



# CHOOSING MATE

*Brenna Lyons*

BINARY **Raze** STARS

# STARTING WAR

*Brenna Lyons*

*Choosing a Mate*  
*Starting a War*

Two Erotic Short Stories by

Brenna Lyons

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*Will of the Stone*  
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*Crossbearer Turned*  
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*And many others.*



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## *A Note from the Author:*

The muse is a noisy creature, and her whip stings. I mention this to explain the two stories you're about to read. When I'm writing in a series world, the muse will get fixated on an unanswered question or "what if" raised elsewhere in the series. Both of these stories grew out of games of "what if."

I've warned readers, on occasion, to read another story before you read a particular one. I won't be doing that today, but I will say that these stories were written to appeal to readers that already have a fair grounding in the series. If you don't, certain turns may seem abrupt to you...jarring, but Night Warriors fans will be able to follow the changes easily.

Happy reading and welcome back to the Night Warriors world!

**Brenna**

# Glossary of Warrior Terms

*Beast*—Beasts are what humans erroneously refer to as vampires. The stories humans tell are obviously not correct, but you can't expect a human to get everything right.

*Blutjagd*—The “blood hunt.” Warriors crave battle with the beasts, as the beasts crave blood. Warriors are tied to beasts in that they sense many of the beasts' special powers. A Warrior can feel the use of coercion, feeding, and other controls of humans. They also feel other Warriors engaged in *Blutjagd*, the death of beasts and Warriors in their range, and the presence of nearby beasts that are not fully ghosted. Rigorous battle training will quell the *Blutjagd* for short periods of time.

*Elder*—One of the original beasts, the Stone stealers who were damned for their crimes against the Stone and the Warriors. The elders are gifted with powers turned beasts are not, including the ability to reproduce with a *Blutjagdfrau*, the ability to turn other beasts, and the inability to be killed by anyone but a Warrior.

*Endspiel*—The point in printing when a Warrior must either seal printing or go insane. A Warrior who feels printing may not progress should break printing long before this point. Note that they are rarely smart enough to do so.

*Fluch*—The Warrior's curse, passed from father to son or daughter. The *Fluch* may be removed from a daughter but never a son. If the *Fluch* is not removed in the *Zeremonie der Freiheit* by the time the menses begin or the *Zeremonie des Schutzes* is performed before freeing, the daughter is cursed to become *Blutjagdfrau*, a female Warrior. Because elders target *Blutjagdfrau* as mates, Warrior fathers will go to any lengths to free a daughter not marked by the Stone.

*Ghosting*—A talent that both beasts and Cursed Warriors learn to harness. Ghosting can hide the physical form of Cursed Warriors or beasts and all they hold or carry from each other and humans. In a lesser strength, it can “blur” the image of the user so that humans do not note the passage in particular but still see a person there, which avoids accidental collisions. Even a ghosted beast cannot hide uses of power that a Warrior can track. Warriors sometimes ghost in tandem to remain visible to each other but not other Warriors or beasts.

*Krankheit*—The “sealing sickness.” In the final stage of the transformation between human and Cursed Warrior, at or about the sixteenth birthday in males and a year after the start of menses in females, the sickness strikes.

The young Warrior will suffer nausea, vomiting, a high fever, disorientation, dizziness, and may become incoherent. It is usually the only time in a Warrior's life that he or she becomes ill, save morning sickness in a *Blutjagdfrau*.

*Printing*—Like imprinting, a Warrior becomes tied to his mate for life. He cannot choose another if she's lost, cannot be unfaithful while she lives, and cannot ever divorce or otherwise dissolve the union. A printed Warrior is the most stable of men, unless his mate or children are endangered or lost. Then he will suffer the printing madness and may have to be killed by his house. Likewise, a Warrior who breaks printing, even early printing, will suffer for it. A Warrior who breaks printing too close to *Endspiel* will face the madness.

*Veriel*—The Mad Elder. The Destroyer of Lives. The Mad Deceiver, who led the traitors and freed the elders from the Stone. The most hated and hunted of all the beasts. Fixated on one woman, he would destroy the world to own her. At least, that's what the stories say of him.

*Warriors*—Also called Cursed Warriors, *Krieger der Nacht*, *Soldat der Nacht*, or Sons of the Stone. The Warriors were an ancient race of protectors who spawned the beasts and now are driven to hunt their former brothers to extinction.

*Choosing a Mate*  
*A Night Warriors' History*



**NOTE FROM BRENN:**

I always have to know how things started. When the muse answered that question, I made some startling discoveries. The very first beast war started when the gods escalated the war in their realm by choosing humans to be their vessels on Earth. The first few “Stone-chosen” were named for the blood marks they possessed.

Happy reading!

“You know why this is necessary,” Syth prodded her.

Ani nodded miserably. Their Goddess Mother had proclaimed that the war could only end with children from her line. The gods had named her Raga, Mother of Peace and vessel of the Stone Goddess. Though both of the males originally chosen for her had been lost to them, producing children was essential to that end.

If only that didn’t mean bedding with a man not Goddess-crafted for her, she might not be so nervous about it. As it was, Ani knew that she would never have happiness in her life.

*Damn Reg!*

“Are you prepared to do this, Ani?” her brother asked.

She peeked up at him, reassured by the fact that he looked no happier with the situation than she was.

Syth stroked a hand along her cheek, hooking her long hair behind her ear. “If I could return Ori to you, I would. You know that, I hope.”

She swallowed a sob at the reminder, then nodded.

Ori had won the battle for her bed and had gifted her with a single, sweet kiss in promise of the mating to come. But that mating had never come to pass and, courtesy of Reg, never would.

*Damn Reg!*

“Ani, today or another day, this must happen,” Syth reminded her.

“Then it should be today.” She was glad to hear she sounded surer than she was about it.

Syth offered her a comforting hug and took her elbow in his hand, leading her down the corridor and to the chamber where their remaining numbers waited for her “pleasure” in choosing a mate.

*There will be no pleasure.* That was nearly a given.

Ani realized she was being peevish. Of course, there would probably be pleasure. *Krieger* were known for their sexual prowess. Whichever male she chose would do that, out of duty, if for no other reason.

*But there will be no love.* She’d been fated to love whichever of the two destined won her bed.

And she had loved Ori, much more than she had ever loved Reg. Ani pushed that thought away. Ori was the past. Whatever *Krieger* she chose was her future, love him or not.

She paused at the archway and took a calming breath. Syth offered a squeeze of her elbow in support.

He released her as she entered the chamber. It could not appear that he'd led her decision in any way.

Ani nearly turned and ran at the sight of them. She'd known this was coming, but she hadn't been prepared for the reality of it.

The men showed no distress at her reaction. None of them commented on the step back she took before she managed to smooth her jangled nerves.

There was no instruction given. The Goddess Mother's plan so fouled, there was no tradition for what was about to happen. No one had foreseen it to suggest where to progress from the ruins they'd been dealt. In the end, Syth had conferred with the *Krieger* remaining.

Only two possibilities had been advanced to her for a decision. Since it was Ani's body and her children at stake, no one had argued that the ultimate choice should fall to her.

The first had consisted of Ani taking each of the men into her body in turn until she caught pregnant with a child...or two. Three... As many as she would be have proven willing to carry and from as many of the men as remained unprinted when she sought out males to fill her bed. Syth would have raised the children as his own, and none of the others would know who had truly sired them.

Beyond the horror for her of taking all the *Krieger* in turn, that possibility presented the very real possibility that all of the men would be driven mad by the idea that the child she bore was his own and she with it. She secretly believed it more likely that some would be driven mad and some not, further fragmenting their waning ranks.

The other was the only possible solution. Ani would choose from among the remaining men and take only that chosen man to her bed to sire her children.

Not that the plan was perfect. Ani was the first to admit that there were problems with it. If her chosen one printed on another woman, he would be forced to leave her or go mad in wanting the other. Beyond that, he would not be able to perform sexually with Ani if he was printing on another. If that happened, she would have to choose again and release her first male to his chosen.

There was little possibility that any of the remaining men would print on her. But, short of isolating her chosen from all the other women in the world, how could they avoid the problem?

She conceded that there was no way.

Though she'd stood immobile for so long, none of the men prompted her to continue with this farce. Syth had decreed that no one was to speak to her unless she spoke first and seemed to want an answer. There would be no coercion, no convincing her. There would be no appeals of Ani's final choice. They would all accept it as law, as if the Goddess had chosen the man for her personally.

Still, approaching them took all her fortitude. Though she'd seen Syth nude while he bathed, she hadn't seen another man in such a state. Now, she was faced with six of them, all more than double her size.

Ani wanted to look them in the eyes, but that wasn't the point of this display. She knew their faces, and when Syth had asked, she hadn't been able to simply choose one as more appealing than another that way.

To this moment, she wasn't certain which of the men had suggested she choose the most appealing...package. She supposed it didn't really matter who had suggested it. Since Ani had been unable to choose a favorite by face, she had to choose by some differing quality about them.

All of them were tall, broad men. All had thick, black hair that reached at least to their shoulders. All had dark eyes, ranging from deep blue to brown and even black. All had training scars of varying lengths and in varying places. There was only one thing left that would matter to a woman, according to the one who'd suggested this manner of choosing.

*Choosing a mate by the cock that appeals to me most. I must be mad to have agreed to this.*

But she had agreed to it.

That a given, Ani started at the closest man. His cock was as long as her hand and fingers combined...not so long that she worried about his depth harming her, but he was thick enough that she was afraid he might be an uncomfortable fit.

The next was slim and long. *Too long.* The urge to compare his length to that of her forearm was enough proof that Ani would shy from it when she had promised to embrace the one she chose. She moved on.

The third was of average length and girth, and Ani considered him a moment longer. She conceded that comfort was the only concern she had to worry about. Any of them would be an avid lover, passably talented, and produce the children the Goddess needed of them.

*But I must consider them all. If any of them feel slighted, it could have catastrophic results.*

She moved on, trying to push away the realization that all of them were hard for her inspection. Was it excitement that whoever she chose would get to bed with her? Was it just another battle to them?

The next was both long and thick. Not as long as the second but as thick as the first, easily. Ani started to move on, dismissing him that simply.

*Not so simply.* His cock jerked, slapping wetly against his belly, and she looked again. The slit in the head was beaded with clear fluid, and more of the same dotted his lightly-furred abdomen, where the head had struck. At her inspection, it jerked again.

She took a calming breath and moved on.

Focusing on the other cocks was difficult. Her gaze strayed to that one, again and again. Ani forced herself to consider them all. The fifth was the longest and thick, though not as thick as the one before. The sixth was less than a finger width longer than the first and narrow, as well.

She ranged the line again, not to compare dimensions but to compare their readiness. Only two of them had sacs that appeared hard and full, indicating—by her meager understanding—that they were aroused fully at the moment. Only the one was weeping fluids for her.

What did it mean? Had it been so long since he'd had a woman beneath him that he was in aching need of one?

The heat at her back meant Syth had drawn near. While he would not interfere, she was certain it was a gentle reminder that she was essentially baiting these men.

"I wish to consider...several further?" Ani hadn't meant to make it a question. It shouldn't have been. She was the one that would choose.

"Which?" Syth inquired. "And do you wish the others to leave?"

"Yes." She was certain she wouldn't be choosing several of them already. "They should leave." At least then she would only be faced with three cocks and not six.

At her brother's silence, Ani darkened. She had to name the three that would stay, and that meant doing so by connecting faces to the parts she'd been examining so closely. *For the rest of my days, I will know what every Krieger's cock looks like.* It was mortifying.

Her face burning in embarrassment, she looked up.

The third one was Len. His name meant *mountain*, but he was the one of average proportions.

Pol was the fifth; though his dimensions frightened her, his sac was tight and heavy in arousal.

Baroo was the fourth...the one whose cock was weeping fluids so avidly. She had to know why that was before she made any further decisions.

"These three," she breathed. "Len, Baroo, and Pol."

The other three tipped their heads in acknowledgement and withdrew to the next chamber, probably to dress. She winced at the thought that more than one of them was probably relieved that she hadn't tied him to her.

The three she'd asked to examine further shot looks that seemed to question silently at each other. None of them voiced their concerns, whatever they were.

*They are not permitted to.* There was something liberating in that.

Now that she'd asked to consider them closer, Ani didn't know how to accomplish it. She could hardly ask the questions she wanted to. Could she?

*I have every right to.*

"You are all very...ready," she noted.

Three brows furrowed, and sideward glances passed between them, but none of them commented.

Ani worked her lower lip between her teeth, nearly squirming in place.

Syth cleared his throat. "Did you mean a question in that, Raga?" he asked formally, using her title instead of her name. "You must be specific in your asking."

Her face flamed. "How often...? How often do you each typically...?" She swallowed hard. "Mother take it. I cannot do this." She turned to leave, the precursors of tears burning at her eyes.

Syth made no move to stop her. Part of her wished he would. Another was relieved he wasn't doing so.

Her hand was on the archway when one of them spoke.

"Often, Raga."

She spun back to them, her heart hammering. By the way Len and Pol gaped at him, she guessed that Baroo had spoken.

"Ask whatever you wish of us. If you choose to bed with one of us... It is your right." He tipped his head and offered a solemn and serious look.

Len and Pol nodded and grumbled their agreement.

Her heart hammering hard against her ribs, she took careful steps toward them. "How often do you?"

Len looked as if he would rather not answer that question. "As often as I have the opportunity to. With training and my other duties, nearly daily still."

"Thank you." Her mind reeled at his answer.

Pol went next. "More than daily. I have a fierce hunger."

She suspected he was boasting, hoping she wanted a virile man. He wanted to impress her. Ani knew *Krieger* bedded with women often, and she didn't care for a boastful man. "Thank you." She hoped it didn't sound as cold and clipped as it felt.

Ani looked at Baroo.

He met her gaze solidly. "Typically close to daily. I have gone as far as three hand of days, but I prefer not to wait longer than one or two."

She didn't hesitate. "And the last time you lay in a woman?"

Baroo didn't flinch from the question. "A day ago."

"Then you are not...?" The words stuck in her throat.

He waited patiently for the question, his eyes soft and inviting.

That gave her the courage to ask it. "Then you are...content not to bed a woman today...or soon, if needs be? You are not crazed to bed?"

"None of us would force you to bed, Raga." His voice was soothing.

"That was not what I asked," she huffed.

Baroo cocked his head to one side and stared at her for a moment. Just when she would have rephrased the question for him, he answered.

“No. I am not crazed for a woman.”

The others hastened to add their agreement.

He wasn't crazed for a woman, but he strained and wept sex fluids. Ani launched into her next question before she could convince herself that it was inappropriate.

“Is...” She motioned to his cock. “Is that...personal...to me?”

Baroo looked down at himself, seemingly confused. “All the men are erect, Raga.”

“That did not help,” she grumbled.

“Be specific,” Syth reminded her.

Ani swallowed hard and looked up at the three men. Their reactions to her question were varied. Len seemed to be studying cracks in the ceiling. Baroo silently invited her to ask. Pol smirked in a way she found most irritating.

“Please leave,” she snapped at him.

His smile disappeared, and he tipped his head, following her orders without question. No matter why he was aroused, Ani would not spend her time bedding with a man she loathed.

There was a tense moment of silence. Finally, Ani forced herself to speak.

“You react more acutely than the other men do,” she explained to Baroo. “Is it because of me? Do you feel something for me personally?”

Her heart pounded in fear that he would say it wasn't personal, that he felt nothing for her personally, that none of them did.

Baroo stared at her for a long moment. None of the men spoke. They barely breathed.

“Yes. Very personal,” he offered. His muscles tensed, as if he feared she would tell him to leave next. Or perhaps he feared Syth and Len would accuse that he was swaying her with his words.

Ani took a step toward him, daring to lay a hand on his chest. A gasp left his mouth, and his cock jerked. His muscles tightened down another notch.

“Len can leave,” she managed. “I have made my choice.”

Len withdrew a step. “Thank you for your consideration, Raga. May you have many strong sons.” The blessing imparted, he left the chamber.

\* \* \* \*

Baroo found it difficult to think clearly. Pol's plan to impress Ani with his size had failed him, and Baroo had captured Ani's attention without breaking the rules set out for them.

It was unbelievable. It was a gift or a blessing. Surely, the Goddess Mother had led her chosen daughter to Baroo personally.

“What is your wish, Raga?” her brother asked.

Baroo's cock had opinions on the matter, but it was the Young Mother's leisure and not his own urgency that mattered.

Ani didn't seem to know how to answer that. At last, she spoke in that same tentative tone she'd used when questioning their sexual exploits.

"You said I was fertile now." The way her voice faltered at the end said she was unsure.

*Or she wishes she was.* Baroo answered before Syth could. "I do not require immediate consummation, if that is your fear. As always, your choice is law."

Syth's voice was something of a rebuke. "Ori did not press for immediate consummation either."

He didn't need to say more. A moon later, several of the remaining *Krieger* still cursed Ori for a fool that had wasted his single chance to sire children.

But not Baroo. Baroo thanked the blessed Goddess Mother that Ori had been so unaware of the danger he faced. If Ori had not been lost to her, Ani would have no need of another, and Baroo would surely die in wanting her.

Ani pressed closer to him, shivering at her brother's warning, and Baroo shot the Stone lord a warning glare for it.

"I watch my back better than Ori did," he informed Syth.

A stiff nod of acknowledgement was his only answer.

Baroo continued. "What would please you, Raga? Anything that will put you at ease with me."

A wan smile pulled up at her lips. "It would please me to have you call me Ani."

"Ani." He'd always thought of her as Ani. Reminding himself to call her by her title had taxed his mind, a mind that was usually mired in lust any time he was within touching distance of her.

He could mark the moment when that lust had taken hold of him first, and he'd suspected that either the Goddess Mother had chosen him for Ani then...or that the trickster god Veriel had sought to drive a wedge in their ranks by cursing him with unrequited feelings for the Young Mother.

"You must make a choice, Raga," her brother insisted. "This is unkind to Baroo."

It wasn't. Every moment with her in his arms was a gift he would treasure forever. Baroo opened his mouth to say so.

Ani looked up at him, her smile strained. "Would it be unkind to ask to speak for a bit?"

"Not at all." If they grew to know each other better, she might feel for him what she'd felt for Ori. The concept of a life loving her while she could not return the feeling was the only horror deeper for him than Ani choosing another in his place.



Syth walked away, then returned and pushed Baroo's wrap at him. As if that reminded Ani that he was unclothed, she backed away and went a stunning shade of red.

She turned toward the corridor to her chambers and stammered out something about waiting for him in her work room. With that, she was gone.

*Running from me.* The thought hurt.

*Ani needs time. I will give her as much as I can bear to.*

Syth's warning made his heart stutter. "We do not have the leisure of time, Baroo. My sister has chosen you. If you feel as you say you do about her, bind her to you quickly and give her the heirs the Goddess Mother wishes...before Reg can act again to stop it."

"As soon as Ani is comfortable with the idea of sharing a bed with someone other than Ori," he vowed. He prayed that day would come soon.

Syth snarled at him, but whether it was at Baroo's use of Ani's given name or at his warning being ignored was an uncertain thing.

\* \* \* \*

Ani chose to lounge on the furs. There were other places to sit in the chamber. She wondered if Baroo would choose to share the furs with her or to sit apart from her.

*He said he was affected by me personally.* Would that mean he would hint at more or not do so, as to put her at ease with him?

*All my life surrounded by males, and I understand so little about their ways.* Of course, Ani hadn't been permitted to mingle with the *Krieger* since her blood began to flow.

Baroo strode through the archway, dressed again as the men did for training. He looked around the unfamiliar space, pausing at each possible place to settle. At last, he stepped to the foot of the furs and folded down onto the stone floor, his legs crossed beneath him.

It took Ani a moment to realize she was staring at the edge of his rough hide wrap. Was she hoping for a glance at his cock?

*I should look away.* She didn't.

"I can remove my wrap, if you wish."

Ani looked up, mortified that he was teasing her about her interest. It didn't appear that Baroo was teasing. She wriggled, uncertain if his candor was better or worse than the idea that he might be making fun of her.

"Or not," he conceded.

She nodded. But where to go from there? Ani wasn't certain what to talk to him about.

Baroo had his own ideas. "How did you choose the three?"

Ani stared at him. "How?"

He took his time answering. "When you named Len, I thought for certain..."

"What did you believe?"

"If you had been choosing for moderate length, Len, Vin, and Hir were of a type. If you wanted a longer man, Kor, Pol, and I would have been your choices. If you wanted a thick man, Hir, Pol, and I would have been your choices. If you wanted a man with less bulk, Kor, Len, and Vin would have been the obvious choices. In no way do the three of us match up."

Her face was burning at the recitation of their dimensions.

"You were not choosing by those sorts of attributes. Were you?"

Ani shook her head slowly.

"How did you choose us, Ani?"

*He has a right to know.* "I choose you and Pol because of your avid excitement. I wanted to know why you responded as you did."

"But you dismissed Pol without asking that question."

She cleared her throat. "I...uh... I dislike Pol."

A smile quirked up his mouth, and Baroo's throat bobbed in what was probably laughter. "An excellent reason to dismiss him."

Before Ani had a chance to fully appreciate his comment, she burst out in laughter. Baroo shot her a sly little look that made her laugh harder. He didn't speak again until she'd recovered.

"Why Len then?"

Ani bit lightly at her lower lip, uncertain how to discuss it.

"I see," he mused.

"Do you?"

"His length and girth are much less formidable. That was the reason. Was it not?"

\* \* \* \*

Ani's shock would have been amusing if Baroo wasn't so worried that it would continue to be a problem for them. He had to put her at ease.

"The differences are not as striking as they seem."

Her look spoke her disbelief.

"Women accommodate all lengths and girths." In fact, the village women often said they enjoyed the larger men, which was no doubt the reason Pol had believed Ani would choose him, based on his size.

*But those are older, experienced women, most of which have borne children.* Ani would be tight, untried. Perhaps, she would find his size uncomfortable, but there was no way to know it until she was willing to bed with Baroo at all.

Calming her was necessary. If she was fearful when they bedded, chances were she *would* find their joining painful.

Ani nodded solemnly, her eyes large and trusting. Her gaze slid from his face to the edge of his wrap.

“Are you certain you do not wish me to remove my wrap?” *Or to remove it yourself.*

She didn’t look away. “No.”

“As you wish.” *Damn, but getting her to relax to the idea of bedding will not be easy.* And just the thought of it had him hard and weeping, and had for days.

Her eyes blinked, and her brow furrowed. “I meant... No, I am not certain.”

“About?” He prayed it was as simple as him removing his wrap now and not uncertainty about a woman’s ability to take varying dimensions.

Ani peeked up at him. “Syth says I am being cruel to you. I do not mean to.”

He smiled. “Nothing you have done is cruel, Ani. Your brother should not speak for the sensibilities of other men.”

She hesitated and then motioned to the furs beside her. His heart skipping in anticipation, Baroo rose, stepped to the furs, and folded down beside her.

Ani reached a shaking hand to him and touched his chest as she had earlier. Her gaze assessed his reaction, her eyes widening at the little moan of delight he let pass.

“This is personal to me,” she breathed.

“Very personal,” he repeated.

The moment she collapsed into her brother’s arms, weeping over Ori’s fate, burned in his memories. She’d screamed, ranted that she would never willingly bed with Reg after what he’d done, and she’d sobbed until her face and eyes were swollen and red.

At that moment, Baroo had wanted to tear Reg limb from limb. He’d wanted to be the one holding her, the one inhaling her feminine scent. He’d wanted to be the one to take Ori’s place in her heart and bed, and that feeling had never faded and likely never would.

She explored, testing the feel of muscle beneath her small hands. Her hand retreated, and Baroo took a calming breath. It caught in his throat at the feeling of her hand delving beneath his wrap.

With exaggerated care, Ani trailed her fingertips up his inner thigh, ruffling his leg hair and waking his nerves to bliss. Her fingers curled in the mat of male hair, traced the outline of his rigid sac, and started up his length.

“Yes,” he urged her, his breathing ragged.

He didn’t doubt that it was Ani’s touch in particular that affected him. He’d had women sucking him or riding him that affected him less than she did with an innocent, questioning touch.

“Oh, yes, we should,” she whispered.

“Only if you truly wish to,” he vowed. “Not because you are fertile. Not because of anything your brother has said or done.”

But the fact that she was fertile was impossible to ignore. Baroo wanted his seed nestled deep in her and growing nearly as much as he wanted to draw his next breath.

Her massaging hand said she wanted something.

“Do you wish to watch me release to your hand, Ani?” Given much more of her, his climax was a surety. Whether she watched him or not, he was going to spill soon.

*I want her to watch it.* If she didn’t finish him, the urge to do so for himself and let her watch was strong.

Her nod was quick and jerking, her eyes wide.

Baroo untied his wrap and pulled it away, exposing himself to her. Her hand was tiny and pale, compared to his sun-touched length. Her fingers only just met around his circumference.

A small sound that might have been distress or pleasure left her lips. They parted slightly, and her breaths were short and quick. Ani’s scent rose to an enticing high.

The climax built in the root of his cock. As if Ani sensed it, she tightened her fist around him and milked hard toward that end. Baroo groaned, letting himself go, fighting his eyes open to take in every expression as she watched him shoot.

He stifled his sounds to low, intimate ones Syth was unlikely to hear but Ani would. If the Stone lord overheard sounds of passion, he might believe the task of conceiving Ani’s first child accomplished.

Her eyes widened at the rush of his seed, but she didn’t pull away. Baroo’s cock spasmed against her grip, and his climax went on. Her lips parted in an “O” of surprise.

At last, it ended, and she continued to stare. Ani was so still, Baroo wasn’t certain what to make of the reaction. He spoke her name softly in the attempt not to startle her.

Ani drew her hand back, her breathing coming in little gasps and catches. Baroo wanted to hold her but feared that reaching for her would send her running.

“Calm, Ani. All is well.”

She didn’t acknowledge his comment. Her hand shaking, Ani reached out and trailed her fingers through the ribbons of cum on his chest and abdomen.

“Why do you let me...?” Her face went crimson, and she averted her gaze.

Baroo reached out and cupped her chin in his fingers, urging her gaze back to his. “You chose me because my reaction to you is personal. Every touch is a

joy to me, Ani. What would be the sense in denying myself that joy? Or denying you the chance to touch and learn?”

“Even when I am not certain of more?”

“Even then.”

Ani squirmed, looking hopelessly confused.

“You need time to consider what you have seen.” Baroo didn’t question it.

“Yes.” Ani vaulted to her feet and ran for the archway to her personal chamber. She stopped there, peeking at him around the edge of the rock. “Will you return to your home, Baroo?”

He shook his head slowly. “No, Ani. I will be here when you wish to speak to me again. Here or in your bed. Whichever you prefer.”

“Here...for now.” With that, she fled to the comfort and familiarity of her bed.

Baroo took his time, wiping away the leavings of his release. Yes, he was staying here with her. After what happened to Ori, Syth had decreed that Ani’s chosen wasn’t to leave her.

The man in question appeared in the archway to the corridor. He scowled down at Baroo. “I take it none of that went inside her,” he grumbled.

“For a man with the Goddess-given place of protecting his sister—the Goddess Mother’s vessel, no less—you seem awfully quick to push her into bed with a man she isn’t comfortable enough to offer herself to. Her choice is law, you realize.”

Syth visibly calmed himself. “The Stone says Reg and the other traitors have allied themselves with Veriel and the traitor gods. Traitors allying with traitors.” He shook his head. “It defies all reason.”

Baroo stared at him, trying to find the words to ask what this meant.

“Training on how to defeat the traitor beasts begins tomorrow. You will have half sessions. I believe you know how I expect you to spend the remainder of your time.”

*Trying to convince an innocent woman to accept me in her bed.* The whole thing flew in the face of the rules of sanction.

\* \* \* \*

An oppressive silence fell over the training chamber, and the hair on the back of Baroo’s neck rose in warning. He straightened and turned toward the archway.

Ori stood there, staring at Baroo as if he was deciding between beating him to a pulp and burying a blade in his gut. At his move toward Baroo, the other *Krieger* parted to let Ori pass.

The older man stopped an arm's length away from him, a tic working in the back of his jaw. "Baroo."

He tipped a curt greeting, unwilling to avert his gaze for any reason. There was no question why Ori was singling Baroo out. He'd heard Baroo was Ani's new chosen, and this was some sort of challenge, no doubt.

"Practice," Ori ordered. "Now."

Baroo waved him ahead, unwilling to give Ori his back. His opponent's eyes narrowed, but he complied, his gait tense and primed. There was little doubt he meant to pummel Baroo if he could. There was less doubt Ori wanted to kill him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Baroo saw his usual sparring partner, Len, move to Syth's side.

Syth started talking, but Baroo's mind was only half on the instruction. Beasts could be taken by a heart shot with a sacred weapon or by completely severing the head with the same. The heart shot would be easier. There were other ways to weaken them, but the usual killers would not.

He named the god each former *Krieger* had allied with. Syth explained how the beasts had been created by the hollowing out of the former *Krieger's* soul and the gods in question pouring a portion of their own souls in their places. It was unnatural. It created monsters. And it made the gods themselves vulnerable, while making their formerly-human proxies all the more powerful. It had been a calculated gamble, trapping a portion of their god-souls in the beasts to try and win the greater war.

All the while, he and Ori sized each other up. They'd sparred before, though they weren't often paired. But this time would be different. This time, the fight was personal.

Syth called for sparring practice, and Ori closed on him. The first few hits came hard and fast. Baroo landed the first that would be considered a killing blow on a beast.

Ori backed off two steps, taking slow, deep breaths while the pain in his chest eased. He didn't give the traditional nod of readiness. Instead, he launched at Baroo with a look that said Baroo would be taking the next blow.

He didn't. Ori went down hard, but it wasn't a killing blow for a beast. Baroo's move to take that blow ended with Ori flipping Baroo beneath him. They rolled and struck blows, struggling for the superior position.

"You think you are worthy of her?" Ori growled at him.

Baroo struck him across the face, bloodying Ori's lip. "No man is worthy of her, and you know it."

Syth called a halt, and they ignored him. Baroo threw Ori off and flipped to his feet. Ori swept them, and tried to do the same. Baroo took his knee and came up over him, bringing his fist down into Ori's heart hard.

The man beneath him grimaced, panting in the agony Baroo had left him in. Baroo waited for another attack that didn't come.

Ori stared at him. When he spoke, there was no question it was a warning. "If you put her through what I did, I will personally slit your throat. If you hurt her, I will make you live as I do now."

Baroo took to his feet and offered his hand to help Ori up. "I would kill myself before I would give Ani a moment of discomfort." He started to turn to Len.

"You train with me, Baroo," Ori informed him.

A smile pulled up at his lips. "So you can repay the damage I have dealt you?" he taunted.

The older man pushed his way to Baroo's face. "No. Because no other man in this chamber is as committed as I am to making certain you survive what is coming for you intact. We have something in common, you and I."

*Love for Ani.* He nodded grimly. "It gives you no rights," he informed the damaged lord.

"I know that. I accept it."

Baroo offered his hand in agreement, and Ori took it.

"I will not be soft on you."

Baroo didn't smile at that. "If you were, I would kill you myself."

\* \* \* \*

Ani snapped awake with a shout of horror. Burying her face in her hands, she tried to banish the visions of what Reg did to Ori. She hadn't seen it, of course, but the thought of his scarred body bothered her just the same.

Perhaps it was because the attack had been carried out in her name. Perhaps it was the horror of the things traitors did to achieve their goals. Either way, she wished Syth had told her they'd killed Ori. Of course, that would be a lie and beneath *Krieger* honor.

Baroo appeared in the archway between her work room and her bedroom. He lowered his blade slowly. "May I enter, Ani?"

"Yes." She wanted Baroo's arms, the solid reality of his protection and comfort.

He strode to her, laid his sacred weapon on the table beside the bed, and settled beside her.

Baroo didn't ask what her nightmare had been. He probably didn't have to ask it. She'd confided it to him their second day together, when they'd spent hours talking and looking at each other, neither daring to touch.

On their third day together, they still hadn't consummated. They'd talked for a while that afternoon; they'd kissed and touched. Baroo had released her arousal

with his hand, whispering sweet words while she clung to him, needing more that she was afraid to ask for. Needing him but still too afraid of losing him to commit to bedding fully.

She'd retreated to her bed at the sight of him tasting her cream from his fingertips, his eyes hot in meaning even a virgin like herself could follow. His mouth would have come next, and Ani hadn't been certain she would deny him after that.

His arms encircled Ani, and Baroo eased her to his chest and both of them to the bed. "Sleep, Ani. I will protect you."

But sleep was the last thing she wanted. He was nude for sleep, and he was erect. Ani wanted more than being held and comforted. She wanted him touching her, tasting her...thrusting inside her.

Ani stretched upward, sliding along his body to bring her lips to his. Baroo angled his head to one side and sealed their mouths together.

He didn't ask what she wanted. He'd told her to let what came between them happen naturally. If she found herself unsure or uncomfortable or frightened, she was to tell him to stop or leave him for a time as she had earlier.

*There will be no stopping. Enough of playing the rabbit. Baroo is mine, and I am his.*

His lips parted hers, and he progressed to the deep, passionate kisses he'd introduced her to earlier in the day. Ani wrapped her arms around his neck and tugged. Baroo complied, covering her with his solid length.

Her heart stuttered at the weight on her, at his knee working up between hers, pushing her legs wide to admit him. She thrust her hips up, moaning at his muscled thigh touching her so intimately.

Baroo pushed up at her sleeping tunic slowly, probably believing she would startle and call a halt. It slipped past her waist, and his cock left wet trails along her belly.

Ani gasped and pulled her head back at the sensation, her body in a riot. She wanted to beg him to continue, wanted to touch, wanted—

*The tunic has stopped moving. Baroo thinks he has pushed me too far.*

"Yes," she breathed. "Please, Baroo."

His kiss was less restrained at that. The tunic passed her breasts, and he broke off the kiss. Just when she thought he might abandon his own rules and question her, he lowered his head and sucked one rigid nipple into his mouth. Ani found breathing difficult, but somehow she managed to drag in enough air to expel some of the tension building in her with a shout.

Baroo moved from one breast to the other, growing more avid. The tunic slid off the ends of her extended arms and left them skin to skin.



It was glorious. Ani wished she'd had the courage to do this days earlier. She pulled at Baroo and worked her slit against his thigh, needing more, needing all of him.

He grumbled curses into her breast, his breath hot and fast against the wet nipple. Baroo raised his head, his eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth as if to question her, snapped it shut, then dove in for another heated kiss.

His hand left her cheek and reappeared on her thigh. He cupped it and drew her leg wide around him. Ani wound her tongue around his and fisted her hand in his shoulder-length curls, doing her best to encourage him with her limited knowledge of what appealed to him.

His weight shifted, and his other leg pushed between hers. The broad head of his cock painted trails up and down the length of her seam. The teasing was too much, and Ani pressed down until the top curve was nestled between her nether lips.

It wasn't enough. She tore her mouth from his. "I need you, Baroo. Now. Please."

His hands circled her hips and lifted to position her. Before she could ask again, his cock was deep inside her.

The sensations were so striking, Ani couldn't identify any given one clearly. She was full—from the curls teasing her seam to the crown nestled inside her—stretched tight around his girth. There was a throbbing pain, a matching pleasure radiating up her abdomen and down her thighs, and the delight of his fingers massaging the curve of her ass.

"So beautiful," he breathed. "So perfect."

Ani moved her hips, pressing her buttocks down into his grip, massaging her inner channel with the length of his cock.

"Oh...definitely perfect." Again, he looked as if he meant to question her. Baroo didn't.

His hips slid back until only the head of his cock breached her. His forward move filled her even more fully than he had the first time. Ani moaned and arched into his hold. Her fingers curved in a purely instinctual move, driving her fingernails into Baroo's back.

From his groan, she guessed it was enjoyable to him. He moved again, withdrawing and thrusting deep. Her hands tightened, and he started moving faster.

In moments, he was driving hard into her. Ani pulled him deeper, only mildly aware of the fact that she was drawing blood on Baroo in the process. If his sounds were any indication, she had no reason for concern.

The sensation of the knot being pulled tight inside her returned, and she prayed for forbearance to the Goddess Mother. When she'd climaxed to Baroo's

hand, Ani had nearly fainted in pleasure. This was faster, hotter, and Ani was certain it would shatter her into pieces.

The sensation of release was powerful and breath stealing. Her mind muddled, Ani couldn't say when her gasping breaths turned to screams and pleas for more. One moment, she was unable to fill her aching lungs...or perhaps trying to overfill the same. The next, her sounds were echoing off the chamber walls.

Baroo lodged his cock deep inside her, and he joined in Ani's sharp sounds. The heat of his seed shocked her into another spate of vocalizations she couldn't name. The world around them went hazy and indistinct, and she held to Baroo as the only sure thing she could attest to.

Clarity came back a little at a time. The first thing that made sense to her was Baroo. His hands stroked at her hair, and his voice feathered against her lips, soothing sounds that she couldn't properly put meaning to.

Ani opened her eyes, staring up at him, stunned. Syth had told her how enjoyable bedding could be, but she'd believed he was exaggerating to put her at ease. She was glad he hadn't lied about it.

\* \* \* \*

It was difficult to tell if Ani was happy about what had happened between them or not. Of course, Baroo knew she'd enjoyed the act, but her shock attested that something had caught her unaware.

"Are you well, Ani?" he asked gently.

She gasped out a weak little "yes," and aftershocks massaged Baroo's still-erect cock.

Before he could rein himself, he was pushing deeper inside her, reveling in her body's reaction.

Ani's fingernails bit in hard, leaving new tracks on his back. Raga, but that was good.

It was something of sacrilege to think of the Goddess Mother by her name when she was embodied in Ani, her essence split between the Stone and the woman. It was appropriate to defer to the Walking Goddess, but reconciling that was difficult for Baroo. On one hand, it was hard to think of Ani as anything but the sensual woman he desired so much. On the other, there was no denying that he was lying sheathed in a goddess. What else could one call this enticing woman?

Ani pressed kisses to his chest and throat, making his cock ache to continue.

"Are you certain?" he asked, breaking his own counsel.

*She is fertile.* With any amount of agreement on her part, Baroo would be inside her every moment day and night she was willing, training be damned. Not

even Syth would drag Baroo from Ani's bed for training, if the Young Mother proved agreeable to conceiving her first child.

*My child!* All her children would be Baroo's, if he had any influence in it.

Her breath puffed into his ear, and she nibbled at the lobe. "Sure of you."

"Sure enough to carry my child?" It was probably already too late to avoid that outcome, but he wanted to hear it. If Ani said she was willing to carry for him, he'd last all night, at least.

"Yes. Your child. Our child. Raga's child." Her voice was a temptation, and her body heated around his length.

"Mine. Ours." He pushed away the sacrilegious thought that Raga had nothing to do with what was between himself and Ani. He would see Ani's face when he looked at his children, not the Goddess's.

Baroo rose, lifting Ani onto the column of his cock, her legs spread around his hips. She shivered in what her body's reactions said was delight. Little gasps bathed his throat in heat, and her nipples pulled at the hair on his chest.

They thrust against each other, a hard grinding that forced his cock as deep as it would go. There was no withdrawal, as if both of them wanted the feeling of him lodged in for an extended stay.

Her sounds were sweet and low, and her hands closed on his shoulders. Ani tested the feel of moving over him, faster and slower, but always deep.

Ani's eyes slid shut, and her head rocked back on her slender throat. Baroo bit back his release, forcing himself not to climax at the early contractions of her muscles around him. When her body released, so did his, in hard wracking spasms and a flood of cum.

"Mine," he repeated. Ani was his and no one else's.

"Only yours," she assured him.

That quickly, he was ready again.

\* \* \* \*

Baroo opened his eyes, smiling at the sight of Ani. After their third joining, she'd fallen asleep, his cock snug inside her. Duty had demanded he let her recover from their passion when his cock had screamed and pounded at his nerves for more.

Hours later, her body was a pleasant blanket. Though the urge to wake her for more was insistent, the comfort of her body pressed to his and the sealing they'd accomplished after she'd promised to be his were enough to stay his hand.

Then again, considering the fact that his hand was currently curved around her delectable little ass, why would he want to move it? That thought in mind, he laid his head back and let his eyes close.

But sleep wouldn't come. His nerves were on edge. Baroo slid from beneath Ani, needing to be prepared, though he had no idea what he should be prepared for. He pulled the furs over her and stroked a finger across her amulet, promising his protection silently.

Back on his feet, Baroo retrieved his sacred weapon, moved to her work room on silent feet, and looked around for some sign of danger. He cursed himself as ten types of fool. Syth was near and protecting their sleeping backs. He would have one of the other *Krieger* with him. What could pose a danger to three *Krieger*?

Still, he was uneasy for a reason he couldn't name. Baroo donned his wrap and sheathed the weapon. Edgy and battle-ready, he returned to Ani.

Baroo couldn't name the feeling at his back, but it set off warnings in his skull so intense, he whirled that direction, his sacred weapon out. It sliced a line across Pol's chest, shocking Baroo.

*Goddess Mother, I have killed him.* Pol must have felt the same warning and come to protect them. He must have been the one aiding Syth that night.

Baroo opened his mouth to curse vehemently, then snapped it shut at the sight of the black blood, coursing down his former brother's chest. The smell of it was akin to death and sickness instead of the copper tang of human blood.

*He is no longer human.* Was this what the beasts were?

Pol smiled a fang heavy smile, answering that question, and disappeared into a fine smoke before Baroo could take a killing blow.

"Traitors be damned. Syth!"

Ani came awake with a start at the shout, scrambled to the head of the bed, and pressed the furs to her chest. Her face went dark, and she coughed harshly, most likely at the smell. Her eyes blinked and teared up, reinforcing the determination.

In the blink of an eye, Pol was back...along with Reg and Nul. A heartbeat behind their arrival, Syth and Ori rushed in from the work room archway.

The three beasts ignored Baroo for a moment and focused on Ori. Reg smiled, baring the inhuman fangs that proved he was the young beast Veriel now, just as Syth had imparted to them in training.

"The gelded fool," Veriel greeted Ori.

"The traitor coward," he returned the greeting.

"Close your eyes, Raga," Syth ordered. "A woman should not see what is about to happen here."

Out of the corner of his eye, Baroo saw Ani bury herself beneath the furs.

That accomplished, the Stone lord turned to Pol. "Name which god damned you."

He didn't smile at that. "He gifted me, and my god is Lorian."

“He poured a portion of his unclean soul into your empty one, and you accepted it. Believe me, you are damned as no other ever will be.”

“He made me a god,” Pol insisted. His gaze shifted to the lump of shivering woman on the bed. “And now I will take what was intended for me.”

“Raga chose me,” Baroo snapped at him. *Ani chose me. None of them will touch her.*

Ori laughed shortly. “As young Veriel lost to me, but the second never sees it that way, I suppose.”

“Second?” What was Ori talking about?

“There are always two to vie for Raga’s attentions. I was watching for Pol to go traitor after he failed with Raga. I saw him meet with the traitors and returned here to warn Syth.”

Baroo glared at Pol. He’d been so poor a loser he’d turned traitor? Baroo would have sworn he knew Pol better than that, until this moment.

The beast in question didn’t seem troubled by his betrayals. He tipped his head and raised clawed hands, signaling a test of skills to follow.

Syth cocked his head to one side, as if considering something of great importance. “You all want a turn with her?”

Baroo stifled the urge to crack the hilt of his sacred weapon off Syth’s skull for saying something so foul in front of Ani. He listened for a whimper from her that didn’t come.

The Stone lord continued in a cold tone. “Which first?”

Lorian and Veriel answered in the affirmative together. The two glared at each other.

Baroo bit back a smile at Syth’s handling. He was pitting the beasts against each other.

Syth wasn’t finished yet. “And why exactly is Draden here? As I recall, he was never Raga-chosen to seek Her vessel’s attentions.”

Lorian glared at the aforementioned beast, then at Veriel. It was clear he agreed with that sentiment but hadn’t been given a choice. “Sacrifices must be made to reach goals,” he offered coolly.

“You want to gut him.” Syth took a step toward the line of beasts. “They want to gut you, as well. And Veriel will...once he has used you to fight us. He will gut you both and leave you to die.”

Lorian opened his mouth to protest, but Syth wasn’t done yet.

“You were not the first Raga-chosen, Lorian. You think Veriel has not already convinced himself that you have no right to bed with Raga? You think he really plans to share her with you?” He made a mocking sound.

Veriel’s eyes narrowed in warning.

“Did I ruin your surprise for them, Veriel?”

Baroo let his grin show. It would only infuriate them to see it.

Veriel's look promised death. "Remember what the gods promised. Help me kill the *Krieger*, and the world is ours."

"And Raga?" Lorian asked.

There was a moment of silence. "We take her together."

That prompted a whimper of fear from Ani, and Baroo felt his fury like a bonfire. He would have thought it was a trick of the mind, had he not felt similar reactions emanating from both Syth and Ori.

There was no time for Baroo to state his intention to kill them. In the next moment, all three *Krieger* were engaged in battle. Predictably, each singled out what he saw as his worst enemy. Draden attacked Syth, Veriel went for Ori, and Baroo found himself engaged with Lorian.

Baroo wasn't certain if Lorian suffered from being new to his damnation or was overconfident in his fighting style. Either way, the beast was impaled on Baroo's blade in a matter of heartbeats.

It wasn't enough. He shook the beast free and turned, burying his weapon into Veriel's heart through his back, smiling at the crunch of bone on metal.

Baroo looked up, meeting Ori's gaze over the beast's shoulder. It was only then that he realized the other *Krieger* had taken a matching blow to the chest. There was no saying who the kill belonged to.

*It does not matter. There is still one alive.*

*Or not...*

Baroo didn't need to see Syth strike the blow to know Draden was dead on the Stone lord's blade.

\* \* \* \*

Ani shivered in the stillness. Though she prayed the *Krieger* had defeated the beasts, there was no way to know.

*Unless I look.*

But Syth had told her not to look at the battle.

*There is no battle. It is finished.* And she had no idea if Baroo had survived it.

Her heart ached at the thought. She had no idea if her love was alive or dead. A scream built in her throat, and she threw the fur back, needing to see him alive.

Three *Krieger* heads turned toward her, and she sobbed in relief at the sight of Baroo. He lived! As long as he lived, all was right with the world.

Their eyes widened, and Ani looked down at herself, gasping at her nudity. Though Baroo and Syth had seen her unclothed, Ori never had. She pulled the furs up to her shoulders, glancing his way shyly.

Slowly, patiently...Ori withdrew his blade and cleaned it on Reg's clothing. He sheathed it, bowed his head to her, and then averted his eyes.

"A part of me will always love you, Raga, but I cannot be the man you need, either as Raga or as Ani. I know this for a fact. I withdraw to the far reaches of our territory. May you have many strong sons with your chosen."

Words stuck in her throat, and Ani forced them out. "May you find someone that brings you peace."

A weak smile pulled up at his lips. "If you say it will be so, I believe."

With that, he turned to Baroo and offered his hand. "You are worthy of her, brother. Your sons will be great warriors that even the traitor gods cannot stand against."

Baroo took it in a *Krieger's* greeting. "Have no mercy on them, and may we fight together again."

"I will hold you to that."

In the next instant, Ori was gone without a backward glance. Baroo shifted from foot to foot, his gaze moving from the downed beasts to Ani to Syth.

Her brother smiled. "Take her to the bathing chamber, and wash away the blood of battle and of lovemaking. The others and I will dispose of the beasts."

Baroo started to lift Ani from the bed, still wrapped in the furs. "My thanks."

"Baroo?"

He hesitated and looked over his shoulder at Syth. "Yes?"

"Do not appear for more than food or bathing until my sister is well past high cycle and bearing your son."

Ani's move to protest such an order died at Baroo's lips meshing with hers. He drew back, laughing darkly.

She shot Syth a warning look. "I believe we will. I also believe we will lie to you about when I leave high cycle. You deserve no better."

If her words angered or embarrassed her brother, he showed no sign of it. His laughter followed them out of the chamber and down the corridor.

*Starting A War*  
*A Night Warriors' History*



**NOTE FROM BRENN:**

Thousands of years before “Crossbearer Turned,” Raga was handled in a very different manner. Was it better or worse? Who but the gods can say?

Happy reading!

“Ragan?” her brother asked, looking up from the weapon he was sharpening. Gatin’s eyes narrowed, and he focused on the hands clenched in her dress.

“It is time.” Her body burned, opining that it was more than time. She’d tarried, fearing what she knew she had to do.

His brow furrowed, his jaw tightened, and he grunted his agreement. “I will assemble them.”

She took her leave with a tip of her head to him, rushing to her bed and the momentary safety of it.

It would only be a short reprieve. Before the sun set again, Ragan would be on that bed, spread wide for the thrusts of one of the men. The thought of it heated her woman’s sex and chilled her blood at the same time.

*Enough. I was born to this, gods-chosen to carry his seed. Whoever he is...*

Ragan had picked the two secretly, months earlier. She’d thought choosing the two would be difficult, but as prophesized, only two had called to her and drawn her eyes.

The men hadn’t been told which two she’d chosen, or even that she’d done so. She’d watched them, hidden by a drape at Gatin’s side.

Only Gatin knew that she’d chosen and who she had. He’d waited for Ragan to request the proving, patiently allowing her to come to acceptance of the fact that her body would cease to be her own when the victor claimed her.

The ceremonial gown was of the lightest material she’d ever seen. It hid nothing. Her beaded nipples and woman’s curls were nearly as clear as if she stood nude. The dampness from her core made the material it touched clear instead of opaque, showcasing the blood mark on the front of her thigh.

That was what proved she belonged to the victor to come. As if in confirmation, the blood mark throbbed in time with her heart and sheath.

Gatin’s voice sent a shiver down her spine. “Ragan? They are here.”

“A moment.” She tied the ceremonial sash around her eyes, a symbol of her acceptance of the gods’ will in her mating. “Come, Gatin.”

The drape whispered, announcing his approach. Her brother took her hand, guiding Ragan through the drape and down the corridor to the training room.

She held her breath, letting it out on a rush at the sound of the tandem gasps of surprise. They’d seen her. Now they would fight for her...perhaps to the death.

\* \* \* \*

Oren forced a breath, his heart hammering in excitement. He'd assumed Gatin had called them to offer further instruction, not to fight for the Mother Warrior.

They hadn't seen Ragan since she'd been a child of four. From the moment the eldest Warrior, save her brother, had reached fourteen, Gatin's sister had been sequestered in the belief that the Warriors would kill each other to possess her.

A slow perusal of her nearly naked body confirmed that. No wonder she'd been sequestered. Even in the heavy gowns most women wore, she would be stunning. Oren didn't doubt he'd have killed for her then, let alone now.

Gatin's voice boomed out. "The gods call to Ragan to seek the mate intended for her. She has called to both of you. By the right of combat shall the will of the gods for Ragan be decided."

Oren shot a sideward glance at Piet. They were close in strength and prowess. It would be a hard fight, but Oren had no intentions of losing it.

*Then again, neither will Piet.* Oren glanced at Ragan out of the corner of his eyes, his cock coming to aching readiness. Gods, but the woman had a body any man, human or Warrior, would kill for.

*And we might.* If the loser didn't lose consciousness before he'd suffered enough damage to kill him, the victor would be the only one left alive.

*If I lose, grant me death.* Something told Oren he'd want her for the rest of his life, even if Ragan wasn't his to touch.

*I will not lose her. She will be mine and only mine.*

Gatin's voice drew him back to the present challenge. "Draw your weapons and take your places," he ordered.

Ragan shivered at that pronouncement. Her spine stiffened, as if she was preparing herself for the battle she wouldn't see.

It was a kindness that her eyes were covered. A lady shouldn't have to see two men tear each other to pieces, Mother Warrior or not.

It also insured she could show no preference between the combatants. Moreover, she couldn't sway the fight by calling out warnings to one or both of them. Since the gods had called Ragan to both of them, her urge to do so would be fierce.

Gatin stepped in front of his sister, drawing his weapon. If either of the combatants approached Ragan before the decision was made, Gatin would cut him down and give his sister to the other.

Oren focused on Piet, just as Gatin ordered them to fight the gods' duel.

Piet came at him hard, and Oren blocked blow after blow. Ten passes in, neither of them had made inroads toward a win.

With each clang of metal on metal, Ragan winced. Her shivering became more pronounced, until she pressed to Gatin's back, seeking the solace her brother offered.

The master trainer didn't relax his stance, but his lips moved, most likely in calming words for her. Something about it stoked Oren's *Blutjagd*. Gatin wasn't a rival male, but he *was* a male protecting the woman Oren wanted for his own. It was intolerable.

He lunged toward Piet, intent on killing him, if that's what it took to claim Ragan as his own. His younger Warrior brother faltered, attacked, then faltered again. Oren didn't question the reason for it. There was nothing in his style that Piet would recognize, nothing that would give clues to what Oren intended to do next.

Where the change came from, even Oren couldn't say for sure. The mark of Ori burned hot on his skin, seemingly answering that it was called the gods' duel for a reason. Ragan would be mate to the victor, but on another level, the god whose mark the Warrior victor carried would lay with the Goddess Mother whose mark Ragan did.

*Perhaps the fire is Ori's fury?* It was possible. The whims of the gods were not Oren's to decipher.

Sweat broke out on his skin as he moved faster, striking blow after blow. Piet held his own for a time, but his fire was inferior to Oren's.

It took three slices of Oren's blade, before he managed to rein in the *Blutjagd* enough to let Piet fall. He took two steps back, glaring at the younger, daring him to rise and die like a man.

Piet seemed prepared to do so. With his blood pouring onto the floor, he planted a hand to push himself up. Oren tensed to kill him...then relaxed as consciousness fled Piet's body, and he slumped to the floor.

Oren turned to Gatin, surprised to see the master trainer raising his blade in warning. For a moment, Oren worked at that. He'd won the gods' duel. He wasn't supposed to fight Gatin for his mate, as well.

A jerk of Gatin's head to one side had Oren's face burning in understanding. He looked down at himself, miserably noting the bloodstained hands and weapon, the splatters of the same on his clothing.

*A Warrior mate should never see such things.* Guiltily, he admitted he'd been so intent on her that he'd neglected her gentle nature.

*I must not do so again.* With a nod of thanks to Gatin, he went to the pots of water the master trainer had indicated.

Oren scrubbed his hands and arms, careful to remove every drop of Piet's blood. He stripped off his clothing, certain that Gatin would see it washed or replaced for him while Oren claimed his mate.

He tended to his weapon, lowered it to the table, then lifted it again. Oren couldn't state why he was taking his weapon with him, but he theorized it was the burn to protect his mate driving him to do so.

As an afterthought, he moved to the last clean pot and dumped it over his head, scrubbing at his skin. Ragan deserved the best he could offer, not a dirty, sweat-soaked man rutting on her. That accomplished, he turned to Gatin.

The master trainer sheathed his weapon, drawing Ragan to his side with a kiss on her uncovered chin. "Your mate, Ragan," he whispered.

Her shaking hand extended, and Oren folded it into his own. Something soft and completely at odds with his fighting fury lit in him, and Oren wondered at it.

Gatin motioned to the corridor he'd drawn her from. "The second chamber," he instructed. "Everything is prepared for you." With that, he withdrew to Piet's side, most likely to determine if the young Warrior would live or die.

Oren guided Ragan as he'd been directed, noting her shivering and her ragged breathing. "You have nothing to fear from me," he promised.

She nodded, but her trembling increased as they neared the chamber.

The sight of the fur strips laid over the bed had him hard in anticipation. He knew what was intended, of course. Oren imagined all the Warriors, save Gatin, had played at the scene with the women who sated their sexual fires, dreaming that the Mother Warrior would one day be his.

But those had been experienced women, and that had been a game. Ragan was an innocent, and she was frightened. To possess her body, he would have to seduce her mind and heart.

He trailed kisses from the sash to the tip of her chin, drinking in her gasp of surprise. "You fear what I mean to do," he noted.

She hesitated and then nodded.

"I will not harm you." Oren planted a lingering kiss at her throat. "Do you trust that is true?"

"Yes." It was more a breath than a word, and Oren smiled at that.

"There are things I must do," he soothed her.

Her muscles tightened down a notch. "I know."

"You will love them," he vowed.

Her head moved slightly, in what appeared to be a negative response.

Oren hung his weapon over the foot of the bed, then lowered her to the surface. Ragan positioned her body in the center, looking small and fragile.

*She is fragile.* In a moment of realization, he gleaned that the true test was not the test of blades, but rather the test of self-control to come.

He eased her arm up, wrapped one soft fur strip around it, and knotted it down loosely. He tied the other end to the far spindles of the headboard.

Ragan played her wrist against the fur, her nipples peaking against the fabric of her gown. After a moment, she extended her other arm for him.

Oren smiled, tying the fur on that side. Gods, she was going to look so good, spread for him this way.

*She will look good, regardless.*

It was time to make her love the restraints. Oren lowered his head, taking one perky nipple in his mouth. Ragan gasped in surprise, her arms tensing. Her body rose against him, and a moan of delight left her lips.

He left that breast and moved to the other, his hunger sharpening at the way the gown went clear with the addition of his saliva. Ragan tipped her body, seeking his mouth with the unattended nipple.

Oren didn't hesitate. He let his hunger guide him, nearly maddened in the need to possess her fully, though he'd only just learned she was his. On that thought, he moved down her body, tasting her skin.

Ragan tried to spread her legs, but the dress was cut narrow, and she couldn't spread them more than shoulder-width.

He glanced at his weapon, a plan taking shape. "Do you trust that I will bring you pleasure, Ragan?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation that time.

"Be still and let me free you."

Her brow furrowed, but she nodded.

Oren slipped his weapon from the sheath, his mouth going dry. He licked his lips, then plunged the blade through the tight material between her thighs.

Ragan let out a little squeal of distress, and he answered with a soothing noise. Oren yanked the blade downward, cutting the dress from thigh to ankle. He returned his blade to the sheath, grasped the edges of the shredded fabric, and tore it to mid-breast.

She bit lightly at her lower lip, seemingly uncertain.

"Spread your legs and let me please you," Oren instructed.

Ragan did as he bid. Oren guided them wider, tying down the first...then the second. He took his time, surveying every fingerwidth of her lush body.

*Oh yes! This is a gift from the gods and nothing less.*

\* \* \* \*

Her mate settled on the bed between her ankles, and Ragan tensed. This was it...the moment her mother and brother had told her would come. His male rod would sheathe inside her, planting his seed deep.

Though she'd never seen or otherwise experienced the claiming, she knew she'd bleed as she did at her woman's time. Ragan only hoped the pain would be comparable to the cramping she felt then and not to the ripping pain of injury.

*Fool! He will tear away my maiden's barrier. Of course it will hurt as any injury would.*

His hair tickled at her thigh, and she jerked against the fur. The soft, warm stroke over her blood mark could only be his tongue. Ragan squeezed her eyes shut tight, drinking in every touch greedily.

He did touch...and taste. The victor moved inward, to the sensitive line of her inner thigh. Then he moved up, his lips and tongue exploring what was his by the right of combat and by the virtue of her blood mark.

His breath teased at the center of her body, and she arched up in shock. The anticipation was maddening. Would she feel his lips first? His tongue? His calloused fingers? Or his rod? Not knowing was torture.

His mouth came first, suckling gently at a fold of skin far to the front of her body. Pinpoints of color danced inside her closed eyelids, and she gasped.

She hadn't expected so much pleasure. They'd never told her she'd feel any at the claim, let alone blinding pleasure.

Ragan wanted to move against him, but the fur bonds prevented more than the smallest movements. It was both frustrating and invigorating. She was at his mercy, and he was playing her body like a fine instrument.

She wished she knew his name to spur him on, but it was tradition that she would not know the identity of her mate until the claiming was complete. Ragan cursed the sash preventing her from seeing him, even as her body heated at the idea that she was being so handled by an unknown man. There was something wickedly appealing in the possibility that it was either of the two.

He retreated, and she begged him to stay, shamelessly asking for more. A hum of male satisfaction vibrated against her slit, and she bowed up with a cry of need.

His tongue stroked and taunted, and she fought the fur strips all the harder. Her body tightened, reaching for something she couldn't name but suspected was the thrust of his rod into her conspicuously empty body.

That sensation didn't come, but another did. Sparks of pleasure flared into a bonfire. Her muscles burned then melted. Screams that she recognized as her own voice, anguished but not in pain, echoed off the stark stone walls. It was a formless begging for the one thing she needed above all else.

As if he could interpret her sounds and movements, her mate pulled back then returned, his rough fingers spreading her tender folds for the thrust of his rod.

For a hand of heartbeats, they were both still and silent. Her body rioted in sensation.

Pain... It was excruciating but so overpowered by other feelings she couldn't properly determine how much it hurt or how to react to it.

Stretching... The fullness of his rod touched Ragan in places she hadn't realized existed until that moment. She wanted to feel more of it, to feel all of him. For reasons she couldn't name, she knew he wasn't seated fully yet.

Pleasure... The bonfire still burned and sparked. The muscles of her sheath surrounding his length undulated, bringing whispers of new pleasures with them.

Ragan forced her hips up with a scream, seeking his full length. She babbled words intended to be pleas for more but that might not have communicated her wishes. In her scattered state, they might have told him nothing.

As if belying that, he seated himself deeper.

Her breathing went ragged, until she feared she might collapse in a faint. Her hips rose and fell, forcing him in and out fingerwidths.

“Yes,” he urged her. “Take what you need from me, Ragan. Give me all of yourself.”

She would have thought such a thing impossible hours earlier. She wasn’t supposed to give herself to him; the victor was supposed to claim her. Her body would cease to be her own and become his to play at.

Realization heated her blood. Her body *was* his to play at, but not because he’d taken it by force, as she’d always believed he would. Her mate had brought her to such pleasure that she’d willingly conceded to him, that she’d begged him to take her body.

Ragan thrust her hips up, pulling at the bonds. Her mate growled out a curse, wrapping his big hands around her waist, supporting her weight to allow her to move with ease.

“Come again for me, Ragan. Come again, and I will do as you wish.”

She wasn’t certain what he meant, but she sought the rhythm her body set, gasping at the buck of his rod within her. Was she pleasing him with her movements?

A moan from him answered that. “Oh, yes,” he breathed. “You are so close.”

Knowing she had the power to affect him as he affected her was a heady drug on her already affected senses. Ragan moved faster, taking him as deep as the bonds and his hands allowed.

Her breathing turned to ragged gasps and then to little sounds she had no name for.

“Come to me, Ragan. Come for me.”

The tightening in her belly gave way to a drumbeat of pleasure. She screamed, her body shattering into disjointed sensations.

One of them was the heat coursing into her. *His heat. His seed.* She moaned at the feeling of rightness about that.

“You are mine, Ragan,” he growled.

Her inner muscles tightened in pleasure at the truth of that statement. “Yes. Yours. Only yours.”

He leaned over her, untying the sash that covered her eyes. The material slid away, and Ragan blinked her eyes in the sudden brightness of the chamber.

His face took shape slowly, and her heart stuttered in excitement. “Oren.” She hadn’t thought she had a preference, but her heart called her a liar. From the



moment she'd sighted the two men and identified them to Gatin, Ragan had hoped Oren would be the victor.

\* \* \* \*

Her smile warmed his heart.

A fierce jealousy followed. Would she have smiled thus for Piet, had the younger man been the victor?

Oren slid back and thrust into her, staking his claim. The fierce need to have her see his face as he claimed her drove him on.

He reached to release her hands, wanting to feel her touch as he drove into her.

"No."

Oren met her gaze, wondering at her refusal.

"This way first," she requested.

He started to question that, his voice dying off at the cycling of her hips against him. Gods, but he'd nearly shot off when she'd taken him this way blind. Now she was doing it with full knowledge of whose cock pierced her, and it was twice the thrill.

"Say it again, Ragan," he grumbled.

"Say..." She gasped, riding his cock.

"Say you are mine," he ordered.

"Yes. Yours. Oren, please."

His name on her lips broke the last of his tenuous control. Oren thrust hard and fast, fascinated by the sweet expressions and sounds Ragan vented.

The explosion of climax rolled into the sweet caress of the seal of printing. Oren went still...deep inside her, groaning at her swiveling hips.

Mindful of her needs, he eased out of her. Blood mixed with their fluids flowed out of her body, staining the ceremonial dress. Oren spread her slit, rapt on the sight of the proof of his claim pooling on the linens.

Ragan moaned, tipping her hips. "Oren?"

"Gods, but you're beautiful." How he managed to form the words was a mystery to him.

She raised her head, performing a silent assessment of him.

"Have you seen a man before?" he asked.

Her cheeks darkened to an enticing red. "I have seen the men stripped to their bathing cloths."

"Unclothed?" he asked.

"Only Gatin...when I was young."

Oren smiled at that. "Before he had a man's body," he guessed.

She nodded.

He reached across her, releasing the first of the fur restraints. Ragan stared at him, questioning the move with narrowed eyes.

"I will hang the ceremonial gown in announcement. Then I will take you to the heated springs." He licked his lips at the idea, and she shivered in seeming delight. "We will touch, Ragan. We will taste. You will come to know my body, as you will know no other man's."

"Only yours," she gasped.

\* \* \* \*

Ragan panted in intense pleasure, her hands tightening against Oren's shoulders. It had been three days of decadence, and still it showed no signs of stopping.

The Stone, in its wisdom, had called her to claiming at high cycle, as it called all Raga to claiming at their time. Oren would not leave her bed until she'd passed the moon phase and carried his son.

He stirred the heat inside her in long, slow glides of his cock. She shivered at the word. Oren had been diligent in stoking her fire, as well as in her education in the delicate delights of love.

"Oren!"

She startled at the sound of her brother's voice, and Oren pulled her to his chest, shielding her body from the doorway behind the shelter of his own. Her mind numbly processed that Warriors always protected their mates in the shelter of their bodies, even in battle.

"What is it?" he growled back.

"It has happened. We need you."

Ragan wondered at the tightening of Oren's muscles, but she didn't have time to question it.

He set her off his body with a series of grumbled curses. Oren panned his gaze up her body, his eyes hot in promise. "Dress, Ragan."

The order stunned her. Until her high cycle passed, neither of them would dress. "But—"

He silenced her with a kiss. "Quickly, now. Do not remove your amulet, for any reason. Do not leave our chambers. Promise me."

Oren was her mate, and his only concerns would be for her safety. Were they under attack? Who could be so foolish?

"Ragan," he reminded her.

"Yes. I promise, Oren."

He brushed another kiss against her lips and launched through the drape, his sacred weapon in hand. He was nude, but since he had no clothing in their chamber, she suspected Gatin meant to offer the use of some of his own.

Ragan stared after him, her heart pounding, though she couldn't say why it was. The chamber suddenly felt empty...too empty.

She went to the chest Gatin had given her when she'd gone into seclusion, pulling out her mother's best gown. *I have better*, a niggling corner of her mind reminded her. But there was something comforting in her mother's gowns, and she desperately wanted comfort now.

Dressed, she looked about for something to do. Her hands were shaking too wildly to work her loom with precision.

*I should make something for Oren.* She'd avoided it, until the claiming was complete, afraid that whatever she worked at would prove a poor match for the temperament of the victor.

*I don't have to weave it now. I can make plans for what I will weave.* That in mind, she went to the loom and considered what she knew of Oren.

The fires of the gods burned hot in him. That was no surprise, considering he wore the mark of Ori. But he wasn't hot-tempered. She dismissed the rougher fabrics and darker colors that simply.

The memory of his hands, calloused but so tender against her skin, kindled the doused fire in her well-used body. It would have to be a soft material, both in color and weave. She searched out her best, smiling at the plans taking shape in her mind.

The sound behind her warmed her heart. She'd known Oren would return to her as quickly as he was able to. Ragan turned, her smile fading and her blood cooling at the sight of two of the other Warriors.

Piet and Tral stood between her and the drape to freedom. Anywhere else she ran would be further into the underground corridors of her home.

*And further from Oren and Gatin.* No, she had to stand her ground or make her way toward the training areas and the village beyond.

*Oren made me promise to stay here.* She swallowed hard. She would have to try to hold her ground.

Ragan didn't question them. With her heart pounding in her throat, she wasn't certain she could form words if she attempted it.

"Lady Ragan," Piet offered smoothly.

Despite her promise to stand her ground, she took a step back. There was something cold and calculating in his look.

*They invaded my chambers!* Only Gatin and Oren were permitted here.

Ragan might have argued to herself that Gatin and Oren sent them to protect her, but she knew it for a lie. If anyone was left behind to protect her, it would be one or both of the aforementioned men in her life.

*They mean to claim me for their own...or fight a new gods' duel in mockery of the first.* Gatin had always told her the Warriors would kill each other for her if

she didn't remain sequestered. Now Piet had seen her. Likely, he'd told Tral about her attributes.

Why had the men been so inflamed by seeing her in the ceremonial dress? Surely, a simple announcement that they were to fight for her would have sufficed. Or she could have been presented in clothing that didn't bare her so completely.

Why had the loser of the match not been immediately killed? Had it never occurred to them that a man enflamed to attempt murder for a woman would not submit to defeat so simply?

Piet took another step toward her, and Ragan ran aground on her loom.

"Why so frightened, Ragan?" he purred.

She grasped at anything she could use against him. "Oren will kill you this time. If you touch me, he will—"

His smile went wide and mocking. "I will do so much more than touch."

Her stomach lurched at the idea. If he forced himself on her, whose seed would plant? What would Oren do, if he wasn't certain he was the father of the child she carried after this night?

Ragan raged at it. *How did they get past Oren and Gatin, in the first place?*

Piet continued. "First me. Then Tral. You belong to all of us, Ragan. That is the way of it."

She shook her head, woozy at the concept. She didn't. Gatin had assured her she was intended for only the strongest...only the master hunter among the Warriors. Why would her brother lie about such a thing?

*He wouldn't!* She knew Gatin would never submit her to something so foul.

Piet made a move to pull her to him, and she swung the shuttle in her hand. He moved, of course. He was a Cursed Warrior. She was simply a gods-chosen woman. Instead of the shuttle connecting with his face, her wrist did.

The shove didn't come from him. Invisible hands forced her backward. The loom splintered against the stone wall, fouling the work on it and tangling Ragan in the threads.

She looked up, gaping at the sight of Piet pulling himself back to his feet, across the chamber from her. So he had been thrown, too?

*But why?* Had the gods protected her? She'd never heard of so outward a sign of their will.

*The amulet! Oren told me not to remove my amulet.* The amulet was bathed in the Stone's glow of power. But the amulet didn't react in such a way to Oren and Gatin.

Perhaps it would only react to one who meant her harm. The gods would know such intent.

Her examination of the events came to a crashing halt when Piet let loose a bellow of rage and ran for her. Tral stood his ground, one eyebrow raised as if in amusement at what Piet was attempting.

Ragan fought the threads, grumbling complaints when they pulled at her, slowing her attempts to escape him.

A battle cry brought her head up. Oren appeared from nowhere, the drape swinging in his wake. In the time it took Piet to pivot toward him, her mate's sacred weapon was planted in the center of his opponent's chest.

Gatin was beside him in the blink of an eye. Tral moved to flee further into the keep, but he made it only a step. Oren swept Gatin's spare weapon from its sheath and threw it, planting it as neatly in Tral's chest as he'd planted his own in Piet's. Both slain Warriors fell.

Ragan opened her mouth to ask for Oren's help in freeing herself, but the stench hit her solidly. She'd never smelled something so foul. The gorge rose in her throat, pushed up by her gagging.

In the next instant, Oren was there, gathering her to his chest. Gatin cut the tangled mess of threads free, releasing her to wrap herself around him.

"The rest have fled," Gatin whispered.

Oren sighed. "Three dead then. That leaves us with three to kill."

Ragan shuddered at that. There were six who'd intended to rut on her?

"All on your blades," Gatin replied in seeming awe.

A movement drew Ragan's eyes to her brother. To her shock, he knelt on the floor, his head lowered in submission to Oren. Before she could question it, he spoke.

"I greet you, Oren Elder Killer. You are indeed a most worthy mate to Raga."

Ragan's head spun. *Elder? What is an elder?*

Her gaze strayed to the dead Warriors and the thick, black blood that oozed from their wounds. *They aren't Warriors anymore. What are they?*

The End

## *About the Author*

Brenna Lyons wears many hats, sometimes all on the same day: former president of EPIC, author of more than 80 published works, columnist, special needs teacher, wife, mother... In addition, she's a member in good standing of ERWA, MWW, RWU, WPM, IWOFA, and Broad Universe.

In her first seven years published in novel-length, Brenna has finaled for eleven EPIES and won two of the coveted awards. She has also finaled for three PEARLS (taking Honorable Mention second to NY Times Bestseller Angela Knight), two CAPAS, a Dream Realm Award, and has taken Spintetinger's Book of the Year for 2007.

Brenna has been termed "one of the most deviant erotic minds in the publishing world...not for the weak." (Rachelle for Fallen Angels Reviews) She writes milieu-heavy dark fiction, mainly science fiction, fantasy and horror (in 21 established worlds plus stand-alones), poetry, articles, and essays. She teaches classes in everything from POV studies to advanced editing, networking to marketing. Brenna loves talking to readers and can be reached via her site at <http://www.brennalyons.com>.