough to require three full-time Warriors to lead its army."

"And right now we only have two," Hosander added and one corner of his mouth quirked up. "So this request for additional funds is mostly

a case of short-term loss for long-term gain, hmm?"

"Precisely." Raull sat back down, squeezed Keira's hand and turned over the next sheaf of paper in front of him. "And now to the business of a public, summer festival."

#### \* \* \*

"What do you think of your Warrior now, Sibyl?" Raull purred into her ear as they walked through the palace at the end of the day. He looped his arm around her waist and held her close. The last, aqua rays of the setting sun filled the hallway, made the polished stone floor glimmer. "Now that he's nothing more than a political drudge?"

"You're hardly a drudge," she said. "I like snuggling up next to a prince at night."

"I can guarantee you far more than snuggling, woman," he promised, pressed his teeth against the base of her neck and growled seductively.

"Stop it. Please." A woman's voice came from a gathering room further down the hall.

They both started walking faster.

Keira recognized the room as the one Hosander had hurried her past her first day in the palace. The one, he'd said, some courtiers like to gather and indulge in come evening.

A serving woman, Aethely, had a hold of Benar's hand and was trying to pry it off her backside.

He laughed at her, squeezed until she flinched then gave her bum a solid smack with the flat of his hand that made the other courtiers laugh.

Raull opened his mouth to yell at the man but Keira barged in front of him, grabbed Benar's thumb, bent it back over his wrist until he dropped to one knee. He cried out then froze in place when she applied a bit more pressure.

"Do I have your attention?" Keira said. Her voice was low, menacing and it rolled through the room like ripples on smooth cream.

Benar nodded jerkily. He smelled of alcohol and his hair was disheveled, the top buttons on his tunic were undone.

"If you ever lay a hand on another woman

within these walls, I will sever it from your arm. Do you doubt my sincerity?" she asked calmly, almost conversationally.

Again, Benar nodded jerkily. When she released his thumb, he fell onto his side and was slow to stand up. Keira, with Raull at her side, left with Aethely in front of them.

"Has becoming a prince reduced you so, Warrior?" Benar yelled after them.

When they turned, Benar looked to his fellow courtiers for support. They were all inching away from him nervously.

"Huh? You let a woman fight your battles for you," he pressed recklessly.

Raull grinned crookedly, spread his feet, leaned back, crossed his thick, bare arms over his chest. "When it's *this* woman, yes. You see, Benar, Keira is no ordinary Sibyl. She isn't old with only the ability to prophesize. This one," he said, lifting his chin in Keira's direction, "is as much a Warrior as I am. And if you ever challenge her again, you'll *wish* it was me pushing back."

He turned without waiting for a reply and left with the two women.

The next morning, the courtiers arrived at their offices to find two new proposals from the prince on their desks. The first one said that all public meeting spaces had to be reserved in advance, indicating the purpose of the meeting. All alcoholic beverages in the rooms had been removed and would not be replaced. Anyone found using those rooms for any other purposes would be fined heavily for misuse of public resources. The second proposal was the immediate revocation of all hereditary positions within the palace. He thanked the hereditary courtiers for their service then argued that the evolving needs of their civilization made many of those offices redundant or obsolete. The work of each hereditary office would be reviewed and if it could not be absorbed elsewhere, public elections would be held to appoint a minister.

Raull had backed up his proposal with a budget showing how much the kingdom was spending on the regulation and control of things that were no longer required. Things like the illegal claiming of wives, and the monitoring of hisian leaf blight when the fungus that had caused it had been eradicated over two-hundred cycles ago.

No one but the most dedicated gossips and drinkers protested the first proposal. None of the other courtiers took their complaints seriously. Most were glad to have the late-night excesses stop. The second proposal was debated hotly. The select few who held the hereditary positions represented the city's noble families.

Benar headed up the dissidents. "My family has worked for this city since before the Warriors' compound existed," he bellowed in the central meeting hall. "And this is the thanks we get for our selflessness?"

"Selflessness?" Raull repeated. His brows drew together. "Members of the high cabinet whose appointments are hereditary earn five times the annual salary of elected members. While your service is appreciated, it is only custom that sets your appointment and your salary. We must evolve if we are to survive. It's a simple fact of our existence. Prince Casus served this kingdom nobly but his time came and went as well."

"Came and went?" Benar said incredulously. He held out his arms, posturing for the crowd. His short, brown hair bristled. "Is this political ignorance, this disregard for tradition and service

the outcome of elevating a mere Warrior to the position of prince?"

Most of the listeners gasped. Benar was always slighting others in private, Raull included. This was the first time he'd dared say anything so inflammatory in public.

Raull's answering smile was frightening. "If your service was so exemplary, you will have no trouble being elected. Public tax money pays your inflated salary which is large enough for you to support your family, two brothers and their families, as well as your numerous mistresses and their children."

Benar turned bright red and he pushed two other courtiers aside to reach Raull. Most of the people watching looked stunned. The Warrior towered over him by more than a foot yet Benar bristled, shoved a forefinger into Raull's chest, barked at him like a master disciplining a servant.

Ignoring the much smaller man's outrage, Raull continued. "If the public is going to pay you, they have a right to elect you."

"And what about you, Prince Raull," Benar

sneered. "You were not publicly elected. We appointed you. We can destroy you just as quickly." He snapped his fingers beneath Raull's nose.

The crowd gasped when Keira leapt between them. Benar scrambled backward. Her long cloak parted, revealing the weapons fit into its lining. She withdrew two small, slender swords, leaned her weight back and kicked. The sole of her boot caught Benar in the middle of his chest. Flailing, he fell backward. Keira was on him in an instant. She sat on his thighs, pinning him then thrust the tips of her weapons into his ribs.

Benar screamed then blinked. There were two small tears in his expensive, tailored tunic but no blood.

Smiling cruelly, Keira glared at him. "You dare touch a crown prince?" she hissed. Her voice, dark with inflection, rolled through the room, echoed off the walls.

Johnis and Erand, who had been outside tending to other business, rushed in. Weapons drawn, they immediately took up defensive positions around Raull. They didn't look at her, didn't stop their fierce scan of the people in

the room but like every other man there, they trembled when Keira spoke again.

"Has Tarmig-Lun been reduced to this?" she asked in that same, dreadful, echoing voice. "What has happened to your nobility? Have you become fat, over privileged, petulant children who seek their own advancement, their own prosperity over the needs of the people you've sworn to lead?" With terrible slowness, inch by jagged inch, Keira began drawing the tips of her blades down in two parallel lines. She knew she hadn't pierced Benar. She'd been very careful when she'd stabbed at him. The worse she was doing was scoring his skin just hard enough to leave thin, white lines. The sound of her blades ripping through his clothing however made Benar tremble from head to toe. He grabbed her blades, tried to wrench them out of her hands. Keira's strength defeated his easily and when she smiled down at him, the courtiers closest to them groaned in fear.

"I should gut you for raising your hand to a crown prince. Instead..." she purred, thrust one sword back into its sheath and grabbed Benar's hand. She looked down at him, sat very still then her smile widened. "I see your death, Benar. It will not be a good death."

The crowd murmured, shifted, then fell back into uneasy silence.

"One of your own sons will kill you."

Again the crowd's fear and reverence for a Sibyl left them breathless and silent.

She continued. "You will not be elected to the post of minister of culture. In fact, that office will cease to exist," she added conversationally and tipped her head to one side, squeezed his hand hard. "One of your many sons will poison you. It will be a painful death. I see you thrashing in a bed with expensive, woven tapestries around it. You're quite alone."

In a powerful, elegant movement, Keira jumped to her feet and stepped away from Benar's prone form. "Your days of gluttony, of abusing the female staff within these walls to gratify your perverseness have ended," she whispered yet the sound seemed to ripple, grow until the great hall didn't seem capable of containing it.

Turning her back on him dismissively, she began pacing, speaking to the other courtiers.

"Tarmig-Lun has been without an effective Sybil for too long. You have not had the gift of second sight to help you in your decision making. Instead, you've listened to men like Benar. Men who've become corrupt. Your choice now is simple. Turn away from this corruption that is eating at the heart of you, or don't." She continued to pace. "Be warned. The penalty for not turning away from corruption will be public exposure." Straightening, she pointed at Raull. Her long, bright hair flicked back. "Your new prince heralds an era of public disclosure. This is no longer the time of...custom," she added and gave Raull a quick, quirky smile. "Nothing you do," she continued, turning back to the crowd, "nothing you decide will be kept secret any longer. You are paid by the people, work for the people. They will scrutinize everything you do and if you're not willing to live up to the high standards they deserve, they will elect someone who will."

"Think about what you're going to do." Johnis' voice was cold when he spoke. It rippled with power and inflection.

Keira turned and saw him level his sword at

Benar. The courtier had got to his feet, pulled a dagger out of his boot and was aiming it at Keira's back.

In an instant, Raull was standing between her and Benar but it was Johnis who continued to speak.

"Not only did you dare to touch a crown prince but you also threatened a Sibyl. A *Sibyl*," he barked, stormed over to Benar, brought the back of his hand across the man's face with a resounding crack. "Your punishment under law is death." Johnis wretched the blade out of Benar's hand, turned to Keira, lifted his brow as if asking for her verdict.

She answered without hesitation. "I do not ask for his death, only his dismissal from my sight." She smiled at Benar and it was terrible to watch. "He has offended those he's supposed to love more than anyone else. They will carry out their own justice."

"When?" Benar screamed as soldiers appeared, grabbed his arms, dragged him away.

"In time," Keira replied enigmatically and, again, turned her back on him.

#### \* \* \*

Dinner that day was quieter than usual. The courtiers seemed subdued by the day's events but their talk was perhaps more earnest because of it.

Sitting beside Raull, Keira looked up when a tall, slender woman wearing a simple brown cloak stepped into the dining hall. Skirting the diners and servers, unnoticed by just about everyone, she made her way to the head table. She stopped, stood directly across from Raull, and waited.

Keira gave him a minute, then another to break off his conversation with Johnis before she nudged his arm with his. He turned to her, hesitated, then looked at the cloaked figure standing less than three feet away from him.

"You were right, Keira," the cloaked figure said and pulled back her cowl. In her early fifties, she was pretty and liberal streaks of silver highlighted her yellow hair. "They're not particularly bright, are they. Hmmph. Must be the love of a good woman that mesmerizes them."

"Speaking of good women," Keira said, stepped around the table and hugged the new arrival. She caught the attention of a server and asked that another place at their table be set for their kingdom's new seer. "I'm so glad they sent you. How was your journey, Beth?"

"Good," the woman answered, smiled her thanks when Keira lifted her traveling cloak off her shoulders. "Now that the rainy season is over, there were no flash floods on the central plain. Although," she added as she took her seat and looked at Raull pointedly. "When I passed through the village of Peeheth, I saw that there'd be an outbreak of spotted pox within the next week. If I were you, I'd send some medical supplies and personnel. If you get on top of it right away, the outbreak will be minor."

"Um, of course," Raull mumbled, set down his spoon and called over the minister for public health.

"How's my mother?" Keira asked. "How is the colony?"

"She's good," Beth said brightly then took a sip from the cup that was set in front of her. More and more eyes in the hall were turning to her. Heads were craning to catch a glimpse of the new Sibyl that had magically appeared in their

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midst. "She's spending more time with your father these days. She misses you but you don't need to be psychic to figure that out."

Keira returned her wry grin.

Beth continued. "The colony's going through some interesting changes. Small things of course. You know how we like to cling to our customs. But there's more interest in what's going on outside our walls. Bit by bit, we're growing, learning. It's quite remarkable actually." She finished off the contents of her cup then downed a bowl of terup fowl soup. Standing, she stretched her back then looked down at Keira. "First thing I need to do is visit Wanda. Your letter mentioned her illness. I don't think I can cure it but maybe I can halt its progress."

Everyone in the hall stared at the women as they left. Sibyls were rare enough but to have three in a kingdom, even one as large as Tarmig-Lun, was unheard of. The murmurs and whispers said they hoped it was a sign from the gods that Tarmig-Lun would soon be as safe and prosperous as it had always been. Maybe even more.

An hour later, Keira returned to the main dining hall alone. Logic had said that Wanda was beyond help but, still, she'd hoped. Beth would visit with the old Sibyl every day, do what she could but for now, she'd retired to the temporary quarters Raull had arranged for her. Wanda and her prince would of course remain in the Sibyl's quarters until her death. New quarters would be built for Beth.

When Keira walked in, the dining hall was empty. The servants had cleared everything away and she could hear dishes being washed, supplies being put away in the kitchen beyond. Raull was sitting where she'd left him. Still at the high table, he was talking with Johnis and Hosander. The tall, impossibly beautiful Warrior had stepped easily into his new role as general. She was happy to see that Raull was including Hosander in more of his private conversations. The trade minister was an honorable man, fierce about the welfare of the kingdom. Keira suspected he'd become a valuable confidant.

What she wasn't happy to see was Aline sitting beside Raull, touching his arm, telling him how worried she'd been, how upset Benar had made them all, how glad she was their new prince was unharmed.

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Gently, Raull tried to push her away. Aline simply switched hands and stroked his thigh.

Keira lost it. All discipline, all good sense flew out of her head. Reaching into her cloak, she pulled out a throwing star, aimed and let it fly.

The three men and Aline started and looked around when the deadly, metal disc sunk into the paneling just above Aline's head. Keira had thrown it so hard most of the sharp edges were buried in the wood.

"Oh now you've gone and done it girl." Beth's melodic voice echoed in the empty room. She was leaning against the doorway, arms over her chest, ankles crossed. "Is everybody in this kingdom plum stupid or just a select few?" She looked up at Keira who was fuming and about to pounce on the foolish, spoiled noblewoman. "Saw something about you tearing her a new one so I thought I should head over here and see if I couldn't stop things before they got out of hand."

"Ah, ah, missie," she added when Aline sidled up to Raull, tried to hide behind him. "You do not want to piss off a Sibyl. Especially this one. A word to the wise...take your hands off her man and keep them that way. That hunk of metal she threw at you? It'll cut clean through skin, sinew, bone, anything. If you're ever stupid enough to touch him again, she'll throw one of them straight through that pretty little hand of yours. Rip a hole big enough to see through that'll heal only because they'll amputate. And no, I'm not joking," Beth added without a trace of humor, turned and left.

Aline swallowed, backed away from Raull, then ran out through the kitchen.

"Um, gentlemen," Raull said nervously when Keira turned her anger on him. "Let's pick this discussion up in the morning." When Keira turned and stormed out of the room, he followed her without question.

Wordlessly, they walked through the empty, central meeting hall, down one grand hallway then another. Just before they reached the royal apartments, Keira stopped. Beth was sitting on a massive, carved wood table. Her feet swung freely beneath her and she was leaning forward, tilting her face up to the last of the clear, aqua rays of sunlight streaming through a long bank of windows. She turned to Keira and smiled.

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"Something else I saw," she said and jumped off the table. "Stop dragging your feet around this one, girl." Beth nodded in Raull's direction. "Whatever's holding you back? Let it go. You're going to spend the rest of your life here, with him. Die a happy old woman with a touch of arthritis, maybe a little gas," she added with a shrug. "Sorry about the last part but life happens, huh? It's your fate, Keira. I'm not the only one who's seen it but I'm the only one with enough balls to tell you to your face. Your kids are gonna be strong, smart, although your second son's sense of humor will drive me around the bend." Beth rolled her eyes and rubbed her temple. "Now, I'm going to bed. For real this time. Sleeping outdoors sucks," she added as she walked away. "God I miss indoor plumbing. Tell that Warrior of yours to have some installed here."

Their mouths hanging open, Keira and Raull watched her disappear around a corner. When she was gone, he opened the door to their suite of rooms. They continued walking and eventually stopped when they reached their bedchamber, stood on opposite sides of the bed, looking at each other. "So?" he asked quietly.

Puffing out her cheeks, Keira exhaled. "I was so sure they needed me," she whispered. "So sure I'd be abandoning them if I left permanently."

"I'm sure they *do* need you," Raull said. "Who wouldn't need the security you provide? But I also think they can live without you. That not having you there to rely on will make them rely on themselves."

"Make them grow," Keira whispered.

"Grow. Evolve. Not cling to custom." He walked around the bed, touched her shoulders, laid his forehead on hers. "I'm no Sibyl but I know I can't live without you. None of this would mean anything if you weren't here. Worse, I'd lose any will to fight for these people if I didn't have the one person I wanted most beside me."

"You're exaggerating."

"No I'm not," he said, kissed her and undid the belt around her waist. "Stay with me, Sibyl, and let me prove it."

She returned his kiss, held him tight, and smiled up at him as the last of the dark aqua

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sunlight faded. "If a Sibyl has foreseen it, it'll come to pass."

Gwen Campbell got her start in the magazine industry, writing everything from news stories to children's fiction to obituaries.

When the company she worked for succumbed to economic turndown, she looked at her bank book and gave herself one year to pursue writing full time. The deal was if she made money, she didn't have to look for a real job. It's worked out pretty good so far and she still doesn't have a real job.

A life-long believer in romance, she now writes romantic fiction. Gwen is married and she and her husband contribute the success of their relationship to making a point of saying "I love you," at least once a day, sometimes saying, "Yes, dear," just because, and making sure the toilet paper always comes over the top of the roll. She says her best sticky-plot resolutions come to her while dog walking.

Following are some excerpts of other hot erotic titles from Shadowfire Press.

If you enjoyed the scifi erotic romance, *Where my Warrior Leads* by Gwen Campbell you might also like Gwen Campbell's *As My Warrior Commands*, her first scifi themed *Frontiers of Love* title.

When a kingdom crashes down around her, will his love be enough to save her?

Sibyls are old crones. Everybody knows that. So what's a warrior supposed to think when a beautiful young woman turns up in the middle of a siege, says she's a sibyl, predicts the downfall of a kingdom and tells him he's going there with her to prevent it? He does what any hot-blooded warrior would do. He follows the woman. She's intelligent, brave, can see the future, has an ass he can't stop staring at and she knows how to make him laugh. What he doesn't know is that the sibyls have predicted the downfall of the Kingdom of Jareb-Phar if a young sibyl enters their throne

room. What they don't know is if her arrival will be coincidental or cause the kingdom's fall. The only thing the warrior does know for sure is that beneath his beautiful, young sibyl's discipline is a woman as lusty and wanton as he is.

Here is a short excerpt from *Frontiers of Love* 2: As My Warrior Commands.

Touching her arm, Thain encouraged Jessica to take another bite of hard bread. They'd eaten the last of the soft two days ago. He had a sense she dipped it into her tea, bit off a piece and chewed only to make him happy. They'd left the flood waters behind that morning.

For the most part they kept to their own, dark thoughts. Because a full bath was impossible, both Jessica and Thain stripped down in the failing light and dragged wet cloths over their bodies. Again, Thain had to discipline himself to look away. The beautiful Sibyl stirred him more with each passing day. As a Warrior, he was trained to ignore the distraction of women when necessary. His discipline had never been so thin. Jessica had laid her leathers out to air and sat wrapped up in one of his drying cloths. It provided adequate coverage but Thain couldn't stop looking at her smooth shoulders, the curve of her knee. He adjusted his seat and wished his damned hard-on would go away. His balls had ached for days.

When they finished eating, he reached for her metal plate. Leftover food slid off hers and landed on her leg.

Thain had noticed she trimmed the fat off her meat. He found it odd but didn't mind. It meant more for him and he'd taken to cleaning off her plate for her. Without thinking, he knelt in front of Jessica and licked her thigh, picking up the perfectly good piece of fat while he cleaned her skin.

Jessica gasped—then moaned.

Damned Warrior. He'd got right past her defenses. Thain's warm breath, the rasp of his tongue sent shivers up Jessica's leg, straight to her pussy. It spasmed and she couldn't stop her response.

Thain grinned wolfishly. He'd thought this

Sibyl incapable of lust...or a master of it. He touched his tongue to her skin and watched her reaction.

"Stop," Jessica breathed. She gripped his hair but pulled as much as she pushed.

Setting the plates aside, Thain wrapped his fingers around her thighs and licked her skin. Jessica was the sweetest, softest thing he'd ever touched. He inhaled her scent, the heat of her body, the spiciness of her arousal. She wove her fingers into his hair and this time made an effort to push him away. Thain resisted her easily and dragged his tongue along the primly shut line of her legs. He pulled gently and Jessica allowed him to ease her knees apart.

There was no more need to resist her. She clearly wanted him and he'd wanted her from the moment he'd laid eyes on her. Six days of riding with her soft body pressed into his...nights lying beside her had taken their toll. Thain's cock was rock hard and ready to make this beautiful Sibyl his.

You might also enjoy her paranormal erotic

romance, *When a Pack Dies,* the first book in Gwen Campbell's *Wyoming Wild* series.

Can a young werewolf who's lost everything learn to trust enough to love again?

Fina had a life, a family, a future until a pack of rogue werewolves showed up and killed everyone she'd ever loved. Escaping with the only other survivor, a six-year old boy named Ryan, Fina crash lands in Wyoming, in the middle of a huge pack led by a sheriff with a streak of bad-ass that goes bone deep. Weres, especially young and on the run ones, need the safety of a pack and when the sheriff gets his first whiff of little miss hellfire from back east, decides for her that his pack is where she'll be staying for good. Problem is, the sheriff's equally yummy brother wants Fina too. Fina's safe for now...that is until the rogues come sniffing around, demanding the return of their woman. And they're willing to kidnap Fina's best human friend and threaten to change her unless Fina comes trotting back home.

## Here is a short excerpt of When a Pack Dies.

"Higher, Fina!" Ryan yelled out as he pumped his legs forward and forced the swing to move faster.

"Here it comes," Fina warned him with a laugh and pushed the swing harder. She laughed again when Ryan shrieked with joy. There were some moments like this—when Ryan's exuberance surfaced and Fina's rose to meet his. There were some moments when they emerged from their pain, anger, loneliness and vapidness...some but not many.

They'd been on the road over two weeks now, moving in random patterns and sometimes circling back for a day or two...but always, gradually, moving further and further west. Something about that direction still pulled at Fina and she'd stopped wondering why.

"Let's find a motel early today, Fina," Ryan begged after he'd tired of the swing. It was just before noon and they'd pulled into a rustic, roadside café to eat. It had a big parking lot—even though it was on a road made almost redundant by a nearby interstate—shaded picnic tables and a large, children's play area. Ryan wove his hands into Fina's, held on tight and let her lift him and flip him in a complete circle until he landed back on his feet with his arms stretched taut behind him. He leaned forward and squealed happily, trusting his weight to Fina's slender arms before hopping, letting go and standing up.

He ran toward the café entrance and the promise of lunch. Fina raced after him, grabbed him, swung him into the air and when his striped t-shirt lifted up, blew a raspberry kiss into his exposed belly. Ryan giggled wildly and pushed her head away. By now they were both sweating a little and they ran into the restaurant's airconditioned foyer.

"Let's find one with a pool again and can we stay two nights can we please, please, Fina?" Ryan pleaded.

Grinning, Fina opened her mouth to say yes then stood up very straight. The air in the café was full of the delicious smells of fried chicken and baking but beneath that was the unmistakable smell of wolf. Her hand shot out, reaching for Ryan and she started backing up toward the door. They'd traveled through a few communities with werewolf populations. It would have been almost impossible not to. They hadn't stopped in any of them and she always made sure the gas tank never got below half full so they wouldn't be forced to stop anywhere she wasn't comfortable. During the past two weeks, Fina's ability to think rationally had improved from the near catatonia she'd experienced immediately following the death of her pack. She'd rationalized that, as a female about to enter her prime breeding years, she wasn't likely to be chased off by another pack. Maybe she'd even be invited to join. She couldn't be absolutely certain of Ryan's welcome. Even though he was a child, he was male. Packs usually didn't accept outside males.

The door behind her swung open and a man walked in. He was big—huge—stood at least six-two and had a chest wide enough to qualify for two zip codes with shoulders to match. The flat stomach and lean hips that sat above and below his thick gun belt told Fina that every impressive inch of him was solid muscle, not flab. He looked to be in his late twenties, wore a dark police uniform and scented like a werewolf with a streak of badass that went bone deep. Fina caught a whiff of urine and one look told her that Ryan was staring up at the man in terror, pushing flat against the wall like he was trying to back right through it to get outside. A dark stain spread across the front of his shorts and a thin stream of urine was sliding down his leg and puddling around his sneaker.

"Oh poor poppet."

Fina's head spun around to a fifty-something woman walking into the foyer from the café. She was dressed in an unflattering and rather silly looking alpine-style dress with an apron tied around her generous waist. She clucked her tongue gently, looked down at Ryan with gentle eyes and held out a slightly wrinkled, pudgy hand to him.

"Don't worry about a thing, little honey," the woman cooed gently. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Fina's wolf jumped to the fore when the woman stepped between her and Ryan. The wolf in her shoved the woman back and made a grab for Ryan, ready to bowl right through the big cop if she had to get the child outside and safe.

### \*\*

Sheriff Cutler Powell stared at the slender, auburn-headed mad woman standing in the foyer of the best—and only—café on his pack's land. She was small, maybe five-four, and had satiny skin turned a pale gold from the sun. The spray of freckles across her pert little nose made his cock twitch...she was just that pretty. The scent coming off her made him harden instantly. It was like breathing in pure lust and there was nothing pure about his reaction to it. The wolf inside him raised its head and in a low, satisfied rumble, spoke one word.

### Mine.

Only little miss pure lust was currently assaulting a senior, respected, female member of his pack. With a smooth, controlled movement, he stepped forward, put his hands on the most enthralling woman he'd ever come across and lifted her. The kid came up with her, hauled upward by her hold on his arm. She let go and the kid dropped back down onto his feet and started shaking all over. Holding her beneath her arms, Sheriff Powell pinned her back against the

wall with her nose level with his. He had to bite down on his tongue before he did something stupid like shove it into her mouth then ask if she had any plans for the rest of her life.

# Where the hell had that thought come from?

Cutler was pretty sure the flailing banshee in his hands wasn't the kid's mother. She probably wasn't even related to him. But their scents told him they were from the same pack and he could see from the way she'd reacted to Dorothea stepping between her and the child that she cared for him as if he were her own pup.

"No one in my pack would ever harm a child." Cutler spoke quietly and clearly. The woman stopped slamming her fists into his chest. She hung between his hands, the fire and rage draining out of her blue eyes. She looked at him warily. She was young, although her eyes looked older than her face, and she couldn't be more than twenty. He breathed in her scent again, wanting a full picture of her health, strength and status. The information he picked up was all contradictory. She was strong yet she wasn't. She smelled of youth yet there was a smell to her that was either age, pain or fear. She was unmated

yet there was no innocence left in her. But by then, Cutler was sporting a raging hard-on and decided the prudent thing to do would be to put her down before the wolf inside him took over and dragged her out back for a quick fuck—then another—and probably one more after that.

### \*

Despite Ryan's instinctive terror and her own blind, maternal rage, Fina believed the big policeman. Maybe it was the uniform? When he stepped back and set her on her feet, Ryan rushed forward, wrapped his slight body around her leg and trembled.

Cutler noticed Dorothea Pike adjusting her waitress uniform. She cleared her throat quietly. "The washrooms are back here," Dorothea said, "I'll give you a hand with some washcloths if you'd like." She made the offer politely despite her obviously jangled nerves. Cutler saw Dorothea's hand flex and knew she was resisting the urge to rub the middle of her chest where the much younger, much stronger woman had straight-armed her after she'd made the mistake of stepping between a mother and her

frightened pup. If their positions were reversed and Dorothea had found herself in the middle of a strange pack, she'd probably have done the same thing. "Do you have a change of clothes for him?" Dorothea asked quietly.

Fina looked at the pudgy gray-haired waitress with the gentle, blue eyes. She'd never felt so guilty in her life but she also knew she didn't dare apologize. In werewolf packs, the strong ruled so she held back the ingrained and heartfelt apology sitting on her tongue. It was far better to appear arrogant than weak...especially when she and Ryan were alone and defenseless.

"Yes," Fina replied evenly. She fished her keys out of her pocket with one hand and reached for Ryan's hand with the other. "I'll go get them."

The huge cop had tugged the keys out of her hand even before she realized he was pulling on them. "Allow me, Miss...?"

Sheriff Powell gave the spitfire his best friendly-guy smile. She and the boy were werewolves. Natural born too from the smell of them, probably from somewhere back east. His instincts told him the minute he let her walk out the door, she'd simply drive off and never

come back. He just couldn't let something that smelled like forever get away. Even if her scent did confuse the hell out of him.

Or you might enjoy reading *In Heaven's Arms*, a *Finding Love: Memorial Day* themed contemporary story by Persephone Jones.

Two wounded souls find healing over the Memorial Day weekend.

Hawaiian tattoo artist Koal Kalani is a man making peace with death. Having lost his daughter and ex-girlfriend in a car accident, he is no stranger to heartache. So much so that when he encounters an unnamed woman in the cemetery, he is drawn to her for reasons known only to those in the midst of sorrow. Though their exchange is brief, it leaves him wishing the angelic stranger will take him up on his offer to visit him at his shop in town.

School teacher Madalyn Maris is still looking for the strength to move on after the death of

Matthew, her beloved Marine Corps fiancé. A year after her devastating loss the unexpected happens. She meets a man in the cemetery, one with bottomless dark eyes, a leather jacket, a warm embrace...and a business card for a tattoo parlor.

With a lifelong fear of needles, Maris can hardly believe it when she stretches out beneath Koal's masterful hands. But something about the tall, dark, and handsome Hawaiian puts her fear at ease and her libido in overdrive...

Here is a short excerpt from In Heaven's Arms.

"So, how much do I..."

He took a step toward her and took her by the hand, his black coffee eyes simmering with intensity. In a second, she knew his intentions. Without saying a word, his eyes roamed the features of her face, down her chest, her body, all the way to her feet and back up again.

Her heart started beating double-time. He led

her into the back of the shop to what appeared to be a dimly lit break room of some sort, equipped with a table, a black leather couch, a few chairs and a kitchenette. The most important thing she noticed however was they were completely alone.

Koal placed her hand on his chest and took hold of her at the waist. "C'm here."

"I shouldn't b—"

This was wrong on so many levels. What was she doing? First hugging a stranger in the cemetery, stripping down to her underwear for the same stranger, letting him give her a tattoo. Never mind what went on inside her head...

She watched his head tilt slightly to the side as his face descended toward hers. Upon feeling the soft strength of his mouth, she closed her eyes and let his kiss take her over. This was the kind man from the cemetery. The man who'd held her while she fell apart. Koal. When she opened her heavy eyelids he was looking at her, searching for a reaction. A reaction she couldn't decide on. Truly, she didn't know whether to slap him, cry or both. All she did know was that she wanted him to kiss her again.

Miraculously her lips gravitated to his as if pulled in by some unseen magnetic force. They kissed again, this time when their lips met it was deeper and more wanton, their tongues lashing at each other as if in combat.

She resisted under the force of his desire and pulled ever so slightly away from him to catch her breath, planting the heels of her hands squarely on his shoulders. "You called me a name while I was in the chair."

Heavy-lidded, he swallowed visibly. "Mm—'anela. It means angel."

Painting her jawbone and neck with kisses, he hooked his fingers under the thin waistband of her red lace panties and eased them down her legs, gentle as a feather. She met his gaze and watched him pause for telltale signs of objection that she had neither the strength nor the will power to give.

She didn't stop him because she couldn't.

You might also enjoy *Secret Fantasy* a contemporary BDSM title by Kitty Cahill.

Good girl Sara doesn't stand a chance against charming bad boy, Chris.

Sara Donovan is a good girl. That is until the day her best friend gives her a gift certificate for thirty minutes with a phone sex operator. "Joel" unlocks forbidden desires in Sara, needs she'd kept hidden from the world, for fear of reprimand from her domineering preacher father. Once unlocked her desire to be dominated in the bedroom threaten to overwhelm her.

Bad boy Chris Masterson wants Sara Donovan for himself. But his reputation as a player keeps the one woman he truly desires from trusting him. When his usual tricks fail to entice the cautious beauty, he comes up with a plan. To become her secret fantasy...in the flesh.

Here is a short excerpt of *Secret Fantasy*.

Chris shook his head. "Nope, too late. You

just tossed down a gauntlet. I'm obligated by men everywhere to pick it up."

"Listen to me. I'm not interested in the type of sex games you play with your flavor of the month. Okay? I want more than a one night stand and a promise to call."

"Jealousy?" He tilted his head slightly and stared at her. "You know, I never would've thought you'd have that emotion where I'm concerned."

"I am not jealous," she retorted lamely.

"You want to know what I think?"

"Not really," she said through gritted teeth.

He pushed away from the car, invading her space. His mouth dropped to speak softly next to her ear, hovering close enough his hot breath fluttered over her neck. "I think you're more than interested. More than just intrigued by it. You want—no—*need* it.

Sara pushed him back a pace. Of course, she knew he allowed her to do so. The man was as solid as a brick wall. "Let me repeat this so you get it. I am not some little...airhead you can push around. Got it? Not. Interested."

"Why do you lie to yourself? You and I both know the truth. Why not just admit it? Then we can begin this."

Sara scoffed. Yeah, sure begin it and end it in one sweet, hot, but most importantly brief night of conquest. "There's nothing to begin. I'll never be one of your little...what do you call them? Subs?"

"Sub? What the fuck?"

"What? Is that the wrong term? You'll have to forgive me. I'm not well versed in the whole BDSM thing and..." Her stomach clenched at the sight of his nostrils flaring, like a wild animal scenting the air. Everything about him screamed dominant male. Sara guessed that's why it was so easy to believe he'd be a Dom.

"Don't tell me that you actually believe all the bullshit people pass around this town?"

"What else am I supposed to believe Chris? You're a womanizing Dom who struts around with every woman who's dumb enough to fall for your tricks." She crossed her arms and glared.

"You prove the rumors true with the way you act."

"I'm not a Dom," he stated plainly, running his hand through his hair. "I'm just confident and like things to go my own way. And if that means I have to take charge to achieve that, I do." His gaze didn't waver for a second. Sara shivered under that concentrated stare.

"Whatever. The point remains that I don't want anything to do with you or your wild life style. I won't join in with you and your buddy. You will not have me tied to anything, with any part of yours or anyone else's body inside any part of me. Is that clear enough? Never going to happen."

Again, he leaned in close, and her senses were filled with the spicy, manly scent of him. "Never say never to a man who can make you scream with nothing more than the tip of his tongue."

Before Sara could retort he brushed her lips with his, then strode away. Confidence riding every step of his long hard body. Against her will, her eyes dropped to the tight butt beneath his Old Navy carpenter pants. Why, oh, why

couldn't he have been ugly? That would've made telling him *no* a helluva lot easier.

Or you might also like *Apocalypse Dance* a paranormal erotic romance by Michael Barnette.

For Nikki salvation is just a Dragon away.

With the world population decimated by a mutated strain of Ebola civilization as we know it has gone down in ruin. Warlords rampage across what was once the United States of America, killing, raping and adding to the misery and horror that has swept the once proud nation.

Nikki, once on her way to becoming a brilliant doctor, is being sought as a concubine by Roderik, self-styled King of the Lone Star Empire.

Here is a short excerpt from *Apocalypse Dance* by Michael Barnette

Her breath caught, and she shuddered under the onslaught of sensation. Her nipples peaked so tightly it looked like it should hurt. He drew the tip of his tongue around the areola, one hand pressed at the small of her back, holding her still for his exploration.

She tensed slightly and he eased his hold, sensitive to her reactions, both positive and negative, learning what she liked and what sent a dampening of desire through her on the wings of fear. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. He wanted her to know nothing but pleasure from his every touch, his every whispered breath across the silken expanse of her flawless skin.

"Bells...." She almost screamed his name as he closed his mouth around the stiffened nub, sucking, teasing it with the edges of his teeth. His cock throbbed with want for her, his own desire heightened by her cry. She wanted him, and even if it came down to nothing but the heat of the moment, her need for comfort, he didn't care. He'd take this, savor it, use it as a balm to the nightmare memories that haunted him in the small hours of the night.

Pulling away, he met her gaze. Awakened

passion warmed her sable eyes. "Do you want this from me?"

"Yes!" There was no reservation or hesitation in her reply, nor in the way she kissed him afterward, her entire being seeking what he offered with the same intensity he had sought her. Her answer was as immediate as her need, and just as heated as his own.

You can buy Frontiers of Love 2: As My Warrior Commands and Wyoming Wild 1: When a Pack Dies by Gwen Campbell, Finding Love-Memorial Day: In Heaven's Arms by Persephone Jones or Secret fantasy by Kitty Cahill and Apocalypse Dance by Michael Barnette along with other fine erotic romance and erotica titles from:

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