



FERAL FEVER

By

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Dedication

To Melinda who really needs to get back to writing.

Chapter One

(Earth year 2013 AD)

Knives became my friend years ago in Egypt. I didn't like leaving them behind. But I had enough sense not to question my commander about weapons and what I didn't see while staring through the shuttle craft's window across the burning sands ending at the base of the mountain where my superior officer swore a wormhole connected planet Slaken to the world of the Luvks. Or so an Earth girl reasoned. But Aisling Bjorn wasn't on Earth anymore and reason had been cast out the window with a proverbial bucket when I bailed on my home world about a year ago. Especially when Commander Goro had insisted we leave our knives in the shuttle today. Better to gulp back my questions and observe over Goro's shoulder where he toyed with the space shuttle's controls.

Surely the gateway was there in the glinting face of the blood red sedimentary rock. My vision just couldn't detect whatever indicated its presence. But this singular point in the universe was where we intended to walk into another dimension. Or something equally bizarre. Rarely did scientific explanations make sense after I joined the Order of the Marshals a year ago in that Big Apple New Age bar, *The Awakening*, because there really wasn't a scientific explanation for this wormhole. It merely existed, according to my psychic superiors.

And who could demand more explanation when you just woke up one day in a crazy dream that defied all the logic a girl absorbed studying the rise and fall of civilizations in archaeology? After all, the last thing archaeologists believed was that extraterrestrials built anything on Earth. *Or that aliens even existed at all.* But nobody on earth, including archaeology, knew about the Blood Wars or the extraterrestrials who made appearances in Earth legends as werewolves and vampires.

So, joke's on me. A secret doorway was about to lead my team into an alternate universe where cat-like people required a were-assassin Marshal to help them coexist with the winged beings here on this side of the portal, on planet Slaken. Since both populations are telepathic, meaning composed of higher-evolved psychics, my earthling peer and I, lesser-evolved psychics, will bond perfectly with the populations to complete were-assassin bonds. So, I'm going to become a were-wolf...

"How do you feel, Aisling?" Goro asked me in his calming half whisper of a voice without turning away from the shuttle's control panel.

"Ready to go."

"Like change knocks at your door?"

Yes, especially because my door is that I'm psychic. Or so The Marshals swear my powers of healing make me so. But I can't control my power. Even better, I'm going to intermarry with one of these higher-evolved psychics to create a political alliance through marriage. Why? Marshals have the upper hand in sheltered thoughts because were-wolves have impenetrable minds like lesser-evolved psychics. Like me. So, no mind control and a whole lot of terrifying power lay in my future.

"Just remember, the Luvks are matriarchal," Goro noted. "Their society is ruled by seven

queens whose sons form a Royal Guard for each matriarch. But the provinces war among themselves. Adding healers to the picture instead of psychics who can remote view or kick butt with telekinesis should buffer the friction between warring groups by saving the wounded without causing conflict in interfering in other ways.” Goro’s tall black-leather-clad form climbed out of the pilot’s seat. “That’s what will keep you alive on Luvk.”

But what I don’t understand is why me? Goro’s wife always said I shouldn’t open a tuna fish can let alone touch a bleeding person until I learned to manage my psychic power.

“Let’s go.” Goro shot me a stoic glance before sliding his commanding gaze to my peer Johnson and strode across the shuttle’s sterile metal interior. “Let’s not keep the warriors waiting.”

For some reason, I couldn’t conjure a picture of these cat warriors in my mind. I’d never been one to gravitate toward vampires, werewolves, or cat people in fiction. I was a sci-fi girl. My thoughts were always on things lost to time and how they worked into the natural order of bigger things as well as *how* they had *become* lost to time. Science. Scientific mysteries are my passion. And one stared me down. That’s probably why I was so gung ho about leaping through this invisible portal.

Goro headed toward the gaping sun-lit hatch, his long black hair swinging with purpose.

Finally. I shoved into the commander’s shadow, throwing my light backpack of personal items over my shoulder, and followed him into the warm sunlight.

Bringing a couple things from home had been a silly act in grasping at my childhood baggage. But something comforting lay in the few pieces of clothing, a paperback novel—just in case I have a child so far from home and want to teach him to read and write his mother’s tongue—a postcard image of Earth I lugged along for posterity. So, call me sentimental. The postcard was my adult equivalent of a teddy bear or security blanket. But the point is that I’m fully aware of the point.

Goro’s swinging tails of his long black leather coat lured me toward the accumulated bits and chunks of debris at the mountain’s base.

Time to experience something no other scientist would ever experience back on earth.

My heart squeezed out a tiny cringe.

For joy or fear? I’d been in space about a year now. Nothing short of amazing had happened. I landed a seat at the head of class in Marshal Law and everything in cultural studies from Quadrant One to Twelve they had managed to cram into one year. An anthropologist couldn’t grumble about one second of said year. But now I headed into the unknown. Like an exalted Mayan volunteer who’d been wined and dined for a year but faced the ritual blade that would flay his hide into a priest’s cloak as he became the symbol of fertility, the *Xipe Totec*. This was it. My future. Aisling Bjorn literally died today on her home side of the gateway in an act of sacrifice for humanity. Well, planet Luvk’s humanity.

A stone hit the heel of my boot.

“Sorry,” Johnson muttered.

Was he a better choice to marry into the Luvk society? The Luvks were warriors, combative, and always one wing shy of winning a fray. Apparently they could hold their own enough to operate independently of the Slakens. But Johnson was probably the best candidate for working with the Luvks. He could heal a wound with one touch resulting in a momentary flash of light that looked like the lights flickered. Me, I struggle to focus my psychic energy only to drive it all into a person and suck myself dry. I always collapsed into an unconscious heap afterward. The Luvks will think I’m weak. Most likely useless. Johnson was the best bet to

secure a strong Marshal presence among the newly liberated colonials. But that left the elitist bastards for me to contend with. I just couldn't decide what the best option is for The Cause.

Goro stepped up to a grainy red stone wall, never paused, and disappeared through what appeared to be solid rock.

Maybe the commander had some kind of psychic power associated with his vision. I don't know. But I closed my eyes, gripped my backpack straps beside my armpits, and just followed in his footsteps without missing a beat. Two steps later, someone grabbed my elbow.

"You're here, Aisling," Goro said.

At the risk of looking like a fragile terrified female, I opened my eyes.

The most beautiful forest of green raced upward across a mountain toward rocky barren peaks in the blue sky. "It's like earth." I sucked in a deep breath.

"In landscape, yes." Goro pointed to my left.

To at least a dozen extraterrestrial humanoids lined up before a tree line, standing on the edge of a grassy meadow. Luvks. All were menacing, striped like tigers, wearing enormous shield-shaped metallic masks above a metallic o-ring with black leather lacing for a halter. Or something that had to serve solely as some decorative clothing instead of functional armor sparingly covering their broad chests. But their black pants made the warriors a sight to behold. Someone in all *her* infinite wisdom dressed these males in pants that had almost completely open sides. Something along the lines of chaps. The gaping sides of each pant leg were strapped together with small black tabs, probably leather, just enough to make the pants functional but show off the musculature and striping on each man's legs. Cap off the perfect picture with knee-high black boots and this display of power and beauty was only overshadowed by the intimidating metal mask each of the warriors wore.

These guys were dark. Deadly warriors.

"Now this is a planet," Johnson sighed.

The warriors didn't seem to notice Johnson's compliment. But how could anyone tell without their facial expressions to factor into the mix? The warriors just stood there, waiting. The one in the middle stood quite a bit taller than the others. The three long horns lined across the top of their masks only made him appear taller still. His height probably won him a lot of respect.

For the most part, they looked identical. Massive arm muscles, the kind a girl could wrap herself up inside and nap away the day. But that's just a detail worth noting because these guys had yet to reveal their perspectives on life. A little menacing presentation didn't tell anyone squat about the Luvks other than outsiders needed to walk very carefully over this planet's smoldering coals the Slaken's couldn't extinguish.

"You left your knives on the shuttle, correct?" Goro asked.

Now, that wasn't something I wanted to recall. "Yes." But these warriors looked like they could take care of a few aliens on their turf. As long as they were on our side all would be fine.

Johnson nodded his reply.

Goro turned to the warriors. "Greetings, Borun."

Across the few hundred yards of boulders and grass separating them, the tallest warrior nodded and threw an arm backward, waving behind him.

Apparently, he was in charge.

The other warriors turned and disappeared into the trees.

The motion provided an excellent view of the stripes on their backs. I couldn't see any

indication of fur. Grant it, quite a distance separated us. Nor did I detect tails. Each man had dominant black striping. But their other stripes were a color ranging from a vibrant orange to a dull gold or white. All the patterning appeared like a genetic tattoo. Or these guys spent a lot of time under the needle. And they each had bluntly cut hair pulled back in a queue. The hairstyle made sense given they wore masks. Although, a person would expect functional masks to cover the backs of the warriors' heads as well. These masks did not and left their purpose a mystery.

The tall Luvk, Borun, quickly walked toward us. Strong muscled arms swinging to maintain his pace, his stature demanding we take note. Quite a bit over six feet tall, he cast a long shadow when he stopped before Goro and scanned the shorter Johnson from head to toe.

"This is Marshal Johnson, Borun." Goro's calm cool voice smoothed over any friction between the two males during the Luvk's assessment.

Borun's gaze snapped back to Johnson's, and the Luvk nodded once.

That movement seems to be the standard universal acknowledgement between males.

Borun's brown gaze coolly slid to mine and paused, for a moment as if drawn to something in my eyes, then he assessed my person. Hopefully just my attire. But something told me by the slight pause of his gaze at my breasts and hips that he was studying me for other reasons.

Chapter Two

“Aisling, I’d like you to meet Prince Borun,” Goro stated with that almost whisper of his deep calming voice.

Why had my bad ass alien boss gone from Johnson’s formal introduction to making mine more intimate? Screaming sexual harassment wasn’t going to get me anywhere.

Borun’s gaze snapped back to mine, to consider something with a glint, then pulled away to Goro. “The female won’t be safe until we reach Queen Ishan’s palace. She rides with me.”

Just what in the hell was going on out here in an alternate dimension, or whatever where this warrior spoke perfect English? Or am I lighting a match to burn my bra? I could use a little bit of goddamned respect.

Borun pivoted, his orange and black slashed body revealing movement at the tree line.

The warriors had returned riding large dog creatures. Or something equally formidable. Okay, so maybe I didn’t want to ride a monster *alone*. Yet. Even a dog-thing or whatever they were. These beasts’ muzzles weren’t wide enough to resemble bears. But I wasn’t going to quibble over which animal they resembled most when these creatures could obviously rip me to pieces with their canines. Something about their heads reminded me of the were-form Marshals transformed into. But on four feet instead of two. Strength. Terror. A few memory flashes from the past year were just what it took to send my gaze racing back to my boss.

Goro waved us on to join the Luvks.

Well, here goes my big anthropological adventure.

* * * *

Borun wasn’t certain what lunacy unfolded around him as he headed to his war mount, Jonner. But something went terribly wrong, he thought. This female looked like my sister from a distance, in every detail down to her black leather boots, pants, and long sleeved white shirt. Up close, anyone who’d seen Frenyl would know Aisling was not the princess. They’d see her for what she was—a Marshal—and take her for what she could be—a mate simply because there were so few noble females of marriageable age among the provinces. But the fact these Marshals presented new alliance opportunities for each clan meant every Queen wanted her son to be chosen to mate into the power and prestige associated with these off-world beings who promised to end the sky demon raids.

But this female changed political games here on Luvk. Now any Royal Guard could vie to land among her consorts, representing his realm and queen among her mates. Her mates could then sway her choices in dealing with the seven realms. Would she be strong enough to see outside the desires of her mates? Or would she buckle to their whims leaving Luvk clans even more at odds with each other? But a Royal Guard’s problems only just began. He could convince her to request him for one of her mates or kidnap her to eliminate the decision.

The sound of crunching grass behind me noted the Marshals followed me.

Extremely wise. Surely, the forest crawled with princes out to steal away with *that* female. I would be to blame if Mother didn’t have the right to choose between adding the male to her consorts or mating off one of her sons to Aisling. Given the Marshal’s pale skin, flowing

white hair, and blue eyes, Mother might just choose one of her high-caste sons to breed more high-caste granddaughters for political marriages with Aisling instead of taking the wormy male into her royal bed. I wouldn't put it past Mother to have planned to use Aisling in that manner all along. There was no telling what passed between Goro and the Queen during their private discussions.

Mother was conniving enough to have arranged for Aisling to come if Goro had mentioned her skin, hair, and eye color. I met Jonner's red gaze, grabbed the pommel of war mount's saddle, and hopped into the saddle's firm seat high above the ground.

Harin waited nearest on his war beast.

Would the others balk with the female among them? I reached out with my mind to mindspeak to my half brothers. *"The female rides with me. You and Clor take the males. We must move quickly. Two days' ride is too long with her in tow."*

"I heard that," Goro said, moving toward Harin, reaching up for a handhold to climb up behind Borun's half brother. *"What do you mean? You can tell me. The other Marshals don't mindspeak. You won't alarm Aisling."* Goro turned to Johnson. *"Give her a hand into the saddle."*

The slight weight of the female settled in behind me comfortably as if she'd always ridden with me.

The fit she managed more easily than her uncomfortable glance. I should have been more charismatic. Mother always told me my charm was what would win me a mate. Since when did I listen to her? At least the little hitch in the female's heartbeat I'd heard back when I walked up to her was gone. Maybe she merely feared me now. All the better. The last thing I want is to have anything to do with Mother's manipulation. She could mate off one of her *Pure Hearts* to the Marshal and torture that unfortunate prince with a ruler's interference. Better him than me. I shot Goro a stare. *"She is of highest caste in appearance. There will be trouble."*

"I wish your mother would have told me that instead of encouraging I bring a female with Aisling's coloration." Goro seemed to frown.

But Goro probably feigned the gesture. The commander had a way about him that all the Royal Guards used to move through Luvk society. One never knew what to expect from the sugared lips of a Royal Guard until it was too late to escape.

The female sat quietly, watching me over my shoulder.

By the twinkle in her dangerous sky blue eyes, it was only a matter of time before she tasted power and tormented her own harem. And a harem she would be forced to take once the provinces heard of her beauty. The real test of my duty would be delivering the prize at my back before every prince in the seven realms descended upon me. Why do I feel like Mother sent me on my last quest? I kneed my mount in the ribs.

Jonner hopped into his anxious trot indicating his readiness to move on.

The female's palms fell on my back, seared my skin with a softness I'd rather not remember. Gods' torment, I did not even want to begin thinking about her as anything other than my charge.

Her fingers wriggled under a strap of my halter at my back and pulled with a vengeance.

Maybe I should have warned her about my war mount's behavior. I'd been through the portal. No animal even remotely similar to Luvk's war beasts existed on the other side. But she was from an even more distant world. I couldn't hold her to the same expectations of those familiar with what I called life. I'd have to explain everything. Or end up with an earful of Mother's complaints. That wouldn't make for a comfortable position in the Royal Guards to a

lower-caste warrior who would never marry out from under his mother's clutches.

* * * *

Aisling didn't care for the dog-horse's smooth bouncing gait. Talk about unexpected. What kind of animal shifted from still to all over the place in a blink? I had to keep a grip on Borun's halter strap to keep my seat. I could hold myself pretty much in position with my knees clamped around the beast's sides. Enough to keep me somewhat stationary. But my thighs almost immediately quivered from their extended strain in trying to hold my body steady. The only way to really hold on easily would be to slide my hands around Borun's *supple* muscles and grab his halter from the front. *Before* my fingers broke off in the clench I have from this angle on the back. Too dangerous with the way he looked ready to kill. No. I just couldn't bring myself to slide my hands around Borun's chest after the way he scanned me over during our introduction. What if he thought I was doing something *else*? I clutched at the leather strap more tightly and tried to find something *else* to think about.

But how do you not think about anything but the amazing muscled ass pounding into your groin? And those brilliant orange stripes on his back danced like flames, making me dizzy. I turned my head and tried to redefine *else*.

Another warrior loped his mount up beside them and studied me from head to toe.

Like I was exotic. The animal I rode slowed to a walk.

The curious warrior trotted off.

"Do you need to rest, Aisling?" Goro called.

What would they think of me if I said yes? I studied the dense forest.

"Aisling?"

Dammit. Whether I stay here or return to the Slakens, these people will always think of me as the weak female if I complain. I threw my shoulders back, tried not to look at the dancing flames on Borun's wide back, and met Goro's gaze. "No."

The war dog halted.

What now?

My fingers burned from trying to hang onto the halter strap.

I released my grip on the halter, if only for a moment, to straighten out my poor stiff sore fingers.

Borun slid off in one casual leap and turned his now golden eyes, although I had thought them merely brown the first time he looked at me. Weird. Maybe I was too self-conscious before to really look into his eyes. The only part of his face anyone could actually study. Maybe that's why they wore masks? To make people focus on their eyes.

Even without the standard facial features I'd seen on extraterrestrials to guide one's assessment of a person's mood, I could tell Borun was perturbed in that stare. And what could be so damned hideous about their faces that made them wear those masks? What were Luvk warriors hiding?

"Slide forward into my seat," he commanded.

My heart jiggled a little at the deep tone of his voice. Not good. Was he trying to make the ride easier for me? An idiot wouldn't move. I slid across the saddle.

Borun shot me a final unnerving glance and hopped back into his seat.

Behind me. Pulling my ass and back against his extremely wide chest and snatching up reins I hadn't noticed before. God he just wrapped his body around mine. Am I being claimed as some possession without my knowledge? So much for falling in love as a were-assassin. Goro would explain what transpired the next chance I got him alone because riding like this was

too damned intimate by the accusation I'd seen in Borun's eyes. *But I had no choice in what unfolded.* Either way I rode, I was going to be all over Borun. At least, he chose this route and could stew over the problems that arose from his end. I for one wanted things to go as smoothly as possible.

* * * *

Mother was going to pay for sending me on this errand, Borun thought. I tried to forget about the curves I had one arm wrapped around. Her accursed long soft pure white hair kept rubbing my chest. And she seemed frail or timid. The clans would chew her up and spit her out like a toothpick. Mother and her annoying plans for reigning supreme couldn't worsen any further.

But duty called. There was no other way to transport the female to the palace aside from her clutching at my chest. And the last thing I needed was her hugging me, shoving her curvaceous breasts into my body. I kicked Jonner into a gallop and pushed out my thoughts to my brothers. *"Let's make it to the ridge by nightfall."*

We rode for hours until I began pitying the female. It wasn't as if her behavior changed. But Royal Guards were nobles. And nobles were reared to respect females. And she just might have needed to relieve herself. Or something. So, I reined in Jonner at a calm high mountain pool and pushed out with my mind. *"Keep watch while this female stretches her legs."*

Although the delay cost them time. An hour more on their trip really wouldn't matter. I slid off the saddle to land my boots squarely on the ground, reached up to the female's slender waist, and carefully lifted her light form.

She went and touched my wrists with gloriously soft hands, meeting my gaze with a questioning glance.

As if she wondered why we stopped. Or thought her touch set my body aflame.

She wobbled a bit on her legs.

Not used to riding? She'd be broke in before long after one of my half brothers ripped the others to shreds to bed her.

She turned to pat Jonner's neck.

Unwise. "Don't."

She shot me a glance over her shoulder but patted the war beast's brown fur anyway.

She was lucky Jonner didn't bite off her hand for her defiance. Apparently, he'd accepted her in my allowing her to ride him.

"How dangerous is this animal?" she asked while combing through the war beast's ratted fur with her fingertips.

What kind of affect would the truth have on her? Would she cringe at a lifestyle deemed barbarous by the sky demons? "He kills for me."

Jonner turned his nose to where her hand scratched his neck and sniffed her scent.

"I think you're just a big puppy." She scratched behind Jonner's ear until the war beast closed his red eyes in happiness.

If she wanted to fancy herself special, fine. I slid my gaze down the length of her backside, down to her slim long legs cloaked in warrior black, back up to that rounded ass that had plagued me in the saddle. And that long wavy hair as white as clouds.

Beauty.

Absolute beauty my brothers would kill to possess.

She gave Jonner a few firm pats on the neck and stepped off toward where the pool's mercurial surface reflected the sky.

Silently she walked as if her thoughts lingered on every leaf, stone, and faint ripple cutting the water's perspective of mountain capped in blue. But danger lurked beyond that calm reflection of the Starry Sky realm. I dared not allow her to stray more than a few steps. I took a step behind her.

She drank in my world as if she hungered to claim it as her own until she stopped at the water's reflective edge and planted one black boot on a low boulder.

"Aisling?" her commander called.

She snapped back from nature's enthralling spell and spun to Goro's approach. Her gaze fell on my chest and slowly assessed my form in one seductive sweeping caress.

Did she know the significance of her actions? How her assessing glance could be misconstrued as interest? Even worse, not one trace of disgust for a lower-caste male graced her assessment. Nor did her heart beat differently, revealingly. Even though she merely studied me with her eyes, most high-caste females never acknowledged the presence of an orange male.

Her weakness would always be those eyes. Barely blue. All-knowing eyes of the elderly who have had their vision turned inward as time stole away their view of the world we took for granted. The eyes of those who held some uncanny knowledge about life. Eyes that promised a solution to everyone's problems. But dare any of us buy into the promises in *her* eyes? She was a foreigner. And females proved full of promises. Rarely did a female's promises carry through with any of *her* lies.

But Aisling was not Luvk. Her promises had yet to be proven twisted torments.

Her gaze slid up to lock onto mine.

She *saw* me. The largest Luvk male. Low-caste prince. And she didn't shudder.

Stupid manipulative female. If only time would steal my sight and rip her beauty from my mind. Then I wouldn't bear witness to those she would fool with promises. And a dozen fools accompanied us. My brothers weren't as strong as I was. They would fall under her spell and be forced to share their mate with a harem of bickering outsiders.

But her gaze studied me.

Look away, Aisling. Find another warrior to study.

Goro stole her foolish attention from me.

"Yes, commander?" She picked at one of her thumbnails.

"Please stay near the group." Goro claimed a spot beside her.

Her brow furrowed. "I have no intention of causing problems."

Goro reached out and patted her shoulder. "I never said you did. Let's stay near the warriors until we understand this world better."

Aisling nodded and turned her glorious face back toward the water. "What did your home world look like?"

Goro's heartbeat drilled a moment only to fall silent again.

Did was key to that reaction to her inquiry. Something must have happened to his planet.

Goro faced the water, mimicking Aisling's act of homage to Luvk and thrust his hands under his coat behind his back.

The commander stood as indomitably as any Luvk warrior. "The sun bore down on our world a bit more harshly than it does on earth. I remember green vegetation. But the greens always looked washed out. Blinded by sunlight."

She turned her nose to face Goro in profile. "What is it that you say? *To simply be is to burn a thousand times brighter than the sun of your home world. Always strive to 'be' for the greater good?*"

Goro graced her with a nod although the song of his heart seemed to waver between sadness and thrashing. “Spoken like a Jennian priest.”

She chuckled. “You can’t imagine how thrilled I am to be away from Jennian illumination. Titan is so cold. And I’m a tree lover. The Jennian priest’s garden was well worth visiting inside that moon, but I just couldn’t stomach all the pontificating I was forced to endure just to gaze upon a leaf.”

“So you prefer it here, then?” Goro chuckled.

What would she say? I leaned a little closer as if my heightened hearing couldn’t detect even the faintest whisper.

She nodded. “Who wouldn’t?”

Not the answer I wanted the other warriors to hear.

“Good. We’ll pass ruins later today. I’ll ask if we can stop.” Goro stepped toward me.

A presence pushed into my mind. “*Lord Borun, your mother asked that I show Aisling the ruins.*”

Not Mother’s meddling again.

* * * *

By the time Borun’s party reached the mountain of the ancients, he finally understood the wisdom in warriors wearing masks. Wise decisions made long ago often made little sense to those still following tradition. More than anyone could imagine. The metal shielded my senses from the floral scent clinging to the Marshal’s hair. Albeit, enough of the fragrance managed to root in my nostrils. Just enough to make me rue the day my mother lured my father into her exalted bed. I reined in Jonner and shifted my feet to a firm footing in the grass at the mountain’s base.

Everyone knew about the entrance to the ruins. And everyone knew about the Marshal’s arrival. But Jonner stood quietly, detecting nothing, the excellent guard he was. So, a break to stretch our legs was timely. I reached up for the Marshal’s light form and grabbed her waist.

She studied the territory so vigorously that she didn’t even grace the kindness in my helpful attention with a glance.

Females. Always being waited upon hand and foot.

Her gaze finally searched for mine. “Prince Borun, are we almost to the ruins?”

Would she wobble like the last time she claimed a foothold after riding? “Inside.” He nodded toward the mountain’s dense forested cloak.

A wave of enthusiasm smoothed out the thoughtful creases on her face.

“Shall we go?” she lilted.

Why the interest in history carved into stone? Reading died ages ago with the kings. “We’ll wait for Goro and the guards to accompany us.”

She nodded once and scanned the surrounding forest, stepping, stretching the creaks out of her limbs.

One by one, the Royal Guards reined their mounts to a halt and descended to take up watchful positions around the ruins’ entrance and another handful of warriors entering to scout ahead.

Each of my half brothers took the walk leading into the ruins as an opportunity to measure the Marshal. She was shorter than all of the guards. *Vulnerable.* Talk about annoying. I crossed my arms over my chest and shot each Royal Guard a threatening stare he couldn’t miss.

But who wouldn’t study the female? She barely reached my nipples in height. That was tall for a female but still left her trapped beneath the warrior’s stares. Weaker.

Goro strode to her side. "Shall we go?" he asked.

Aisling's features bent into exquisiteness with a smile.

But loveliness meant nothing in a female's intrigue with this ridiculous waste of time. Only Mother would show important guests an eroded city buried by roots. Females. I stepped off to the entrance.

Although my half brothers hadn't announced intruders inside the city, anything could happen. Especially if Mother had this excursion planned down to each breath we all took.

The Marshal followed at my heels.

Rarely did a man find a cooperative female. Or she was smart enough to stay with the only Luvk who could possibly protect her from the other warriors?

"What do you think of this place, Aisling?" Goro asked her.

"It's extremely old," she said.

"The Queen told me over a thousand years have passed since the forest reclaimed the city."

"This is a city?" she gasped in awe. "I've seen monuments reclaimed by forest before. But they were smaller. Mayan. An entire city?" her words died as if she was too stunned to continue.

Why the interest in a city's death? It's gone. It means nothing anymore.

A presence pushed into my mind. "*Can we show her the Wall of Glory?*" Goro asked.

Wasting time to climb halfway up the mount's interior was foolish. But Mother wouldn't understand my refusal to cooperate. "*Yes. But we must hurry. The forest certainly crawls with Royal Guards from the seven realms. We risk a fight if we encounter them.*"

"*They'll all have a chance to meet us soon enough. Your mother has summoned the Queens to her palace.*"

I should have expected as much. Every Royal Guard from the seven realms will be present. Waiting. Panting over the Marshal.

After almost an hour of climbing through dark passageways, I led them to the cavernous Hall of Wisdom where the Wall of Glory's carved stone raced up hundreds of feet on one side of the enormous space. A window still allowed sunlight's glow to penetrate the darkness.

Nothing felt bad. Not one sound other than their footsteps graced the chamber. Not even a hint of an ancient spirit dwelled therein. All was lost. Buried beneath the forest in a crypt of crumbling stone.

The Marshal didn't seem to realize. She walked up to a place where the muted sunlight's glow touched the elevated surfaces of each symbol. Where she could reach the carvings and followed the shadows painted magically with sunlight by the ancients for all to see. She seemed to want to touch the writing, as if it were precious gold, but drew back her fingertips before damaging the images.

What could be hidden in her actions? Fear? Respect?

Goro followed a few steps behind her.

But he merely observed her.

This was such a waste of time. Dangerous. "*We should hurry. Or we'll never reach the palace by nightfall tomorrow.*" The last thing I want is to spend another night out with this Marshal, risking her capture.

Aisling rose from a crouch and turned, intrigue stealing her thoughts from us.

Goro walked back, almost to me, and stopped a few steps away only to face her. "Do you think you can read this wall?"

Read it?

Aisling snapped out of her thoughts, settled a conspiratorial gaze on Goro, and stood stone still. "That's why you chose me for this mission?"

Goro nodded once. "They no longer read their history."

Her suspicious gaze slid to mine.

What thoughts danced behind that beautiful mask?

She blinked away her view of me and scanned the Hall of Wisdom.

Not all was lost to the Luvks here. Truly. One line of princes had passed on the skill of reading to all its sons. But never had reading and writing done a thing for a Luvk even before the sky demons came. Those who could do either wasted time spent elsewhere.

"Do you think you can decipher this code, Aisling?" Goro asked again.

She sighed while studying the walls. "Maybe. But we cross-referenced texts written in various languages back home. Something like the Rosetta Stone made a huge difference." Her gaze locked on Goro's. "I have no idea what these people were doing a thousand years ago. And if I could crack the code, what difference does it make?"

"The Marshals need to know what happened between the Slakens and the Luvks."

Her mask drained of enthusiasm. She took one step, wiped at her brow as if a long stray white hair tickled her temple from where it loosed itself from its tie, and she inhaled. "Let me see if I've got this correct." Her hand fell to her side, and she met her commander's gaze.

"You're going to leave me here because you want me to learn a history that occurred over a thousand years ago. And what will this biased history gain the Marshals?"

"Can you do it?"

So much for revealing answers. The commander was as annoying as Mother.

Her gaze slid to mine. "Can anyone still read these symbols, Prince Borun?"

Did I have to tell her? The answer was obvious. I either lie and lose honor or assist with the effort to unite the seven realms. The Marshals seemed to be working toward that goal given what I've just overheard. "One warrior reads some of the writing." And his brother was too insane to bother with.

"There's your Rosetta Stone," Goro stated.

The whisper of the commander's voice didn't carry that message well.

Aisling's body seemed to freeze where she watched her commander, her heart racing as if she wanted to run.

Maybe she wasn't keen on confrontation?

"I can try," she said. "But I don't understand how you can rationalize how a thousand years of cultural evolution translates into the key of what will end the conflict between these cultures. My resurrecting a memory that certainly has been passed down generation to generation through oral history seems a waste of time. Oral history is a powerful tool that preserves anything of cultural significance. With oral history, we don't need a Rosetta Stone."

"See why I chose you. The others know computers, weapons, or have psychic powers that can gain their mates quite an upper hand in political battles. You, Aisling Bjorn, you can change history."

Her eyes rolled as she obviously struggled not to cross her arms over her chest defensively.

Like a good warrior attempting to react emotionlessly. Not even a mask would help her with that eye roll.

"So my psychic power is a joke." She threw her arms up, her heart quieting. "We

shouldn't hold up Prince Borun any longer. I can study these writings later. Much later. And I assume the intention has always been for me to work with this planet's last scholar."

Goro chuckled and turned back to the passageway. "*We are finished*," he said in mindspeak.

The female didn't appear to be. She seemed to want to stay with the fleeting stories. Or hide how disturbed she was. Poor thing. A Royal Guard understood the weight of manipulation. She could have a few minutes to collect her thoughts if she wanted them. What better place than the Hall of Wisdom. I pushed out my mind to find Goro's. "*We'll follow in a moment*."

Goro's crunching footfalls quieted until silence echoed in the cavern.

The female walked to a chunk of wall that had fallen from high in the shadows overhead. She squatted and traced a fingertip through a groove created by a scholar ages ago. "Who is this warrior who reads the Luvks' lost language?" She didn't look at me when she asked.

Would answering her questions gain me anything? By the frustration I'd just witnessed her experiencing, it couldn't hurt the Luvks to finally have an outside presence working in their favor. "A Royal Guard."

She rose and took a step toward me with long slender legs. In her black leather pants and white shirt, she looked like a Luvk. Like the Queens. "And you are a Royal Guard?"

Those eyes studied me with more than simple intrigue.

My heart hitched.

She almost blinked, but dropped her eyelids as she turned to another chunk of Luvk history blocking her path.

Could lost history stop the sky demon raids? I'd be a fool to inhibit that process in any manner. But where were her thoughts? "Yes, I am a Royal Guard."

"Well, you've heard everything Goro wished to share with me. I need information on life here, or I'll just be wasting your people's time."

Anything if the information would help her aiding the Luvks. "What do you wish to know?"

"I studied culture as a scholar. And I realize there are taboos to subjects. But I'm about to be slaughtered for the greater good of your people."

How right she was. I gulped back a chuckle.

Her gaze turned to me where she squatted beside the writing she was commanded to descry. "Can you explain how the marriage system works? I'm supposed to mate with a Royal Guard. I'd appreciate it if you clarified what I'm getting into."

A hint of fear glinted in those ageless blue eyes. If I told her the truth about the Royal Guards from the seven realms lurking to abduct her in order to bypass the selection process of a queen, she'd panic. "I promise, Aisling, tomorrow you will know everything there is to know about marriage when you meet my mother. But now, we must hurry or we risk a far greater danger."

She stood, wiped the dust from her hands on her pants, and stepped toward the passageway where Goro had disappeared. "Very well. I'm trusting you on that. You apparently know what's going on."

Time will reveal if she truly trusts me. She was here to infiltrate. Whether or not she could would be the question. One way or another, she was going to marry regardless of what she understood about the process. I could help her, educate her, feel out her loyalties. And doing so would assist in ending the sky demon raids. Anything to help the Luvks sleep at night.

A presence pushed into my mind. "*I heard something, Borun*," Clor warned in

mindspeak.

I caught Aisling by the upper arm.

Her brow furrowed as she stared at my grip.

“Wait here, Aisling. I’m checking the passageway.” I pushed my thoughts out to my half brothers. *“Eyes and ears alert. There might be vermin in this cave.”* Then I focused my heightened hearing toward the ancient corridor.

* * * *

Aisling couldn’t help but watch the prince’s wide striped back disappear into the shadowy corridor. The darkness engulfed his markings as he passed into shadow, the stripes blending into the murkiness until there was nothing left to see. I’m alone, she thought.

My gut flopped.

Goro would leave soon and where will I be? At least Borun had finally said more than *do this and that* and *my dog kills for me*. Since these warriors don’t say much, I’m going to have to confide in someone here. Borun seems like the best choice at the moment.

A rock ticked off twice in a rattling fall behind me.

Was something there? I turned to where the noise sounded off.

Nothing but shadow and walls of stone.

“Marshal?” a male voice called softly from behind me.

That wasn’t Borun.

My heart raced.

Maybe it was one of his men sent to find me? She turned to the warrior.

He was almost as tall as Borun. But Borun’s men were a good six inches shorter than him. And this male’s stripes were black and white. At least that’s all I could tell by the shadow he chose to stand inside with his back to the wall next to the exit.

“You’re the Marshal?” he asked again.

Carefully as if he checked his tone. What did he want? “Yes.”

“I heard everything. You’ve come to unite the clans? This is true?”

Well about as true as I can prove given they can’t read my mind. I nodded.

He pointed to the side of his mask where the chin runs up to the cheek. “Remember this.”

I squinted hoping to gain a better view through the shadows but all I could see were the three standard horns jutting off the top of the mask. The same damned mask Borun wore.

He sprang into life, running toward me.

God, I’m dead.

Chapter Three

The warrior slid to a halt at Aisling's feet and stared down at her with blue insistent eyes. "Remember," he said.

With my heart pounding like the world was ending, I studied the edge of his mask decorated with three round holes lined up along the edge. "Alright."

He leapt around me.

What for?

He raced into the darkness of the Hall of Glory until only silence echoed in the space. His white blond queue swinging at his broad shoulders.

"Aisling," Borun blurted, bursting back into the chamber. He covered the space between us in five strides while scanning the chamber. "Your heart is racing."

Probably because you left me here. I gulped down the knot choking my throat. "Your guard didn't do anything to me. He just spoke."

He turned his mask until his concerned gaze met mine. "My brothers aren't anywhere near the Hall of Glory."

Oh shit. "Is that bad? I mean—" What in the hell did I mean? "Should I be worried about meeting people from other clans?"

He inhaled so deeply that I didn't need a reply. "Oh little one, you have no idea what's in store for you."

Not what I wanted to hear. He had to help me. "Please, Borun." I laid a palm on the warm corded muscle of his lower arm.

Something akin to a jolt of awareness shook his golden eyes. "A woman should never touch a warrior."

"I need you to prepare me for what is to come. Just tell me what in the hell they want." He was noble. He had to take pity on me. "I can't help your people if I'm unprepared." And God, were the others even close to being as honorable as him? "You can tell me which ones are the bastards."

"We shouldn't talk here. Or anywhere until you're back at the Queen's palace where there are private places to speak. The forest is crawling with Royal Guards from the seven realms who want nothing but to abduct you to empower their clans through this marriage you are so concerned about."

* * * *

A wave of realization washed over the Marshal's delicate features as Borun struggled not to rudely rip his arm away from her gentle touch. But her heart fearfully thundered. And her hand shook a bit. Those symptoms of fear outweighed my fear of being infected by her touch. A stupid fear.

By the expression on her face, I could tell she slowly began to understand what transpired around her. She would have to stop asking about marriage when everywhere one turned hid another pair of ears. "We should go," I tried to speak as softly as possible to jolt her out of the spell of her thoughts.

Her gaze slid left and back to mine. "He went that way. But it shouldn't matter because

he didn't do anything to me." She sucked in a deep breath and withdrew her hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to break any cultural rules."

Blessed stars, her touch was too accursedly addictive. "Come now." I pivoted to the passageway.

One by one, we were joined by my half brothers who stepped into the corridor before or behind them, covering their retreat until the blessed sunlight finally produced the forms of the other two Marshals, their war mounts, and the five guards left outside.

I pushed out into my brothers' minds. "*Take heed. We encountered a foreign guard in the ruins. We must go quickly before the female is lost.*"

All the warriors hopped onto their mounts. I snatched up Aisling's light frame and swung her into the saddle. The guards were setting out toward the setting sun, to Mother's Starry Sky realm by the time I pulled Aisling against my chest and booted Jonner into a trot.

Riding with her was becoming too normal. Almost intoxicating with the scent of her hair. Her rounded ass tucked into my groin. And the curves I had to reach around to hold Jonner's reins caused more pain than the thousands of two-inch thorns of a *Thwarnok* bush.

By the time we made it to the ridge, the sun had almost set and a chill lurked in the air. The luxury of a warm campfire was dangerous. So, I threw my sleeping skin on the ground, almost dead center of the encampment, in front of all my watchful half brothers squatting with their gear and sleeping skins, and ushered Aisling to the spotted fur. "You'll sleep here."

She wagged her head. "I'm fine. That's yours."

With all the nobles watching, this was not the time to argue about *his and hers*. "You'll do as you're told. I'm keeping watch most of the night. I don't need a bed."

Goro stepped into the last beam of sunlight at Aisling's shoulder. "We're fine, Borun. Take care of your duties. We appreciate your assistance."

So the commander put his Marshal in her place. Or was the commander trying to send me off on an errand? *Goro* had no right ordering a Royal Guard around. Only the Queen had that luxury. "*She stays here, among the guards.*" And that was all I would say on the subject. I pivoted to check the camp's peripheral ring of war mounts.

Her heart raced the minute I stepped into shadow.

Was that a plea for help in that she feared my brothers? Or was she just terrified because I had revealed every Royal Guard in the seven realms was after her. Neither reason should have mattered. Especially when losing her after that last encounter in the ruins would certainly end my life. Mother would have my hide to hang in her great hall if I didn't personally monitor our defenses throughout the night.

The uneventful night crept along until I switched out the guards so everyone could sleep and leaned my shoulders back against Jonner's side. The beast shifted and whined. But nobody cared to rise without something dangerous demanding attention.

Sunlight tickled my eyes open too soon. Or was the alarm set off by Aisling's form looking down at me with my sleeping fur in a tight bundle?

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you. But the others were breaking camp." She shot me a meek smile.

"It's alright." I shoved my aching shoulders off Jonner's warm fur and grabbed the saddle to prepare for the day. Hopefully today proved more sympathetic than yesterday. The last thing we needed was a skirmish.

* * * *

Well, I'd better relieve my bladder if I'm going to get back on that dog-horse, Aisling

thought, and extended the sleeping fur to her guardian. "I, uh, need to take care of a few things this morning." Maybe smiling might help get the message across.

He took the fur and scanned the group of milling Royal Guards.

Two approached. Both black and white but otherwise absolutely identical and unidentifiable.

"They will guard you, Aisling." Borun shot me a hurry-up-and-get-back stare. "I need to saddle up Jonner."

Well if he thought it safe to send me off with these warriors, fine. Hopefully, these nobles would give me the privacy I wanted, or I'd have to hold it all day.

The guards led me into the trees beside the milling camp.

Just in case something might happen, I counted off seven steps. It was a trick I used in Central America when working in the rainforest. A person never knew when something bad would happen and getting back where you needed to be was but a certain number of steps through the trees.

The black and white warrior twin to the left nodded at a clump of bushes.

Apparently, Borun understood my dilemma.

The other twin skirted the shrubs.

Both turned their backs to me. Fine. I can't think of a reason not to urinate at the moment. Bladder screaming it would burst. I stepped into the shrubs, shoved down my leather pants, and took care of business.

Thank goodness, somewhere along the line, I learned to just go with things. Like urinating in front of two big hunky tiger guys who were my potential mates. Ugh. Why did that have such a weird ring to it? Probably because my father was a bastard who impregnated my mother and ran. Probably because I had a little issue with just spreading my legs for anyone. Although, these males were kick ass. Totally leg-spreading worthiness. But I was operating blind here. However the Luvk marital system worked, Borun hadn't bothered explaining much. But he had a lot on his plate protecting me. He really deserved some kudos for doing an excellent job. Unless this was all some display of power. I finished up and stepped from the bushes.

Neither warrior looked my direction.

Nice guys, I suppose. Maybe Borun was just a worry wart.

Movement burst from the left through the trees.

A leaping dog-horse landed beside me and snarled a ferocious sound.

The creature's rider sat tall, like Borun, wearing the same mask, but it wasn't my guardian given the male's golden stripes.

The nearest of my guardians lunged at the intruder.

Hell, I've got to get out of here. I turned one-hundred-and-eighty degrees to count off the seven steps back to camp.

Another tall warrior with black and white stripes blocked my path. His mask had four slashes along the chin.

Nobody among Borun's warriors wore masks with those markings. Just like the holes on the warrior's mask in the Hall of Wisdom. Where's Borun? "Borun!"

A black and white warrior jumped in front of me, growling some deep threat, the stripes on his back blocking my view of the man with the slashed mask.

Pinned in from the front and back. I've got to go somewhere. I darted right. Either way, I'm heading away from the camp. Not good. But the racket the wrestling growling warriors

made shrank into a more pleasant tone with my footsteps.

A loud crash thundered behind me.

Something enormous. I've got to hide. I stretched my stride toward two tree trunks.

Where is Borun?

The crashes kept coming.

What ungodly thing made that sound? I glanced over my shoulder.

A black and white warrior charged his leaping war beast but spaces away.

That guy also wore a mask with the slashes on the chin. Shit. Where can I go? I leapt to the right, toward some low vegetation between two tree trunks, and tripped.

The ground hit my side and stilled the world.

Hands grabbed my waistband and back of my shirt, pulling my clothes so tightly the fabric could have sliced my throat. The warrior swung me through the air until I saw his dog-horse waiting beyond the trees.

So Borun's concern was well-founded. "Put me down." I kicked my legs wildly trying to hit some part of him with a stiff heel of a boot.

He growled a threat and heaved me onto his saddle.

I struck with such force that I feared I'd cracked a rib. I hung across the saddle with my nose stuck in the dog-horse's smelly fur.

Pain ebbed through my ribs.

The warrior flew into the saddle behind me and kicked his mount into a trot.

If I go with him, I'll probably never fulfill my Marshal duty. Or, in the least, wouldn't be in as productive a relationship from the forced marriage. Life with someone who'd kidnap me had nothing to do with anything but gaining power. And probably wouldn't allow much for bringing the Luvk clans together. Just another bastard like my father... I've got to escape. I shoved my head off the dog-horse's smelly fur, craned my neck, and saw an orange striped warrior plowing through the army of tree trunks toward them on his mount. A huge warrior.

The mask he wore held no markings. *Borun*. "Borun," I screamed.

The warrior who held my body in place with one steely arm turned to Borun's approach.

What could I do? I need a goddamned weapon. But what? Goro confiscated my knives. And. I'm just a bloody healer. I scanned the saddle.

Nothing. And nothing on the warrior's hip. But I might be able to rip off his mask and ram a horn or two into his skull. The things we do for the sake of duty. I twisted around.

The warrior's gaze slid to mine.

Why did his blue eyes gleam? I shoved up, lunging for the side of his mask.

He didn't see it coming.

I wrapped my fingers around the edge and yanked. And yanked.

The mask flew off. Heavy and awkward. It was all I had for a weapon though. I'd have to make do.

He grabbed my chin and forced me to look into his blue eyes.

Into his almost human features. He had short facial hair like a manicured beard, the color of the hairs matched what had to be the striping on his skin beneath the beard covering his squared jaw. Black and white. He definitely came off the villain even though the raw power and anger twisting his features could have melted any of my friend's hearts back on earth. He just needed the cocky shit knocked out of him. I swung the mask at his head.

Chapter Four

When Aisling unmasked Prince Kruk of the Thunder Clan, Borun knew nothing could have gotten any worse. That is, until Kruk made Aisling look upon his face. She wasn't just a marriageable female. Now she owed Kruk compensation. And any Royal Guard from the seven realms would want to be sitting in Kruk's saddle. Able to demand anything he wanted from the purest looking female on Luvk, a female wielding all the power and prestige of the planet's Marshal. The Thunder lead Royal Guard *wanted* her.

But Aisling surprised the bastard by knocking the breath out of him with his warrior mask.

I tried to reach her before she worsened matters.

Kruk blocked her arm before she hit him twice, but he seemed disoriented, sitting motionless while she slithered off his saddle.

That little one fought like a war beast.

Jonner leapt toward her as if he feared she needed assistance.

Aisling didn't look like she wanted to waste any time dwelling on the Thunder Clan though. She threw her trophy mask into a tree's tangled roots and bolted to me.

At least she knew who held honor.

Jonner skidded to a halt, allowing me the chance to swing her up behind me into the saddle. It took a bit more effort than it ever did to seat a male behind me simply because she didn't have the spring in her jump like a Luvk. But Aisling obviously had no intention of staying with these Thunder Clan nobles.

She snaked her arms around my chest and laced her fingers through my harness' straps like she'd had an epiphany with riding war beasts, realizing how to ride. "Who are they?" she asked in one of my ears where she managed to prop her gaze at my shoulder.

"Trouble. Hold on."

Thunderous racket noted another war mount's approach. Jonner swung around to meet the intruder with a venomous hiss.

The golden warrior, Svar, loped toward us.

If Aisling didn't cling to my back, he probably would have launched his body at mine for combat—tempted fate at long last with hand-to-hand battle. But these foolish nobles wanted her so desperately that they fought with their hearts instead of their minds. Many a warrior died for that mistake. However, they banded together to take me on. To possess Aisling. But even if they planned to share her among their siblings, they'd get something from their combined efforts to possess her. More like a prized death blow since they were up against me.

I pushed my mind out to Svar and anyone else who might be listening. "*The female isn't agreeable. Return to your queen. Or suffer the consequences.*"

"I haven't heard her say anything of the sort," Kruk yelled in Luvk.

Svar charged at me with the long glinting curved blade of his battle claw.

One I'd never seen before because these warriors knew better than to draw their blades on me.

Aisling's grip around my chest tightened.

Jonner's muscles already tensed to react.

Desperation never presented itself in such ludicrous acts to obtain power. "*You won't have her, Svar. Ever,*" I warned in mindspeak.

Motion in the forest beyond Svar sprang to life.

My half brothers.

Svar's war mount dove toward Jonner.

Jonner countered with an evasive leap.

Svar's battle claw sliced through the air at my upper arm and grazed it with a sting.

Cut or not, I wouldn't give up Aisling. Not after they foolishly drew a weapon on me. Like I'd give up a fraction of the respect my reputation was due.

Jonner backed rearward until I could watch both Svar and Kruk. The wall of my encroaching half brothers bore down upon the Thunder warriors. Steps separated them.

Clor crashed into Svar, their battle claws heralding a battle to anyone in earshot with a distinct resonating peal.

Now was our chance to escape. I shot Aisling's blue eyes a glance over my shoulder. "Hold on." I kneed Jonner into a gallop.

The war beast's full stride might unseat her. But we had to try to distance ourselves from the distracting scuffle. Returning to the Queen alone without a full guard with Aisling was now my only option. Too many males wanted too many things. I can't even trust what my own brothers might decide to do given all the madness in the forest. Not that any of my half brothers ever challenged me. I headed for the river.

Jonner could carry us upstream without leaving a scent trail. And there were plenty of caves to hide in if someone got too close. If Aisling couldn't ride at a full gallop all day.

Aisling rode a war mount like a warrior though. Her ass slid down to sit upon the saddle. She molded her curvaceous body to my back and matched the way Jonner pitched my weight with his wide gates. If I lost my seat, Aisling would probably just snatch up the reins and proceed. Like a Royal Guard. She wasn't anything like the weak higher-caste females who required constant protection.

The cut on my arm burned a nasty chastise for my thoughts straying to the female. But who wouldn't think a thought about her with her curves molded to his body and ramming up his ass?

The cut burned again.

Taking a moment to treat it would ensure I didn't fail Mother. I studied the bleeding line.

The cut wasn't too deep but bled a lot. I could ride all day. Dare I risk exhaustion if I'm wrong? Unwise. The Royal Guards could steal the prize if I wasn't careful.

Jonner veered down the mountainside toward the river.

Where I'll bandage the wound. Aisling can rest a moment as well. Then we'd set off again for the safety of Mother's palace.

Jonner slowed.

The terrain changed from deep woods to upper wetland where the grasses spread down to sunlight along the glistening water's edge. Jonner took the last few steps to the water, sniffed the air, and dropped his muzzle to drink.

And I detected no telepathic presence with my mind. Time to bandage my cut. "We'll stop for a moment, Aisling." I swung an arm around to help her slide to the ground.

She hopped onto her feet, gaining a foothold with her black boots, wobbled a bit from the extended ride at full gait, and waited for me to dismount. "You're hurt," she gasped and reached

for my cut.

Her gentle touch burned as much as the wound.

She worried for nothing. "I have bandages, Aisling. The cut is minor."

She shot me a perturbed scowl. "Then why is blood all over your pants and down Jonner's side?" She pointed at my war mount's blood-encrusted fur covering his ribs.

I couldn't argue her truth. But the pain was minimal. And my energy level hadn't changed. I could fight as well as transport her safely to Mother. She just didn't understand the warriors of this world. "It's not that deep, Aisling."

Her breath knifed and those soft fingers went to the cut, spreading the tissue wide with a motion that equated to a pinch.

But I wasn't about to tell her to stop hurting me. What kind of warrior admitted to a female she caused him pain?

A new wave of blood surged from the wound.

Her disgusted mask shifted her grimace. "That's deep." She gulped. "Sit."

A command? This little one had fire in her heart. Maybe too much for her own good. "I don't take orders from females," I warned softly.

She locked a concerned gaze on mine. "I can fix this, Borun."

Her voice was so soft, so cooing, that I'd rather just listen to those words as if a songbird perched upon my finger. But Royal Guards had little time for songbirds. And the blood gushing from my wound wasn't just minor.

"Borun," she insisted, tugging at my wrist.

Blessed stars, what a warrior did to maintain peace in the seven realms. I bent my knees, descending to the firm ground of Luvk. Watching her.

What would she do now? Touch me more, no less. But that touch was enough to set my heart thundering into madness. "Do you not recall I told you not to touch warriors?" So much for learning the rules to survive.

Her gaze watched me in profile. "I'm not about to lose the only person I can trust here."

My gut sank.

Or worse. But I'd rather not think about worse with Mother waiting to choose between another consort or a female like Aisling to mate strategically among the clans. "Maybe you shouldn't trust me, Aisling." I couldn't even be sent on a simple task without fouling up my orders.

She turned that beautiful face to me and inhaled deeply.

Therapeutically as if the very breath fueled the fire's flames hidden deep inside her warrior spirit. But her heart rattled a warning. Or something.

"What if we mated? Would these warriors go home if you and I joined in a political marriage?" she asked.

My heart sank so quickly I almost keeled over.

To think such thoughts was foolish. But those words hung between us, demanding a response. To consider such an option... "Mother would display my hide in her great hall."

The war drum in her heart stilled.

Why? Had I crushed her feelings? Dare I think she desires me? Those thoughts led only to a Royal Guard's demise.

"Very well, then." She fingered fire into my wound with a pursed straight-lipped grimace. "I'm not very good at this healing thing. But I'll fix this. You should be warned that healing knocks me unconscious for a few hours."

Was she angry with me? Of course she was after her little proposal. Such insanity only led to disaster. She deserved better, a higher-caste marriage at least. If not, seven of them to unite the seven realms. Kruk was the first now. And Mother would see Aisling had the best match from every clan.

“Okay, sit still.” She laid her warm palm upon my wound.

But, she’d be unconscious for hours? Maybe this wasn’t the best time to have to haul the most beautiful female around the countryside slung across my saddle. I pulled my arm away from her warm touch. “This is not a good time, Aisling.”

Her gaze met mine as her hand fell away, her brow knitting. Her stare almost stung. “I can do it, Borun. I don’t care what they think of me. I *can* do something right.”

Her heart pounded with equal determination.

What had she said back in the Hall of Wisdom? Her psychic powers were weak? Was that a thorn in her side? Obviously by the malice in her features. If I acquiesced and let her fall unconscious when her alertness made every difference in her future, would that make a difference? The glare in her gaze sure could muddy a warrior’s thoughts. But I’d seen that look countless times among my half brothers. She needed to prove something to herself. And the idea of helping her made my heart flutter. I slid my wound back to her seductive warm body. “Very well.”

Determination gripped her features.

* * * *

Aisling almost choked on the lump in her throat. The prince was going to allow me to heal him? But I managed to gulp it down and push all the memory from my mind of the insulting discussion Goro and I had in front of Borun back in the Hall of Wisdom inside the city ruins. I could help Borun as much as he helped me. Well, a little. Hell, he’d gone and saved me how many times now? I’d never really know given he won’t cough up the goods on Luvk lifeways. But he’d declined my proposal for some reason using some excuse like his mother wouldn’t let him drive the car.

Mothers.

I do have value. *Even though* my mother wasn’t capable of seeing it. *Even though* she refused to allow me to cure her breast cancer. But Mom was so lost in her twin’s death. *Even though* I tried to convince her I still needed her after I finished my PhD. But Mom couldn’t shake her darkness. Her dependence on something she lost. The very same dependence that kept me an only child because Mom feared I’d harbor the same co-dependency in a sibling she had with her identical twin. I can make a difference here on Luvk with my healing or my education.

I’ll begin with big bad Borun and all those orange stripes. I just need someone like him to see healers can help a warrior survive battles. That he needs a mate like me. And I’ll be damned if I get stuck with one of those other bastards.

He watched me drape my palm over the wound like a bandage.

The wound was something I caused. Yes. Don’t worry. I’m going to undo the damage. I closed my eyes and focused to center my energy in the deepest point within myself. Right where Johnson had insisted the energy accumulated. But a resistant scientist often missed the mark.

I focused inward.

An upwelling of energy surged in my chest. Radiating up my arm touching the wound. Blasting out of my palm.

The world went black.

Chapter Five

Aisling collapsed against the wound she healed, an unconscious heap as she had warned, and Borun caught her limp curves. She'd done what she claimed she could do. The only evidence of the wound remaining was the dried blood on my arm and war leathers. And although she lay unconsciously in my arms, I feared even more for her safety now. Healers were legends among the clans. Myths. Something long since lost during Luvk psychic evolution into telepathy. Not even the Slakens had the luxury of healing themselves with psychic energy. She was even more a treasure now.

And her life even more endangered with the advantage her skill offered a clan.

Kruk definitely would use her to birth his high-caste children as well as heal his wounded warriors to maintain his prominence over his brethren with his mother. But Kruk would have to share Aisling with his half brothers after the earlier scuffle. Then Royal Guards from the seven realms would descend upon the Thunder Clan to possess Aisling. And the partial peace Mother had managed to perpetuate through her narcissistic actions would dissolve into a bloody war that had nothing to do with sky demons. I studied Aisling's sleeping features where she laid across my lap.

The Marshals probably thought she could work miracles. Mother undoubtedly planned to squeeze this female of every drop of energy she could to promote peace. But who would ensure Aisling's survival? Dear Gods, this is my place in the madness. And Mother had no idea. She'd sent me on errand to recover her prize, leaving me holding the booty without so much as a thought about where I'd be left in her efforts to reign supreme over the clans.

And Aisling in all her innocence proposed marriage. Why? She couldn't know I was low-caste.

Jonner nuzzled my shoulder.

As if knowing I sat with my shredded future. That's where I'd be, sacrificed and displayed on the golden walls of Mother's great hall for all my half brothers to see if I took hold of Mother's prize. If I saved the one thing I know I need to save for the greater good of the clans.

Jonner nuzzled my shoulder again.

"Come on, Jonner." I slid my arms beneath Aisling's shoulders and knees, rose, and carefully slung her limp body over the saddle.

Jonner eyed me with those omniscient red eyes.

As if he worried for Aisling as well. "I'll take care of her." I leapt into the saddle. "She needs to sleep at the cliffs." I kicked Jonner.

Jonner hopped into a trot and followed the winding river, knowing the way to the cliffs.

Little time passed before we stood at the base of the cliffs riddled with caves where the river poured down from above to carve out a winding channel at the foot of a mountain with deadly churning waters. The waterfall had chosen the path of least resistance on the left side of the cliffs leaving a dry side where Jonner could climb more easily while hauling Aisling's dead weight and my own. And the higher the war beast could take us, the safer we were from detection while Aisling recovered from her healing-induced sleep.

But only a fool would attempt the vertical climb with an unconscious person in tow. Or a warrior known to fear nothing and win all. This feat would be no less than any other task I faced that earned me respect around the realms. "Let's go," I commanded Jonner. "High."

Jonner claimed a grip on the formidable surface, and another, until I had to clutch Aisling's damnable curves against my groin. It took everything I had to focus on squeezing my knees, gripping the war saddle with one hand, and balancing Aisling's weight with the other arm. That's one more factor than usual. If Jonner could carry us to safety though, I'd be cursed if I couldn't hold on.

Jonner's almost fingered paws reached out for one grip after another above the churning water below.

And another. Passing cave after cave as if he knew the higher the safer for us all. And the greater chance he'd have to rest from the climb without fighting off anyone who managed to follow. And before the planet could yank me back to the dangerous water below, Jonner paused, hanging from a crack above a cave where I could slide Aisling's body back across the rocky floor into the tight crevasse.

I ripped off my mask to ensure I could fit and maneuver inside the crevice, shoved it in with Aisling, and climbed in after her, managing to crawl over her unavoidable curves without bumping my head three times. Twice proved more than sufficient to convince me this was a stupid endeavor. But if she'd been awake, there would have been enough space for her to crawl comfortably on her own. Once I'd gotten behind her, dragging her by her shoulders was easy. I maneuvered until my back lay against hard cool rock.

I could watch her calm sleeping profile.

Jonner crawled into the cave's mouth, turned to face the sunlight, and settled down with his head on his crossed forepaws. He shot me a curious glance.

"Sleep." The command was good advice. But something told me trouble lay ahead. Or at my side.

Especially since my warrior's mask lay halfway between Jonner and Aisling. She didn't understand what seeing a warrior unmasked entailed. If I left it there. If I just collapsed into a sleep. If... I'd bring on my uncontrollable future. That's what the beauty represented.

My demise.

Although the promise of her in a warrior's bed was enticing to a Royal Guard, add her healing powers and a warrior may think a new route to power unfurled before him. A strong wise warrior would judge his options carefully. But the process of balancing need from desire never proved painless. As this warrior began to see, oh sacred stars. I sighed and climbed over Aisling's soft curves.

Seductive curves.

I couldn't move where her body barely rose and fell against mine. Enticing me into betraying my better judgment.

Every drop of my blood raced to my loins.

What would it feel like to rub my hand down her delicate ribs to her woman's mound?

Gods, if her eyes popped open, caught me in what appeared to be the act of mounting her, if she even remotely looked willing, I was doomed to buckle to my traitorous body. In no way could I then turn away from the bend in her hip where my hand begged to explore. Or the meadow scent in her hair.

The mask. How so much protection of the self dwelled in that warrior's shield. I shoved off her toward the mask. A protective amulet of sorts. The one thing that reined in a warrior's

emotions. Trapped behind it, a warrior recalled years of training. Years of learning self-control. Years of wondering what a life mated to a queen to breed was like. Some males proved weak and took other females to their sleeping furs. Undesirable females. Those of another caste. Commoners. But Royal Guards rarely squandered their right to noble alliances in doing so. Sometimes, a female would take pity on a queen's entire brood of male offspring, taking them all to mate. That tactic diffused tension among Royal Guards. But rarely did many males benefit from those alliances with the limited access to a mate and the potential for favoritism. Clinging to tradition's mask was wisest. I snatched the cumbersome metal and laid it near Aisling.

Lying in the darkness didn't bring on peace even though I carefully stretched out where our bodies didn't touch. Time crept by. Even Jonner slept, unaffected by the waterfall's muted roar. But sleep evaded my aching groin. And the warriors were out there. We still had almost a full day's ride. Gods, when would Aisling awaken?

She finally stirred, her hand reaching up to rub her eyes or temple.

Good, we could depart at once.

Her *heartsong* suddenly raced.

She bolted upright into the tight space, knocking her head into the overhanging rock.

What lunacy did the sacred stars witness in my existence today? I couldn't deal with another delay if she knocked herself unconscious. I reached for her. "Take care, Aisling."

She gasped and fell onto her palms, crawling through the small gap above my waist, never returning my gaze.

What was she doing? "Aisling."

"I can't breathe," she gasped. "In here." She kneed my gut in an attempt to crawl over me.

If she couldn't breathe now, she would collapse when she saw the waters far below their perch. I grabbed her ankle. "No, Aisling. Don't go there. Let me help you."

She kicked.

Like that would rid her of my handhold. I pulled her back to me, snaking my body around to match the length of hers.

But she thrashed her hard limbs wildly as if she struggled for breath underwater. "Aisling," I whispered so not to spook her further.

She punched my chest.

"Enough," I barked and drew her dangerous curves so tightly against my body she couldn't move.

She stiffened.

As much as my loin did. Gods, maybe she didn't notice.

She arched her neck back and shook her head wildly, never looking at me. "I can't breathe."

"If you settled down, you'd realize you can speak because you are breathing," I whispered, grabbed a handful of her silken hair and hard head, and shoved her nose into the calming pulse of the crook of my neck.

She still fought my grip.

Whispering seemed to calm her though. I leaned against her ear, as well as her deadly tempting silken hair, and inhaled slowly. "Breathe, like me, Aisling," I whispered. "Feel my body as I breathe. Match it."

Bless the stars for warrior masks. Without the protective metal between a female and a man's senses, there would be no peace in the land. This I know now that Aisling was lying with

me. But I didn't wear my mask.

She managed to mimic my breathing with one sharp inhalation, then exhaled slowly.

That's the trick. I rubbed the back of her head and pulled her so tightly against me that I dared not inhale, or I might crush her.

But she managed another deep breath.

Oh, the softness of her hair. How does a warrior fight off an attack of his heart?

* * * *

Aisling overcame the hyperventilating from her claustrophobia with the stark realization that the warrior she'd become so fond of just saved her life *again*. The strong intelligent one who refused me, she thought. Hell, he smelled so good. Like warm spice.

"We need to go when you can travel, Aisling. The Queen is waiting."

The warm breath from his words tickled my ear.

Just empty promises to dwell upon. Couldn't he just leave me alone? No. His Mother awaited. Just what did the Queen want from me anyway? "Why do you keep saving me?" I asked where my lips fluttered against his neck's warmth.

Something extremely hard moved against my leg.

His arousal. And he rejected me in my proposal! How could he deny his feelings toward me now packing that much attraction? And his damned mask wasn't on. After seeing the one warrior's face, something else obviously lay behind their function. The other warrior wasn't hideous, rather handsome for the most part. Borun would face me too. I tried to lean my head back, to look at him where we lay in the shadows.

His grip didn't waver.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

Not when I finally got this warrior to wrap those massive muscles around me. "If I say no, what happens?"

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest only to roll out like a deep throated growl. "We must go."

Danger. So much for finding a trustworthy guy you could grow to love in a world where you had to mate and become a were-assassin. Trust seemed so fundamental in were-assassin relationships too. Why can't I have that one thing? He is obviously here, holding me against his *desire*. I shoved off his hard chest, pushing with everything I had.

"Don't, Aisling."

"Let me look at you. I need to tell you something. I need to explain."

"You shouldn't." He sighed. "Don't look upon my face. It only creates problems."

"Horse shit." I shoved harder against his iron arms. "For you, war-beast shit. I can tell you're attracted to me. So give it up. Or is your resistance to talk to me a sign of your true contradicted self? Maybe I was wrong about you. You're just a coward?"

The low staccato of his growl rumbled to warn that I may have pushed the limit of acceptable subjects.

His iron arms loosened around me.

God, he is going to face me. After I insulted him. Maybe I changed his mind?

My heart jiggled a little.

The pressure around me faded until I could push my head back about six inches. He didn't look down at me though. Or wouldn't. What kind of cultural constraints made these warriors hide their faces? Rather, what made that one earlier today force me to look upon his face? Enough of this madness. I shoved onto my elbows and scanned Borun's almost-human

features, all consumed by shadow.

His low growl threatened me to keep my distance.

His scowling full lips.... A black, orange, and white beard only highlighted his squared jaw line. His ears were almost squared off around the upper edges. And above his human-like features, hovered the most expressive part of his face. Golden eyes, glowing with some wayward light that managed to reflect off of them inside this dark space like his eyes were full of a glittering golden protective curtain. Hiding something.

Something deadly flickered in those glinting orbs that set my heart melting into an aching puddle.

"I hear your heart, little one," he whispered.

So he had some kind of extraordinary hearing. Or he was rubbing my nose in the fact I told him I felt his hard-on. Would he still deny his feelings for me now? I needed an ally. And here one stared me down. Big iron flag of truce with a phallus sewn upon it waving in the air. Good. I'd tell him everything and see how he felt about becoming a were-assassin. "Marshals mate with one person—"

"Not likely here." He shook his head.

"Goro warned me of that. But when Marshals mate, there's a blood exchange."

His eyes squinted minutely. Curiously. "Why?"

"To trigger something genetically inside the couple." I wagged my head. "It goes against everything I ever studied and believed on my home world. But it happens nonetheless." Would he even understand if I explained the sexual union between two psychics in love and the blood ingestion set off a genetic reaction? Like something chemical. But more spiritual.

"And what does this blood link do?"

Would he even want to have anything to do with me after he learns the particulars? His people were so warlike that it shouldn't matter if he got a few perks in the process of mating. Especially with a person you *wanted* to mate. And he was pretty up there in the area of *wanting me*. But lust was lust. "They call it blood lust."

His head tilted right weighed down with curiosity as if demanding more information.

"The binding creates a blood bond between the mates, a bond that keeps the mates together, pulling them together for the blood exchange. They crave each other and are almost inseparable. At least for long periods of time." Telling him more might be too much. "So I need a mate I can trust. One who doesn't behave like an animal."

His eyes slowly closed, and he shook his head like a drop of water annoyed his brow. But he opened his shining eyes to stare me down again. "I'm low-caste, Aisling. Mother won't waste a marriage with me to you."

What? "It's my choice. I'm the one with the bartering chip."

He exhaled, with a slow shake of his head. "No, little one. You have no idea what's in store for you. I've seen high-caste daughters mated to fifteen warriors or an entire Royal Guard, to keep the peace. And with your Marshal and healer status, you are far rarer than my sister who my Mother decided must wed a Slaken prince. Mother is all about power. And I am of little consequence in her game. I am merely the means to deliver you safely into her service."

Goro had to know about this freaking sexual free for all. As if I would agree to mate with a dozen males. Was that even possible with the blood bond? It couldn't be. Besides, I'm from earth. I mate with one person. Oh, God! Goro warned me about this.

"What is that I see dancing in your eyes, little one?"

Couldn't he tell? What would he say if I blurted *unadulterated fear*? Damn, I'll look

like an idiot.

The stone walls closed in around me.

* * * *

Borun watched as his charge's already pale face drained of color after she proposed her political alliance. *Again.*

She gasped and gurgled for air beside me.

Not again. I shouldn't have told her about Luvk marriages. I foolishly terrified her. For what? Now I needed to drive back her fear of a dark future. "No, Aisling. I'll help you. Please, stop worrying." I grabbed her arms and shook her to get her attention back to breathing. Blessed stars, promising such a hollow promise was lunacy. All I could do was explain how she could bend the mayhem around her. Adapt it to her use.

But she kept gasping for air.

Fine. All the air she could possibly require lay right beyond the cave opening, in the sunlight.

Jonner studied us where he rested wedged halfway in sunlight at the cave's entrance.

She just needed to get out of the cramped space. Then she could think with a clear head. "Mount."

The war beast shuffled into the sunlight to disappear, finding a grip on the outer wall. I climbed over Aisling's flailing body, grabbed beneath her armpits, and dragged her on her back to the cave's edge.

The waterfall's roar elevated with each of my placements of palm and knee.

She just looked at me, gasping for air.

Not only did I stuff her into the cave but I told her all about the marriages. And I've been stupid for not wearing my mask. I slung my mask over my shoulder, horns down, and grabbed her cheeks with both of my palms. "You must listen to me, Aisling. I need you to calm down. Jonner can take us back the same way he carried us here. But you must remain calm."

Her breathing calmed a little beneath the blue sky.

Maybe it's my touch? Or I'm growing too attached to her—as attached to her as she is to me. Did she stroke my pride with her propositions? Or am I as weak as the other warriors? It really mattered little given I had to return her to Mother. But I would complete my duty whether or not she was desperately gasping for breath or slung across my saddle. "I'll mount. Then, you will," I shouted into her ear above the fall's roar and slung a leg over Jonner's saddle with nary a thought in the process.

The planet threatened to suck me down into the churning waters. I anchored my heels in the stirrups and reached for Aisling.

She studied me for a moment but shoved onto her elbows.

Not good. She caught a view of what lurked below. "Don't look at it, Aisling," I shouted and extended a hand.

Did she hear me over the noise?

Her gaze slid to my palm.

What was she thinking? "Come to me, Aisling."

Jonner shifted his grip, sliding closer to the cliff.

She rose to her knees, shut her eyes, and took my hand.

Bless the stars. I carefully pulled her light weight to the ledge's edge. But she'd have to open her eyes to climb into a seat before me.

Her eyes popped open.

All the wisdom of the ages seemed to stare back at me. Or she just contemplated death by drowning. I leaned backward a bit to show her she needed to sit before me in the saddle. That had to look safer than attempting an awkward maneuver to claim a seat behind me. Besides, there was no guarantee she could hold her own at that angle. I gave her hand a firm jerk.

Her mouth pursed into a tight ball of determination. And she leapt.

Chapter Six

Stars' jest. Aisling jumped right into the saddle with me like a pouncing Royal Guard. But not straddling it like a sensible warrior. She faced me with both legs dangling over one side of the saddle, arms clutching my chest with her nose tucked safely into my neck. Like a lover offering a welcoming embrace.

Jonner bounced.

Curses. A swim looked in our near future. I willed my grip to remain steady.

Jonner began climbing upward.

Up or down. Either direction was fine given we needed to get off that accursed cliff.

Aisling shifted her leg.

Gods, sit still.

"I feel like I'm slipping," she yelled.

She wasn't. But how did you argue with a female who thought she was dying?

She drew her leg up and snaked it past my body.

Right to where she faced me squarely in the saddle, staring me down like my lover with her arms wrapped around my neck. The way we were tilted in the climb only compounded matters. Her legs hung aligned with Jonner's body. Not down the saddle with mine. More like gravity wrapped those long legs intimately around my waist.

Would she ever stop staring me in the eye? And she seemed to enjoy the view of my face. I just need to don my damned mask.

Jonner neared the cliff's top, pulling with his grip in the minutest cracks of the cliff.

Never sooner. Hopefully, we'd make it to the Queen's palace by nightfall. We'd have to run the entire way. But a night alone with Aisling would prove a far greater battle than contradicting whatever Mother had planned.

Jonner pulled us over the cliff's edge atop the side of the mountain and halted. The source of the falls lay higher up the mountainside where a substantial glacier melted throughout the summer, feeding the water at Jonner's feet with icy runoff.

A little dip in the cold river seemed timely, especially with Aisling's curves leaning into my erection. She didn't seem to notice where she clung to my neck with those sky blue eyes burning holes through my soul.

"Thank you for taking care of me," she said.

My gut sank down until catching a ride on the roaring waters racing away from the mountain peak.

Cold and lost wasn't good. But those words struck a far deeper chord. A warrior worth his merit wouldn't abandon her in this madness. "Honor and duty are everything, Aisling."

A chill skittered through my body.

And the more I heard her words resonate inside me, the more I knew I had to do something to save her from the Royal Guards. I had to save her for the sake of the clans through her proposition of a political alliance. *And maybe a little bit just for myself.* But Mother would never need to know that much. Mother would sit back and relish in how her handiwork pushed to unify the seven realms. How her most respected low-caste son had *finally* given her what she

wanted, a political alliance through marriage. Maybe even an heir to the Starry Skies throne. And would marriage be so bad given I wed a female from another world who obviously had more convictions than Luvk females?

Aisling's gaze slipped away, down to the space between our bodies, and back up to meet mine with a new determination. "Maybe you should just stop and feed me to the wolves. Let me go. Be done with me." Her gaze drifted off to the distant treetops stretching out on the horizon toward the other realms. "Goro wouldn't have sent me here if he didn't think I could handle this duty."

A hint of sadness in her voice pleaded for help.

You won't have to do it alone, little one. I grabbed her cheeks, turned her mouth to mine, and planted my lips across the softest flesh I'd ever felt.

Her body melted into mine like the ice melting from the upper limit of the Starry Sky realm to race down the mountainside in one grand deluge of jolting energy. Those lips returned a passion no high-caste female would ever feel for me or could feel for any of the Royal Guards because those females cared nothing for anything but their rank. But Aisling wasn't from this world. She wasn't like any of the Queens. And with each of her tongue's tickling explorations of the seam of my lips, I knew more than anything that nobody could save her. No one but me.

My heart ached until I could feel nothing but her touch.

Her palms rubbed into my drumming heart.

Only a fool would withdraw from the intoxicating warmth of her skin.

So much for dishonoring oneself by giving into desire. She'd captured my heart. Looked upon my face. *My soul.* There was no turning back for a conquered warrior. Or so the people claimed. I'd be cursed double fold if I failed the Luvks after this...

But was it failing oneself to finally taste the pleasure forbidden a man born into power? To feel the soft curves a Royal Guard dared not tempt him into betraying duty. Or his sanity. To let go and dive into desire was lunacy.

But lunacy prevailed as she pried my lips apart with her lashing tongue and sucked mine deeply into the warm cavern of her mouth.

Deeper into deadly desire.

My arousal throbbed and lurched.

But my vow to protect her was more than lust. It was to help all Luvks. And Mother would be pleased in the process nonetheless. Pleased with the female's conquest. But I could think of nothing but sucking her tongue into my mouth.

I claimed it for my own.

She raked her tongue over mine again.

My body burst into flames. Perilously burning as my heart froze, then thawed in one agonizing bout of confusion as if forcing me to reevaluate the situation. But it didn't matter. I had to move forward. I had to protect the Luvks. And with Aisling, I could know love in the process. If she could love. Was that even possible with females from her world?

If only I could touch her all over. Trace the curve of her breasts with my tongue. Taste her sex. Suckle her nipples. Just like all of the consorts I'd monitored mating with my Queen when I was forced to stand watch over Queen Ishan as her lead Royal Guard whose sole goal was protecting his Queen from her lovers.

Trust would be an even greater reward. But duty was duty. The Luvks needed an advocate. And what worse prize than lying with Aisling's writhing body beneath mine as we danced to the little pleasure sounds I drove from her body?

* * * *

Borun's lips trailed across Aisling's chin and down her neck to latch onto the throbbing skin above her jugular in one warm sucking tribute before his presence withdrew completely. And he stared so deeply into my eyes that I couldn't breathe, she thought.

"I won't let anything happen to you, little one. This I vow. You can take my word to your grave. For the vow will surely put me in mine."

Was he joking? That was a new side to him. A side I welcomed. I tried to breathe looking into that proud face. But he'd sucked my soul from my being and left me hollow and aching for him right where I really shouldn't have been thinking I needed him. However, sex at the moment seemed like a really excellent way to celebrate our alliance.

His gaze was so intent that I couldn't look away and dared not risk breaking the spell of his declaration by stumbling over my feelings with stupid questions. I didn't know him enough to differentiate between his implied meanings and cultural dogma. Especially whether his statement was an agreement to mate with me or just a promise to help with his mother. A political alliance was a political alliance. And one with a warrior who looked as amazing as Borun couldn't be a life sentence. I slid a palm across his warm neck and stiff collarbone to the supple skin concealing his steadily beating heart.

He yanked his warrior mask over his face, stepping back into the Luvk prince mystique, ignoring my touch.

Now I couldn't read the concern furrowing his brow or squaring off his eyebrows. Or feel it in his kiss. I could only rely on his word again. Truth. Honor. Vows. These warriors were all about such things. I just needed to keep my cool and wait for instructions. Especially after that amazing kiss. Or I'd be *royally* screwed, to say the least, the way my body was humming. "Alright. Just tell me what to do."

"Turn around. We must reach the palace by nightfall to meet with the Queens. Or we lose time and opportunity."

How time and opportunity were defined on Luvk would be interesting to learn. I turned in the saddle, Borun steadying me with a python arm locking around my waist.

He always steadied me. Why? Was his some medieval mentality or a personal preference he had for me? I like the preference angle. At least, he worked to create a plan of attack. For what? Surely he would share information now. "You said time and opportunity were key here. What did you mean?"

He slid his other arm beneath mine and took up the reins, locking me between the powerful musculature in his upper limbs.

Sitting there was becoming awfully nice, cradled between two robust arms and his cushioning chest. But muscles were my Achilles heel. And there were too damned many muscles around me. Squeezing my little voice of reason into a squealing teenage girl.

Need shafted me from heart to groin.

He leaned down close to my ear where the chin of his mask barely touched my shoulder. "We can't afford to have the Royal Guards squawking before the Queens."

Jonner leapt beneath me, rocking my *need* into madness, and the world raced by.

So much for a clear answer. Especially with the way my groin ached for the hunk of man pressing into my back. The day would drag on excruciatingly.

* * * *

By the time they reached the top of the hill leading down to Queen Ishan's palace later that day, all Aisling could see were thousands of bright fires lighting up the night's darkness.

The territory undoubtedly looked as rocky and barren as the last few hours' worth of daylight had shown this territory to be, she noted.

Jonner halted as if honoring his home with a quiet salute.

"Here is your new home, the Starry Sky realm, my Mother's domain," Borun said with a soft rolling growl. "Climb behind me. I doubt we're clear of the deep waters yet. And I'll need full use of my arms to safeguard you."

Danger here? Not by the millions of stars twinkling overhead. "But we're almost to your mother's palace. Are these guards so stupid that they'd attack us in full view of the village?"

"Desperate, Aisling. They are desperate. Quickly. I need you to hang onto my harness to ensure your unshakable grip protects you if anything happens."

And with the way Jonner moved, an unshakable grip would save my ass. I growled a little myself on my grand crawl around all of his supple muscles to reposition behind him in the saddle.

If I'd done anything of the sort on earth, I'd have had the man on the ground, peeling back his leather pants, taking what I wanted from him by now, whether or not his motives were obvious or not. But Borun was an enigma as much as his Luvk culture proved. What did he want? What in the hell did anything he say mean? And just what was he about to do? Just where would I be when his dust cleared and I faced his mother? I settled onto the saddle against his back and leaned in to gain a grip around his broad chest.

"For the record, Borun, I don't care for them calling your clothing a harness. It's like you're some animal they get to lead around. And those damned masks really irritate me."

A chuckle rumbled in his chest. "It's been a long time since I felt like anything but a war beast. So, hold tight, little one. And when we arrive inside the palace walls, remember to let me do the talking."

Jonner pounced into a run.

The dark world rushed toward them in a fresh gust of cool mountain air. I settled down and leaned into Borun's solid warm back, my cheek above the circle in the center of his harness. The rocking motion could have lulled me to sleep if my fingers weren't pinched by gnawing leather. But our moving bodies shifted in sync as if we'd always rode together.

Hypnotically. I could have held onto him forever. Clutched the darkness. The killer warrior who kept saving me. He'd better have what I craved in mind.

Something danced in the blackness where my gaze stared.

Whatever it was had phantom qualities. It seemed to come and go but always had a presence. Ephemeral. Then I saw the stripes. I shot up as high as I could with a jarring motion, yanking on his straps. "Warriors," I shouted into the cool wind.

Borun's head snapped left and right.

He must have kneed Jonner.

The war beast's gait lengthened or quickened.

In the night's darkness, either was a difficult call. But I watched the dancing firelight whisk toward me in the night while hugging his warmth.

Drums thundered to my right.

I turned to assess the sound.

War beasts. Their pounding footfalls. Rode by two mounted warriors on dog-horses with glowing red eyes.

"Borun, to the right."

Jonner veered left.

My body swayed right, but I righted myself with a pull on the halter against Borun's steely body. We rode so closely that I thought we'd certainly be considered mated by all who witnessed our arrival.

"Hold on, Aisling," Borun shouted.

Jonner was airborne, throwing my body and Borun's into the dark velvet of the cold night sky. I doubt I would have managed to stay on the dog-horse if Borun hadn't stuck his seat. The impact from landing jarred my teeth to their root tips. But Jonner didn't let that stop his escape. The war beast grabbed something in the darkness and heaved us upward, vertically.

Hanging there, I squinted at the tiny points of light in the heavens and made out a dark pointed barrier above us. A wall. One that looked like it was fashioned from medieval pointed posts.

Jonner hauled us against gravity's pull, up to the edge to teeter above a crowd of masked tiger people and buildings behind the palisade.

Were our attackers still following us? I looked down at the dark ground where we had just been.

Nothing but ground and a silver moat watched our balancing act. "They're gone, Borun." "Let's go then."

Jonner leapt from his perch.

The crowd ran from the war beast's descending mass.

Jonner landed in a crouch and hissed at anyone foolish enough to stand too closely. Or maybe at the wicked impact Borun's and my body had with his back.

Borun let out a ferocious roar. "I don't know who dared chase me outside my own gate, but I've had enough tonight. Get out of my way or die."

Apparently, the villagers spoke English too. They backed the Hell out of our way.

Jonner hopped into the receding masses. The war beast carried us around two corners and up to a well-lit set of stairs spanning the side of a two-story building. The night cloaked most of the structure's details except for the double-door entry and the pair of guards at each side of the entrance.

The crowd quietly followed from a distance. Even children gaped in wonder.

Was I that much of a sight to draw so many from their night activities?

Jonner halted before the flickering torches lighting the building's steps.

"Come," Borun said, sliding off the war beast. He immediately turned and plucked me from the mount as if he'd grabbed his most treasured weapon.

Villagers closed in to their rear, then on both of the sides leading up to the steps.

Borun growled a low threatening sound.

The villagers halted and stared.

Watching. Did I really look that different or interesting? Maybe they thought it quite a feat he returned with me at all.

Borun grabbed my hand and gently ushered me toward the closed doors.

Gently considering his gait almost insisted I jog.

Two identical white and black guards stood to the left. Another set stood on the right, but they had orange and black stripes. Borun didn't bother with greetings. He stormed toward the doors, kicking them into enormous clattering wooden shutters, and leading me into brilliant white light cast down a short corridor.

Both doors kept banging against the walls.

People stood everywhere. Flinching tiger people. All of them turned to the noise. The

crowd parted as if the racket from Borun's entry shook the dark wooden rafters.

Ahead stretched a wooden platform spanning the far side of a cavernous room with an extremely tall ceiling. Older women, or females, obviously tiger queens, lounged upon thrones or chaise lounges before a golden wall. The scene was almost odd and out of place after everything I'd been through to get this far. Especially when those matriarchs looked too damned comfortable.

Borun led me to the base of the Queens' platform, released my hand, and planted his black boots apart. "Mother."

The most centrally located female who sat in a chair—throne—smiled an almost insincere smile at him. "I'd thought I'd lost you for good, Borun."

Borun's growl rolled low and steady across the room.

Was he angry with his mother? Or just everyone in general?

"One would think these bastards would have killed me to possess the Marshal. But they all failed, Mother."

All the Queens shot disturbed glances between one another. Not a sound dared to tempt Borun to throw another insult at the group.

"Now you see why I sent you to escort the Marshal to me." His mother's smile curled into one cheek and her blue gaze slid to mine. "Welcome, Aisling. I trust Borun has taken good care of you."

Funny she phrased the feat that way. I nodded and opted not to speak for Borun's sake. After all, he wasn't angry at me. I owed him cooperation. And maybe he could save me however he intended.

Goro and Johnson stepped out of the crowd to my right. Goro toted my backpack.

Thank goodness. I had nothing on me from earth except some underwear. Underwear didn't make for creature comforts or memories. And by the looks of the animal hides gracing the walls in this great hall, there didn't appear to be much in the way of preciousities to be had by noble women in Luvk either. I really had entered the Dark Ages.

Goro crossed the space in seconds to hand me my possessions. "Are you well, Aisling?"

Something inquisitive flickered in his fiery orange Xquine eyes.

"Yes, commander."

A door squeaked behind me.

Borun turned to face the sound and straightened his shoulders.

What now? I followed his line of sight.

A tall black and white Luvk male wearing slashes on the chin of his mask stormed into view.

Borun stepped to my side to cover me in his menacing shadow.

"That one is trouble," Goro whispered.

The black and white male's black boots ate up the space between us until Borun stepped in front of him.

"Stand away, Borun. I have business with this female."

Shit. Acidic tones did mean trouble.

Borun's growl heightened until the whole damned chamber resonated with rumbling thunder.

"Bring your complaint to me, Prince Kruk," Borun's mother ordered.

The man who I beat with his mask. No wonder he sounded so pissed. Did he want me to show the crowd how easy it was to beat the Hell out of a Royal Guard with his mask again?

Kruk's black boots skirted Borun's boots. Step by step. But Borun sidestepped with each of Kruk's footsteps, blocking Kruk from catching my gaze again.

Goro had moved to stand near Queen Ishan. Johnson too.

Kruk claimed a spot before the Marshals and Queen, bowing slightly.

"What is this complaint that brings you so angered into my palace?"

"This female," Kruk pointed at Aisling, "Unmasked me. I demand compensation. I want her for my mate."

No.

My heart sank.

There could be no worse catastrophe than this. Not now.

"Nobody touches my mate." Borun's growl rattled off like the gunfire from an automated weapon. "I claim Breeder's Rights and not only refuse to allow Kruk lodging until my rightful three months with Aisling have passed, but I refuse to allow him any contact with her until any younglings from our mating have been born."

My gut twisted.

What did Borun just claim? Rights? Breeding? Babies? God, he's *defending* me. What did any of those demands matter? He could have anything he wanted as long as he kept that devious prince away.

Kruk snarled.

Borun didn't seem to hear Kruk's protest. "And if Kruk doesn't care for my conditions, I'll put him out of his misery now. He certainly deserves it after torturing me and my charge the past two days."

Kruk whirled to the Queen. "I demand compensation any Royal Guard would require."

Not good.

Borun leapt, grabbing Kruk's shoulders, and hurled the warrior's enormous mass across the room at a wall decorated with weapons. "Choose the weapon you wish to end your life, Kruk."

Kruk jumped to his feet and snarled at Borun.

Were they going to fight? And could Borun beat anyone as tired as he must be? Kruk was almost as tall as Borun. This had to be a mistake.

"I demand compensation," Kruk roared at the queens.

Nobody uttered a word.

"Choose," Borun roared, "or *I'll* make the choice for you."

Kruk lunged at an object on the far wall, something with an extremely long handle hanging about four feet above his head. The weapon had a bulbous end with at least two spikes protruding from it.

Shit. Borun just stood there. Waiting. He needed to get his ass over to find something to beat off an attack with Kruk's piece of hell on a stick.

Kruk growled and swung the weapon in a charge.

All Borun did was stand there.

I'm going to die right after him. I will. In Kruk's bed.

Chapter Seven

Aisling could only watch as the weapon's spikes in Kruk's hands headed right for the metal circle positioned on Borun's chest. That damned harness was a bull's eye, she decided.

Borun dropped to the floor, just in time to evade the weapon's impact, then leapt unnaturally at Kruk whose body kept turning before he could manage to stop swinging and react. Borun grabbed the weapon's handle, kicking Kruk's ribs with such force that the massive warrior flew into the male audience as Borun wrenched the weapon free of Kruk's grip.

The crowd shifted in a blink, away from Kruk as Kruk's body came to a halt at the boots of three orange males dressed in standard Royal Guard attire.

Nobody even gasped.

Total assessing silence filled the chamber as Luvk witnessed the stakes planted, uprooted, and shattered in the battle of two warriors' wills.

Borun swung the weapon overhead in one full circle and tossed it at the attentive crowd.

The warriors shoved out of the sliding weapon's way as it rattled to a halt at the base of a wall.

Borun growled. "Go to your beds, fools. You've dishonored all Luvks in your childish attempts to possess the one thing that can unite us all during the past two days."

"Borun, please. I hear your anger and understand every bite in your words," Ishan said. "But you've frightened your mate. Show her to her sleeping skins and let her sleep away this clamor. We acknowledge your Breeder's Rights. Now see to the Marshal."

Borun turned his glowing golden gaze to me.

A shiver skittered through my soul.

Gooseflesh tickled the hairs on my arms to chilly attention.

I tried to suck in a deep breath.

I did. Where are my sleeping skins?

He took one step toward me.

I was his mate now. *I think*. Wasn't that what I had offered?

His slightly bowed legs and black boots devoured the space between us in microseconds as he studied the Queens, then focused his fiery gaze back upon me.

My heart did a swan dive.

How could any woman stand there and be defended in such a manner and not find the man stole her breath away? Stupid mask. Ridiculous harness. He deserved whatever he wanted. Freedom to think and act. My body.

He extended a hand to me.

Who wouldn't take the warmth and strength offered in that massive palm?

He nodded at the Queens.

"Tomorrow, Borun. We'll speak with the Marshal tomorrow," his mother called after us.

I threw the backpack over my shoulder as he led me toward the doors beyond the pack of observant males.

All eyes watched us.

Kruk said nothing where he rose to his feet.

As if anyone would defy Borun again. He was right. They were no better than cowards to risk the unity of their people for their own selfish whims.

Borun pulled me into the softer torchlight outside, into another besiege of stares, and turned me down to walk along the porch's length instead of mounting Jonner. We stepped from one pocket of shadow into another in silence.

What would he say first? Would he despise my putting him into the position he was in? After all, I had literally begged him to do so with my proposition. He couldn't blame me though. Not after kissing me the way he had at the waterfall. His grip on my hand didn't seem angry and accusing. No. He was taking care of me. *Still*.

Leading me to a safe place. I hope.

Borun guided me down another set of low wide steps out of torchlight.

Wooden steps, I think.

We took four more steps across a hard earthen surface.

"Step up, Aisling. Here." He carefully waited for me to feel out a rise in the darkness. "I will have the workers make certain there is lighting here from now on."

Because he now had a mate who required lighting? If only he would have expanded on that statement.

He pulled my hand toward a soft glow beyond a rounded building's edge and shoved a door into a warmly lit space full of shadows and a central hearth's dancing flames. "My aunt tends my fire." He pulled me into the room. "Ask anything of Morna. She will care for you as she always has me."

The door thumped at my heels.

This is my future? Nothing dark and sinister? Just a cozy space with one hunk of man who spoke ever so softly. At least, to me.

Borun yanked off his mask and tossed it upon a pile of furs.

Just the way I liked things. Unmasked.

Golden firelight gilded his almost-human face. Maybe it would have been exactly human if he didn't sport that genetic tattoo of tiger stripes. But then he wouldn't be Borun at all. And I was really starting to favor Borun.

His eyes burned in the soft firelight.

Watching me.

He reached up to yank a tie from his hair and shook out his orange locks as if he'd finally been liberated from duty. "Your heart doesn't lie, little one," he whispered.

Oh, the way my heart raced probably announced to his delicate hearing how damned ready I was to launch my body at his. Were female Luvks that aggressive? I didn't want him to think I did that sort of thing all the time. Really. I had with two other men. But when a girl went to graduate school with a bunch of geeks, there weren't many to get all hot and bothered about.

He grabbed me up, lifting me until his warm hungry mouth covered mine. His teeth latched onto my lower lip with such passion I couldn't keep my hands to myself. I wove my fingers into his hair, trying to trap his hunger there. To let him devour me. He could have anything. Anything.

His mouth sucked hot kisses down my neck until finding the pulse he seemed to gravitate toward when the mood took him.

My soul felt like it would seep away through his kiss, into him. God, I just wanted his hot mouth all over me.

Gooseflesh dimpled my flesh until I shivered where he carefully held my feet off the floor.

My legs swooshed upward.

He swung an arm beneath my knees lifting me before him without releasing his lock on my soul in his kiss.

Trapped. I wanted to remain trapped. Under his spell. I leaned my cheek into his soft hair and groaned. Everything about my body ached with need. I just wanted him to throw me down and pound home. I'd be his home. His hearth. His sanctuary if that's what he needed.

He kicked a door wide and carried me to wherever he wanted me.

Toward a circular glowing pool in a black room where a small area was lit with a few candles.

Sexy. Seductive. Almost meditative.

My heart sank even further into his tempting world. There was no turning back now. Earth was a part of my past. Borun was my future. Here in the darkness.

He leaned down, gently placing me upon something soft beside the glowing water.

A seat or furs.

His gentle mouth slipped away.

So did his hair.

I couldn't see any part of his face in the damnable darkness. The shadows stole all but his silhouette from me like that crappy mask. If I could, I would have snatched his scratchy whiskers and pulled his intense expression back to me.

But he fumbled with my boots, gently pulling them off in two swift motions.

Any man who'd carefully undress me was worth keeping.

"You can't see me in here, little one, can you?"

If I said no, my voice might crack from the desire welling up inside me.

"My vision is strong enough for both of us," he said.

And just what kind of vision did he talk about? One that saw a future? Or night vision?

The light at his back outlined his body and jerking movements as he removed his own boots before he shoved his pants down. "Swim with me," he asked in such a way I could only rise and pull off my clothes one piece at a time as he stood before the pool's glow, his erection begging I join him.

He jumped into the pool, surfaced, wiped the water from his eyes, and watched me.

He hid his hunger well if that's what burned behind those glowing eyes where he anchored himself at the pool's edge with one elbow. I could barely concentrate on stripping seductively knowing how hard his cock felt when I laid inside that cave or straddled his lap on his mount.

Mounting was a crucial subject at the moment.

If only I could wrap my legs around that waist and get him to pound deep inside me. I shoved out of my leather pants and wriggled out of my lace hot pants.

Borun thrust a handful of fingers through his hair and propped his other elbow up for support on the pool's rim.

He seemed too comfortable for what I had in mind.

We're going to seal this pact and exchange blood. Over my dead body. Then there would be no more room for whining rivals. Only Borun would be at the center of my reality. And I'd feel freaking whole again. I jumped into warm water and rose with my long hair draping down my back to tickle my bottom.

Bubbles kissed my skin.

Geothermal baths were a killer. Talk about luck in landing on a planet and falling for the biggest bad ass with all of the accoutrements necessary to lead a comfortable Dark Age life. And just what accoutrement was he hiding under the water's swirling surface?

He studied me as if he didn't know what I would do.

Well, time to just take what I wanted. I swam over to his long hard body and bumped a ledge with my hip. Who needed a seat when an amazing hunk of man meat just roared at the world that you were his? He could carry my weight any time. I laid a palm against his bare hairless muscle of his abdomen.

He watched my hand as if mesmerized.

As if he enjoyed the wait. What would he do if I took a hold of his shadowy member distorted by the bubbling water? I slid my hand south over his ribbed abdomen into the coarse curls leading to cock.

He grabbed my hand.

His mouth fell on mine as he lifted me to his lips. "Aisling," he whispered the faintest words against my lips. "We have all night. Let us relish the first night we have together. *Slowly.*"

My heart exploded into oblivion and melted down into the pool, sucking me deeper, threatening to drown me in the intoxicating heat at the pool's bottom. I'd die right then and there if he didn't catch me. If he didn't kiss me. I snaked my arms around his neck to hold myself above the water.

He drew me into the gentle circle of those massive arms and squeezed me so delicately that I could never know the true strength of his lean body. Never feel the deadly anger I had witnessed well up inside him in my defense. All I could do was look into those glowing eyes and hold back some kind of choking emotion. Tears? Or a lump of need? He wasn't going to be anything like those warriors who chased us. No. His actions proved he *could* love me.

He placed the most tender kiss upon my lips and looked me in the eye. "What's wrong, Aisling? Have I frightened you?"

Maybe I'm frightening myself with these thoughts of potential love. All I could do was wag my head and bury my nose into his neck. Duty didn't seem so difficult with this mate.

One of his palms slid up and down my back, measuring me or just touching something he couldn't stand not to touch. His other arm locked me in place where I floated, right above the thing tormenting me most of all. His hard-on. And that secret weapon kept rubbing my ass. Goading me into battle.

Didn't he realize I was as needy as him?

His adventurous hand slid around to measure the curve in my breast.

God, the lightning jolt of need deep inside my core almost shot me across the pool. I shoved back against the supple iron of his supporting arm into a yoga stretch with my palms against his chest.

His breath knifed as he exhaled, and his gaze slid to where his fingers finely tuned my nipple sending a jolt of hot electricity from the hard point to my groin.

Not good for maintaining general order and morale. I couldn't sit still where I straddled his goddamned iron waist.

He growled, leaning over, latching onto my collar bone with the most amazing heat in his delightful mouth.

Match that with the gentle scrapes of his rough beard against my skin and I was about to

warp faster than the speed of light.

God I would die the way my womb ached for the full length of his hardness sliding along my inner channel. "Borun, please," I begged. "Just quick. Just once. Please. I need you inside me." All the way to his balls.

A chuckle rumbled from where his mouth massaged my skin. He leaned back upon the pool's edge and watched me with those glowing eyes.

Calculating. How could he be so calm after the display of anger before the

Queens? "Borun, you're killing me." I tried to reach around and grab his cock. To shove it inside me enough so that he wouldn't be able to refuse.

He grabbed my arm and twisted it back to place my palm on his chest. "How can a warrior paying homage to his mate translate into killing her?"

As if he didn't delight in watching me suffer. "Deprivation."

"Then, little one, you aren't going to be very happy tonight given I intend on making you prove to me how strong your desire is." He lifted me with strong arms beneath my knees and at my back only to head to a row of steps I had yet to discover. His gaze locked on mine. "I'm going to test your every nerve. Torture you with interrogation. And when it's all over, I'll know your true motives."

The big ox. But I couldn't hide how willing I was for him to bring on the shackles and disembowelment. After all, he was carrying me somewhere...

He planted a gloriously hungry kiss on my lips, thrusting his tongue into my mouth, taking anything and everything he intended to claim. I slid my fingers into his wet hair and tried to kiss him as deeply in return. But he had no intentions of relinquishing his control. I just gave in to the interrogation.

A door thumped.

Probably just him kneeling one open.

He carried me into the shadows, planted me on the softest expanse of fur I'd ever felt. Not one inch of my body extended beyond the divinely luxurious bedding he owned.

He kneed my thighs apart. His black form hovered with the firelight behind him.

Right there. Yes, settle between my legs.

He was nothing more than a powerful shadow in human form. No stripes. No colors. All male. Powerful raw needy man. I dropped my knees to the furs, opening myself, inviting him in.

Couldn't he see me begging? I reached for him.

His firm body slid past my palm.

Down to pin me to the furs with the most exquisite weight. I gasped beneath his lithe mass.

He shoved up on a palm as if fearing he might hurt me.

No more delays. I grabbed his back and pulled his sinuous muscles back down to warm my belly. "I like you here, on top of me."

The enchanting rise and fall of his body with each of his breaths only sent my thoughts reeling. I had to touch him, run my palms down his muscled lower back, down to those two rising handfuls of hard ass.

He groaned a deep throaty growl where his face hovered above me.

Watching me. I could have climaxed just listening to the sounds he made. But he rationed them out like bites of food before a starving person. He seemed to just want to study me while my hips rocked involuntarily *for* him. Or he measured my reaction to his touch. That's

what this had to be about—the-never-touching-a-warrior thing he mentioned when I healed his wound. He was starved for my touch and wanted to relish every moment. Or witness the truth in my actions. How could he even begin to think I wasn't sincere?

The seductive suction of his mouth latched onto my jugular again.

Oh, Dear God. Teasing me with those scratchy whiskers. But he was focused on my pulse. That might be a problem after the blood exchange if he shape shifts and can't control himself. I could bleed to death. But one step at a time. Now I just needed to get him to ram his hard length inside me.

His solid cock lunged between my legs.

Good. His defenses were buckling. I glided my palms across the muscled angles of his ass, down to where those iron mounds curved into his legs with amazing firmness.

He groaned against my skin, arched his hips, and marched burning kisses down to my nipple where he latched on with such ferocity I almost bucked him off my body.

"God, Borun. Will you never make me yours?"

He rose on a knee, grabbed his cock, rubbed the head of it through my damp folds, while nibbling on my nipple.

Raw demanding need shook me from heart to groin. "Tease," she hissed.

He thrust the luscious hard length of himself so deeply inside me that he stole my breath away.

At long last, he plunges into the abyss. I threw my head back and sucked at the darkness, slapping at the fur for something to cling to as I writhed with the delicious hardness of him buried to the incredible root inside me. And my channel adjusted, easing open to allow his welcome presence.

I trembled.

My hips rocked with a mind of their own as if searching for the blessed friction of cock rubbing against clenching muscle.

And nobody gave a shit that he just hovered. Observing.

My prince of warriors had the deadliest interrogation weapon.

He slowly toyed with withdrawing.

I'd die. Right then and there. "Please, Borun!"

Borun overpowered me with one mind-numbing lunge after another until I could feel his thighs quake where my thighs held them like I rode his war beast. But my body's tremors had nothing to do with over-exertion. He leaned over, thrusting and throbbing, planting his sweaty brow against my forehead, growling with his rapid breaths, each one magnifying in intensity as he riddled me full of the most seductive sensation—absolute bliss. And I matched his every wild aggressive lunge with my hips to ensure the pleasure never ended.

Tickling, breathtaking, uncontrollably wild rapture. So damned amazing all I could do was cry out with ecstasy. I grabbed his shoulders and clawed into his skin to anchor myself for the rising tide of our release that came in one overwhelming need to scream.

The calming sea of completion washed through me.

Every angry moment, every bit of the past two day's frustration, every bit of his pain and exhaustion seemed to burst inside me. Over and over. And I wanted to take it from him. To hold him. To thank him for saving me. I matched each of his last desperate plunges into the serene waters encircling me.

He arched his neck backward, grunting then growling as his final wild thrusts squeezed the last bit of his wild heat inside me.

And I never let go. Didn't want to let go.

He halted with a final squeal of air from his lungs and focused on my gaze. Some wayward firelight fueled the glow in his eyes. "Did I hurt you, little one?" he managed.

Rather, I hurt him with my nails more than he could have caused me injury. I eased out of my grip and slid my palms softly across the undulating damp muscles of his shoulders and arms. "No. Oh, God, no." Even though I wondered if we looked like feral beasts, mating in a frenzy. But who cared? It was so damned amazing.

His gaze drifted left.

Undoubtedly to where my hand drank in his amazing body. Every bulging vein and turn of muscle. "I please you?" His gaze slid back to hers.

The big lout. "Can't you tell?"

He chuckled softly. "I thought you were so fragile when I first laid eyes upon you. But you rode my war mount like a seasoned warrior." His chuckle gurgled into a growl. "Clinging to me just as you did now." He leaned over to nuzzle her breast, scraping up another rash of my gooseflesh with the coarse hairs of his beard as he plucked my nipple into a taut bead with his teeth. "And I knew back then there was no way I could feed you to the wolves. What are wolves anyway?"

I would have cried right then, but he kept nibbling on my nipples, sending electrifying ecstasy shafting through my core.

So I found my hero. His heart held the courage, honor, and strength I needed to survive the trials ahead. Even if I never took on another mate. Even if Queen Ishan forced me to take on fifteen. But once the blood bond was made, nothing could separate me from Borun. He would always be worthy enough to save me from the wolves. And even if it seemed ludicrous that I could love him after knowing him two days, maybe that was possible. It certainly stood for a lengthy debate given the type of world I was thrown into on Luvk. Now to seal the blood bond. "Wolves look a lot like Jonner. Smaller though. I need a knife, Borun."

He snorted. "I make love to you, and you're going to try to kill me now?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "The blood bond. I'm about to make you a Marshal."

His gaze locked on mine again. "Little one, you meant what you said back in the cave?"

As if I'd go around tempting tough bastards with fantasy to wrap them around my little finger. I'd need something stronger like magic and blood to manage that feat. "Do you think I'd whip up these crazy notions to entrap males? No, I'm not about to let you get away. Give me a knife, Borun."

He chuckled and rolled to one side of the sleeping fur. "Oh, little one, you don't have to do anything to entrap warriors on Luvk. Merely enter a room, and they'll line up to do your bidding." He pulled a long knife from the darkness and handed over.

I quickly sliced a small cut on my upper arm and scraped some of the blood up with the blade. "Here." I extended the knife to him.

"That's it? I just take such a small amount? It's almost as if there is no reason for the gesture."

"Yes." God if he really didn't want to do this. I couldn't have every warrior on Luvk running around trying to win me over to ingest my blood because he shared the details of were-assassin blood bondage with Luvks.

He ran a long finger across the sharp edge and licked his digit clean of the libation. His gaze flashed like the blood sparked a fire in his soul.

Firelight danced upon the blade.

He slit his upper arm in the same area I cut mine, scraped up a draught, and handed over. "To seal the pact for you, little one."

How did he always know what to say to make my heart dive?

"I hear your heart, Aisling."

I snatched the blade and licked the blood from the edge before those observant glowing eyes.

A tingling burned through every cell of my body, slowly radiating from my core out to the tips of my limbs. I stared at his shadowy face the hearth's light hid from me. All but his eyes of shimmering golden fog. And knew my life would never be the same. Could he even begin to comprehend what lay ahead?

"Has the burning stopped?" he asked.

So he felt it too. "Yes."

"We are one?"

"Bonded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. I hear in about twelve hours measured by the method on my home world, I'll become ill. It's a symptom of the blood lust. But other species don't experience the lust at the same intensity people from my world do. So, you may not have the need to mate with me as often as I do."

He threw his head back laughing.

His ass off, literally.

"You have no idea how the mind of a Royal Guard dwells on nothing but mating, little one. And how to keep you alive to ensure I can mate." He rolled me over to where I straddled his waist and he rocked his hips until the tip of his thick engorged member rubbed my lower back. "If I cannot give you a child in three months time, it is nigh impossible."

Shit. Why hadn't I thought of the high risk in pregnancy among were-mates? Why did the fact suddenly hit me now?

"Aisling," he rose so quickly to clutch me against his beating heart. "What did I say?"

How could I tell him? I just created the unbreakable blood mate bond. "I'm almost afraid to admit it." Because my safety without Kruk afoot hinged upon a successful pregnancy.

Borun pushed me aside, laid me in his arms, and settled me down against the soft fur of his bed like a broken body. Firelight etched out his strong features and painted the stripes upon the skin of his face.

"Tell me," he ordered.

Would he hate me? I hadn't lied. But everything he had done to protect me was suddenly tossed out the window. "With were-assassin marriages," I gulped down a knot forming in my throat, "pregnancies are extremely risky and rarely produce children."

Chapter Eight

Aisling's heart drummed so rapidly that she couldn't look at her mate and clamped her eyelids shut. The science behind the dilemma probably wouldn't change the questions that raged through his mind, she thought. Luvks were so violent. And I hadn't just omitted the details. Hell, rabid tigers chased us the entire time we were together en route to the palace. Nobody had a moment to contemplate having children. Although that part of mating seems extremely important to Borun, it never even crossed my mind. Especially when he lifted me off Jonner, marched me in before the Queens and warriors, and roared his ass off in the great hall. Who would think of anything other than a warrior like *him* saving her when facing all that brouhaha? "Thank you for saving me. But I think I've done myself in." I popped my eyes open to find him watching me.

A lump of dread fisted in my throat.

His lips gently planted a kiss upon mine. "No more riding war beasts."

He planted another sizzling kiss on one of my nipples.

A bolt of desire shot through me as the nipple knotted.

He tugged the bead into a long point with his teeth, only to release the tender tissue. "No more wild mating."

He groaned.

For what? His misery. I couldn't blame him. The thought of not going riding really sucked. He must hate having to play things easy. Safe.

He shoved my legs wide, moving ever so quickly to slide between my thighs. "And no more worries." His hot mouth landed on my navel, lapping, nibbling, while his broad palm massaged my ribs with the most delicate of touches.

If this was what he meant by no wild sex, we were both in trouble because all I wanted to do was get him inside me. Grind his hard shaft until it became a permanent fixture within me. God, to only stop my soul from begging for his stiff ramming cock.

His moist mouth and scratchy stubble edged lower, dragging those hands along. Down to where he spread my nether folds wide and licked my trembling body beyond controllable. Sucking, nibbling, lathing around and around until I became deliriously close to shooting off the bed.

He rose and thrust the full length of his hardness inside me.

All the way to the blessed hairy root.

My body tensed around him, trying to lock him there.

"Aisling," he groaned and threw his head back as he pushed his body backward at the end of those incredibly muscled arms. "I want to hold back. To keep from hurting you." He gasped.

God wouldn't he pound into me? I rocked my hips and squeezed my vaginal muscles as tightly as possible. Something had to set him off. Release the frenzied beast.

He growled, withdrawing ever so slowly, painstakingly creeping his luscious thick shaft along the tightness of my vagina, and leaned onto one arm, muscles bulging to the max above me, watching, savoring every moment as he pulled his engorged member out of my body with excruciating patience. Over and over so damned slowly I almost cursed.

I couldn't stop watching or squeezing the sanity out of him. Couldn't close my eyes to shut out the view of him taking what he wanted.

When would he just let go and take it all?

Everything about him was raw strength and power. And here he hovered above me, proving to himself, or me, that he controlled our world. Everything but my ability to breathe. I gasped for air beneath the overarching undulating muscle of his arm.

Wouldn't he ever end this madness? I snaked a leg over his striped firm ass and curled the foot around his thigh to pull his glorious weight down atop my belly.

His golden gaze slid to meet mine while he stilled, perched upon that one arm.

Something flashed in those misty orbs.

Was that satisfaction for how he played my body like a musical instrument? "Borun," I whined. Not a sound I liked to make, by the way.

He leaned the tight muscles of his waist into my belly and fell onto his other arm. His amazing mass pinning my groin right where he wanted it. And he rocked the wiry hairs of his sex against my sensitive nub.

He was trying to kill me with *deprivation*. I curled my other leg around his other thigh, opening myself to him as much as possible. I wanted to be his war mount. If only he'd ride me as hard and fast as we'd ridden before. Harder. Faster.

God to touch him. I slid my hands over his waist to his back and ran my palms down that amazing musculature, bent to the absolute limit the way he arched overhead. Down to his wrought iron ass.

"We'll be careful tomorrow," he groaned and pounded into me.

Slapping my bottom with the pat of his balls. Again and again, he rammed his thick rod into my starving flesh until I couldn't hold back my cries of passion. I had to hold something. Had to hang on. Because we were so damned separate. Too damned far apart. If we could only meld into one cohesive mass... I tried to grab his arms but couldn't get a grip.

He must have known. He pressed his weight into my chest until I could sink my fingernails into his shoulder blades.

The world slipped away where I clung to his thrusting muscles. All I could do was gulp for air and focus on where his body melded with mine between my legs that encircled his lithe waist.

He planted his nose into my hair and danced inside me, rubbing the deep itch of my passion into a tidal wave of spasms. I cried beneath him. He growled a low territorial sound into my ear, and his cock jerked inside me, throbbing, exploding his hot seed into my soul.

Bright blue light flashed.

Between us. I almost flinched but held onto his shoulders, released my leg grip around his waist, gave him my body, and matched his dying thrusts. Anything to make us whole again. To keep us together.

But the light had burst from our bodies. I think.

"Aisling," he groaned and collapsed.

God to have that body on mine always. Draping me. Spooning me. Pinning me down to mate. And now there was this strange blue light. He hadn't seemed to have noticed in the darkness. I turned my nose into the damp hair sticking to his neck and tried to smooth away the creases my fingernails had left from my death grip on his shoulder blades. "Borun?"

"Uhm?"

He definitely was well-versed in English. "Did you see the light?"

His head jerked up. "What light, little one?"

I met his golden gaze. "It was between us. Blue light."

His gaze pinched shut a bit. "Between us?"

I nodded.

His hand went to my cheek where his fingers rubbed my skin contemplatively as he scanned the surrounding darkness. "No." His gaze landed back on me. "Was it inward, moving out?"

Maybe. "I don't know."

He slid his palm down my neck, over my clavicle, and to my arm where he fingered my skin. "Your cut is gone from the blood exchange."

I healed myself? Was that possible?

He felt the spot where he'd sliced himself, rocking his hips forward in one intoxicating motion, pushing my body as if he still wanted me. "And I'm healed as well."

Nobody told me I'd be able to heal through sex.

"Aisling," he gasped.

I met his gaze. "What else happened?"

He dipped down until the tip of his pointed nose touched mine. His gaze boring into mine. "What if this healing skill you possess protects our children?"

The thought was overwhelming. The potential even more so. Kruk couldn't hurt me. Relief welled up inside me until my eyes watered and my nose ran.

"Don't cry, little one." Borun pulled me along the side of his protective body and blocked out the insane world with those big muscled arms. "It's a sign. A gift from the stars."

* * * *

Borun fought the urge to go roaring around the compound given he'd just mated and beat Kruk's political ploy. But Aisling needed to feel safe, he concluded. The only way to help her relax and sleep was to lie still and convey my feelings for her. I slid my arms around her body, still slick from mating, held her as I had done in the cave, and listened to her *heartsong* with one of my ears pressed against her ribs.

Gods, to hold her like this was unimaginable yesterday.

She was mine.

I was mated.

And I did anything but cringe in fear.

How could anyone have convinced me that I'd welcome this moment so? I'd run from mating my entire forty-four years of life. Or at least as long as I could remember. Mating caused unhappy ties, demands, and pain. But Aisling hadn't done so. Why would she? She's a female from a *different* world.

And I have beaten Kruk for the moment. Now she'll face the revelation of Mother's strategy with me. I just need to protect her from the Queens now. Those females would be foolish to cross me. And they know it. My mate was *mine*. Nobody would dare toy with my Aisling.

Satiated, momentarily, I just needed to rest for what comes tomorrow. The Queens will be plotting to gain the upper hand with Aisling. She will need my guidance. So a rested mate with a clear mind would serve her best. But I so wanted to touch her soul again. To nurture the germ of a child and show the rest of the Royal Guards who had captured the Marshal's heart.

* * * *

Aisling awoke on her back with her big sleeping tiger mate wrapped around her chest.

Like I was his body pillow, she mused. I tried not to chuckle. His face snuggled between my breasts, one arm curled over me holding my right side, the other arched around my head and shoulders. One of his knees was tucked between my thighs. Way too nice. And I wasn't about to move and lose the happy feeling humming through my body.

So this was the torture he warned me of. Well, not so bad. Maybe if I had been mated to other Luvk males I would be miserable. Like Kruk. I struggled not to shudder and wake my mate. But fortunately, I had my Borun. And we'd bonded beyond standard rules of marriage with the blood bond.

How do I tell if my feelings were more from the blood pact than what I could ever call love? I'd never been in love before. I'd been in lust twice. I'd been in equitable relationships to promote my career. But I'd never just wanted to lie around and let someone coddle me. Borun could do that anytime. Especially since he helped me rein in my healing powers. *I think.*

I guess it's crazy to fancy this stuff as powers when I have to have sex with someone to control the energy. But some things are nuttier than my situation. Like, hello, I'm sleeping in a tiger man's sleeping skins on a planet just a quick turn and two steps through a magic portal on the far side of Quadrant Four... What could be nuttier than that?

Borun stirred atop me.

He had to be exhausted. I raked a handful of fingers through his hair to comfort him.

He tilted his golden gaze to mine. "Did the food wake you?" He shoved up on his hands and leaned on one of his sides.

Food? "What food?"

He pointed at a tray with glistening silver dishes covered with ornate domes. "And the chest must be for you. Mother wouldn't have one of her sons mated without sending a wedding gift."

Why did I get the feeling that box contained his *bride price*? The vile queen. I tried not to snort and insult Borun because he definitely had value—the most of any male I had met in the seven realms. But Queen Ishan was something else.

His stomach peaked for food. "I'm famished." He rose, stepped over me, walked his incredible striped nude butt across the room, and returned with the tray.

I would have sent him for something else just to watch his muscles move but thought my motives would be a little too obvious. However, he'd probably like that.

He placed the tray beside me and began pulling covers off dishes. "Bread?" He extended a piece to my lips. "Your people call this bread."

Okay, I'll taste it. But afterward, he's explaining how he knows about my people and English. I took a bite of salty softness. Bread. And chewed. Strange but almost familiar herbs seasoned the melting carbohydrates. "It's delicious." I swallowed. "But I want to know how you know my language."

His eyebrows arched as if he relished descrying the great mystery. "Two males who were enslaved by the sky demons escaped, returned, and began teaching us the language over two generations ago. Most nobles speak it. Even though we don't admit this to the Slakens. We feel we have the advantage when captured, knowing their tongue."

Did Goro know this part of Luvk history? But Borun had said bread was of our people. "So you learned about bread from these Luvks, not earthlings?"

He chewed a bite of the bread and shook his head. "Commander Goro spent a week here last month. He told us many things. How some things we had would prove familiar comforts for the Marshal who came." He shot me a wink and hopped to his feet. "My mother heard the same

things.” He swung the chest’s lid wide and foraged through the loot, his killer ass angled toward me in the firelight’s glow.

Undoubtedly on purpose.

He withdrew a long piece of leather or fabric with some type of fluffy white fur dabbled with black spots sewn to one end and brought it to me.

I’d rather have watched him walk across the room than have studied that object.

He held the fur end up until the other end brushed the wooden floor. “And this is a queen’s jacket.”

Becoming a queen was out of the question.

“You look ill, little one.” He knelt by my side, draping the jacket across my legs.

His pleasure in presenting me with the garment was truly touching. Insulting him wasn’t my goal. But how could anyone from my world versed in equality even begin to stomach the concept of queen? If I could stop the madness, I had to intervene now. I locked a firm gaze on his.

Muted sunlight brightened the room from his left through a small window that showed another room existed beyond. The light revealing his concern.

“Borun, I gladly married you. And took you as my blood mate because I can have only one. But I cannot and will not in any way pretend to be one of those queens. I’ve seen nothing that makes me even remotely impressed with them. Nor am I power hungry. I joined The Cause because I was a misfit on my home world. The Cause took me in, gave me purpose, and took me to a planet to help a people find a way to live their lives as they see fit. That doesn’t mean I’m offering to carry on the cultural torch here. I’m just here to see the Slakens leave the Luvks to themselves.”

* * * *

Borun couldn’t believe his ears where he stared at his mate wrapped up in his sleeping skins inside their lodge. She confessed she wasn’t here for power, he reflected. Rather, to monitor what was to come. And her *heartsong* confirmed every word she uttered. “I don’t want a queen for a mate.” He almost fell in her lap with relief but wanted her to try on the jacket. “This gift takes months to make. Please accept it for me. My mate deserves such things.”

She smiled a little half smile, took a fistful of the jacket’s finest leather reserved only for Luvk queens and their children, and rose. My sleeping skins fell away from her pale skin and beautiful curves, leaving her towering over me with the longest white hair. Pure. Soft.

All mine.

She swung the sleeveless garment around her shoulders, thrusting one arm and then the other into the sleeves, and pulled both sides together at her breasts.

What was better? Her nude body or the way the jacket left her lower body and silken hairs in my view? I rose, trying not to think about the blood racing to my manhood, and showed her the two toggle closures that clasped the sides together to conceal her breasts.

She worked to close the sides of the black leather.

But that wouldn’t save her from another round of mating. I slid my palms down the warmest softest leather over her slender curves, down to her hips, and stepped to her side, pulling her conspiratorial gaze toward me as I slid one palm between her damp thighs.

She was still wet. Always wet. And by the look in her eye, willing. We really needed to speak with Mother before I lost all my senses and wallowed in Aisling. “Even though my blood burns to make love to you, little one, we must discuss what is to come and meet with Queen Ishan.”

“You’re right. Sometimes I can’t believe I just fall under your spell.”

What sweet declaration. But her heart tattled on her whether she confessed or not. He struggled to gulp down a chuckle. “You know that we have three months to plant seeds, little one.”

She nodded.

“And that Kruk will take you to his bed if I haven’t succeeded.”

She acknowledged the grim point with another straight-lipped nod.

“But we must create a different alliance, one that will ensure you have this Rosetta Stone you need to end the sky demon raids.”

“Sky demons? Raids? Are you talking about the Slakens?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, tell me more.”

That sparked a brilliant gleam in her eye. “Today I will request of the Sunrise Clan queen that you wish to have her son, Prince Mart for consort.”

Her heart thrashed beneath her skin. “I really only want one mate, Borun.”

Of all the blessed things to hear roll from her lips. But she needed a Royal Guard to protect her when I was called away. Certainly she realized that much after Royal Guards tried to capture her for two days. And she needed to learn Luvk history chiseled into the Hall of Wisdom. Now for a bit of reason. “Given you carry my child in three months, no warrior will touch you until you have given birth. Unless you request it of your consorts.” Royal Guards in her case.

“That’s a year, little one. A year for raids to occur. A year for you to understand the writing on the walls of the Hall of Wisdom. A year is a long time. And Prince Mart can teach you the symbols long before you must bed him. I think you will carry a child soon.” Especially since I could think of nothing but bedding her.

“But what if you’re wrong? What if I get trapped with more mates?”

She doesn’t hear her words. “Aisling, listen to yourself. You live by Luvk law now. You are equivalent to a queen. You must protect yourself with a Royal Guard.” Even though I’m not so happy with the thought of sharing her. It’s for the greater good.

She planted both her feet squarely before me. “On my world, a man marries a woman. One at a time. Albeit, there are a few exceptions. But those aren’t the rule. And Marshals only have one mate. One. I don’t want to share what we have between us. You deserve a mate as much as anyone on this planet. So just get used to my way of doing things. I’m not a queen. I’m a Marshal. And Marshals don’t operate by local law. We are held to a higher standard and must strive to be successful.”

She had no idea what she faced today. “Well then, little one,” he tapped her small pointed nose with the pad of one finger, “you’d better eat up because you’re going to need all the energy you can muster to debate with the seven queens of Luvk.”

She exhaled, loudly, and sank down into a pile of leather to chew on some fried fish and baked tartlets. The slump in her shoulders said more than anything. She didn’t want to debate nor pretend to be something she wasn’t. And she only wanted me for a mate.

Nor did I stomach the idea of sharing her with anyone well. But it was the way of my people. And I could if I had to. To protect her. To raise our children. She desperately needed all the protection I could find for her. And the best protection at this moment lay in her taking on one Royal Guard from each realm, as a mate or a guard. No queen would be snubbed with that solution. They’d all return to their palaces feeling equally significant. And I could choose all

the finest and trustworthy warriors to work toward our goal of ending the sky demon raids.

She said nothing else.

We'd come full circle, back to riding war beasts and gritting our teeth. At least until I had to rip off a few heads to keep the respect I was due and determined to find for her. Facing Ishan and the other Queens wasn't going to be easy. Especially since Aisling had the conscience all the Queens lacked. Shit was going to sling far and wide today.

Chapter Nine

Against Borun's suggestion, Aisling pulled on her olive drab camouflage pants and belted them around the bottom of her white tank top. Today felt like a day for battle, she noted. Since I felt like I was going into battle, I thought the whole soldier ambiance might make me feel a little better about facing the Queens. I yanked on my black combat boots, pulled the bloused hem of each pants leg down over them, and strapped on a knife to the outer side of each of my thighs for good measure.

Borun observed without more than feigned indifference.

Well, he was going to have to get used to the fact I was in charge. I had to reach my Marshal goals. At least I felt better with the knives strapped to my puny ass. Knives saved my butt in graduate school. They just might do the trick now. I'll have to thank Goro for that. He'd hidden my knives in my backpack along with a few other items. I had been trained enough to use the syringes to keep blood on hand of my were-mate. But the knives were even more comforting. I felt a little more prepared with these rabid tigers at every turn. And now I'd take care of this harem insanity. "Everything will be fine, Borun. I'm a Marshal. They're going to have to accept that Marshals don't keep harems."

"Someone is going to accept something today." He smacked his lips. "Are you ready?"

I ignored his jab and offered him my elbow. "Shall we go?"

He shoved up, yanking on his mask.

"I really hate those damned things," I muttered.

He sighed and led me back through the maze of walkways where the hot sun struggled to burn off shade.

"You're going to be difficult, aren't you, little one?" he muttered.

"Just as difficult as you have been, dearest mate. Do you see how we're made for each other?"

He chuckled softly. "I saw that when you held onto my halter and rode my war mount like the skin on my back." He shoved the doors to the great hall wide and shot me a serious gaze through the eyes of his mask. "Although, I don't feel like being flayed today."

Who was talking about skinning tigers? He escorted me back to the great hall's entrance, walking me through the village's dark wooden circular plain buildings surrounding one large square structure with a smaller identical second level capped with a peaked roof reminding me of something like an undecorated pagoda. But the simplicity of the village's architectural style didn't leave me peaceful. I stared into the bright lighting inside the cavernous space where the queens seemed focused on our entry, lounging upon their thrones in gemstone studded leather and furs.

They were queens. Maybe he was right about my being assertive. But someone had to put these females in their places. And I had enough clout to demand to be left the Hell alone. I stepped across the threshold.

"Borun," Ishan called out to where he walked a step behind me. "Bring your mate closer. We all wish to speak with her."

Jesus. Like I need to be taken by anyone anywhere. I can maneuver across a room

without a guide thinking for me. So they view me as my mate's pet? I so need to bite back some wicked retorts and focus on not becoming one of these hideous pompous queens. But the last thing I need is for the Luvks to ignore me. Royalty will always be royalty. Of which I am not. Standing my ground in acting like a queen is going to be the only way I keep my sanity.

"Little one?" he prompted over my shoulder.

Borun doesn't need to usher me anywhere. I'm a Marshal. I can handle this. I headed toward the Queens.

"Take care," he whispered.

The Royal Guard loitered on the side of the room behind where we entered through the corridor-type passageway. So, I couldn't see the audience without turning. And who'd want them to think for one moment that I had any interest in choosing a dozen or twenty of them.

Quite a few tasty smells tempted my mouth to water.

I suppose food couldn't hurt anything. Just where was it though?

A slight lilting song, music of some sort, tickled the tension from the room from wherever it originated. A greeting? Or Pan's seduction? I'd be foolish to let down my guard. Not that anything about the room was welcoming. Even the lighting—anything but the awkward bright natural white of the sunlight outside—helped me feel relaxed from where it artificially illuminated this space overhead in round glassy balls.

Borun's footfalls followed me to where I claimed the spot he had stood yesterday before the attentive Queens. Back when he had proven there was a male Luvk I could connect with and mate. It was true. I'm putting a lot of stock in his integrity given the trip here. The other Royal Guards weren't trustworthy. I had the only Royal Guard I needed. Borun.

Where were Goro and Johnson? Was no one here to side with me? They would have been nice to have on hand. Especially Goro's quick wit.

"Good morning, Marshal," Queen Ishan cooed. "I trust my son took care of you?"

Did she imply we had good sex? The nerve! "I couldn't have asked for better treatment. Now, I would ask what title you prefer to be addressed by. Since there are no queens in my homeland."

The seven queens, all white with black stripes, jolted forward where they sat. "No queens?"

Dare I laugh? I nodded. "You didn't answer my question."

"How can there be no queens?" a thin homely queen blurted.

Ishan waved her off and watched my gaze. "Since we are equal, you may call us by our names."

"We are not equal—"

Borun cleared his throat.

Like that would tie my tongue. "I am a Marshal. You are queens. Those are two completely different positions with different duties. I am not your equal by any measure." I planted my hands on my hips and waited for a reply.

Ishan smiled sweetly and waved a palm at me. "But, you see, we are the same."

Could her ridiculous definition of *female* even begin to logically make a connection between us?

"You are powerful in your position." Ishan smiled.

I turned back toward Borun and caught him trying not to roll his eyes by looking upward where he stood with his arms crossed. As if he motioned *I told you so*. "I may be powerful, but only because I am a Marshal. But I am not a queen. I will not become a queen, addressed as

Queen, or even appear to be a queen.” I pivoted to face the arched black brows watching me from the royal thrones. “I am here to understand the world of the Luvks to see that you are represented fairly by the Order of the Marshals and *not* treated like slaves of the Slakens.”

“Stop while you’re ahead,” Borun whispered.

Didn’t the Queens have his heightened hearing? Couldn’t they hear him verbally admonish me? I turned around to shoot him a dagger with my gaze.

“But our Royal Guards tend to that business?” a gaudily dressed queen stated in her layers and layers of metal studded leather and furs. “High-caste females like yourself should just relax and enjoy a life filled with pleasure from their consorts, Royal Guards in your case.”

So much for an intelligent retort from the vagina and womb.

Borun’s golden gaze drifted off to study something beyond my shoulder.

He hadn’t helped at all. “I’m not high-caste. In my home world, I fought my way up the social ladder to get respect. I don’t believe in inequality even though I’m surrounded by it. And I expect respect.” I whirled to find many Queens had donned masks of horror.

“Here. Here,” Ishan chimed in while fussing in her seat. “You are our guest on Luvk. We must ensure your safety. You have no Royal Guard. Let us each select our finest Royal Guard to send to Marshal Aisling.”

The Queens all rustled with newfound enthusiasm as I was suddenly omitted from the decision making.

Hadn’t they heard a thing I said? “No. I’d rather not complicate my life at the moment. I’ve only been here three days. Why do I require an army when I have Luvk’s best warrior already?” I waved Borun’s direction.

“She must have Kel.” The heavy Queen waved at me as if I was incapable of rational thought. “Kel is the charmer of my brood.”

Somehow no matter what I said seemed like it would make a difference. These women were either idiots or so damned sneaky that they tricked me into talking in circles.

“No, Queen Iwari,” Borun spoke loudly. “Prince Var from the Ice Lands is our choice. Your lead Royal Guard.”

He did not just choose me another mate. I shot him a glare.

Borun focused on the Queens. “Marshal Aisling has specifically requested Prince Mart from the Sunrise clan.”

“Of course, the Marshal may request any Royal Guard she prefers,” some Queen said. “A consort is a consort.”

Borun’s gaze met mine.

He didn’t react to the venom mine certainly spat at him.

“Otherwise, Prince Lehd from the Sunset clan, Prince Proy from the Dancing Rivers, and Prince Ovh from the Smoking Lands are the only choices I’ll accept in my lodge. If these do not please the Queens of those realms, those realms will lack representation in the Marshal’s Royal Guard,” he bellowed.

“And what of the Thunder clan?” Ishan asked.

Borun’s stern gaze snapped to his mother. “Since Prince Kruk has asserted his claim on my mate, we have no need for another Royal Guard from the Thunder clan.”

“There you have it,” Ishan cooed. “The Marshal has sufficient protection. We can all dispense with formality and return home to protect our realms against the sky demons.”

Or return home to hurl.

My knees wobbled.

* * * *

“Where’s the wine, beer, or whatever you have that’s got a kick strong enough to knock a war beast off the top of a palisade?” Aisling asked, standing in the doorway to the banquet hall, mindlessly staring at the bustling noble crowd before her.

Ignoring me, Borun thought. She hadn’t graced me with another glance since I ticked off the only warriors I would work with to the excited Queens. But my mate’s consorts were the finest and most reliable warriors of the seven realms entrusted to her service. And I trusted them. All but Kruk. He’d proven himself anything but noble. But Aisling couldn’t see this now. Not in her anger. Or fear. “Will drinking yourself into a stupor make a difference, little one?”

She shrugged. “I need a drink. Maybe ten.” She just stared at the dining scene unfolding before her.

A sea of Royal Guards milled up and down the length of three long tables waiting for others to seat themselves while the Queens hustled into their seats for the midday meal.

Thanks the stars. Her commander’s black form pushed through the crowd. Shorter than the Luvks, he was difficult to spot until he broke through the striped sea. Goro headed toward Aisling.

The commander would make a formidable Luvk guardsman.

My mate snaked her arms across her chest and planted her feet squarely beneath her.

Oh, Aisling was not happy with anyone.

Goro quietly nodded once in greeting and tucked his hands behind his back beneath his long jacket. “You’ve taken on a small army, Aisling.”

“It wasn’t my choice. And where in the hell were you when my genius mate decided to assist in the choosing of my entourage?”

Oh, no, she wasn’t happy.

Humor curled up one corner of Goro’s mouth. “I warned you that you’d have to mate with more than one male here if you chose to work with the Luvks. When you arrived at court already mated,” he shot me a respectful nod, “you’d made your choice. Honestly, I doubt Johnson would have had any say in his future at all here.”

Chapter Ten

"If every ear in the room wasn't finely tuned to what we are saying, you wouldn't be singing that tune, Goro. I was being hunted by insane tiger men," Aisling snapped at her commander in the dining hall's doorway while Borun quietly listened to her conversation.

I'll have to think of a way to smooth over this stressful situation for her, Borun thought. Later.

Goro nodded ever so slowly. "I was there, Aisling."

"You should have given me weapons of some sort."

He chuckled. "I did. I found the strongest and most intelligent male to escort you to the Queens." Goro's gaze slid to mine. "I couldn't have asked for a more competent and reliable warrior to assist us."

"Oh," Aisling almost spat and snarled. "I'm nothing to them. I'm just a vagina and womb."

Goro wagged his head. "No, you're the solution to their problem. I've spoken with Prince Mart. He is gathering his sacred scripts to share with you at this very moment."

Aisling tried to look away from Goro as if she no longer wished to speak with her superior.

"And, Aisling, he agrees that you both may find something to snuff the sparks of war in the Luvk's future. But you must focus and accept that with every turn in life, we sacrifice a bit of our souls for the greater good." Goro bowed slightly, turned on one heel, and strode back toward a seat of honor near the end of Ishan's table.

Aisling turned to face me, her expression draining of color. "Famous last words."

At least she didn't glare.

"Please, I need to sit somewhere quiet. Please." Her eyes glittered and she teetered slightly.

I would have squeezed away those pains but dared not show the others how she was tormented. "Everyone watches and listens, Aisling. Don't let them think you're weak. Sit with me. Dine with me. I won't allow anyone to touch you. This I swear."

She sucked in a deep breath that tugged her fear away and gave me the most pitiful beg of a stare before turning back to the crowd.

Her discomfort was my fault. I should have warned her I was going to declare we'd mated upon our arrival. I should have explained the consequences. But she's the one who extended the proposal. I merely brought it to fruition. She will understand soon the significance in all these aspects of Luvk marriage. I placed a palm on the slight curve of her lower back and nudged her slight mass toward the tables. "The warriors I requested for your service won't cross me, little one. Nor will they leak any information about what goes on in our lodge. They are the finest Royal Guards in the seven realms. Four wear the masks of Royal Guard leaders. I promise you, I chose them for your protection. And we will need protection—guards at our doors night and day as well as to accompany you anywhere you venture into the seven realms."

She walked quietly toward many watchful eyes, the blatant segregating of black and white tigers from lower-caste Luvks among the Royal Guards where the black and whites sat

closer to the Queens, and we strode toward our empty seats. The other guards sat at separate tables with their backs to the heads of the tables, where they could eat without being observed by females.

"Do not look at males when they are eating. This is common courtesy at court," Borun whispered loud enough I could hear.

"Where are the Queen's mates?" She managed to prove her mind still digested everything around her.

"They rarely travel with their mates. You'll only find sons and mothers at these affairs."

"Don't think you're ever getting to stay at home if I'm forced to participate in these ridiculous politics," she mumbled.

She was just angry and intimidated. And what warrior wouldn't stay in his lodge when he had a mate like Aisling to *guard*? To curl up with when darkness fell? To ride with passion only reserved for those few Royal Guards chosen to breed? "The thought hadn't crossed my mind."

"Don't expect me to run my lodge the way a queen does either. And no," she shot me a stern glance and whispered, "I don't want to know how Queens trod all over their mates. It's bad enough I have to whore myself out and sleep with every man on this planet."

Her words shredded my heart into a thousand pieces.

That wasn't truth. Maybe hers for the moment. But none of her guards would touch her without invitation. Had I done this to her? I made her feel like a whore? Disrespected and used. Why hadn't I realized this before? Certainly her anger was part of this whoring herself. I would make it up to her, if it killed me. "Come, little one. I could use a drink myself." I settled her into a wooden seat next to Ishan and grabbed a wine gourd.

* * * *

The wine saved Aisling from blurting out more ridiculous garbage she'd regret later. Or the chemical hum in her cells just helped buffer what everyone said, she thought while holding Borun's firm elbow en route back to their quarters. No. The wine had locked my lips. Yes. And Borun didn't seem to mind. Until I wanted a second flask. Then he intervened. But I could handle wine. *On Earth*. My head felt a little more than light on Luvk. Or it was the blinding sunlight crossing our path all the way back to our personal quarters. "Are we almost there?"

"Yes, little one. Next time maybe you'll listen to me when I warn you about taking care with the wine."

He sounded like a father. "Just how old are you?"

"What does my helping you have to do with my age?"

"You sound like a father."

"That I'll never be until you grace me with the gift of a youngling."

Oh, these stupid Luvk lifeways that kept a man like him waiting for an opportunity to spread his seed around made my head hurt. I rubbed my temple.

Okay, maybe I was biased because I was damned-sure attached to him before instigating the blood bond. I so needed to stop allowing Luvk lifeways to bother me. I was here now. A part of this world. I just needed to accept things.

"Here we are," he chimed.

A shrill squeak almost jarred my brains into mush. But I found myself stepping into his decadent darkness. Cool. Calming. Home. Luvk.

My body swung into the air.

Into those big massive arms that cradled me so delicately. God, like the way he held me

with those python arms in our private bubbly bath.

My soul ached for him to hold me, squeeze me. Thrust into me with his thick swollen cock. Make me his again after the horrible events unfolded today.

His legs snatched up a few steps around the hearth, and he laid me down on those soft damned furs.

Furs were good but not what I had in mind. All I could do was sink into them though, submit to the imminent pleasure I knew had to be coming in the way he placed me exactly where he wanted me.

Where was his hungry mouth? His strong muscles pinning me down, right where I couldn't do anything but writhe beneath his amazing weight. And where was that light that burst forth in the darkness? Who gave a shit about the light? Bring on the dangerously addictive darkness. I could stand the differences in life here as long as I had him.

The wonderful pressure of his hands slid across my body, cupping my sex and a breast.

Yes. The darkness. I can sink even deeper if I drank more Luvk wine. Luvk could suck me in to fan my soul's flames of passion. The planet better after I was forced to take on a harem. I arched into Borun's intoxicating hands and begged them to drag me deeper into shadow.

He fumbled with my belt. "I don't like these straps from your home world."

But he wriggled the buckle loose and shifted my pants down to my ankles.

Thank goodness. I couldn't have sat up if I tried. And where were his damned hands?

One by one, he pulled off my combat boots. Then the pants only to push my legs apart and crawl between them.

Thank God.

"Little one," he whispered.

Just ravish me with that body. "Uh-hmm?"

His finger traced a line across my panties. "Your body is exquisite in these garments of your home world. But I believe I am partial to this particular piece of clothing." He shoved my knees into the air and sank a hot kiss on one of my inner thighs.

Sucking. Trailing a tongue and delightful brush of his whiskers along the inner length until all I could do was gasp for air as the tip of his tongue stopped at the edge of my panties.

God, just rip them off. I couldn't move. Couldn't sit up or reach to run my hands through his hair and force his mouth where I wanted it. Damn the wine.

His mouth latched onto my other thigh near my knee and tortured me with the tickling tip of his tongue again.

My hips rocked, curled my wet sex toward the promise of his mouth, begged him to make me climax in our dark little corner of Luvk.

His weight rose, crawling over me, grazing my belly with the sinuous muscle of his exquisite waist.

All I could see were those glowing golden orbs. "Borun," I whined. "I need you."

"Little one, you *need* to be healed," he growled softly.

His glorious weight settled onto my body, held me down, pressed his rock hard shaft against my groin, and latched the hottest sucking kiss onto my neck that threatened to draw the last drop of life from me.

Screw healing. Literally. "Inside me." How did a girl communicate with a man intent on driving her insane with *deprivation*? I bucked my hips to reiterate my point, snaking my legs around his supple thigh muscles, and felt my nether folds part for his cock, begging, pleading he would take pity on me and dip into my aching flesh.

Damn the wine that set my blood burning but trapped me in the furs.
A fiery itch spread through all of my cells.

I suddenly couldn't lie still. My arms were on his corded muscles. My hands in his soft hair. I couldn't stop shoving his mouth down to my nipples. He was there, gnawing the sore welts of my breasts through my shirt, shooting electric jolts through my heart that melted my insides until they drained from my soul.

That wasn't good.

My panties were so wet I doubted he could have peeled them off.

His weight crept away with the heady scrape of his beard and singeing bite of his kisses. Down. Dipping his hot tongue into my navel until I danced on the end of his wicked tickling heat.

I groaned and let my legs fall away from his iron shoulders, hoping he'd forego *deprivation* and get on with the healing. God, wouldn't he just tear off my hot pants?

His fingers curled around the edges of my lace panties and slowly pulled them down, licking his way with seductive warmth right down to the spot above where I wanted his firm lips to loiter.

My body trembled and writhed.

He growled and yanked off the panties.

A chill swept through me.

That tongue slowly teased my nether lips open, and he rubbed one fingertip around and around my clit.

I wanted his tongue on me but couldn't lie still or find words to express myself. I could only grab fistfuls of sleeping skins. God, wouldn't he just latch on and make me come? "Borun!"

His searing mouth settled over my nub like a hot brand.

I shot off the bed to find the largest man I'd ever seen lying between my legs, sucking the life out of me. I wanted to ride that head. Somehow, I managed to lift one heavy wooden leg and wrap it around his shoulder. Then the other.

He growled the darkest sound I'd ever heard, then he devoured me.

* * * *

Aisling rode my mouth like she clung to the back of a galloping war beast, crying, bucking her sex against my teeth so wildly that my body betrayed me. Her need drove a sweeping tidal wave of release through me before I could bury my emotion.

My seed exploded into my leathers.

Wasted.

But I wasn't finished with her.

Yet.

My mate would never question me again after she took what she wanted. I am her servant, her guardian, and her advisor. She had to learn to believe I'd never lead her into danger. I sucked her sweet clit through my teeth and made her grinding hips beg for more.

Moaning, she leaned back on her arms, neck fully extended where her breasts bulged upward beneath her thin white sleeveless shirt, her beaded nipples dimpling the fabric. But she couldn't stop rubbing her clit against my teeth. She gasped for air and groaned, rotating her hips.

She wanted more.

And I could give her more.

The blood raced back to my loin.

Now, the pleasure is mine. What would it be like to hold her against a wall? To slam into her from behind? As strong as she seemed, I dared not risk crushing her small body in a mating frenzy. But, take her nonetheless. She could handle riding a war beast though. I raised up, sliding a hand behind the softest silkiest skin of her arched back, pushing her down to lie upon the most expensive furs of Luvk.

She'd have more furs after every kill I made during the hunt. There would be enough furs to drape her exquisite curves in softness unequalled by anything but the hot vise awaiting my aching flesh.

She looked up at me through the drunken slits of a woman dazed with passion I'd seen so many times when forced to stand guard over my mother while she took a new mate to her sleeping skins. But Aisling couldn't hold her head up.

Her passion I've seen could never be denied no matter how angrily she behaved toward me. Resentment, I understood. But sharing our love was permanent, not like temporary bouts of anger. Now to drive away that anger. I shoved my leathers down and pulled my tender swollen shaft into cool air. To empty what remained of my scalding seed into her.

She groaned, watching me, tilting her sex up to meet mine.

Begging for the gentle pat of my balls against her bottom as I thrust into her slick channel. As if I couldn't find that sacred altar myself. Now to pay homage to the blessed stars that would certainly grace the night sky. I slid my engorged manhood's tip against her wet sex's mouth.

She hissed.

That was a sound I never wanted another warrior to hear.

"Borun!"

I shoved my stiff rod into her taut channel. Deeper. Down into the searing abyss that lures me back to kneel at her altar. Back to suffocate myself inside her smothering fiery soul. To be enslaved by her impassioned spirit. It didn't matter that she wielded more power than I ever could. She was high-caste, and I was her guardian. Guardian of her soul, her heart, and her life. And failing her with one fraction of hesitation would destroy anything we had. And anything the people stood to gain. I plunged into her being, giving her everything a Royal Guard learned he was supposed to give his mate, proving she had nothing to fear in our union, hoping she believed me because my scorching seed pumped out from my clenched balls to explode inside her like a thousand birthing stars.

We screamed together.

A blue light flashed between our bodies as if magic made the germ take root.

I fought between standing still while flexing so far backward that I could revel in the way my shaft pulsed inside her or leaning down to plant my forehead on her shoulder and drive every last spark of life inside me hard and furiously home—the way she liked sex. Hard. Rough. Bless the stars. I so needed to ride her.

But the distracting light seemed to originate from our bodies, flashing so quickly that I vaguely noticed it while grinding my life seed deeply inside her so that my youngling took root. To give me the one thing that would prove to all Luvks that I deserved my mate. An heir.

The need to drive my seed deeper won out.

I leaned over and pumped along her tight channel until there was nothing but Aisling.

"Did you see it, Borun? The light?" she gasped as she matched my dying thrusts, blow by blow.

"Yes."

The last vestige of essence squeezed from my manhood.

Now, I could rest with her relaxing body. With my mate. I slid my arms around her slim curves and drew in one deep ragged breath where I sprawled out upon her damp skin.

"I don't feel groggy anymore," she whispered. "You healed me." She laughed softly.

She rubbed her palms over my shoulders the way she always did in her own manner of enjoying my body. Who would ever have guessed this beauty would want to touch my hideous orange hide?

Her warm hands slid across my shoulders and down the exhausted muscle of my arms only to glide back up in a delicate massage.

That touch was one Royal Guards would kill for. Had tried to kill for. A taste of her. An electric touch from her finger. I shoved up onto one elbow to gaze down at her while she slid her palms over every inch of my chest, arms, and shoulders. Relishing me.

"It's been a long day," she whispered, hiding her gaze from mine. "Did I humiliate you too much?"

"No. I warned you that someone would have to accept things today. And after witnessing your torture, I could never hold any of your actions against you, little one."

"I'm too old to have a fit like the one I had in front of your nobles."

Now that's not what I saw or heard in her *heartsong*. "You attempted to rationalize with irrational females. That is impossible. Ask any Royal Guard."

She snorted and shoved the hair dangling over one side of my face behind my ear. Her fingers lingered there, tracing out the squared ear's edge with her incredible whisper of a touch. "I felt like an idiot after they kept badgering me in circular arguments to get what they wanted."

Poor thing. She had no idea she showed the Royal Guards she wanted nothing to do with the Queens' games. "The warriors witnessed the real you. Remember, they will listen if we need to rally them."

Her gaze locked on mine. "You're not embarrassed? You think they will respect me?"

More so when she bonds with her Royal Guard. But I wasn't going to tell her that. Although witnessing her demands for equality among the Luvks, I doubt she'd show any favoritism when she finally took pity on her guards and took them to her bed. That is, after my youngling took root in her womb. "Yes, Aisling. The warriors will respect your actions and rally against the sky demons."

Her heart fluttered in the deadliest of fashions.

A dive of heartfelt emotion. Love? Acceptance? Joy? What would I learn if I could read her mind? She didn't know she had caught me in her trap without intending to do so. But that was the Luvk male's burden in life, to protect his heart with what his ears revealed or be lured deeper into the insanity of females.

* * * *

Her mate knew how to relax Aisling to the point of *any resistance was futile*, she mused. Who could have fought the mind-boggling sex and gentle way he carried me from room to room? Those damned arms were everywhere. Holding me. Caring for me. Maybe this whole idea of being equivalent to a queen wasn't a bad thing. I just needed to go with the flow. Until the first knock rang out at the door.

Borun's head shot up where he laid draped across me upon our sleeping skins.

The irritating interruption in my quiet time with my big muscled tiger man was beyond annoying. I didn't want him to climb up and cross the room. But he didn't seem to care. He marched his striped nude ass away to pull the door wide without so much as flinching at the flash

of afternoon's bitter sunlight or in flashing the occupants of the compound with his nudity.

A masked warrior towered in the doorway.

Almost as tall as Borun. There's no way his vision could have penetrated our lodge's darkness to gaze upon my nudity. I hoped. But I pulled a length of soft fur over me and propped upon an elbow.

Not one word fluttered across the room to my ears. Damn my lesser-evolved mind. I'd give anything to tune into their mindspeak discussion.

Borun closed the squealing door and cast the room back into darkness. "Come, little one. Dress yourself. Your guards are arriving." He stepped into light around the fire.

No. I don't want to have anything to do with them.

"I hear your *heartsong*, little one." He knelt beside me where firelight could catch in his eyes. "We must greet them."

Didn't he care I felt betrayed and powerless? "I don't think I can. Not right now." I pulled a fistful of fur farther up my chest.

"Aisling." His hand reached for my arm and rubbed a jolting caress up to my shoulder. "I swear I will not step away from your side. But these warriors have been honored in the greatest way. They have been selected. And you will insult them if you do not greet them."

Chapter Eleven

Standing inside her lodge, Aisling could have cried, but the lump of choking dread in her throat wouldn't let the wave of dread in her soul rise to her eyes. This had to be how people passed out from fear, she concluded. Through suffocation. How does a person argue with tradition on an alien planet with her were-mate who knew everything about survival on his home world?

"This is your place among us, little one. These are your guards. I'm not suggesting you bed them now. I'm only saying show them the same respect you expect to be reciprocated. They are as intelligent as you tried to tell the Queens you are. Besides, none of them dares touch you after I publicly denied Kruk's claim to you."

True. There was no way around my politician role.

"Don the same clothing you wore this morning. Look as if you've done nothing but wait for their arrival. We will go meet them when you are ready. They will not know you and I spent the afternoon mating. Nothing will suggest that."

"Except your nudity." When he answered the door.

"Aisling," he whispered a chastise. "Don't let your thoughts run wild or you'll lose your sanity. You are strong. Show the others the same strength you showed me over the past few days."

"You think I'm strong?" How laughable.

"Stronger than the Queens. None of them would have done anything you did since your arrival. Except make demands." He chuckled.

Alright. What else could the Luvks possibly think of to torture me with today? I had their biggest warrior protecting me. I could survive just about everything else.

Before I knew it, Borun donned his mask, marched me through rankled sunlight to a door three steps left of our lodges' door, and shoved the massive planks inward. A fire danced down the long curving space, a room that ringed the outside of our lodge as far as I could tell. Windows allowed natural lighting into the space enough to note the presence of the rising males to my sun-deprived vision in the shadowy room.

These males were enormous. I gulped.

Borun's hand gently pushed my lower back toward *my* guardsmen.

My harem.

Another choking lump of dread fisted in my throat.

Insulting them would have been as foolish as everything their mothers did in public. I took my first step into the future forced upon me. Into the gaping *darkness*.

The warriors never flinched or turned a head. They just waited as if expecting something.

Borun stepped to my side and escorted me to the dancing flames of the room's fire pit where he motioned I could halt.

But another fire pit burned down where the long room curved. This lodging had to encircle ours in a long concentric space wrapping around my personal quarters like a layer of an onion. My guard then protected me in an external barrier between the Luvk world and my

sanctuary. I counted five warriors. Only one was black and white. The others had a range of orange tones among them. Good. I preferred the warmth.

“Aisling?” Borun prompted me softly.

Oh shit. I couldn’t afford to screw up again. I scanned the glowing eyes trained upon me. “Welcome.” What in the hell am I supposed to say? Thank you for bringing your gratuitous penises to my lodge?

* * * *

“She isn’t from our world. For her to take on more than one mate is as difficult as one of us being refused by our mates and sent home to our broods. Be gentle with her,” Borun said in mindspeak to his new guard brethren.

“No warrior here could find fault in that. She proved today, before the Queens, she does not relish their extravagant ways. I almost collapsed on the great hall’s floor when I was requested to serve this one,” Lehd of the Sunset clan slid his gaze to mine. *“She asked for the low-castes.”* His gaze slid to Mart. *“All but Mart who has his own troubles no high-caste must contend with.”*

“I resent that,” Mart of the Sunrise clan retorted. *“My interest in things deemed insignificant carries back through a long line of Royal Guardsmen. One day you will wake up to realize that our history and our language should be more important than bedding a queen.”*

These warriors had to ignore the past or Aisling might completely turn from them. *“Let’s not argue among ourselves. It’s difficult enough as it is for Aisling to accept our ways without tension among her guards.”*

Lehd nodded, his gaze settling back on Aisling, transfixing with a strange expansion.

I’d seen the look before. Awe. Shock. The realization that a warrior might have a kernel of a future in a female’s bed. But not until she extended the invitation. Requesting these warriors’ service was only the beginning of a long tormented wait for each Royal Guard who is selected for consort duty.

“Excuse me if you’re mindspeaking,” Aisling said and shifted her footing looking between me and the others. “But I’d just like to note I hate these masks. I can barely tell you all apart. Back on my home world, the only people who wore masks as you warriors do are a group of women. It’s a spiritual tradition that translates into everyday life but is viewed by most as imprisonment. I didn’t care for it on earth being the culture I was raised in. Albeit, I realize you probably have taboos associated with these masks. I wouldn’t want you to feel you had to wear them because of something I expected from you. I release you from this cultural constraint if you wish to walk freely within these walls. If you don’t, I will understand.”

“She wants us to bare ourselves?” Proy of the Dancing Rivers clan almost blurted in his mindspeak.

“Only here.” I studied his steady gaze. *“It’s a freedom, an indulgence known only to those Royal Guards serving the Marshal.”* I’d have to do something to ensure they understood the significance. I yanked off my mask. But would they follow suit given it meant they were mated with Aisling?

The warriors stood there, watching me, blinking.

Lehd, the youngest of the guards, grabbed the edge of his mask, tugged it from his face, shot me a determined stare, and tossed the mask on the table beside him.

The clash of metal against wood was loud enough to startle war beasts but everything I expected from the only warrior big enough to hold me down during a fight. That was why I chose him. He would be here for Aisling if I was called away. Especially since her pregnancies

were so risky. She couldn't afford to ride war beasts.

Lehd met Aisling's gaze with his open defiance of Luvk tradition. "I've always thought the masks ludicrous because a man cannot battle when trying to dodge limbs with an accursed mask in the way."

She snorted. "Have you ever tried to crawl into the smallest of caves?" She shot me an all-knowing glance.

I couldn't help but chuckle. Leave it to my mate to miss nothing.

"What is your name?" she asked the enormous orange striped warrior.

"Lehd of the Sunset clan."

"Does this mean your clan resides where the sun sets?"

"*She is not stupid, Borun,*" Lehd said in mindspeak. "Yes," he bowed, showing his black hair to Aisling in the action, then met my gaze. "What is her title if she doesn't want to be called Queen?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Please call me Aisling."

At least she hadn't said *little one*. The thought of sharing the nickname I gave her almost made my gut cringe.

One by one, the other guards pulled off their masks, tucked them under their arms, and bowed, moving rationally from left to right as if they had planned to introduce themselves around the semicircle in which they stood.

"I am Ovh of the Smoking Lands."

"I am Mart of the Sunrise clan."

"I am Proy of the Dancing Rivers."

"I am Var of the Ice Lands."

Aisling shot me a timid look. "I'm horrible with names. But a few rounds of rattling off names should help."

She had to be exhausted as tense as she was in greeting her guard. I pushed out with my mind. "*This is enough for her for one day.*"

The guards nodded and stepped to one side of the room as if expecting her to take the time to inspect ranks like a mate choosing her consort for the night.

"*She doesn't think like a queen,*" I added. "*Do not be insulted that she doesn't follow tradition.*" But they were well aware of my Breeder's Rights. I led Aisling back to our lodge.

"*Maybe it's time for tradition to change,*" Mart said.

So says the nontraditional warrior.

* * * *

Back among the shadows of her lodge, Aisling tried to forget about the expressive eyes of the warriors who had been placed in her care. My care, she wondered at the ridiculous thought. I had to mate just to survive here. And what of Borun's enthusiasm with this whole ridiculous marriage? Why isn't the man jealous? When those guards whipped off their masks, there wasn't one of them who had a lick of homely in his body. All those bulging muscles bound in sexy black leather and stripes. No wonder these queens took every damn male they could as a mate. But I just don't think I'm toting anything more than monogamy in my cultural baggage. By the look of loneliness in those men's eyes, I've got one big ass suitcase to drag around. I stared into the dancing flames of our fire pit.

"What's wrong, little one?"

I couldn't tell him what I thought about the perfect males he'd chosen. He'd surely be

heartbroken the way he doted on me. A little lie just might do us some good. "I'm tired."

"Any normal person would be." He reached for my boot and tugged it off.

But being undressed by a Royal Guard meant sex. I just wanted to rest. Clear my thoughts.

"You'll nap until Morna brings supper." He pulled off my other boot, swung me into those big arms, walked across through the shadows, and placed me on the sleeping skins.

So this was the terrifying Luvk warrior who saved me from the others? "The guards you chose for me—mind you, I should be irate at the moment—I can't think of one thing wrong with any of them. So, why weren't they married off to a queen before?"

He sat down beside me, grabbed a handful of my long ponytail, and mindlessly ran it over and over across the black pads of his fingers. "There aren't enough noble daughters to wed to the noble sons." He studied my white hairs he held in his palm.

That made little sense given the polyandry and multiple husband practice. Some cultural traditions jacked with the odds of a fifty-fifty chance of a child being male or female though. "But the females, your Queens, take on the Royal Guards like they could manage thirty or forty."

His golden gaze rolled up to meet mine and humor glinted in his foggy eyes. "You want more?" The incredulous ring in his voice almost made me nauseous.

"No!" Had he lost his mind? "Thank you, but I only have those I have because *you* requested them for me."

Humor flickered across his face so quickly that certainly he reveled in the fact I hadn't wanted anyone but him. He better figure out how to be thinking that way. Because I don't want more than one mate. Job description or not. My blood mate is enough for me.

"They are low-caste males, Aisling. No queen would have them unless she decided she required another breeder for large sons to strengthen her Royal Guard," he added as if he could read my mind. "But they are the best of the best. No one but I could ever take one of them down on the battlefield."

Those fine specimens who managed to behave with dignity instead of the beasts I saw on the way here? No woman would have them? "How are they low-caste?"

"They are like me."

And that would be in size. They were all enormous. None stood as tall as Borun though. Or was it they all were just male? "You better enlighten me. I'm lost."

"We aren't Pure Hearts. Our skin is not as pure as yours."

God, I flew who knows how far across the universe, stepped through a magic portal, and walked right back to the same damned crap I couldn't stomach on earth. "I'm white and you're not?"

Borun studied me with the patient gaze of an observant monk.

"You're kidding me. Because all I see when I look at you is perfection."

His eyes flickered again, with something.

Maybe I wandered off into dangerous woods. Time to change the subject. "Now tell me about the number of daughters to sons each queen births. I want to think about the ratio."

He returned to his fingering of my hair in his palm, watching his thumb rub the white strands against his black skin. "My mother took twenty-three consorts, had twenty-seven sons, three of which are high-caste, and two daughters. Seven sons have been killed in battle. Only one daughter is high-caste."

And she's to be wed to the Slaken. Damn, that blows the fifty-fifty odds of a child being male or female back on earth. A downright universal truth given there are only two sexes in the

mix in the alien cultures I've studied. Throw in skin color and that shouldn't shake things up too much. Lord, twenty-nine children is a lot of pregnancies to suffer for a female. How many pregnancies made it full term? How many children survived their first year?

And these people didn't give the appearance of a high-tech lifestyle. I doubt they have intensive care units for babies. The Luvks didn't flaunt their technology if they had it. It wasn't like I've seen much in the way of electricity here. The only artificial lighting hung—the glass balls—in the great hall. Without proper medical care the first months of life, a child might not make it to year two. So how does a woman have twenty-nine children, most of which are low caste? Oh, how this subject had to be awfully painful for Borun. “Do you want to talk about something else?”

He shrugged in a nonchalant manner by arching his black eyebrows. “Ask what you will. I am here for you.”

Oh well. “Your mother's had twenty-nine children?”

His golden gaze studied me for a moment. “Yes.”

Maybe he feared telling me the number. Maybe he thought I would panic. Surely having that many of his children was out of the question with my potential twenty years of productivity left. Unless the Luvks are genetically wired for multiple births. “How?”

His face turned curiously a few inches where he seemed to anchor one eye on me. “That is what sleeping skins are for, little one.”

“I'm thirty years old.” I couldn't help but chuckle. “I know how females get pregnant. But does your mother have more than one child at a time?”

He wagged his head. “It is common for queens to have forty to fifty children. Only rarely more than one at a time.”

How in the hell? “Borun, you can't possibly expect that many from me. I only have about twenty reproductive years left.”

His brow pinched. “You are so young.”

“I've lost seventeen years of re-productivity in postponing having children to educate myself. And even if I had started at thirteen, I'm hard-pressed to say after studying culture that any human female has ever given birth to that many children.” Ain't cultural constructs an amazing factor in controlling the human creature?

“Our species are very different,” he said.

He didn't exhibit any signs of concern. So plodding forward had to be okay. What could affect reproductivity aside from litter size? Gestation period. “How long do your females carry their young before they're born?”

“Almost a year.”

Nine solar months or ten lunar months was almost a year on earth. He'd probably have a difficult time comparing year length given I have no idea how they measure time on Luvk. Something else had to be the key to such large numbers of progeny. But what?

“What are you thinking, Aisling?”

I met his steadfast gaze. “Just how do your females have so many offspring?”

“It's simple. Females can bear younglings for sixty years.”

The numbers tried to sink into my thoughts but just swirled around in the space between our locked gazes. Sixty years? Just how old is Borun? And he had to live that long single? Alone. Celibate because of his coloration? Luvks *tortured* their males.

His hand reached up to gently cup my cheek. “You're unusually quiet.”

What would he think when he realized I would look extremely old in about ten years?

Especially given I lack all those miracle creams... "I'm just thinking."

"About what?" His thumb tipped my chin up high so I could do little but look into his serious gaze.

About how I'm old. About how I'll be even older in a few years. About how you're perfect. Just how old are you? And how long will it be before you grow tired of me? At least we have the blood bond. I opened my mouth.

Nothing came out.

"Little one, I cannot hear your words. But I hear your drumming *heartsong*. Tell me what dances to that song of dread behind your eyes."

"I'm old. And I'll just keep getting older. So much faster than you."

His black eyebrows arched. "You think I will grow tired of you?"

Why are we having this discussion? He couldn't be any older than I was. And he was determined to be with me around the clock by his behavior alone.

"You don't seem like the type of female to hold back replies." He blinked, almost admonishingly. "But females appear to be the same on both of our worlds. Given I could be killed any time in battle, each of us risks our last breath in one way or another. We are not shallow males on Luvk. We respect our mates, treasuring the one gift we can call our own, a youngling. I can't imagine a female as young as you aging so quickly. But if this is the way of your species, know I have mated for life."

That was a bit encouraging. "How old are you?"

"I have lived forty-four years."

Geesh. Longer than I have. He had to be loyal. Or low-caste to be held under his mother's paw. And after the way he thought only of mating, that's one impressive paw. I don't want to be an evil queen who chained my sons to celibate service. I curled my fingers around his palm and laid back. "Nap with me?"

He crawled along the length of my body and stretched out, never relinquishing my gaze.

There was no doubting he felt something for me. The fact we wore our clothes and just rested at the moment stood for something besides *Aisling is merely a sex toy*.

A knock rattled at the door.

Borun shot me a smile. "Now you will meet my Aunt Morna. She raised me, Aisling, until I was old enough to ride a war beast and join my half brothers in the Royal Guard. And she is the only female aside from my mother and mate who has looked upon my face."

"Alright." I sat up and prepared to meet my first Luvk female who wasn't a queen. I think. She was a queen's sister. "Does she wield as much power as your mother?"

Borun almost buckled at the waist and placed a finger against my lips. "She is low-caste," he whispered. "Say nothing of the sort. Please." He hopped to his feet and trotted to the door.

Effortlessly in that black leather. God I loved to look at his body too much.

The light ushered in a woman who stood about my height. She had long loose black hair hanging down to her hips. Her clothing was a long straight black leather skirt and a white blouse with long flowing sleeves, the hem tucked into the skirt, the shirt fashioned from something that had to be similar to cotton by the lightness of the material.

Her glowing amber gaze locked upon mine.

That was all I could make out of her features aside from her black silhouette the sunlight presented to me.

Borun took her elbow and led her quick strides toward me.

Crap. I sprawled upon the bed like a brood mare. I shoved up to look her in the eye. After all, she knew more about this world than I could ever hope to understand. And she'd raised Borun. She had to hold quite a bit of rank being the Queen's sister. The last thing I wanted was to look like a womb and vagina.

The door snapped shut, blocking the blinding light.

Firelight began to paint Morna's features as she stepped into the soft amber dome cast by the hearth. She had thin black stripes like delicate tattoos filled in with orange on her face. Combined with those golden eyes, she looked downright sinister.

Taking caution with her would save my ass. But she was my gateway into the village if what Borun said was true about her. If I could ask her for anything. And I'd have to begin soon.

Morna halted a step away, looked up into Borun's gaze, and patted his cheek. "You will have beautiful younglings, Borun." Her gaze slid back to capture mine. "I am Morna, the most fortunate female in all of Luvk for the ancients have sent me a vision in my dreams. I saw you coming. To my Borun. And I knew you would bring us peace."

Oh shit.

A chill gripped my body.

"When I held him as a youngling, he seemed so determined to make the others treat each other well." Morna pointed toward the door. "And then I heard you defy my sister and the other Queens before their guards upon your arrival when you told them you wouldn't follow their rules."

Another chill wormed across my skin beneath every stitch of my clothing.

Morna patted Borun's upper arm.

Apparently, aunties can touch warriors all they want.

"And Lord Borun chose you the finest of the guards from the seven realms. You have come to save us." She clutched her hands together. "Tell me how I can help you unite the clans."

How? Words escaped me at the woman's confession.

My knees wobbled.

Borun caught my elbow. "Morna, please. You've tied her tongue."

"Oh forgive me. Where are my wits today? But I couldn't help but blurt my mind after she rode that war beast over the palisade with you, my dearest Lord. And before all the people. They speak of nothing else. Nothing but you taking a mate at long last. And nothing but her beauty and determination to stand steadfast against tradition."

Borun just smiled sweetly at her.

Auntie Morna was obviously dear to him. Probably because she'd been the one constant throughout his childhood. His social mother. And she still saw him as her prized child regardless of the fact he towered over the largest Royal Guards of the seven realms.

"Come now, Morna. Sit by the fire and introduce yourself." He led her to the hearth where she stood while he collected her some flat square pillows.

Okay. Let's try this again. I walked to her side and extended a palm for shaking. "It's nice to meet you."

She stared at my hand a moment then took it. "Is this a tradition from your home world?"

I took her palm, gripped it for a shake with mine, and squeezed to follow through with the greeting. "Yes. We introduce ourselves this way. Males and females."

"Oh," she gasped and reciprocated with a hardy shake. "Tell me more about this place of peace."

Now how to break it to her that there rarely was peace on Earth?

Borun tossed a pillow on the ground for each of us and descended onto one himself where he proceeded to study our conversation.

Fine. I'll indulge his aunt. I descended.

Morna followed.

The woman was obviously absorbed in politics. And Earth had plenty of that to keep her entertained. "My planet is called Earth."

Morna nodded with enthusiasm. "This I have learned from the Royal Guards. They speak of it often because of your language which is now the language of the Royal Guards."

"Well, do they know Earth history?"

"No. But you can teach us so we will learn to live as people on your home world."

That's so not what I wanted to hear. "But your culture has value. It exists on its own by its own rules. And it's your heritage. You should embrace this heritage. It is your legacy."

Morna's brow furrowed. "But we do not live in peace. You saw the fools from other realms try to steal you away from Borun in his very own Starry Sky realm as if he couldn't protect you on the soil of his birth."

"But it's not my way to change people. I can offer suggestions of how you can live in peace. But I don't want to change you. Don't you enjoy what it is to be Luvk?"

* * * *

The conversation had gone in an unexpected direction for Borun where he sat watching his mate and aunt. But Aisling's replies and heartfelt expressions meant she spoke honestly and with integrity, he mused. How in the stars did she fall into my lap when nothing but trouble came through that portal?

"Tell me of ways to live in peace then," Morna insisted.

I should have realized Morna would drill Aisling for information. The clans had spoken of new ways to reduce the tension between them for centuries. But with all the unmated nobles squabbling for mates, it was impossible to keep dissention from ruining any progress to unite the realms.

"There are many ways to bring regions together. Many failed through time though. The process by which one fix works the best is one that requires constant maintenance. You must have supervisors and people willing to accept change. And that's the ultimate crux of the problem on my home world. Humans fear change. So, we rarely live in peace."

Maybe Morna was right. Something from Earth might give them a new way to keep the peace among the realms. Only then would we unite to stop the sky demon raids. "Aisling?"

She turned her sweet face to me.

What then is the root of all evil on Earth? "You say there are no queens on Earth?"

"Just one who rules a country that I can think of. A realm, I mean. It's near my realm but separated from the United States by an enormous ocean. But there could be more queens. I wasn't very interested in nobility back in school. I had more fun studying ruins and bones."

"Only one queen?" Morna gasped. "That's why there is no peace on Earth. She rules all the realms the way my sister would! See, Borun, your mate knows many things."

Aisling's gaze squeezed halfway shut as if she suddenly learned I doubted her.

"I never said you knew nothing, little one. I met you three days ago. I haven't been away from you long enough to speak with anyone about you. So, please bear with me as I attempt to speak around a rambling old woman."

Morna started to cackle.

"Kings ruled in my world more than queens ever had the chance," Aisling announced. "It's like a natural order of things even though we females hate to admit that. But males didn't have to stay home and nurse babies. Throw in they had to fight for what they wanted plus their larger builds and you can see kings tended to be in control more than queens."

"Like in ancient times," Morna blurted. "Listen to her, Borun."

As if I don't know the histories. "But those days were so long ago. And the Queens will not be happy to hear us speak of this."

"Kings ruled when the sky demons found our world," Morna countered.

She forgot the most important fact. "And the Kings lost most of what we had to those sky demons. It's the Queens who kept our society together."

"Oh?" Aisling glanced between Morna and I, finally studying me with those blue eyes. "Things were very different when the Slakens discovered your world? Since that's why I'm here, I'm ready to hear the stories."

She would. I brought Morna into meet my mate. And now my mate is corrupted with tales of old. "They can wait until tomorrow. Today you will rest." But soon we would discuss these options so someone was ready to implement a new method of uniting the realms when the time presented itself.

* * * *

Aisling stood next to the five chests of gifts sent by the Queens. And wondered what to do about refusing them. If Borun thought I was going to just dig through the chests of loot, he was insane. "I don't want dowries for my guardsmen to come and bust their asses guarding me. It's bad enough I have to keep a harem. But the Queens don't have to pay me to keep them! They'll work off their keep just doing their jobs."

Borun nodded thoughtfully. "But would you risk insulting our traditions? Save the guards the disgrace and humbly tuck their gifts away. These warriors are legends among the seven realms. Treat them with the respect they are due."

I didn't want to look like a queen. All these gemstone studded belts and black leather reeked Queen. But I can't insult them. "Are you certain these guards weren't among the crazy ones out to capture me?"

"Yes, Aisling. I know every warrior by his stripes and mask. Even their mounts are easy to recognize. You can trust your guards."

Well, when in Rome. But Classical archaeology just wasn't that interesting. I flipped a trunk's lid open and stared at the rim of a golden bowl slightly exposed among the leather wrapping the glinting yellow metal. "So they gift me all these precious things when they should be using their wealth to fund their defenses."

"You're thinking again, little one." He slid a hand around my waist and pulled me under his python arm.

The room shrank, becoming very cozy.

Way too warm and fuzzy. No, he wouldn't change my train of thought with an intoxicating embrace. I stared into his golden eyes. "These gifts are wasted on me. The money should be used to strengthen relations between your clans."

His palm slid down my side to my squeeze my ass. "The wealth is doing that. Wedding gifts strengthen clan ties. Accept them."

How could a girl argue when her big sexy hunk of man meat was gripping her ass? "But it feels so frivolous. So wasteful. I am here to help. Not to hinder."

He groaned and took my elbow, leading me back to the bathing pool.

Not sex again. “Borun, this isn’t something you can just make disappear with mating!”

“Although I told you Royal Guards only think about sex, I’m not at the moment.” He ushered me through the darker room, around the glowing pool, into the back wall which wasn’t a wall at all because he opened a door.

Proy stood on the other side, apparently guarding the door opposite a bed covered in someone’s sleeping skins.

Like I want to come face to face with one of my harem near his bed.

Chapter Twelve

Proy nodded at them in a shaft of sunlight cutting through the dark living area between Aisling's tall bodyguard mate and where Proy stood. The shadowy space fluttered with movement as the other Royal Guards crawled out of the woodwork.

Oy! There was just nothing worse than having a harem forced on you, she thought.

"Gather around the table," Borun commanded.

And his men followed orders while his python arm nudged me toward the descending warriors. The door swung wide at the end of the space, producing the black and white Mart in his mask. He saw me and whipped off the horrid armor--mask.

Apparently, he'd been guarding the door. Borun must have commanded him inside with mindspeak.

"Aisling has issue with wedding gifts. She says they are wasted on her and should be used to unite the clans."

Geesh, give him an inch and he conquers the world. "I don't want to insult anyone." She scanned the raised black eyebrows around the room.

Something told me that these men weren't going to agree with my perspective. Borun really was onto something in selecting the most intimidating males for consort service.

"They are uniting the clans, Aisling," Mart stated.

So the scholar agreed with Borun or felt comfortable enough stating his viewpoint. And I didn't want to debate the point with six over-sized males. Okay, maybe Mart was a good half a foot shorter. But I'm certain his brains made up for his lack of height.

"I understand that point as well as Borun has informed me I'm insulting you all by refusing the gifts. But my intention is to direct funds where they will be utilized the best. And I'm not a queen. I don't need to stroll the village walks in grandeur. I just need food and a dry place to sleep." Okay, make that *safe* dry place to sleep.

Lehd leaned back against the wall near the window at the table. "Aisling, don't you think it wise to appear to follow tradition until you have learned what you need to know to unite the seven realms?"

Is everyone going to nag me about uniting the clans? I rolled my gaze to Borun's. "Is Morna rallying the troops?"

His lips split into a sparkling grin. "I'd say yes, but you're the one who stood up before the Queens and said you'd come to aid us in ending the sky demon raids. How can you do that if you break with Luvk tradition? A few gifts are harmless. Use them to feign compliance." He drew my side against his. "Tell the warriors about the queen in your world and about how she doesn't control all the realms."

Not again. "Does anyone on this planet think of anything else?"

"We don't know, Aisling," Lehd said. "We haven't heard yet."

Oh, was he being a smart ass? His gaze followed me like a lovesick puppy though. Nothing was coming off cocky from him. I suppose just admitting how things differ politically on Earth will get me out of this situation. I sank onto the empty wooden chair in front of me at the wooden table.

All eyes in the room followed my descent.

But those eyes didn't widen beyond belief when I said mostly kings ran the countries of my home world in history. These Luvk warriors leaned into the declaration wholeheartedly.

Borun stepped up to press an encouraging knee into my shoulder blade and pat my shoulder. "Now, little one, tell us about your realm's king or queen."

The fact of my reality seemed to be one of political badgering. I was the badgered. The only way I could save myself was to come clean with the goods. I studied each warrior with a second of respect and looked up at Borun. "There are no kings, queens, or noble sons in my realm."

Borun's smile twisted into his left cheek. "And how do they manage that, little one?"

"A long time ago, peasants were starving and their nobles couldn't feed them. So, the poor rebelled. This was after a religious movement that sent people into the unknown, across an ocean, to find a new place to live and follow their beliefs. Both events brought together ideas that the poor lower class people no longer wished to be controlled by their royalty. So, they found a new land, the land of my realm, where they created a place without kings and queens. They use a group of elected officials to decide what the group should do about problems." Hopefully that was basic enough to get the point across without stirring up too many questions.

Mart stirred to life. "You say these officials find ways to solve problems? How do they go about finding resolutions?"

Oy! It's going to be a long afternoon. "It's complicated because the way they are voted into power creates animosity among regions in my realm. And there's a person selected to represent the realm. Although, the person doesn't have the authority of a king or queen, the representative often appears to hold the same rank. It's hard to explain given you haven't thought of this before. But many men and women serve in two councils to see the people are represented. In doing so, they just don't seem to get much accomplished—in my mind. But I'm an anthropologist and rarely does anyone understand what I see. They feel anthropological perspectives oppose their own and decide they're threatening. So, I study history."

"What is an anthropologist?" Lehd asked.

Well, he managed to listen even though he was drowning in a pool of puppy love. "The term for those on my home world who study people in the sense of culture."

The warriors shot confused gazes between themselves but let the foggy issue die. Apparently, the clinical terms of science weren't part of the English they knew.

"Culture is leaders, wise men, children, weapons, homes, hairstyles, clothing, songs, stories, beliefs, rules, masks... Culture is everything that a group of people shares, including the thoughts about things you can touch. It is essentially what it is to be Luvk."

Those glowing eyes watching me blinked in understanding.

I'd struck a chord they could all appreciate. Now to strum a significant tune. "Kings, queens, and councilors mean nothing when they can't help their people."

The warriors nodded.

"You speak wisely, Aisling," Mart said. "I like this idea of so many councilors working together to benefit the people."

But don't look at me to set up your political system. "Then think of a way you can make councilors work for the Luvks."

His blue gaze locked on mine as he nodded. "This is all you will offer us in example?"

"It's not my place to choose for the Luvks. But in the realm of my home world, there are many low-castes treated certain ways because of their hobbies, places of birth, and even skin

color. I don't think a council can change this. It's obviously part of something bigger. Something universal among groups of sentient beings. Your people must change that themselves. If they can."

Borun squeezed my shoulder again. "Come, little one. You need to think of other things for a while. It is time for you to meet Princess Frenyl."

Lehd and Proy pulled on their masks and paced the walk behind us to the great hall. By the time I stepped beneath the artificial lighting with Borun at my side, I felt like pointing out Frenyl could have any of my Royal Guards she chose. The look of disgust on her exquisite face showed me she resented my taking the best of the guards off the market. Noting I had nothing to do with that wouldn't gain me any ground here, before the Queens.

"Welcome, Aisling and Borun," Ishan greeted. "My daughter has requested to meet with the Marshal."

Where the princess had been since my arrival, I could only guess. Pushing any issue would get me nowhere. So, I waited to be approached.

Frenyl's long black skirt swept the rock floor as she took her time walking toward me, her faintly striped white arms crossed over the gold studs adorning her black bustier. Her black stripes were so thin and so short on her arms that anyone looking could barely see them. She paced out a path around my guards and I, leaving nothing to the imagination at how much she disliked me. "She looks nothing like me."

The Queens shuffled where they sat and giggled.

Of course I don't look anything like Frenyl. I don't have stripes. But the resemblance was uncanny. We both had long wavy blonde hair with just enough curl to tempt a man to touch it. We both had pale blue eyes. Hers didn't glow under the light spheres. We stood the same height and were the exact same builds. No wonder the Royal Guards were in such a feverish frenzy to possess me. I shot Borun a stare where he stood, masked, with his arms snaked across his chest at my shoulder.

He faintly rolled his eyes.

"Don't be rude, Frenyl. If I hadn't seen you both until this moment, I'd swear you both burst forth hand-n-hand from the same womb," Ishan said.

Twins. I looked so much like the prized princess that Goro had to have chosen me with purpose. That's a topic we'd soon discuss. He could count on it.

Frenyl stuck her nose up in the air. "If she is so important, send her to marry the Slaken. Borun doesn't need her."

A low growl gurgled from my mate at his sister's childish statement.

Ishan rose, her leather skirts shuffling beneath the weight of all the yellow gemstones embedded upon the skirt's waistline beneath her more than ample bosom. "Walk with me. I wish to venture into the garden. A little fresh air always lightens the darkest days."

Gardens were good. Refreshing. A sign of patience. A symbol of humanoids struggling to wrestle nature into a controlled form. And nature seemed so wild on this planet. Yes, bring on the gardens. But why was today's sunny day dark to the Queen?

My mate and my guards followed me out the door behind the queen and her cookie-cutter progeny. They were the same height and shape. But the mother had more curves. Undoubtedly from carrying twenty-nine children. The thought boggled the mind. My *female* mind. The reality shows on television back home showed women having up to nineteen, and hoping for more. But twenty-nine?

"You will not publicly disgrace me again, Frenyl," Ishan growled once outside and in the

sun.

"I don't want to live in another world," the daughter snarled.

"I've heard enough of your childish wants."

Great. Now there's going to be a cat fight. Literally with the tiger women. I slowed my step a bit to place some buffering inches between myself and those snapping skirts.

Borun took my hand and curled it around his warm iron arm.

Looking might have caught the Queen's attention. And she didn't appear to be in good humor today. I just took the lifeline and kept walking.

The Queen's Royal Guards stood at every turn along the intersecting covered walkways.

None of the warriors compared in any way to my shadows. My guards were taller and more muscled. Just more damned intimidating. And in those black leather pants, truly they were a sight to behold. Why had Borun chosen men who could rival his claim on me to serve as my guards? Not that I'm up for claim jumping. But the truth was surrounding me. Borun must be content with his cultural traditions, worried about Kruk and others like him, or this land of Luvk is just beyond dangerous. Dark and deadly. Either way, I seem to be in good hands. Was that Commander Goro's big plan?

Ishan led us into brutal sunlight with two of her Royal Guards setting out ahead of her.

Sunlight seared my shoulders.

I should have worn my long-sleeve shirt. But I had no idea what to expect of this place yet. It wasn't every day the lights turned on and a person found herself switching from growing up at sea level to strolling on a mountain top.

Ishan continued along a gravel path lined with low plants sporting red flowers.

The pathway forked left and right, curving off into shrubs. The Queen turned right and opened my view of the garden's center. A statue of some creature stood in the center of radiating pathways leading into the two-legged beast's stony form. The statuary rested like the unifying center of a wheel's spokes. But the figure was too far away to note details. I stood, squinting, trying to figure out just what the creature was.

"It's Treichon, our god of fertility," Borun said.

God of fertility? Most fertility gods on Earth were female. I shot him a speculative glance.

All three males stared at me. Their masks hid their faces. But something twinkled in their eyes.

"Just why are you all laughing at me?"

"Queens pay homage to Treichon, little one."

Garbage. "I was not if that's what you're thinking. I am not a queen. I just can't see what that statue's form is from here."

Borun nudged her arm to follow Ishan's shadow. "Then let's walk with my mother down to the statue."

Why would it be so shocking that this place seemed to revolve around reproduction when life did back on Earth? Male verses female. Gender roles. Courting and marriage taboos. Music. Humor. Even the purpose of clothing if you thought about it long enough. Everything was about sex! Just like on Earth.

We caught up with Ishan where she stood at the obviously male statue, Frenyl's scowl focused upon me at her side. The princess definitely didn't want to give me any slack. I hadn't created her predicament though. I merely came along at a time when she needed a scapegoat. I couldn't begrudge her anger when I had a harem of willing males forced upon me. At least my

harem looked the opposite of the stout being carved into gray stone beside the Queen.

Ishan slid a palm lovingly across Treichon's ass.

From what I could see, he had a tail. Vestigial or not. It wasn't working for me in its hairless state of about four inches. But it worked for Ishan as she grasped it like a penis.

I shot a questioning glance over my shoulder at the trio of males hovering in my shadow. My attentive harem. What were they thinking? They were going to explain what unfolded when we returned to the privacy of *my* lodge. Especially since I seemed to be stuck witnessing some familial power struggle between females. I focused back on Ishan's undying attention to the tail.

Maybe she just saw it as phallic. One could never be certain unless clarifying the confusion without a question. And even then, every anthropologist knew people lied to get what they wanted. To avoid being punished, stigmatized, or excommunicated. Any loss was loss.

Power was power.

"This is our god of fertility, Marshal," Ishan announced, shooting a look at her daughter. "He's graced me with one high-caste daughter to wed in a superior union for the greater benefit of Luvks."

Frenyl rolled her eyes.

Why was this Queen wasting my time? Besides, I owed the princess one given she said Borun should just sacrifice me to the greater good. "Do Slakens have tails? Or am I lost?"

Somebody cleared his throat over my shoulder.

Ishan turned an arched brow my direction. "No tails. Haven't you met one given you came through their portal?"

"No. My commander brought me here first. He intended on allowing Johnson and I to experience life here before we decided who would stay on Luvk. But I'm starting to think it was planned I stay all along. Especially seeing how similar I looked to Frenyl."

"Oh?" Ishan stopped fondling the rock and turned to face me.

Her actions only supported my growing suspicions that Goro had always intended I stay. "You don't really lose your daughter. She'll always be your daughter. And you gain a female who not only ties you to other clans through acquiring a Royal Guard, but your son becomes the Luvk Marshal. Excellent strategizing, Ishan."

Ishan chuckled a bit. "Thank you for your praise. I'm more thrilled to realize how much we think alike."

"Well, I'm not fondling the tail if that's what you're hoping for."

Borun cleared his throat again.

Ishan chuckled in a giddy fashion. "But it's for luck. You could use some with Kruk breathing down your back to ruck."

Chapter Thirteen

Aisling couldn't think of anything she liked or respected about Queen Ishan anymore as she faced her in the garden. But there was no way out of responding to the Queen, she thought. "I don't believe in luck. I believe in science. If something happens, there's a logical reason for it. Rubbing tails only works if some queen holds death over your head to get you to comply. I don't think Borun's going to allow you to do that today."

Ishan's wicked smile faded into a smack of lips. "Well then. This trip for a peaceful stroll in the garden has gone awry. Come, Frenyl, I hear Goro is going to escort you to the Slaken capitol in three days." Ishan turned away from me as if to inform me I wouldn't be privy to the details.

Frenyl groaned.

Well, no more of these petty power games. I turned and slammed into Borun's chest.

He stared at me.

"She's wasting our time." Did I even have to note that? Both the other warriors appeared to agree with him and their patient blinks. "Besides, someone has to stand up to her. I'm the Marshal. I should be the one. I'm not representing a particular clan. I'm just an outsider."

"We'll discuss this back in our lodge."

* * * *

Borun actually enjoyed listening to his mate tear into his mother. But the fact she was going to bluntly call Mother on everything was a bit too brazen. Mother required special handling. And Aisling was just a little too aggressive. But she'd managed to send Mother off to nag Frenyl. Alone. So, Aisling deserved respect for that feat given it took years to earn Mother's respect in debates. He led the group back to their lodge, left the guards at their doorway guarded by Mart, and proceeded to enter his shadowy abode.

But I've got to convince Aisling to take care in these discussions. "Although I don't care for my mother's manipulation, you will carry my youngling soon. We can't afford to infuriate the Queens. If I'm called away, we will need those alliances for her protection."

"I know. I know. Sometimes I'm just so shocked at what I'm witnessing that I can't believe it's anything other than a game and my mouth takes over." She scanned the room's shadows. "I'm hungry."

My flesh tingled.

I rubbed my arms. "Morna will bring food along in a while."

The tingling didn't go away. It crept down my limbs until I feared I was infected with something.

"What's wrong?" Aisling asked.

"I feel a strange sensation. An itch or something."

She sidled over two steps to touch a fingertip to my harness and traced out the straps on my halter.

My heart kicked into a gallop at the touch, sending all my blood racing to my groin.

"It's probably blood lust." She shot me a wink. "It's been some time since we made love."

Not that long. “Is this what the life of a Marshal is like?” Sex. Desire. Just like a Royal Guard’s life.

“Yes.” She grinned a wicked grin. “But I’m not feeling anything. Yet. We can take care of your itch if you like.” She batted her eyes.

“Food and your commander are on their way. It can wait.” For a short while. And then I’ll have my way with her in the pool.

“I’ve seen where Marshals stand around sweating or shaking.” She placed a palm on my arm and walked around me, sliding her touch along to my side. “When a little sex makes a world of difference.”

Oh the madness of the touch. If she doesn’t stop, I’ll have to throw her on the sleeping skins. I lifted my arm.

She shot me a glance and dipped to step beneath it, out of my view, and slide her warm palm around my lower back. “Do you know how you look to me, Borun?”

Bless the stars she didn’t whisper. I wouldn’t have been able to stand here. What would she say? “No.”

Her other palm landed on my back. Warm. Caressing.

My lurching manhood strained against my leathers.

She slid her palms around my sides to my waist, leaned into me with an embrace, and sighed. “Glorious.”

My heart sank faster than a diving war beast.

It was torture peeling her hands off of me. But I held them, turning to her lovesick gaze peering up at me from my nipples.

She raised onto her tiptoes and trailed her tongue around one of those taut beads on my chest.

My knees almost buckled.

Now that was truly *glorious*.

She slid her palms up my back and latched onto the nub with her teeth and sucked.

Lightning shot from those teeth to my groin.

Pure ecstasy. I wanted to grab her, thrust into her, make the others hear how her yell my name. Over and over. But moving meant the stabbing molten ecstasy ended.

Her lips kissed across my chest, the leather and metal of my harness, toward my other nipple.

My heart thrashed for her to bite it. Yank it into oblivion, taking me along.

Her gaze rolled up to mine right before she reached it. “I don’t want to dine with the others. All I need is you.” Her hands tickled to my sides where they feathered against my ribs as she latched onto that sensitive nub again.

Stars’ jest! What my mouth must do to her. I’d punish her for wanting to hide in our lodge, accordingly. I grabbed her tiny waist, lifted her sweet lips from my breast, and carried her to the sleeping skins.

“Oh, Borun.” She pressed her soft hungry mouth to my ear. “See what you do to me.”

I descended, lowering her to straddle my aching groin, and peeled her shirt off those sweet breasts. Her nipples were so tight I’d have to work them a while to breathe the breath my soul needed for sustenance.

She raised up onto her knees, grabbing my hands, pressing them to curl around her breasts’ soft mounds.

I stared at the most prized wonders in the seven realms, a mate’s breasts, wondering how

much I tortured her in pausing as she waited for me to follow instructions.

Her lips parted. Her little tongue flicked out to lick her lower lip.

Like her tongue on my body. I'd make her scream my name so loud the entire village heard. I turned her tiny stone of a nipple to my mouth and nibbled her flesh.

She groaned, throwing her head back, sliding her palms up my arms to my hair where she grabbed a fistful and squirmed in my lap.

She had to be wet. So accursed wet. The way all the Queen's sires sat together and gloated over sleeping skin tales when younglings snuck into visit and overhear their father's conversations. I could make her wetter though. I pulled and plucked at her nipple until it was so soft that I could indulge with teasing the other.

She clung to me with one arm wrapped around my shoulder.

Needing me. I'd make her always need me. Like I needed to feel her pulse in her neck. Her lifeline that kept her writhing in my arms. I quickly kissed a path across her soft curves to her arching neck, right to that blessed rapid beat and latched onto her soul.

She groaned and tried to snuggle her head against mine. "Oh, Borun, what you do to me." Her hands slid over my shoulders and massaged some kind of secret message into my back.

I wanted her pants off. I wanted her legs spread wide. I wanted her crying out my name. I slid my hands down to unbutton her pants. She wriggled out of them after I pulled off her boots.

Boots were definitely annoying. I slid my hands down her silken body, down to her ankles.

She sighed and leaned back, holding my shoulders.

Nothing looked like her. The beauty. The desire.

Her hungry gaze locked on mine as she came to my face like an attacking predator and captured my mouth with hers, sucking my tongue and breath so deeply inside her moist cavern.

I raised on my knees, leaning her backward with her groin against my belly, and gently laid that pleading body upon my sleeping skins.

"Borun," she whispered against my lips as I backed away to cast off my leathers. "Please hurry."

Tears choked me at her words. Nothing ever clenched my soul before. Nothing like Aisling. I somehow managed to undress and kneel before her. Was I deserving? Was I strong enough for her? Would the holiest stars show me they approved of our match by gifting me a youngling?

"Borun." She reached out to me.

Like an omen. I sank against her trembling body and gently thrust my aching manhood inside her hot flesh. She was as wet as the falls at the cliffs. So wet I just glided all the way to the stars.

She grabbed two fistfuls of the harness at my back and stared me in the eye. "Hard and fast, Borun." She squeezed that hot channel of hers tightly.

My *heartsong*, my very pulse, throbbed in my aching shaft.

Oh for the want of a mate. I fell on my elbows and rammed into her. Thrusting. Pushing. Lunging to bring the gods power in shooting stars down to her. Inside her. To ignite a life that would save her from the Thunder clan. To drain me of every worry for just a while. For her.

She matched every one of my moves with little pleasure sounds even though she clung to me with her eyes shut. It was like she couldn't breathe in that cave again, the way she gasped for

air.

“Deeper, Borun.”

Nothing sounded more erotic than her begging. I strained with each plunge, rocking my hips at the end of each push. Just the way I’d seen it done for all those years.

She yanked harder on my halter, throwing her head to one side, whining. “Faster, Borun.”

Faster, harder, deeper... The world began to spin until I heard nothing but my mate’s cries. My seed exploded inside her. Into the dark safe place of females. Into her spirit’s arms. And if I proved worthy, she’d carry my youngling.

The blue light flashed.

Bless the stars. Bless Aisling.

A knock rattled at the door.

A presence pushed into his mind. “*I’ve brought food, Borun. May I enter?*” Morna asked.

“*Take it to the guards’ lodge. We’ll eat there.*” I dropped my eyes to Aisling’s flitting eyelids and planted a kiss on her cheek. “The food is here, little one. Let’s eat with the guards. I want them to feel important.”

“Alright.”

We quickly dressed and headed to the guards’ lodge.

“Maybe Mart can begin with my first Luvk history lesson.”

Aisling didn’t act upset at dining with the other guards. She seemed to grow to accept the warriors’ presence.

She headed toward the bath, swinging those strange loose pants from her Earth. She shot me a glance over her shoulder. “What’s taking you so long? I’m so hungry I could eat a war beast.”

Although, I could devour her. Her backside was a sight in those black leather pants from back when we rode together. But there was something erotic about that belt wrapped around her narrow waist now and the way her ass swelled in those pants. Something that offered a far better feast than Morna’s offerings. I couldn’t hold back an instinctive growl.

“Borun?” She stopped, standing sideways, her breasts bulging at an excellent angle. “Ready again? We’ll take care of your itch *after* we eat.”

The sooner the better. I stretched my stride, caught up to her through the bath’s doorway, scooped her slender form into my arms, kissed her soft hungry mouth, slid her curves down the front of my body so she’d know I meant to scratch my itch with my extremely big stick, and growled deeply in my chest.

“Stop that,” she whispered. “If they all have your hearing, they know what you’re up to.”

“They do. And they’ll hear you gasp when you’re in our bed chamber.”

“What?” Her eyes widened. “They can hear me that far away?”

“They’re supposed to. That’s their job. If you gasp in fear, they come running.”

“And if I gasp in orgasm?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle and reached for the doorway to the guards’ chamber. “Then they know to leave us alone.”

“I don’t think I like them knowing what we’re doing,” she whispered.

I did. They needed to know who bedded Aisling. “Let’s go.” I pushed the door open.

Lehd wasn’t in his sleeping skins. Which probably spared Aisling the embarrassment of wondering if he’d heard our conversation. Lehd waited with the others, seated around their large

table wearing their masks because of Morna's presence. Two large candles with multiple burning wicks flickered where they sat equidistantly on the table. The candles were for Aisling's benefit given she couldn't see well in Luvk lighting without night vision.

Morna hustled to place dishes along the table's center. She turned to us. "Come eat, Aisling. I have a special treat for you. I'm certain you'll find it as wonderful as the foods you miss back on Earth."

And my Auntie has found another to care for. "I should feel abandoned, Morna. You haven't said a thing to me."

Morna patted my cheek. "I never forget my favorite Lord." She waved me to one of two empty chairs. "Sit, Borun. The cooks prepared your favorite fowl. Stuffed with the finest trimmings, just the way you prefer it."

Undoubtedly a gentle way to celebrate my mating. If so, there would be roasted tubers and wine. I sank into the chair beside the one Aisling confiscated. "I believe the word for this animal is bird in English. Do you eat bird?"

"Quite a few different types."

The others watched my mate with great interest and held back on serving themselves. Probably to wait for her to study the food.

"*Shall I serve her dinner?*" Morna asked in mindspeak.

"*No. She doesn't take well to being treated like a queen, Morna.*" Hopefully, my aunt would just leave well enough alone.

"Would you like me to tell you what every dish is, Aisling?" Morna asked my mate.

"Oh, yes. Please." Aisling perked up attentively.

"*Your aunt is sly, Borun,*" Mart leaned onto his elbows.

"*She's raised many younglings.*" The point was truth. "*Pay attention. You'll learn a few tricks.*"

Saying everything one could imagine about each ingredient worked into each recipe, Morna lifted the large tray of baked *Wark*—a large bird that had enough fat in its flesh to keep it tender over the fire—cut into pieces atop a bed of broken bread loaded with berries, nuts, and herbs and presented the delicacy to Aisling.

My mouth watered.

I grabbed a knife and speared a piece for my plate.

"I raised you with better manners, Borun." Morna scowled.

A lord can snatch a piece for himself. I served a plump golden piece to Aisling.

Morna produced a spoon, dished Aisling and I each a serving of stuffing, and loaded down Proy's plate where he sat next to Aisling before she sent the tray of *Wark* on around the table.

* * * *

One by one, each vegetable, fruit, meat, and bread filled Aisling's plate until she had to beg for a reprieve. Auntie Morna was too generous, Aisling realized. "I can't possibly eat all of this. And I was raised to clean my plate." I shot a timid smile at Borun's doting aunt. "These warriors are huge. I am quite small in comparison."

"But what if you carry a youngling?" Morna's serious mask didn't allow me the room for a reply.

Okay, I stand corrected. I scanned my dining party to find each loading his dish with enough food to feed a professional football player. At least they weren't staring at me as if I had sex to procreate. Or should have sex with them.

Something rammed into my throat.

I gulped back the annoying lump of reality.

Not because of these men's expectations. Here, I dined with my mates. Yet, they weren't animals. They behaved quite civilly, taking turns, and waiting to eat. With knives and spoons. Most likely because of Morna's presence and the masks.

Morna poured a glass of wine and placed it beside my plate. "When you have had your fill, there is dessert. And your guard can explain to you what *Throsoche* is."

As long as it wasn't an aphrodisiac, anyone could tell me about dessert.

Morna excused herself and the masks came off.

I suppose in the long run I'll look back and think about how I got to know these men tonight. Their kindness and breeding. They didn't stare at me. Nor did they make me feel uneasy. They seemed to tuck mindspeak away for my sake and talk of issues in their realms among one another. And Proy didn't say one thing to me other than excuse himself for bumping me with his elbow the one time. None of the males ever touched me. Ever gaped at me. Just Lehd who was obviously love sick.

The discussion turned to the feral activities that ushered me to Ishan's palace. Borun described who had attacked us, each man by name and territory for the benefit of the audience. I knew nobody except my betrothed's identity, Kruk. And I really didn't want to think about him.

"One Royal Guard cornered Aisling in the Hall of Wisdom," Borun announced.

Why did we have to go there?

Mart turned his gaze to me. A strand of his long kinky hair had loosened itself from the tie pulling his black locks back into a queue. The strand dangled down the side of his cheek.

"Can you describe the warrior?"

Who couldn't after he raced toward me? "Black and white stripes. He stood in shadow where I couldn't see much detail though. Not that I could tell anyone apart by stripe patterns as Borun says he does." Something in my subconscious nagged me to keep the details of the warrior's mask a secret. He hadn't hurt me. Just scared me a little toward the end. And I knew so little about the Luvks that they couldn't possibly expect me to differentiate between masks. Although the Thunder clan wore specific masks. I'd keep the point my education trained me to see patterns my dirty little secret.

"You don't recall the markings on his mask?" Mart hefted his silver cup to take a long drink. His cool blue gaze glowed a hazy silver in the low level lighting as he watched me over the rim.

Var and Lehd eyeballed me intensely at that moment.

"How can I tell the masks apart?" That seemed to be the pathetic earthling reply that would appease their curiosity.

Mart rose and waved a palm toward the dancing flames in the hearth. "Let me show you."

Oh well. Why not learn what I can? I rose as he gathered the masks.

He laid them out in a circle around the fire pit. "Note each has a different marking." He pointed at one. "As with my mask, the three circles between the chin and ear indicate I am a Royal Guard born of the Sunrise realm. The three circles represent the rising sun."

So, his half brother confronted me in the Hall of Wisdom. "What are the others?"

He slowly went around the circle noting all but the Thunder clan's symbol, the four lines on the chin. "And of lastly, we have the Thunder clan that I can sketch for you."

"Four lines on the chin."

His gaze pinched with awe. "You remember."

What an ironic choice of words. "When left without weapons to face a more powerful captor, one finds she is more observant if she plans to escape. My commander disarmed us before we passed through the portal. I had nothing to use for protection. So, the mask just seemed like the easiest thing to grab."

"And beat Kruk into a stupor," Borun added matter-of-factly.

"Apparently, I didn't. He recovered." Now I need to know how these masks are the masks of Royal Guard leaders. "Mart, please show me how to differentiate between the masks for rank."

He pointed at them slowly, moving sideways to cover them all, ending with his own. "Each has no mark other than the symbol of his realm. All but mine. Do you see the cheeks are depressed with those linear angles here on my mask?"

Like someone pressed a triangle into them when they were molten hot. "Yes. This notes you aren't a leader?"

He nodded, never letting on the fact bothered him.

Albeit, he still towered over me. With all those muscles, I would be easy pickings if he decided to have his way with me. Or maybe his charm was the little medieval something about his somewhat-tamed wild hair? He'd been so polite. I'd have a tough time finding a reason to squeeze out a *no* if he decided it was time to mate. Intelligence combined with brawn... A girl could really learn to love Luvk.

"What type of weapons do females carry where you come from?"

Mart's question broke my little foray down deep into lust's darkness.

His silver gaze probably mirrored the fact I stood beneath him contemplating how he was so damned attractive.

Damn the wine and my throbbing heart. The Ancient Greeks knew what they were doing in attributing their powerlessness under the spell of alcohol to a deity. Talk about using a scapegoat. But I could cover my ass. "Firearms, knives, and Marshals have torches. Although, torches aren't considered fair in fighting and peg a Marshal as weak. I couldn't bring myself to strap on a weapon that I could accidentally set off and burn myself into ash in a simple flash of light. But I warmed up to blades about six years ago." Maybe he'd think I was just panicking about having to use weapons. I turned back for some support from Borun.

The glowing gazes encircling the table stared at me where the men froze in some stage of feeding themselves.

Apparently, Luvk females didn't tote weapons. Who'd have to given they had these massive killing mates in their shadow? Or maybe the torch had captured their interest.

"Show us how you use knives, little one."

Borun didn't just ask me to hurl blades for their entertainment. He can forget it. "I can't see in here. This isn't a good spot for a demonstration." The whole display aspect of a little Aisling show only brought back a rush of memories of my days in graduate school, those cool desert nights spent in Egypt when Dr. Josselyn's French taste for small breasts and tight asses sent me a ticket to Hell. Well, he'd complained my breasts were just a little too large, but they'd suffice for the sake of his sacrifice to humanity for recovering and reconstructing Egyptian prehistory. The bastard and his misuse of graduate students. But my uncanny, rather desperate, ability to beat the learning curve in knife throwing left my fellow doctoral student in Josselyn's bed after each round of Russian roulette knife throwing. But I think Anna liked losing. Call it climbing the professional ladder. That ladder looked awfully rickety to me. Or mangy.

A shudder shook me.

I reclaimed my safe seat beside Borun.

All the glowing eyes still watched me.

What went through their minds?

Mart descended into his chair.

Maybe I could change the subject. "What about Luvk history?"

Everyone returned to eating.

Not one of them even acknowledged my question. "You don't care for your history? Even I who sees little to admire in the way my own culture picks everything apart negatively in other cultures, I can find some value in my history."

Mart rallied by scratching the back of his head. "Where should I begin?"

Must I utter *in the beginning*? Although, that's the last place I'd want to delve back home. Talk about some nuclear explosions! "Where do Luvks think their people came from?"

"Legend says we leapt from a hole in the sky, onto a cloud raining stars..." His exasperated expression melted into one of wonder as if he enjoyed telling the story with his elbows planted on the table and his extended fingers fanning the air. "Some say the night sky seeded the cloud. Others say a great explosion from a volcano on the other side shot Luvks into the cloud. Either way, the first people leapt onto the cloud that would harden into our planet."

So much for science. Mythology was the glue to a cultural fabric though. I couldn't laugh at their opinions of their origin. Myths worked one way or another to explain the inexplicable. "So was your sun always there?"

Mart's head cocked one direction. "No. The planet was born first. But without light. Which is why we see in darkness." He winked. "And then a great shaking of the land gripped Luvk and a volcano climbed toward the heavens to spit out the sun, to shoot it into the heavens."

Var shook his pure white queue negatively. "Those are tales from before the time of the great kings." His blue gaze locked on mine. "He's telling the stories of the ancients. By the time of the great kings, most people thought it was the kings who seeded the clouds and shot the sun into the sky when fighting battles. They hurled great balls of fire in laying siege to castles. One lodged itself in the heavens."

Three cheers for Var, who, by the way, gave me shivers just in speaking. He was interesting, a strange mix of pale gold, white, and thick black stripes that drew my gaze to linger. He was almost black and white but had enough color to entice the eye. And his declaration only provided what I required, details about these people's cultural evolution. The kings empowered themselves by changing the legends. "How did queens overthrow the rule of the kings?"

Lehd shifted in his creaking chair.

Obviously, the chair bitched about its load. But Lehd was the warrior who almost matched Borun with size. Or Lehd's shifting in his seat equated to the guards' feeling my question dealt with a touchy subject. "And?"

All the men planted their elbows on the table beside their plates, their muscles bulging as if to counter that any validity lay in the part of the story about to unfold.

Mart smiled.

A dashing grin, by the way.

"The Slakens killed the kings and placed the kings' wives in power as if they knew all along that it would destroy our kingdoms."

Nothing beautiful or mythical enchanted me about that cold tidbit of history. Apparently, it rubbed the guards wrong as well. "Okay, I see a pattern." And finding patterns was my job.

“Thank you for the explanations.”

A knock rattled at the door.

Var strolled his slightly bowed legs through the firelight until I couldn't see the way his muscles stretched his leather pants to the limit beneath his apparently iron ass.

I really must stop thinking about my guards' bodies. Or I'm going to be in big trouble. Especially since these men could hear my heartbeat. Just what was Borun thinking about my sudden interest in those he chose for me? I slid me gaze up the undulating muscles of his arms to the arched eyebrow hovering over his golden eye. Thank goodness he couldn't read my mind. Better to pretend I'm upset. “Who is it?” I whispered like I didn't want to speak to anyone else.

“Goro.”

I forced a frown.

Borun washed the emotion off his face and turned to the squealing door.

Goro entered the distant shadows in his standard black calf-length leather jacket, black pants, boots, and vest. “Good evening, everyone.”

He was always so diplomatic.

Everyone replied a greeting, except me.

Goro shot me a smile as he entered the firelight carrying a backpack. “Aisling.” He nodded a smidge. “I've brought you a gift from Darla and to inform you what I will be doing this next week after my departure.”

Well, I guess I needed to know. Will said knowledge make a difference in my life? At least I got a gift out of the visit. I took the heavy bag and placed it on the floor by my boots.

“Before you dismiss the backpack,” Goro said, “let's discuss the beacon.”

“Beacon?” I threw the pack's flap open to find a circular box with a button.

“It's a transmitter. I've planted a larger one on Luvk. Borun took me to an excellent location the first time I visited. The larger transmitter will signal to any Free World satellite or spacecraft nearby. And hopefully we'll locate Luvk shortly. Then I'll bring your pod fighter. You know the drill, as Darla loves to chant.”

Okay, maybe this planet is still in the universe I came from... Can I say whew or what?

“The smaller version you're holding will activate a sensor beneath my skin as long as I'm on Slaken.”

How can he know that? “You tested it?”

He paced beyond Var and Borun's shoulders. Everyone watched the commander.

I guess Goro believed everyone in the room loyal. But how does anyone trust an alien leader notorious for manipulation? Albeit, the Blood Wars were over. “So, you're telling me that all I need do is press this button to contact you?” I studied the tiny raised surface on the hockey-puck-sized remote and pressed it.

“Aisling, don't do that,” Goro ground out through grated teeth and glared at me.

The man had to be bipolar. “Somebody needs to test it.”

“The signal I receive is an electric shock. And it's not very comfortable.”

A giggle tortured me into gulping. “From what I hear, Xquine males are the toughest warriors in the universe. Well, until I visited Luvk and got a chance to push this teenie weenie button.”

Goro smacked his lips. “I see why Darla is drawn to you. She harbors an equally wicked sense of humor.”

Oh, did Darla? “Let's blame that on Earth, the cradle of the humorous female mind.” The impulse to push that button again hung like a howling phantom, goading me from overhead.

“Now,” he dismissed my joke, “I’ve placed the rest of the equipment you’ll need in that backpack.”

All eyes in the room turned to me.

Glowing eyes. As if I held some great treasure. Or a damned torch. I met Goro’s stoic gaze. “I don’t want a torch. It’s like having a viper or a tarantula in your suitcase. With my run of luck lately, I’ll end up torching myself.”

“No. Not a torch. Standard gear.”

Like that made a lick of sense. “Okay, so you’re escorting the princess to Slaken in a few days?”

“Yes. And I’ll be there for three more days until I depart for Titan.”

Good for you. I’m not into frozen moons even if they’re in my solar system.

“Johnson will remain in contact with you over the course of the next year. Or until the Free World Council locates this planet.”

My heart sunk a little.

Maybe everything just suddenly seemed so real. I was staying. Goro would be leaving. I’d be swinging things alone. With my guards. I scanned the attentive gazes sitting around the table until my gaze landed on Borun’s. Yes, he’d take care of me. Until Kruk showed up. And then all I could hope for was all the guards beating the shit out of the Thunder bastard.

“Aisling?” Goro asked.

Crap, I need to pay attention. “Yes?” I stared my boss down.

“If anything happens to you, my mate is going to make my life miserable. She promised me that when I told her I was bringing you here a few weeks ago. You’ll be fine. So, don’t worry.”

Why didn’t I feel like I was going to be *fine*?

Chapter Fourteen

After dining with the guards, Borun pressed his chest against Aisling's back where she sat on the pile of furs used for drying off, encircled by flickering candles, facing the pool with his attentive hands cupping her breasts. Now this was dessert, she mused. Although I still wore my bra, the warmth and pressure of his hands on the small triangles of fabric made my heart race.

He leaned his mouth against my neck and scratched out a whiskery kiss, soft enough to send gooseflesh erupting along my arms. His breaths were almost steady, patterned, except when he'd suddenly exhale, vigorously.

I sucked in a breath for myself.

Moments like this lured me deeper into *his* darkness, so far that I forgot about my woes. I thought of nothing except how Borun made me feel as if everything was going to be *fine*. Hopefully all would go as planned.

"You still haven't dug into the bag, little one." His hot breath warmed my skin with fleeting comfort.

What could possibly be in the bag that could be any more significant than Borun making love to me?

"Are you happy with me, Aisling?" he whispered.

Who wouldn't be? "I'm so happy that I can't stop thinking about you touching me."

His hot mouth latched onto my neck and sucked the heartbeat out of my jugular. My heart melted away into nothingness, soaking his favorite panties. He growled a low sinister sound while toying with my bra clasp as if his sense of smell was as strong as his hearing and sight. Strong enough to smell the fluctuation in my faint scent, noting how wet I was for him.

"Teach me how to unlatch this garment before I die, little one."

Anything to get him feasting on my breasts in his ravenous way. I turned, straddled the leather covering his lap, and presented my whitest laciest bra for his perusal.

He groaned, fingering the small closure, wiggling a finger beneath the clasp.

God would he not hurry? I covered his fingers with mine and showed him how to press the mechanism.

He sighed the most pitiful sound of relief and gently slid his warm eager palms underneath each bra's cup.

The starvation on his face revealed by the light from the pool almost killed me. More than the hunger in his palms.

The biggest baddest Luvk warrior was putty with my breasts in hand. And my breasts responded to his affection with tensing, aching, beading nipples. I snaked my fingers through his hair and pulled his lips to suck the pressure from one of those aching buds. To release me from the torment.

He growled.

I needed him there. Satisfying both of us, now.

His python arms slid around me, pulling me up onto my knees, raising me so he could nibble and tug one tender nipple into a peak before finding the other to antagonize.

He obviously wanted me extremely wet.

I ached so badly that if he didn't throw me down and take me I was going to yell. Or cry. He must have sensed my state of *deprivation* because his fingers slid underneath my panty's edge, and he shoved his palms along my ass until he could test my wetness with his fingertips.

He growled and withdrew his hands, looking up into my eyes. "Aisling, there is no way a warrior can have you and walk away without losing his mind." His glowing orbs reflected that very message.

The blood bond was talking. Driving us to unite. To touch. To exchange blood. But his romantic comments made the motions more intimate. Necessary, Dangerous. I could wallow in his words and never care to see the light of day again. I pressed my lips against his and traced out the seam of his mouth with my tongue.

He growled, tugged off my panties, and pulled his engorged cock out of his pants.

That's just the type of tool I wanted to see him whip out for a round of interrogation.

He started to raise me up with those muscled arms.

To position me right where he wanted me. Fantasy or not, I could take him myself. I slid my fingers beneath his palms and pried them off of me.

His eyes glinted with confusion.

My actions would clear up the foggy mists between us. I curled my fingers around his thick iron erection and watched his eyelids flutter. He couldn't keep his eyes open as I milked his long silken length from the smooth tip and back to the root.

"You're my blood mate, Borun. Are you happy with that?" What would he say?

His eyes opened halfway. "Yes," he hissed.

* * * *

Borun almost fell against the hard rock of his home world where his mate took him by his manhood and made his eardrums threaten to explode with the blood throbbing through his veins. Blessed rock, my mother planet, that threatened to knock the sense back into me before I lost her precious seed, he gasped. I threw a hand back and balanced myself upon an arm where I sat.

"We can't live without each other," she whispered above her excruciating grip stroking my tender shaft.

Those lovely lips spoke unnecessary words. I almost grabbed her and pulled her hips down until I buried my root inside that hot vise of her womb that called to me. But she seemed to have other things in mind. Watching. Waiting.

She leaned down, onto her hands and knees, and trailed her tongue out to trace shivers into my soul. Along the length of my manhood. Her unyielding gaze was relentless as she curled her tongue around my engorged erection until she got to the blessed tip and sucked on my body like she savored my very being.

No warrior could sit and watch his body writhe beneath her intensive stare. I grabbed her underneath her arms, pulled her up to lean her back, to open her soul to me, crawled between her legs, and rammed into the delicious crackling dampness beyond the tight mouth of her sex.

She was so wet her body whispered a greeting as my aching hardness slid along the length of her slick channel.

My mate wanted me. The stars were truly rewarding.

Her fingernails clawed fire at my shoulders, finding the halter strap, scratching in beneath the strip of leather, as her bucking hips matched my strokes perfectly. She became the warrior, and I her mount, her legs sliding around my waist to squeeze me into a full gallop. Slowing was impossible with Aisling. Or I drank far too much wine.

She groaned. "Harder, Borun. Please."

And my body responded, mindlessly, plunging, deeper and deeper until I could think of nothing but the way her channel possessively clamped around my member and how my sac slapped her sweet ass.

I was hers.

She is mine.

Her cries spoke of little else.

Her body went rigid beneath me. Around me. Choking my erection. And she threw her head back, crying out. I couldn't hold back the tide of rapture. My seed burst inside her.

Her body's spasms squeezed every last drop of searing germ from my body.

There was nothing but Aisling. I shut my eyes and desperately plunged again and again to wring every kernel of my essence into her womb. Into a dark warm place where only Aisling could nurture it into life.

A blue light forced its way between my eyelids.

The healing light. If there was a way to gift her a youngling, she would have one soon. Very soon. I settled my racing heart down upon her trembling body. Those breasts. My heart to embrace and protect. "Aisling," I whispered her name as if she might vanish for want of hearing me say it.

Her fingers released my halter to gently slide along my back. "What?" She petted and loved me.

Tenderly. "You're right. I can't live without you."

She silently raked her fingers through my damp hair and cradled my skull against her drumming breast. "That's what they say love is on Earth. Even if we call it blood lust now, I'm glad we have it between us."

Hopefully, my actions proved I would protect her, treasure every moment I had with her. Did females from her world know these things males thought? I shoved onto my palms and raised up to meet her gaze. "I swear it, Aisling. You are safe here with me." Her commander was right. I pulled her hand from my hair and planted a kiss on the palm. "Always safe with me." She had to realize and give no thought to her commander's departure.

Her heart hitched into silence.

She believed me. I grabbed her up into my arms, carried her into our sleeping skins, laid her in the silky softness, stretched out beside her, and pulled her into my heart.

She clutched my chest like Kruk lurked behind her. "Don't let go."

I'd never seen or heard anything close to this passion and vulnerability uttered from my mother's lips during all those years I monitored her sexual rites with her consorts. Coming from Aisling, the words quaked my planet. I slid my hand down her lower back and petted the gentle curve of her sleek body.

Did she know what she did to me? How much she moved me? How she'd shown me what life was like after all my years of a son's sterile service to his mother?

* * * *

"*Queen Grana has been murdered,*" a female voice spoke in Borun's mind.

Borun's eyes popped open from a deep sleep in the darkness where the only light in his lodge radiated from the dying coals of the hearth fire nearby. Was that a dream, he wondered.

Aisling didn't move where she laid tucked into my side underneath my arm.

But she wouldn't have heard a telepathic message. Was I dreaming? Most likely. Nobody had ever murdered a queen. And here I lie on the brink of change. Why wouldn't I

have a nightmare? Aisling was like a queen herself.

The bath's doorway whined.

"*Borun,*" Lehd called out in mindspeak. "*Queen Grana has been murdered.*"

Slakens or fools, someone would pay for the transgression. "*I'm coming.*" I tucked my manhood back into my pants, pulled a fur over my mate's body, and grabbed my mask.

The Royal Guards huddled steps away near the pool.

Ovh, Grana's son, appeared calm.

I reached out to him with my mind. "*My deepest sympathies, Ovh.*"

Ovh nodded, his gaze serious, but not harboring pain.

Why would any noble son pity his mother after the lives we had to endure? "*Have you heard any other news?*"

"*Only that she was found in her bath chamber by her guards.*"

"*Have they called for action?*" Or whatever what would come from this fiasco.

"*Royal Guards have been alerted to keep watch throughout the night.*" Lehd nodded toward the door leading to Aisling. "*She should be guarded as well.*"

And I left her alone. I nodded. "*I'll stay in the room with her. I trust you'll guard the doors. Ovh, if you wish to check on your mother's guards—*"

"*No,*" Ovh interrupted. "*My place is now here with Aisling.*"

As loyalties should be with a Royal Guard taken to be a consort.

* * * *

Aisling wiggled inside the warmest place she'd ever slept. Alone, she noted with a groan. Where was Borun? I bolted upright and scanned the room's shadows.

He sat by the hearth, nursing the fire with a long stick.

Lehd sat with him.

Neither acted like he noticed I sat up with my breasts exposed. Good because Lehd might be adoringly attentive. But I wasn't ready to bare my soul to him yet. Why were they sitting around together in my living area when they could mindspeak at a distance?

My gut flopped.

Something had happened. I pulled the fur tightly up to my neck. "Borun?"

He turned to me. Lehd respectfully did not.

"What happened?" I asked.

He shot Lehd a glance across the dancing flames and turned his glowing eyes back to me. "How did you know?"

Maybe because they looked like two old men ice fishing. "You don't normally sit around with another warrior while I'm sleeping in my birthday suit."

"Birthday suit?" He quickly joined me, blocking Lehd's view with his broad back.

They might have learned English but not everything. "It's what we call our nude bodies on Earth," I whispered and shot him a weak smile.

"Wait here." He disappeared into the bath.

Leaving me with the big puppy. Would Lehd jump my bones now that we were alone? I was easy fruit for picking. He could just pin me down and take a big bite.

Lehd stared at the fire.

Seconds later, Borun reappeared with my clothes bundled in his arm and hastened to my side. "Dress, little one. There is much to do."

"What are you hiding from me?"

He handed me the clothes I wore yesterday. "One of the Queens has been murdered."

"No." I needed to get dressed. In clean clothes *after* I bathed. "Can Lehd step out a moment while I dress?"

Lehd rose and departed through the lodge's entrance.

That damned hearing! "I hope I didn't offend him."

"It's alright, Aisling. Just dress yourself."

"I need to bathe. Real fast."

His gaze settled on me with a knowing flicker. "Quickly."

By the time I rinsed soapy lather from my private areas and pulled on my other pair of clean khaki pants, white t-shirt, and underwear, I felt human and was ready to hear the entire story. I dragged my combat boots and socks to the fire and sat beside my mate. Maybe ten minutes had passed. "I'm sorry. I tried to hurry."

"It's alright, little one. I bathed myself while you slept. Lehd watched over you."

Lehd slowly proved he had the morals of a saint. And huge protective saints packaged in muscles were really nice to have around. Especially those suffering from crushes. "So, what are the mindspeak rumors?"

"Murder. Slakens. They can't determine the route by which the Slakens entered the palatial grounds though. Nobody saw or heard anything." His gaze locked on mine. "Someone always sees a Slaken in these attacks though. The sky demons don't know how to sneak around us. They may have wings, but our heightened sight and hearing wasn't gifted to them. And they have never attacked the Queens. Something isn't right, Aisling."

Lehd strode back to the fire and nodded at me. "Blessed sunrise, Aisling." His gaze slid to Borun's. "Should we leave now that you both have prepared?"

Action? A girl finally got to get out from under the unyielding watch of her harem? But Kruk might be out there, somewhere, lurking. The creep. And then there are the bastards who killed the Queen. "Just where are we going?"

Within minutes Lehd carefully hefted me up to sit behind Borun on Jonner. I grabbed a handhold of leather strap at my mate's chest. Jonner hopped into a trot. My Royal Guard surrounded us as we cleared the front gate and headed back... To the portal.

Good. With all the gargantuan tigers around me, what could possibly go wrong as Borun searched for evidence of the Slakens passing through the gateway?

* * * *

Two days later, Borun agonized, focusing his vision on scanning the ground around the portal in the bright light of the late afternoon's sun. If someone had stepped there recently, a footprint would press down grass or pebbles. Something would indicate an invader walked here, he insisted internally. Especially after we traveled two days to investigate.

"Borun?" my mate asked.

I dared not lose my spot on the ground. "Yes?" I scanned another patch of grass.

"We couldn't fly our shuttle craft through the portal. How can Slakens fly through it?"

"We never see them fly through the doorway. All we know is that they arrive."

Aisling grew quiet.

I finished my futile search for evidence and found my exasperated mate sitting on a boulder next to Lehd. The Sunrise Royal Guard stood as watchful as the rising sun, back to her, in a constant vigil to assess the distance.

Yes, Lehd was the best choice for her personal guard, both physically and mentally. She'd realize that soon. Even though he couldn't replace me. None of them could because of the blood bond. But Lehd would always be there for Aisling. In my absence, she'd probably

turn to him for comfort before she did the other guards.

A presence pushed into my mind. *“Any sign, Borun?”*

I pushed my thoughts out to all of them. *“No sign. Does anyone have a suggestion as to how we should investigate this further?”*

“Why kill a queen? That’s the question at hand.”

“And how did they manage it? Who did this? Slakens? Probably not. So now we should turn to the clans. Who had reason for attacking the Smoking Lands?”

“I can’t hear a word of your discussion,” Aisling announced. Her petulant gaze only noted she wasn’t thrilled at her exclusion. “You know, anyone listening in the forest could hear what you aren’t sharing with me in mindspeak. Or am I just the thorn in your side now? The female you have to guard. You know, I have a brain. That’s why I’m a Marshal.” She leaned back onto her hands and smacked her lips. “Yep. Just a pain in your ass.”

She didn’t stare anyone down specifically. She just scanned the entire group, her legs crossed, swinging one black boot.

“I’m just not used to speaking to the guards without mindspeak, Aisling.” Hopefully, she would believe me. I hadn’t meant to leave her out of the conversation.

“Well, you don’t seem to have found anything. We should head back and see if the cook’s prepared more delicacies. Unless you think the Queen was poisoned.” She shook the toe of her boot as if she meant to knock them all in the jaw with her words. “After all, that would be the easiest way to kill a noble without anyone noticing.”

Of all the blessed falling stars. Leave it to the one omitted from the discussions to point out the obvious nobody ever dealt with because Queens were never attacked. *“Mount up,”* I ordered in mindspeak.

Lehd stepped for his war mount as if Aisling’s words were beyond revelatory.

Movement shot from the left at Aisling’s back.

Chapter Fifteen

“*Lehd!*” Borun yelled in mindspeak at Aisling’s guard who stepped one step away from Borun’s unaware mate perched on the boulder.

No. I jumped into a full run.

Lehd leapt, beating me to the orange striped warrior working at snatching up Aisling beneath her arms. Her gaze widened to the point of popping. But Lehd ripped off the intruder’s mask and clawed into the intruder’s eyes. A gruesome growl rolled from the attacker. He mindlessly reached for his unprotected face and dropped Aisling.

She darted to me.

The mask hit the boulder and rolled toward me, falling with clan marking side up.

Thunder clan. Kruk was behind the attack. I pulled Aisling under my arm and waited to learn how the Thunder warrior would die. Who was he? The black straight hair. Deep orange stripes. A good hand shorter than Lehd. He was either Siv or Vol. His palm color would determine his identity. Siv’s white palms were purer than Vol’s black palms.

The Thunder warrior produced a glinting knife.

Probably to replace his lost sight. A deadly edge could protect a warrior when cornered.

Lehd hadn’t seen the blade.

The warrior swung the gleaming edge over his shoulder, toward the meat of Lehd’s shoulder.

“*Lehd!*” I reached out in mindspeak with all the other guards.

“Look out for the knife,” Aisling shouted where she stood beneath my arm.

The knife slipped out of sight. But Lehd roared, reaching for the missing weapon, yanking it forward, and jabbing it into the Thunder clansman’s neck.

The intruder crumpled in two breaths.

Lehd stood over the body.

Undoubtedly waiting to see if the attacker rose.

Aisling jolted into a run toward Lehd. “*Lehd’s bleeding.*”

“*Stop!*” I commanded with my mind. Accidentally. “*Wait, Aisling.*”

She couldn’t publicly heal Lehd. Not out here where anyone could see. Kruk would become even more determined to possess a healer.

Aisling stopped beside Lehd and studied the bloodied gash coloring his upper arm. She didn’t touch him though.

What was she thinking? Had she heard my command?

She lifted a finger.

“No, Aisling. We must talk.” Before she exacerbated our problems.

She turned a questioning mask to me. “*He’s bleeding.*”

Say no more. “*Quiet! Who knows who is lurking in the forest.*”

Her gaze froze, then her eyes slid right as if it occurred to her she was under constant observation. “*He’s bleeding because of me, Borun.*” She almost whined.

“You do not need to inform me of how often Royal Guards bleed. But you have to allow me to handle this for now.”

She shot Lehd a desperate silent plea, begging for forgiveness from her guardian. Lehd nodded toward me. "It's just a cut. Listen to Borun. He leads."

* * * *

Lehd wasn't about to argue with his leader. Especially after walking away from the Marshal and leaving her unprotected. A foolish mistake, he admitted to himself. I'd have to take more care and just suffer with a flesh wound, Lehd thought. But Aisling seemed so determined to do something about my injury. What could she do?

Touch me?

Brand me insanely with those delicate fingers?

Borun was right. Leave the touching for later. Now was the time to protect her like I should have been doing when the Thunder clansman got his knife in my shoulder.

"Mount up, Aisling," I shot her a stern gaze.

She stared into my eyes as if searching for pain.

"I'll be fine until we reach Ishan's palace. We need to return and speak with the Queens." I waved toward Borun's war beast where Borun sat, waiting.

Her brow furrowed and her gaze fell away, sliding back to her First Mate.

I couldn't be held accountable for Borun's right over her. She had to learn Breeder's Rights set the tone for every interaction between a queen and her consorts. Borun's word was law. And wise Royal Guards followed the law.

She stepped through the whispering meadow grass toward Jonner.

The war mount hissed a warning at me.

Not her. She was magic. Or something as powerful in the way the world seemed to bend at her feet.

Borun watched us.

Or me. I wouldn't give him another reason to dismiss me from his mate's service though. I grabbed her slender waist, hefted her up to straddle the war mount, and stepped back a step.

She slid her arms around Borun's chest and latched onto the straps of his harness.

The way we all wished she clung to us. *One day*. Given the grace of the rising sun or the stars above, she would pity us and take each of us to her bed.

* * * *

Lehd stood there looking tough and indestructible next to Aisling where she leaned against her mate's solid back. Slightly higher than eye to eye with the height of these warriors, she thought. It was difficult to read Lehd's emotions because of that damned mask. But Lehd's mask couldn't hide everything in his heart. He was just human like the rest of us humanoids, even a weak woman like myself.

Blood and sweat. Emotion.

A tenderness swirled in his golden eyes no one could block from the rest of the world using a mask without creating an invalid. And these people needed warriors like Lehd. Not invalids. So, everyone could read his eyes.

He'd saved me from whoever tried to capture me. And he waited. For what? I couldn't tell him about my healing powers. "Take care, Lehd. I'll tend to your wound when we reach the lodge."

Lehd sucked in a deep breath.

Was that a sound of pain or agreement?

"Return to the palace," Borun boomed.

Lehd turned to his mount.

Jonner hopped into a trot.

We set back the way we'd come.

Somehow, I had managed to walk away from my bleeding charge. How? He was placed in my care. That's right. *My care*. I hadn't chosen him. So, how did Borun get off telling me I couldn't heal Lehd? We were going to have a discussion once we locked our lodge doors. I'm just as significant as he is. He'd better learn we're equal.

* * * *

Not long after dark, Aisling sat with the others on war beasts before a waterfall glistening in soft silver moonlight. The men had said the swath of hissing water hid a cave. Not a small crack of a cave but an enormous cavern with water trickling through it, she sighed her relief. So, we entered to find stalactites and stalagmites glistening with enchanting green and yellow illumination throughout the space. Anything was better than a tight crack. I followed a pair of bowed legs and a bare striped back through the murky place.

Borun kept a firm grip on my hand, leading me into the eerie darkness full of strange almost phallic forms glowing as if we were the intruders and this their refuge.

"Var, light a fire," Borun commanded. "Aisling cannot see in here."

A fire wasn't going to make walking across the slippery cave any easier. Nor would arguing with Borun. But the fact he protected me was more important than anything else. All but healing Lehd's wound. Was Borun angry or jealous of the attention I'd give to Lehd in helping him? Why couldn't I touch Lehd *to help him*? These taboos were seriously ludicrous.

Borun stopped. "Sit here, Aisling. Var will build you a fire. We're going to leave the war beasts guarding the cave entrance before going to sleep."

Fine. Like I could be of any help without night vision. I descended to feel for a dry spot and planted my butt on slick stone.

Var's shadowy form hustled a few steps from me, fiddling with something on the cave floor in the darkness. The other warriors disappeared beyond the lustrous rock columns.

Sparks flew nearby. Flames flickered to life before Var.

A fire burned from rounded material. I had no idea what the flammable substance was. "Great job." I could see now.

Var shot me a glinting glance and a nod but rose and departed where the other warriors began leading in their fussy unsaddled dog-horses. One by one, the war beasts were left to snort into a sleeping lump upon the damp rock around the cave entrance.

Guard dogs. What an excellent multi-purpose animal. The creature could haul people and possessions, defend its rider during daily activities, and guard its owner at night.

Borun stepped into the firelight with his saddle and sleeping skin. He shoved off his mask and squatted beside me. "You may heal Lehd now, little one. We are six strong. Add the war beasts and that makes twelve."

All my disgust and tension flew out the proverbial window. I could have hugged my mate. And since we'd exchanged blood last night and stopped for a little sex to curb our blood lust at noon today, I could pass out for a few hours and not have to worry about either of us and the stress of blood lust. I smiled and nodded at Borun. "It's good to see you care about them as much as I do."

He raised his knuckles to gently rub against my cheek. "Oh, little one, they are as important as the blood bond."

For some reason, his point simply made sense on the violent world of Luvk.

Mart's black and white chest emerged into the firelight as he dragged in his saddle. Lehd

followed him.

Neither looked at me. They probably feared Borun's wrath.

Lehd laid out his sleeping skin and stretched out along the length of it, his back propped up against his saddle.

Here we go. I covered the four steps between us and knelt.

His golden gaze locked on mine. "You should sleep, Aisling."

"Men." I sighed to ignore the comment and focused on the scab on the front side of his shoulder.

Mart leaned over the other side of Lehd's chest. "I've seen worse."

"It doesn't hurt," Lehd growled.

Apparently, his pride was under attack. "Well, I will fix this now."

"No, Aisling. Borun said to leave it alone," Lehd snapped.

I studied his short black and orange striped beard and his glowing eyes, glowing with a warning of danger. But he was the big puppy I'd learn to accept. I should have chuckled. But I doubted he would care for the gesture. So, I placed a palm over his wound. "Borun told me to heal you." I closed my eyes, focused all my thoughts into the center of my being, and drummed up the vibrations.

The energy shot up my arm and out my palm.

Blackness spun everywhere until I felt so dizzy I couldn't breathe.

Chapter Sixteen

Lehd almost choked as his *Marshal* fell across his chest like a limp rag. What happened? Borun is going to kill me, he thought.

"Blessed stars! She's a healer," Mart blurted in mindspeak. *"You should have told us, Borun."*

Borun quickly appeared, knelt beside Aisling, and placed a palm on her back. *"I wanted to keep everything a secret until it became important. We don't need the Thunder clan hearing about this."*

Mart nodded. *"Gods no! They're insane in trying to possess her. Throw in healing and there will never be peace."*

Borun slid his gaze to mine. *"She was very angry when I wouldn't let her help you earlier. I meant nothing by it other than protecting her from those who might wish to use her."*

As any of us would have done the same, Lehd thought. *"That need not be said, Borun."* *"No hard feelings between us then?"*

I wagged my head. *"No."* It was good to hear his explanation though.

Borun carefully rolled Aisling's body over and lifted her. *"She doesn't know how to control the energy. Anytime she heals, she is knocked unconscious for hours. And you can't hide her in a cave on The Cliffs. She's claustrophobic. So, remember these things or you'll find yourself hauling the weight of an unconscious female. Better still. Avoid being wounded."*

Insult understood. *"I shouldn't have turned away from her."*

"One step is nothing, Lehd. None of us sensed the attacker's presence. You aren't to blame. We need to be more alert for Aisling's sake."

Mart shifted his footing where he squatted. *"What do you intend to do about Kruk?"*

Borun never blinked or hesitated. *"Kill him."*

Any of us would.

* * * *

Borun snuggled against his sleeping mate's breast where he buried his nose deeper into the fistful of silken hair he clutched in his hand. Go back to sleep rising sun, he silently commanded. Spare a poor soul a few more moments with his mate. With two days left to travel, there'd be little time to bask in her essence. But everything about Aisling stirred my heart into beating a new song. Even the fear I felt when she was endangered offered strange sensations to dwell upon.

Her hands slid around my shoulders and pulled me closer to her softness.

The sound of her heart didn't change.

She still slept. Clinging to me in the cave's strange glow.

And on this trip to the portal, she bonded with the other Royal Guards. We hadn't learned much traveling on this journey. But she began to accept her position with the warriors. What else could her insistence to heal Lehd represent? As soon as my youngling's heart beat in her womb, she could take the others to her sleeping skins. Form unbreakable alliances with the most dangerous and protective males from the seven realms. One by one, she'd give them each a

youngling. And the realms would be united under her roof. Would she accept the Marshal position as one of unification? Since the death of Grana, she'd have to.

Grana's heir barely breathed twenty years and lacked any sort of diplomacy to deal with her rival Queens let alone manage her thirty-eight brothers, two lower-caste sisters, and Grana's surviving consorts. Or would the young Queen send her father and uncles back to their homelands? Most heiresses were foolish enough to do so and garnered little respect in the action. But Queens often thought only of their pleasure. A pack of consulting widowers only irritated the younger matriarchs.

Would Aisling prove any different as the months graded into years? Watching her proved her ideas from her home world were extremely dissimilar to Luvk ways. No Queen would worry about a warrior's wound. Aisling was the answer to Luvk disharmony. Her presence had to set the new standard for matriarch behavior.

* * * *

By the time Jonner trotted up to the door of Aisling's lodge, nothing but horror gripped her Royal Guards beneath the night sky. Two more Queens had been murdered, she learned. Var and Prory now were motherless. *My arrival* set off a wave of murders.

Nausea rolled through me.

Not because of the murders. The blood lust shook me. I wasn't due for another blood exchange for twenty-four hours though. So, gulping wholeheartedly would solve the problem until Borun took care of me. And I was so ready for a little care that I swung my leg over Jonner to jump the five bone-jarring feet to the ground on my own.

Lehd materialized in the moonlight and grabbed my waist to help me off Jonner.

The huge muscled killing machine was always helping me, lifting me, lowering me, touching me. He probably treasured the duty. Albeit, the drop off a dog-horse's back was pretty intimidating to an Earth girl. I appreciated the help for the most part. A descent in Lehd's gentle hands always made me take note of the glorious muscles rippling everywhere around me.

Borun hopped off Jonner and set his gaze on our lodge's door and nodded for Proy and Var to enter first.

Probably to check for lurking assassins. Yes, send in the menacing Royal Guards crowned in war masks with night vision to search for mercenaries. Borun had been right all along. I needed more than one Royal Guard on Luvk. I sidestepped into the security of Borun's python arm.

"Give them a few moments, little one. Then you can rest." He slid his arm around me. My heart flopped.

Between the brutal news of murder, the waiting for my guards to give my lodge a safe stamp of approval, and Borun's doting python arm, my heart had to be flopping like a fish out of water to those sensitive Luvk ears surrounding me.

"It's safe." Borun nudged me with his hip toward the door to the guard house. "Your commander has departed with Johnson."

After the murder, it would be odd to expect them to carry through with the plans for the princess's arranged marriage. Is that where they'd gone? "Did they escort the princess to Slaken?"

We stepped through the doorway into the soft light of the guards' hearth fire. One guard stepped deeper into the room, his broad striped back and black queue retreating into shadow beyond the dancing flames.

"Princess Frenyl has refused to complete the political alliance." Borun walked me to the

fire's warmth and gently took me by the elbows. His glowing gaze behind his mask locked onto mine. "Stay here with the guards. Ishan has summoned me."

What else would he learn about the breakdown of Luvk social fabric since our departure? "Alright." After all, these guards were proving they'd die for me. I might as well just get used to the fact they're going to be on watch at every turn.

"Lehd." Borun stared back toward the doorway.

The big Sunset clan leader's stripes shimmered in the darkness until he stepped into the fire's dome of amber light.

"Stay with Aisling," Borun ordered and departed.

Lehd pulled off his mask and tossed it aside with the same disdain for the molded metal he had the first day he yanked it off to humor me.

I didn't have anything to cast off but the endless days of travel that had coated me with grime. "Is it safe to find clean clothes among my things, or should I stay here?"

"Come with me." Lehd stepped past the hearth.

It's amazing how small I felt walking behind him. Or any of these guards.

Lehd guided me into the darkness around the glowing pool and into my personal quarters where my clothing had been neatly folded and placed upon Borun's sleeping skins.

Undoubtedly laundered by Morna. A girl could get used to all this pampering. But I had to be careful not to let it go to my head. Not to become one of these Queens. Begging to bathe at this late hour probably was something a Queen would do though. Or just do, making Lehd hover at attention with his ass on the line. But I just felt sticky. Would asking for permission be the safe not-so-pompous route since Borun had left for who knows how long? I met Lehd's golden gaze where he towered with his striped arms crossed over his chest and smiled. "Is it alright if I bathe?"

"If you wish." Lehd waved me toward the pool.

When he stepped through the doorway at my heels, I almost choked and paused. I should have known he'd stand guard duty. "Can I have a minute for privacy?"

He turned to me with those glowing eyes. "What's a minute?"

Obviously an Earth term. I clutched my clothes to my chest like I hid behind them already nude. "A measurement of time."

He nodded once and stepped aside.

Okay, let's see what happens. I strode toward the pool.

The door creaked behind me.

Was he gone? I turned.

And stood alone. Okay, I'd better hurry before he guesstimates the length of a minute. I stripped, grabbed the soap dish and a drying fur, and hopped into the warm bubbling water. By the time I surfaced for air, Lehd moved through the shadows around the pool like a tertiary carnivore in search of his supper.

Good thing I wasn't beneath him on his food web. Or, maybe I was!

He headed toward the pile of skins and sank into the shadows.

If I hadn't seen him descend, his stripes would have camouflaged him.

One by one, candles flickered with flame around him. Like magic. I heard no sound although he must have had a lighter. The seven flames cast enough light to where I could barely see his stripes. I tried to ignore him by grabbing a bar of soap, careful to keep my cleavage beneath the swirling water, and worked on lathering my scalp.

The chore required I sit with my back to him on the ledge to work on the ends. So, I

scrubbed...

What was Borun hearing?

What was Lehd doing?

Just ignore him.

I finished lathering my hair from root to ends and dove into the water, swimming underneath the surface across the pool, hitting the edge, turning underwater, and kicking my body back across in one smooth movement to touch the seat where I had sat to wash.

Lehd sat doing something with his hands in the candlelight when I propped myself back upon the ledge.

Flickering light danced upon a metallic object in his grasp.

Well, he was busy. So, I scrubbed my skin.

"Aisling?" he asked me, curiously, but gently.

Oh boy, he better not ask to join me. "Yes?" I scrubbed more furiously.

"You have no stripes?"

It was a funny question. Kind of awkwardly inquisitive. Maybe a touch naïve but nothing nosy. He was just curious. "None." I shoved into the water and turned to prop up on the ledge with my elbows where I faced the man's glowing eyes in the shadows, allowing the water to whisk the lather away. "People on my home world don't have stripes."

"None?"

"None." He seemed unable to believe the answer. "Some of us have tiny spots called freckles though. But no stripes. Although, a few people choose to have drawings added to their skin. I've seen a few completely cover themselves in stripes like yours."

He inhaled deeply.

So loudly I know he thought the idea of a full body tattoo insane. "Luvks would rather have no stripes?" Having him state that much would help me see where Luvks truly stood on the subject.

"The weaker the markings, the purer one is."

How did the belief begin? "Why?"

He shifted his, apparently moving one booted leg that was invisible to my earthling vision in the darkness if he sat still. "The Slakens are pure white. We are not. They refuse to deal with those of us who are low-caste. In doing so, the Luvks began to see only value in fewer markings."

So the Queens had to be white. Although white stripes had little to do with intelligence given Mart. He was no fool like the Queens. But encouraging the Luvks to rear the high-caste females to behave narcissistically undoubtedly perpetuated the hold the Slakens had on this planet. Any anthropologist knew behavior was learned. Individuals were born an empty slate and absorbed ideas from others in their culture. Or so Renaissance men began to push the point on Earth.

"When you finish, I will show you something," Lehd said.

His words broke my train of thought. Why not? "I'll dress if you give me another—"

"Minute," he finished my statement.

I couldn't help but smile. He probably didn't want a mathematical lesson on Earth time. But the fact he used the concept in context was nice. Or he proved he was as smart as any high-caste male was thought to be.

Lehd left the room as one shifting striped mass.

Big guy. Lots of brains to go with the brawn. And lots of heart. Even though I couldn't

hear his. He offered the privacy I needed. I shoved out of the pool and dressed as quickly as possible just in case someone decided to enter the bath. I hauled my laundry and boots back across the cool stone floor.

Lehd's striped back blocked my entrance when I pulled the door open.

Yep. I had a bodyguard.

He immediately stepped aside.

I dumped my clothing beside the sleeping skins and turned to face him.

He disappeared into the shadows by the lodge's entrance and reappeared into the firelight with a chest.

One of the chests sent by a queen. Okay, maybe I should have opened them. But I didn't want to. And now I felt a teeny bit guilty that I should have already foraged through the trunks. After all, the Queens were just being kind. And the guards didn't need to be insulted from my really pathetic culture shock.

His glowing gaze locked on me. "Come." He dug into the contents and withdrew a leather drawstring sack. "Here." He handed over the bag.

No problem. I was just going to be nice and open the pouch. I took the heavy object.

The contents were hard and round.

I wriggled the strings loose.

Beams of brilliant white light shot out from the pouch's opening.

What was it? My gaze darted to Lehd's where the firelight gilded his half-cocked smile.

That smile could melt iron.

My heart wobbled.

"Open it, Aisling." He nodded toward my hands.

I rolled a glittering ball out of the bag into my palm.

A queen's ball of light. God, I don't want to be a queen.

Something almost the size of the ball lodged in my throat.

I gulped back the annoying sensation.

And everything in a ten foot radius was suddenly revealed to me. The red and purple pillows. The intricate frescoes of flowering vegetation and animals painted on the nearby wall in brilliant colors. Two displays of weapons, obviously Borun's, hanging near the sleeping skins and the door. The orange in Lehd's stripes. "Oh my god. Is this the same room I've been bumping through for days?" I stepped around the room casting areas in brilliant light with my footsteps.

A low chuckle gurgled inside Lehd's chest.

I slid my gaze up his bulging pectorals to his sly smile.

"You should listen to those who know more than you," he carefully said.

Yes. I should. But why admit to him he's right? "What do I do with this light ball?"

He quickly plucked the magical light from my hand, pounced upward, a ridiculous five feet, at least, tossing the ball overhead.

Something magical happened. The ball just floated above me. "How does that work?" I gaped at it, pacing out a bit of an awkward circle.

"It is just the way of things. Come, there are more of your light balls inside these chests." He headed toward the now obvious trunks where Borun had left them.

What was the difference between Lehd and Borun in Lehd showing me the lights and Borun leaving them packed away? Why would Borun not think it important to show me these luxurious lights? I joined the squatting Luvk where Lehd tossed another chest's lid open.

He immediately handed me another sack.

I'm certain if I had known him better that he would have stared me down with all sorts of expressive masks. But we weren't familiar enough yet for him to convey anything other than the obvious thrill he had in enlightening his new stubborn boss with those you-should-have-opened-the-damned-trunks-before half smiles. So, I collected the other six balls of light as he uncovered them where he knelt in the balls' radiance.

That magic light was more illuminating than any sun.

* * * *

Lehd stretched out against the pillows around the fire in Borun's lodge while watching his Marshal. Or whatever she would prove to be, he thought. Her *heartsong* never graded into negativity. And her stride now clipped with ease. Maybe the lighting changed her attitude. Maybe she could just see where she stepped now? Whatever the reasoning behind the uplift in her demeanor, I am glad to be the cause of it.

She carried the bag her commander had given her over to sit near the fire beside me.

Had she ignored this gift from Goro's mate as well? What caused a female to be so stubborn? He gulped down a laugh and watched her hands.

Delicate pale hands. Hands that made him hard just watching them. What would they feel like rubbing against my chest?

My body went rock hard.

Not a good thought. Time to think of other things. Like killing Kruk. That bastard needed to die. He'd never touch Aisling. Never see her like this. Inquisitive. Enthusiastic. Gentle. Soft. Just the way those hands had to feel. If I didn't stop looking at her, my seed would line my leathers. I slid my gaze to the seven orb lights overhead.

Queen lights. Sky demon magnets. Maybe I should have left them hidden inside the chests.

"Oh, Hell, Goro," she muttered.

Something about her commander. But I'm not looking. I'm saving myself from spilling my seed.

"So much for instructions." She sighed.

Leave it to commanders to forget instructions. I'd been accused of that one too many times myself. More often than not, the instructions lay right before my warrior's nose.

Her heart suddenly raced.

My gaze snapped to her stuffing things back inside her bag. "What is it, Aisling?"

"Uhm. Uh." She didn't look at me.

A little panic in her heartbeat hinted she hid something in her behavior.

"Oh, nothing." She shot me a meek smile.

"Aisling?" I shoved onto my elbows and watched her closely.

* * * *

Lehd's black eyebrows arched as he came out of his meditative stare at the light balls overhead near Aisling. At least he hadn't seen the lingerie, she thought. I could have talked my way around the syringes and vials Goro left for Borun and I to use in place of blood exchanges if we were separated. But lingerie was lingerie to men. These Royal Guards had probably seen it all by the time they grew into an enormous sexy piece of man meat lounging on pillows like Lehd did at the moment. Except now he stared at me conspiratorially, focusing all his attention on me.

I so liked him better before I got to know a real being with personality lurked inside that

soldier costume. "It's just girl stuff." I cleared my throat. "Female things from a friend who thought I'd be stranded on a planet where there weren't any, uh, girl things."

"Girl things," he cooed and nodded.

Seductively. I'd probably hear about girl things for the rest of my life here on Luvk *now*. I had to remember not to use specific terms around Lehd.

Heat crept up my neck.

He probably wouldn't have seen the blush except for the damned light balls he so conveniently hung overhead. I need to get angry. But he was so bloody cute and sexy. And helpful. Time to change the subject. "Well, I guess I'll read this letter." I produced the envelope Goro's wife Darla had tucked into the backpack.

One of his arched brows flat-lined.

He was too suspicious.

But we weren't having a fashion show tonight. And thank goodness he couldn't read. I yanked the envelope's stiff paper between my hands, pulled the slick flap open, and produced two sheets of folded paper to tuck my nose into. I immediately realized I would have been better off just crawling over to distract my intelligent muscle bound bodyguard with a kiss. Sinking into the darkness of the lack of self-control. Not me. I stood my ground like a good girl.

Dammit. Darla meant well in wishing me the best, in encouraging me to use my wild and unruly psychic gift. I intended to. Especially if it meant my survival. And my guards' survival. I wasn't going to let anyone down on Luvk.

But Darla went on to bring up my mother's suicide. Maybe the natural order of things was the best route in general to understanding reality—my Mother's choice. That is the natural order one didn't learn through scientific study. The natural order of the survival of the fittest minus magical intervention via your psychic healer daughter. The type where one rationalized the pathway to the end suddenly upon one's path was just supposed to be there. Mom didn't want me to save her from cancer with my strange psychic power. She wanted to let the disease run its course. To die. In the end, rationalizing hadn't worked with her. She'd given up long before cancer when her twin died.

My heart thrashed in my defense.

But Mom was gone. And I was alone. So, I joined the Marshals. Healing may not be easy. But I'd figure things out because nobody else would die because of my lack of assertiveness. Wonky powers or not. I crumpled up the annoying letter and stuffed it back inside my backpack.

"You no longer look happy," Lehd noted.

Did I need to come clean? I shrugged. "Is anyone ever truly happy?"

He shot me a shimmering stare. "I've come close."

I couldn't imagine when. But happy was relative. And I'd never marched in his boots. The door squeaked.

Borun strode into our living quarters and nodded at Lehd.

Lehd rose and departed.

"I see you've come to your senses and discovered the Queen's orbs," Borun announced.

Each of his hungry strides stole my breath away as his muscled legs snatched up the space between us. Flashbacks from the first moment I saw him walking toward the commander and I shook me with the power I witnessed in what seemed like a year ago. I just watched the breathtaking view, suddenly so much clearer in the lighting.

He swooped me up into his safe arms and imprisoned me with his ravenous mouth.

My body ached for him to stab into me with his hardness. To quake my being with spasms. To make me feel like I wasn't alone. I had him. The warmth of his touch. But he was into *deprivation*.

His mouth burned kisses down my neck until reaching the edge of my tank top's scooped neckline.

Rip off my clothes.

My heart rattled out my thoughts in Morse code.

His arms slithered away. And he rose to tower over me where he'd placed me atop the soft pillows. Right where Lehd had been lying.

I hadn't even noticed him setting me down.

* * * *

Borun yanked off one of his boots. "*She seemed distraught when I returned,*" he said to Lehd in the other room. I didn't want to waste time talking to one of the guards though. Aisling was all I yearned for.

"Her mood lifted. She smiled. Enjoyed herself for a while. Then she opened the letter," Lehd said.

A splash indicated the Sunset clansman had jumped into the pool.

"Very well. Whatever you did to get her into the wedding chests was short of miraculous. Thank you." A sign of acceptance of Luvk traditions. I kicked off my leathers.

Aisling's eyes widened at the sight of my engorged manhood.

The gesture only tortured me with a wave of relentless throbbing. I sank down on the pillows beside her and slid my hands across the softest skin on Luvk, up beneath her white shirt.

Her body arched into my touch, begging, pleading I move higher. To those softer mounts perched upon the highest mountain beneath the starry sky.

I returned to my altar. My very reason for existence. I shoved her shirt up and nipped at each firm bead of her nipples. Therein her soul pleaded I obey. I had so very little patience with the insanity of the day's events. I just needed to tug at the straws of conformity and drink of compliance. Become the submissive warrior. I pulled one taut bead with my teeth, sucking and sucking until it produced the conduit by which I sipped from the well of duty. And I sank down to drink deeply from her writhing body's pink nipples.

She cried out, thrusting her fingers into my hair, holding me closer.

Begging for more with her rocking hips. I dragged the tip of my tongue across her the curve of her sweet breasts to the other prickled nub and latched on.

She hissed and arched the pebble of flesh against my teeth.

Blessed stars, to thrust my seed inside the wettest hottest place in the universe. My hands slid to her pants.

So did her hands. We struggled to push the garment down. To merge into one cohesive mass of heated bliss.

She snaked her fingers into my harness and pulled me where she wanted me.

Gods, the way she slid her legs around my waist. The way she stared hungrily into my eyes. I just wanted to make the blood stop pounding in my manhood. It had been such a long day. I grabbed my aching member and slid the head along the slick notch of her sex.

She groaned and threw her head back.

She wanted me. I thrust so hard into her damp channel that I slid all the way to root's end. Right where a warrior dreamed of landing. She groaned, the walls of her channel constricting with her sounds, squeezing around my tenderness, sending the Queens' lights

spinning into darkness. I could only clamp my eyes tight and try to focus on her touch.

She pulled my harness toward her, drawing my body down until I leaned on both palms against her quaking ribs, then she rotated her hips as if she rode me. My abdominal muscles took control, squeezing every last drop of blood in my body into the tip of my erection.

Holding back was impossible. I thrust. And thrust. Erupting. Contracting every muscle I had trying to plant my legacy inside her soul. Imbue a piece of my presence for all who visited the Starry Sky realm in the future.

And Aisling matched every one of my dying moves.

Her body went rigid, her inner muscles contracting, over and over.

Greedily draining me of any of my remnant seed.

And I hovered on trembling arms.

She opened those omniscient blue eyes and peered through my soul.

Nothing needed said. I draped my body atop her softness and wrapped my arms around her limp flesh. My mate. My life. But I should take better care of her. Give her time to rest. I shoved up and carried her body to the sleeping skins.

She snuggled down into the furs without argument, closing her eyes.

Since Var guarded our outer doorway, I could bathe quickly. Quickly enough to return to her where she slept peacefully. I slipped away to bathe.

Lehd rubbed water from his face where he leaned against the pool's wall.

He shot me a knowing stare.

One indicating he was almost a little jealous of what he just overheard. Not because of my nudity and obvious satiated state. He had to realize how he would be one of the first she'd take to her bed after she wielded the mark of a youngling. All a warrior needed to do was walk in on them as they were earlier, comfortably sitting with each other. That was the way things should be between Aisling and her Royal Guards.

Lehd's presence pushed into my mind. *"Any plans stewing among the Queens?"*

I jumped into the warm water. *"None yet. Their consorts have been summoned. I fear irrational choices will be made given many consorts no longer have Queens."*

Lehd nodded. *"The Queens may not have made the best decisions. But, at least, the decisions were firm. What does Ishan say?"*

"She plans to marry Frenyl off to Ovh's brood. She speaks of marrying our other half sister to Var's brood."

"But Wryn is low-caste."

I nodded. *"And that is the problem. All the clans do is bicker over who gets the Pure Heart."*

Chapter Seventeen

Sleep evaded Borun that day. Maybe the problem was his pounding headache and the fleeting mindspeak squabbles that deluged his thoughts, he grumbled. Or the fact a little of Aisling's blood would have snuffed the queasiness in my gut. But she fell into a deep sleep. Probably from all the riding. A warrior couldn't sit a war beast for days on end until he'd served a few months as a Royal Guard. My mate only started riding seven days ago.

So few days had passed. But so much had changed.

"Borun," Var pushed into my mind.

"Yes?"

"A message has arrived for Aisling from her commander."

The light orbs had been hung on the opposite side of the living area. Aisling slept quietly in the remaining shadows. Var wouldn't disturb her. "*Bring it to me.*"

Var stepped so quietly through the bath's doorway that if I hadn't been waiting for him I'd have never known he was there. He held a white square.

"*That's the message?*" I asked in mindspeak.

Var nodded, his blue gaze never blinking. He handed me the slick object.

What kind of message came in this manner? "*Thank you, Var.*" I studied the eyes that rarely reflected any emotion in his mask. "*Are you suffering much from the loss of your mother?*" I wouldn't. My mother feeds like a hungry animal off the pain she inflicts on others. But who knew how other queens cared for their younglings?

Var didn't flinch. "*I'd rather be taken as a sky demon slave than serve a queen.*"

Why didn't his answer surprise me? "*Then you must be content. We no longer serve a queen.*"

Var nodded. "*I return to my duty now.*" He pivoted and disappeared through the bath's doorway.

Var was unique among Luvks in his coloring—a pale gold stripe, extremely pale. His white palms and hair set him apart as a Pure Heart with those blue eyes. But his golden stripes muddled the picture for most. All but among females. Luvk had been a favorite among the courts. But he'd always served as the leader of his mother's Royal Guard which meant he was always in view. Even more popular. Most Royal Guard leaders relished the attention the females showered upon them. But why would Var rather be enslaved than wield the power of a Royal Guard leader? Even I had my own lodge separate from the others. I had my own personal attendant who lavished me in my favorite foods and cared for my lodge. And I could take any village female to my sleeping skins unnoticed by the court if I chose to.

"Borun?" Aisling called. "What is that?"

My mate should have been a Luvk in her ability to note changes in her surroundings. I spun to find her propped up on an elbow. "It's a message from Goro."

"Oh?" She sat up completely with the furs wrapped around her body. "I hope he sent news."

I doubt there was much of anything in the lightweight communication. I handed her the white square.

She grabbed my wrist and pulled me down to sit behind her, then she squirmed backward in my lap to rest her warm silken skin against my chest.

My heart almost sank away into nothingness the way she leaned the back of her head into my neck and played with her message. She had initiated this touch. This exquisite form of contact that proved she wanted to be with me. I dared not move or I'd change everything. But something deep inside me forced my arms to snake around her. To hold her curves where she couldn't retreat.

She burrowed deeper into my chest and focused on her message.

"We need to carry the syringes, Borun," she noted as if ticking off the message's details. "Don't distract me. Or I'll forget again. You and your distractions!" She patted my knee.

I rubbed my cheek against the soft hair on the side of her head. "Syringes?"

"It's a way to carry each other's blood so we won't get caught without it. The Marshals usually hide their syringe in their boot." She focused on the strange markings on her message. "Goro will return shortly. He's trying to find out what's happening on Slaken." She folded up the whispering communication back into the small white square and met my gaze. "Have you slept much?"

Her warm palm fell upon my arm and rubbed along my muscles.

Was I her altar? By the way she caressed me, I had to be. "Enough," I lied. I would have loved to crawl into the sleeping skins beside her beating heart and rest my ear right where that *heartsong* drummed for me.

"I'm sleepy," she said, reaching for my cheek. "Sleep with me?"

I raised up her lightweight and placed her down into the sleeping skins.

When I placed her in the furs, her gaze shuttered as my arms slid from beneath her. She sighed.

My mate was so calming the way she seemed to relish my touch. I stretched out beside her body, curled my chest around hers, and slid my knee between her thighs.

She grabbed my shoulder. "I love you too, Borun."

Could it be we had more than this Marshal blood bond between us? I shoved onto an elbow and found her watching me. Just lying here with her. Just holding her wasn't blood lust. There had to be more to what we shared. I laid back down against her breasts, closed my eyes, and sank into her beating heart.

This was where a warrior needed to be, needed to rejuvenate, needed to sleep. Aisling. My mate. If this wasn't love, such a thing didn't exist.

Her arms curled around my shoulders and cradled my head like a youngling. "Thank you for protecting me, Borun."

My soul melted into hers.

* * * *

"Borun," the warrior called again.

Can't they just leave me alone to sleep with my mate, he demanded internally.

"Borun." Aisling slid her palms down my back. "Wake up. Lehd is here."

Would growling make him leave? I opened my eyes and raised up to find his ugly face looking down at me.

And Aisling's breasts. I grabbed some fur and pulled it over her body.

"Blessed sunrise, Borun," Lehd said. "The Queens have summoned all the Royal Guards to the great hall. Should we go?" His gaze snapped to Aisling's and back to mine as if he meant we guarded a Marshal.

Not a Queen.

I pushed into his mind. *"Wouldn't you like to know what they're planning to do?"*

"Isn't it better to speak where Aisling can hear?"

"Not when comparing her duties to that of a queen." Some days a warrior just couldn't rest. "I'll go." I shot my mate a half smile.

"I suppose I'll begin learning the ancient language of Luvk. So, don't sneak off with Mart." She winked.

Lehd bowed slightly and left us.

I shoved up from Aisling onto my knees but pressed into her curves a little.

She groaned slightly and covered her breasts with her arms. "Ooo, that hurt."

"Sorry, little one." I leaned down and kissed her.

The peck turned into a long and deep adventure.

She pulled back from my probing tongue and looked into my eyes. "We need to hurry and prepare the syringes. Also, we need to know what's happening with the Queens."

She was right. We were up, dressed, drawing blood from each other, and holding the syringes in minutes.

"Here. Press the end against your arm like this and hit this trigger," Aisling instructed.

I copied her actions with my own syringe.

A tiny whisper of pressure indicated the contraption had injected my arm.

"There. We're set for forty-eight hours. If anything happens to keep us apart, we can resort to placating our inner beasts with these shots. But be warned. We get five shots per vial of blood." She handed me an extra vial. "This is another ten days. Keep it hidden too. The vial somehow stores our donation so it doesn't spoil." She smiled and tucked her syringe into her boot's shaft. "Although," her conspiratorial gaze slid to mine, "I prefer the old-fashioned method of satiating blood lust." Her white eyebrows danced a few arching steps.

Sex. "Only a fool would prefer a syringe over bedding you, little one."

She grabbed my whiskers in her palms and plopped onto my lap, tears sparkling in her eyes.

Those blue orbs made a huge difference in what a warrior could detect in his mate.

"Don't be too long," she whispered and dusted my lips with a feathery kiss.

If the Queens could gift her Luvk hearing, she could hear my heart and know I didn't want to go and listen to the nonsense. But what did queens care with their idea of duty? I grabbed Aisling's tiny waist and hefted her sweet curves up until we both stood facing each other. "I'd better go before I miss everything."

Her smile bent downward. "I thought I was everything."

Her *heartsong* didn't lie. She teased me. I took her hand. "Come. Wake Mart. Make certain all of the guards are as busy and miserable as I am at the great hall."

She snorted a retort but followed in my footsteps.

* * * *

Mart unrolled a large piece of hide on the table before Aisling. The same symbols covering the Wall of Glory spattered the leather in rows of dots and lines. Nothing like Mayan numbers, she thought. More like Chinese symbols. Glyphs. I was going to have to learn a new language. Add to that I had no knowledge of the spoken form. That meant two languages were on my list. I studied Mart's glowing silver gaze.

Candlelight danced in those foggy orbs.

Did he smother laughter with that misty reflective curtain? It would be fun to show him

how easy it was to learn another dead language after mastering a few. *Piece o' cake* never summed up the challenge more elegantly. I'd give him a chance to attempt to express his sense of superiority. After all he was the last of his people who could read the text. "How did you learn the written language?"

"Practice."

What a smug answer. He obviously thought me incapable of the feat. I tugged the edge of the leather toward me. "Well, what are the basic components of this language?"

"Each symbol has a meaning."

That was a given. "But does each symbol represent a word like table, fire, or wind? Or do the symbols combine in an order to create one of those words?"

One of Mart's black eyebrows arched. "Each symbol represents one word."

"Well, see," I shot him a smile, "your job won't be as difficult as you thought."

The other guards eased up around the table.

Undoubtedly chattering in mindspoke.

If I had worn my white tunic with long sleeves, I would have shoved the cuffs up to my elbows. This job would be easier with a pen and paper. "I need something to write with."

All the guards glanced between each other.

Well, they had no idea what *write* meant. Talk about a caveman moment. A little ochre and oil would make a fine ink. "Okay, I need some oil. Even fat will work. Or something that can burn."

Lehd nodded and disappeared into shadows.

"Ochre's another issue. Just something to tint the fat." I scanned the dark room, my gaze locking on the fire pit. Ash would work. I left the warriors standing at the table, scooped up a large shovel of smoking coals and ash, spread it out on the cooler surrounding stone floor, and mashed the lumps into a powder.

The guards just eyeballed me like I was nuts.

They'd show some respect soon enough. "Do you have a dish I can use?"

Proy presented me with a metal serving container.

They'd obviously already eaten breakfast.

My stomach snarled a retort.

I scooped some ashes into the dish.

Heat radiated through the metal base.

But the ash needed to cool before the oil could be added. Where was Lehd?

The shadows stirred into stripes beyond the hearth's flames. Lehd materialized with a square container. He handed it over to me. "Your oil." His glowing gaze showed he adored being helpful.

A chill skittered down my spine.

Maybe his helpfulness was best left when the others weren't watching. All waiting for their turn at me. It didn't matter if he desired me. They were my consorts. Logic concluded they should desire me.

Var smirked at Lehd.

What was that about? Had they already laid out a pecking order of who gets me first?

* * * *

"*Stop fawning over the Marshal, Lehd.*" Var did everything he could not to hurl the Sunset Royal Guard across the room. But Lehd had no right forcing himself on Aisling, Var concluded. Borun was First Mate and she had yet to bear the mark of a youngling.

Lehd rose, careful not to behave irrationally in front of our charge, and met my gaze. *"I haven't frightened her. We are friends."*

The fool could hear her erratic *heartsong* like the rest of us. *"That's not what I hear. You're intimidating her. Back off."*

"Var is right, Lehd," Mart concurred. *"Leave her to her task."*

Lehd shot us all a warning stare. *"I produced what she requested."*

"You're too young to know better," Mart added.

Lehd's heart began drumming a war song. *"I have been old enough to lead the Sunset Royal Guard for ten years. Don't—"*

"Apparently, twenty-eight years of life haven't taught you anything," Var blurted.

"If you can't stop arguing in front of Aisling, go outside and help Ovh guard the entrance," Proy ordered.

"Yes, the point is to help her feel safe. Not nurture her distrust in her guards," Mart condescended.

Lehd scowled and wandered back into the shadows toward his sleeping skins.

The young Lord had no idea how his brief experiences among the Royal Guard in his instant promotion to leader because of his height and strength molded his views. How could he see nothing but love when servicing the Queens held little respect? We'd all be foolish to risk losing our new position and fall right back into the clutches of our despicable mothers. And frightening Aisling would result in such a fiasco.

Aisling left both containers near the fire and returned to Mart's scroll. *"Do you have a map of the territories?"* She descended into a chair, focusing on Mart.

"No."

"Well, I can make one."

Could she? Since when did females have the intelligence to do a warrior's work? The glances the others shot between the other Royal Guards showed their thoughts danced down the same path.

But what if Aisling could do something no other Queen could? What if she could undermine the matriarchs and help us unite the clans? Or at least keep our mothers from deciding our fates. Although, I'd never heard rumors of any of the other leaders suffering as I have.

Mart's gaze bore a hole through me.

Stay out of my thoughts. Mind your own business. Hopefully the others were eavesdropping on my contemplation.

"I'll need something like a feather. Do you know what a feather is?" Aisling asked.

"Part of a bird," Proy stated.

"Is there a kitchen here? Maybe they have some birds they're preparing for meals later."

Proy bowed slightly. *"I will find some."*

Mart chuckled after Proy's retreating form. *"What an excellent excuse for a hunt."*

Yes. A hunt would be a nice change of pace. Warm sunlight. Fresh air. Although we just spent four days on war beasts. Maybe I still feel caged? Who wouldn't servicing a female.

Mart studied me with those silver eyes. *"Are you staying or going on the hunt?"*

How dare he tell me to leave? Did he have some plan to get the Marshal alone? From my experience, not even one's mother could be trusted. *"I'm due a day simply spent lounging about."* Somebody needed to watch these guards for Borun.

Mart nodded and turned to Aisling. *"I've learned over thirteen hundred symbols and still*

encounter those I can't define."

"How much history have you learned with this handicap?"

"Enough to know what is important."

What importance does the past hold for those who no longer need it? I sank into a creaking chair and leaned into the biting wood.

"What do you call important?" Aisling asked.

Now, I like that question. Poke Mart just enough and he would growl. I watched Mart's face for any sign of irritation.

"What do you mean?" Mart countered.

"Everyone has a bias, a preference for what they learn and see. Just what have you been searching for in Luvk history?"

This little female just might stir up enough trouble to make life finally worth living. So, I was still a slave to a female. What whirled through Mart's mind given the contemplative expression on his face?

"I'm interested in reading how things happened." Mart went expressionless.

"Well, back on my home world, I began studying the history of extinct cultures with an interest in one specifically. But I learned to appreciate them all. And learned not to see what I wanted to see."

"*She just might change our world,*" Mart announced in mindpeak.

She already had just in telling us about the councils running her realm on her home world. A realm without queens. But her true purpose would be secret until she got what she wanted. And the blessed stars know I've yet to encounter a female who could be trusted.

* * * *

Borun ground his teeth where he listened to the bickering Queens in the great hall. His mother's stupidity would instigate another war among the clans. The squabbling had to end now.

"I disagree. Wryn will make a fine queen for the Ice clan," Ishan bellowed and turned to Borun. "And Borun will gladly escort his sister to the Ice realm."

"No." How dare she command me now. "I serve the Marshal *now*. You'll have to find another Royal Guard to do your bidding."

Ishan turned the vilest glower my direction.

She actually believed she could command Aisling and I. "No Queen reigns over the Marshals. And I have First Mate rights over Aisling. I can't wander off on errands."

Chapter Eighteen

Aisling rolled over in her sleeping furs wondering where Borun had gone off to. What was he hearing? And just why did I feel so nauseated? I hadn't eaten anything. Maybe the queasiness was blood lust? If Borun would just get his sexy butt back here, he could remedy the sensation.

But we just shot up with blood a few hours ago. Why was I sick?

Nausea roiled in my gut.

I rolled over to try to shift the discomfort.

Lehd sat near the dancing flames.

Grabbing him and riding the discomfort into oblivion was an option. But I just don't think it wise to create friction between Borun and I and the other guards.

Shooting up with Borun's blood might work. Since Lehd wasn't watching, I administered a blood libation.

The nausea only intensified.

The pressure built, pushing upward, searing my esophagus.

God, I was going to puke. I threw myself at the edge of the sleeping skins and heaved.

I have to be sick. Would foreign alien Luvk germs kill me?

That's when I noticed Lehd's black boots at my side. I slid my gaze along their high shafts to the leather tags holding the sides of his pants together. His black stripes only toyed with my vision. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and met his concerned gaze.

"Are you ill, Aisling?"

Maybe. "I think so. Where's Borun?"

"His mother is on a tirade. He may not return for a while."

My gut settled down. "I think I'll just lie here and wait for him."

"Let me know if you need anything." Lehd rose to tower overhead.

I drifted in and out of sleep, tossing, and flopping. Why? I wasn't dying. I just felt miserable from time to time. The feeling came and went. What if I had some horrible disease that rarely bothered Luvks? My gaze slid to one of Borun's weapon displays near his bed.

He had every sort of cutting edge, long, short, or curved, set into every sort of what appeared to be wooden handle. If I'd felt better, I would have ventured over to handle a few. To contemplate ending my madness. Well, if Lehd wasn't so attentive. When would I realize sometimes it's better to just give into nature? To the darkness. And try to use Lehd to ease my misery?

"Aisling, Morna has brought dinner to the guards. Would you like to dine with us?"

Although it would be a dinner with Lords of various realms sharing all sorts of cultural information, I had to decline. "I don't think I can sit up. But go along without me. I can survive a few minutes alone."

Lehd departed through the bath.

For some strange reason, I finally drifted asleep. Until my gut roiled again. I jolted awake, scrambling for the bed's edge where I hurled again.

Just what in the hell was happening? I felt so grimy that I headed to the bath to wash my

face.

Gravity wasn't with me. The room spun a little. But I grabbed at a leaning wall and managed to stumble to the edge of the pool's whirling water. Well, looking at the swirling bubbles only made my vision whirl.

I grabbed for something else to steady me and fell onto my palms.

My gut boiled with acid.

Cold sweat dimpled my brow.

Water. I just need some water. I reached for some without looking.

Bile shot up my throat.

I heaved and heaved until there wasn't anything else left to purge from my stomach. I splashed some on my face.

The pool smeared into a blur of light.

I fell.

Into my puke. Why did *aw man* come to mind? But I felt suddenly clear-headed. I yanked off my shirt and shoved it into the water.

"Aisling, are you alright?" Lehd asked from the door to the guard's quarters.

Hell, I didn't have my shirt on. Not good with Mr. Puppy Love on my tail. "Uh, just a minute." I wrung the water from the fabric and trotted back into my room, closing the door behind me.

I found a clean tank top and thrust an arm through the sleeve.

Something dark on my abdomen caught my eye.

What was that? A coiling leafless vine. Darkened just enough to a strong gray.

What the Hell? Someone had snuck in and tattooed me. Maybe the ink they used was making me sick? Maybe the culprit was still in my room? I yanked on my shirt and grabbed a long-handled-death-sticky thing from Borun's collection hanging on the wall near my sleeping skins. "Lehd!"

He burst through the door.

I should have known he'd be on the other side. "Someone was in here."

He started searching the room. Before the massive bundle of predator had taken two steps, the other guards were stalking the room's shadows.

Lehd neared me. "Put that weapon away before you hurt yourself, Aisling."

"Don't patronize me. I can kill if I have to." I hope. I didn't have to yet.

Lehd chuckled and gently took the killing stick from me. "That's what we're here for." He hung it back on the wall and went back to work.

Standing there alone wasn't going to help me in the long run. I followed him. *Just in case.*

He worked his way around the room like the others until they all stood around me.

Looking at me like I was some idiot female. "Look, someone *was* here."

"Did you see anyone?" Mart asked.

"No. But I've been so sick. I figured I just caught something. Until I realized I was probably poisoned by," I raised my shirt to show Mart my abdomen, "whatever they used to give me this tattoo."

Mart tried not to laugh. But he did. And so did the others.

After puking my guts up, I had no patience for the insulting reaction. I glared.

Mart seemed to pull himself together, somewhat. "Aisling, nobody did that to you. It's the mark of a youngling."

A youngling?

Mart patted my shoulder. "You're pregnant. And I dare curse your luck by saying you're carrying two younglings."

What the Hell? "Huh?"

The room swayed a bit. I threw up a hand and found some warm iron muscles to block my fall.

"You'll be fine. Var, summon Borun. I'm certain he'd relish an excuse to leave his mother's side today. But only tell him Aisling is ill. I bet he'd like to discover this for himself."

Oh. Shit. I'm so not ready for children. Especially on a world in turmoil.

"Aisling?" Mart called. "Why do you look so distant?"

How could he know I'm pregnant? He was male. Males lived to impregnate females on Luvk. And kill each other. "I just feel a bit lightheaded."

"Come now."

Someone pulled my elbow. "Sit by the fire."

I was pushed down onto soft pillows.

"Everyone back to your duties. I'll sit with Aisling," Mart said.

Pillows shifted beside me.

All I could manage was staring at the dancing flames happily doing some exotic dance in the fire pit. Teasing me with silent taunts.

"Aisling," Mart gently patted my arm.

Couldn't he leave me alone? I slid my gaze to his broad sparkling smile.

"Most females are happy to learn they carry the mark of a youngling. And two! This is a monumental occasion. Aren't you happy?"

Babies. All was too fast. "I hadn't even thought about getting pregnant. Borun was there. All over me. Yes. But in charge. I just never—"

"But you knew what arose from mating?"

Of course. I almost glared at him. "I just wasn't thinking we'd end up with a child so soon. And it's almost impossible to have children in Marshal marriages. Or so the record goes."

His brow furrowed with thought. "Are you certain? Because a youngling gives you a reprieve from Kruk's demands. This is your answer to that problem."

"But on my home world, women choose to have babies. We choose to never have them too. And with my quest for knowledge, like yours, I chose not to have children as of yet in my life."

"But you're on Luvk now."

"Yes, I know." I searched his glowing blue-gray eyes for something to indicate he truly understood. Did he know how violent his people were? Yes, my guards were noble. But did I want to have a baby in this world?

The door swung wide.

Borun strode across the threshold in his mask like a killing machine.

My baby's father. Uh, the twins' father. His muscles working in his casual stride still managed to take my breath away.

He pulled off his mask and shot me a gaze dripping with concern. "Aisling? You're ill?"

Mart shot him a grin. "I think she'll be just fine." He rose and left the room by way of the bath, closing the door at the heels of his black boots.

Borun suddenly walked so determinedly that I couldn't think of anything but his approach. He'd been harassed by his mother all day. He definitely wasn't in the mood for

games. Not that I intended to toy with him. But the babies-are-coming alarm just sounded, and I wasn't ready.

Borun knelt beside me, all his muscles bulging in the side splits of his black pants. His elbows landed on his knees leaving his lower arms to dangle between his legs.

The concern in his golden eyes only made my heart sink.

What was I going to do? I just wanted to go cry on my bed. Scratch that. His bed. My life was total madness. Couldn't I have a moment to digest this new awareness, universe?

"What's wrong, little one?"

"I've been sick all day." What else could I say? I guess showing him was best. I pulled up the hem of my tank top.

His stare widened, softening. His chest shrank as his body forced every molecule of air from his lungs in one tumultuous jolt of realization. When his gaze slid back to mine, those eyes wielded so much emotion that tears welled up to burn my eyes.

I'd be damned if I didn't carry those babies for him.

He just stared at me.

Maybe he tried to breathe? I couldn't breathe either. The big dumb warrior was just as shocked as I was. I shoved up onto my knees and leaned between his. "Mart says there are two."

He nodded in slow motion, never blinking, never yielding my gaze.

"Aren't you happy?" He had to be by his reaction.

"I never thought I'd have a youngling."

I couldn't fight back the tears. If it killed me, he'd have two.

Chapter Nineteen

"Little one," Borun didn't want to say what had to be said as he gazed upon the tear trails painted upon his mate's cheeks, "I have never been happier." He pulled her against his chest and held her as she trembled. Mother would insist on sending me with Wryn now. But I didn't want to tell Aisling yet. Not until the problem arose.

She sniffed and pulled my head down until I stared into her gaze. "What did your mother do to you today? The others were muttering about it."

She would ask. I suppose honesty was my best recourse. "She wants me to escort my sister to a realm for a political marriage."

Aisling's jaw dropped. "But you can't leave me now."

"I have Breeding Rights. But that doesn't mean I have to stay with you. You're carrying my younglings now. The clans are troubled, little one. Nobody knows who is killing the Queens—"

"But I'm a target too. You showed me that when you had the guards search the lodge before I entered."

Why did the Marshal have to be so smart? "Look, little one, your guards can care for you long enough to allow me to take Wryn to her brood."

Aisling grimaced. "That sounds so horrible. Is she agreeable? Will the males even accept her? She's low-caste."

Those same thoughts were all I'd heard all day. "That's why Ishan wants me to escort Wryn."

"And you'll be attacked by rabid bastard warriors who don't care for the decision? I think Ishan's ideas serve a purpose but won't get her the results she wants."

Maybe so. "But there is no other choice."

"Does the deceased Queen have a daughter married to another clan? Have that daughter return to take the mother's throne."

I really don't want to throw in something else for Aisling to worry about. But she insisted on discussing this topic. "Her daughter died in childbirth."

Aisling's face went blank.

"You aren't dying in childbirth." I hugged her nose against my neck.

"You don't know that." Her warm breath singed my skin.

She was such a feisty thing. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Stop laughing. Pregnancy is a huge change for me. I'm in the process of dealing with all the things that could go wrong."

Oh what fortune the stars shower upon me. My mate is a pessimist. "Let's eat. You're probably starved working through the youngling mark. You should be able to keep food down now."

"Ugh." She didn't move. "Not after the day I've had. Keep your food."

"Well sit with me then. I'd love to rub your belly while I eat a Lord's meal."

* * * *

Mart sat patiently, almost watching Aisling, while she jotted down her key for the

symbols in Luvk's written language. Working with him over the past two days had become the one thing she truly enjoyed on Luvk. The one thing that reminded her of home. Throw in how he looked like one of those damned medieval princes with his cropped shoulder length kinky black hair... And dastardly black stripes dominated his beard. He was all sex and power. Where is Borun?

I really needed to focus on my hobby of translating ancient text, or I'm going to have to explain to Borun why I seem to want to have sex twenty-four-seven. Maybe it's the pregnancy hormones. The tattoo had some effect on my physical state. But I just can't seem to find a peaceful satiated state. At least the nausea only comes about every twelve hours. This aching groin has got to go!

"Is something wrong?" Mart asked.

I blinked, realizing I stared at him while deep in my lusty thoughts.

My hand trembled so much from the blood lust that I had to squeeze the quill like it was a poisonous snake I gripped just behind its head.

Where in the hell was Borun? I'd been pregnant two days and his mother wouldn't leave him alone. "Can we arrange Ishan's death next? She's pissing me off."

Mart's concern metamorphosed into a sexy conspiratorial gaze.

And oh the way those shimmering gray-blue eyes glimmered could really light fires among Luvk females. No wonder they had a preference for blue eyes.

"You shouldn't joke about that, Aisling." He tapped the leather where I studiously focused to scratch out lines and dots matched by their equivalent in English with the tip of a quill and my handy dandy caveman ink.

But my damned blood was racing. Hot. Gurgling like it was about to explode into steam. I just needed Borun. Or Mart would be growling instead of grinning. I dipped the quill's point into the creamy black ink and turned back to my glyph of mountain.

My hand shook where I poised the quill.

Certainly Mart saw my problem. Hell. Muscles poised everywhere in my peripheral vision. *Everyone* saw my shaking hand.

My heart raced like a demon chased me.

God, they had to hear the runaway organ.

"Aisling?" Mart asked.

Yes. He heard my raging lust. I carefully placed the quill down on the leather document I'd created and rose, trying not to look into those eyes that seemed to read my soul. But they couldn't. No, Aisling. They only hear your heartbeat. Play off your dark thoughts of a fuck fest by acting sick. Confuse them until Borun arrives for therapeutic sex. "I'm not feeling well. I think I'll go nap." I managed to skirt the table without losing sight of the wooden table top.

Nobody graced me with questions loaded with concern. Instead, I passed through the darkness of the bath.

The pool's glowing light drew me to its hard rim where I stood staring into the bubbling swirls like a mosquito at a bug zapper.

Was there any place on this planet where I could just sit and forget my stress? Where is Borun? Maybe floating in the relaxing warm water would help? I marched back to the well-lit rectangular doorway and shut out Lehd's form where he stood anchoring the wall on the guard's side in full duty stance, guarding me.

Thank God he didn't argue how he should protect me with the door open. I stripped off my clothing quickly while walking back to the pool and stepped into the warm massaging water.

Slowly it licked up my legs to my calves, hungrily, sexually, luring me deeper into its intoxicating whirl of lust. If I called out Lehd's name. If... He would come to me. All love-sick eyes. All his incredible muscles. And where would I be? Straddling the crevasse of morality. Was it even possible to love more than one male at a time? It seemed logical a person could. But to love so many? Impossible. But morality was relative given some cultures practiced polyandry back home.

A chill shook me.

But sometimes, multiple spouses just worked. My problem with the concept was some deep inner thing buried beneath an unfathomable amount of cultural brainwashing. Yes, universe, I realize people in the United States weren't truly monogamous. Serial monogamy only feigned monogamy in the idea of devoting oneself to an individual but, through divorce, allowed a person to have multiple mates. One at a time though. The concept of having more than one husband is just new to me. And desire was natural. I just had to embrace my needs and forgive myself of the damned lead chest I hauled around as cultural baggage.

Was it even possible for me to recondition myself?

Everything circled back to *possible* these days. At least the risk of my murder had dwindled into Borun allowing me to be alone in my personal quarters. Having Lehd's undivided attention was wearing down my last vestiges of the Aisling I knew back on Earth. But back when I walked through that portal, I knew my past life was simply that. Past. Gone. And here was my new reality. I floated over to the pool's ledge and sat.

My feet dangled in the whirlpool of change.

The door creaked behind me.

What now? Can't I be left to flounder in my misery?

Black boots paused in my periphery. Then knees jutted into view as the warrior descended into a squat.

Most likely Lehd. Should I care if the man saw my nude body? I don't. He'd do me a service yanking me out of the pool and ramming my madness into an orgasm. That's all I needed. Rough. Hot. Sex.

"Mart says you're ill, little one."

My heart dove into the bottom of the pool.

Borun.

"Aisling? Your *heartsong* says otherwise."

I choked back tears of relief rising at the sound of Borun's voice and shifted my seat until I could look into his golden eyes.

Could he see my need? He was about to. I pushed up from the pool's firm rim to look him in the eye.

His hand gently curled around my jaw and held me where he wanted me. "What is it?"

I'm dying. It's as much your fault as mine. I held out my hands. They shook like mate meters. "I need you." Did I even need to say those words?

He pulled me up and carried me to the stack of furs where he left me in trembling heap to undo his pants. He moved like darkness, invisible in the room's shadows, then crouched over me, slowly lowering his glowing eyes down to within an inch of mine.

Shut up and kiss me came to mind.

His hot breath caressed my cheeks.

But still he said nothing.

"Borun," I whispered.

His lips fluttered against mine.

Not his ordinary act of possessing me. I slid my palms up the supple iron of his arms.

His lips sucked across my cheek, down to my neck, and forced me to look away from the bit of light cast by the pool.

Who cared about the light? My nipples were so hard that the still air hurt them. If only he nibbled the pain into softness.

* * * *

Borun relished in the fact his mate only wanted him as he inhaled her unique clean scent at the bend of her neck. He knew the bath's darkness shrouded the truth. My thoughts are corrupt to her guards. Was I wrong in wanting to keep her to myself? But I couldn't refuse her. I wanted her. And only for me. Was I any different than Aisling in refusing the other Royal Guards by allowing her disrespect of them? I should do the honorable thing and call in one of the other warriors to please her. Not this time. I greedily grabbed a handful of her breast.

She groaned and arched the soft flesh into my hand.

If the Queens' orbs glowed overhead, I'd see the dark red nipple. The bead that would burst into a pink blossom if I fed upon the bud.

Her fingers raked into my queue and shoved my mouth down to feed. "Borun," she groaned.

What was one more time bedding her before I departed for the Ice realm? Before I left her with her guards? I trailed the tip of my tongue around the tiny fleshy knot she begged me to work.

She hissed and arched against my mouth.

Her blood lust blazed. More than mine. Was this because of her planet of origin? She said her species was more susceptible to the blood lust. I needed to heal her. To heal both of us. I sucked her soul's pearl into my mouth and clamped my teeth around the bead until she writhed between my legs.

Bless the stars I hadn't settled down between her thighs, or I'd be pounding home in her hot flesh already. This would be the last time I satiated her blood lust for days. I didn't want to waste this moment in one heated thrust. I sucked the softening nipple between my teeth until it stretched across my tongue. Until the mark of the youngling called. I crawled down, kissing her flinching belly, tracing out the mark of two babes in her womb.

Slowly, methodically, I planted a kiss along each scrolling vine—symbols of growing life somehow magically appearing on every female's abdomen. Each vine meandered down her midline to her navel where I loved to trace out the small circle, sending her *heartsong* racing as if my hardness thrust into her very soul.

Her *heartsong* played the song her consorts would kill to hear as she flinched beneath my body.

But I still had to taste her. One last taste to carry me through my journey ahead. I rose enough to slide my hand between her damp thighs.

One of her knees fell aside.

I loved how she opened herself to me. I slid my palm along the silkiness of her inner thigh, down to the delicate touch of her curls I couldn't erase from my memory. And memory would have to carry me through the days ahead. For now, I'd revel in making love to her. I spread her soft folds wide, bearing her sex, and circled her clit with my thumb.

Her hips rocked. She managed to lift her head and found my gaze, gasping for breath. Her head fell back to rock away her agony.

Blood lust or not, I reveled in her reactions to me. I knew how to get an even better one. I leaned down and sucked that salty pebble.

She bucked wildly, riding the war beast.

Oh to bring her close to climax. To make her ready for me. I nibbled the nub, relishing the way I could make her quiver and groan.

“Borun!”

My mate desired a ride through the meadows. And I could give her the release she yearned for. Over and over. I shoved up onto my palms and made my way up along her quaking abdomen to clamp onto her nipple.

She groaned and squirmed, looking up to watch me grate her tender flesh from root to tip with my teeth. I switched breasts and kneaded the other taut stone into a soft peak. Into long a long point I could suckle like a famished youngling.

Her mouth gaped. “Borun, inside me. I want you inside me.” She grounded her head against the pile of furs and ran her warm palms across my shoulders, lingering on the straps of my halter.

She wanted to ride me. And I’d take her over the palace gates. I plunged my aching shaft inside the mouth of her tight flesh.

We both groaned together, as if we were already one.

As it should be.

My lower abdomen muscles pumped molten blood into my engorged member. So much that I had to hold my breath, or I’d explode. Aisling’s shuddering channel milked me nonetheless. Tempting me. Teasing me into wasting this last time we’d have together before I saw Wryn safely to the Ice clan.

“Borun!”

Well, I had good intentions. I withdrew and thrust, and withdrew and thrust until there was nothing but the pulse of blood rushing through my erection and the beat of her blood in her womb. We rode the war beast out to Realm’s Edge and out into the crashing surf. Beyond the land of the living into the Waters of the Dead. Down into the silence of sea beasts and pulsing almost nonexistent sounds. Here we clutched each other, her nails clawing my back. But time caught up with us, stealing away with every breath we could gasp, leaving us trembling, gulping for air. I settled my brow on the throb of blood in her neck and waited for our bodies to slowly calm after the blue light faded between us.

Her palms slid across my shoulders.

Seductively.

I knew very little could keep me from lying here. Practically nothing could tear me away. But the clans desperately needed someone to unite them. Change was upon the realms. And she had empowered me to begin the transformation. Her proposal of a political alliance had sparked my options. And I had to act now.

She would have to change her ways also.

She would have to accept the Royal Guards she teased with her presence.

Or those shaking hands would drive her mad.

And the guards desired her. Mart smiled all the time now that she spent her days working under his nose. She had Lehd kneeling at her feet with want. Which of the others would be next? And all the while I’m forced to argue with Mother over leading an expedition into the Ice realm with Wryn. Aisling had to come around. She had to give into her Royal Guard and allow me to make this journey for our sanity. For the Luvks.

Aisling inhaled a deep breath, her chest rising beneath me.
How could I confess what I must do for the Luvks? “Little one?”
“Yes,” she whispered.
So much passion filled that word that my heart stopped beating.
“Little one, I must leave tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty

Aisling just laid there in the darkness of the bath with her exhausted mate's weight pinning her down atop the drying furs. Good thing, she thought. Or I'd run. "You can't leave me, Borun. You're my blood mate. And now, more than ever, I need you nearby."

Her *heartsong* resonated the same tune.

"I must do this for all Luvks. I must try to bring them together even though all Ishan wants is to increase her power." His golden eyes glowed as he rose to prop his head on a palm where he could look down at me. "Aisling, we have the syringes. I will only be gone a few days ride there and back. As Marshals, we should be involved, monitoring this shift in politics to ensure no one is hurt. Especially a female who can't protect herself."

But what about me? What about my morals? What about my needs? Doesn't it matter I've sacrificed so much to be a part of this great social transformation he thinks he's starting? "What if you're killed? What if I'm left here with two syringes of blood? That's twenty days of life. What about your children?"

"Little one, you are strong. You have the strongest warriors here to protect you. And they can provide you with any distractions you require to wait out my return."

He implied I should take them all to my bed. "Borun, I never knew my father because men on my home world don't respect the women they mate. They leave them pregnant. Leave them alone to raise their children. And feeding the young is not as easy as hunting or fishing. Yes, my world is very different. But it's truly the same if you look long enough. My mother encouraged me to educate myself so I would never have to rely on a man." I tried to shove out from beneath his massive body. "And I feel like I'm right back where she was when she told my father she was pregnant. You are my blood mate. You and I have a bond that can't be broken. I don't understand how you can leave me here."

"Our worlds are very different. Luvk males aren't like Earth males. And I will be back in ten days."

Ten days of Hell...

* * * *

Borun quickly chose his weapons while his mate scoured Mart's scrolls in the guards' quarters. Quietly leaving the lodge early would make things easier for both of us, he decided. She wouldn't be sulking. And I could prepare the caravan. I pushed out with my mind, searching for Mart.

"Yes, Borun?" Mart replied.

"Is Aisling with you?"

"Right here. Working on her dictionary."

"Keep her there. When she begins acting strangely, see if her hands are shaking."

"They've been shaking for a short while."

I needed to disappear before Aisling cornered me. There would be no refusing her. "That's the sign."

"What sign?"

"She has to mate often." I wouldn't tell him it's because of a blood bond. There was no

need to create animosity between her guards. Favoritism would only cause more problems. *"It's part of Earth pregnancies. Stay with her. Give her anything she requests."*

"Anything?"

"Whatever she asks for. We are of the same Royal Guard now. Even more, consorts. We serve Aisling."

"She is strong-willed."

That I knew more than anyone. *"And you must be even stronger. For her sake. For the sake of the Luvks as well."*

"I understand."

"And if you see Kruk, kill him."

* * * *

Later that evening, Aisling sat next to Mart who had kindly stopped flirting with her. But working with scripts and linguistics for an archaeologist was just as big a turn on as any devilish grin or seductive arch of a brow. So I kept my gaze focused on my work and off of the warrior. As much as possible given my hands kept shaking.

Boy, I sat with a prince. For the first time it dawned on me that these Royal Guards were royalty, not just guards. The prince taught me his written language. A gorgeous prince. I'm in so much trouble.

Mart leaned close, stretching his muscled striped arm across the leather he read from, in front of me, beneath my nose, and against my knuckles. "Aisling, this line speaks of the borderlands before the portal brought the Slakens to Luvk." Mart's clean nail on his white fingertip pointed to the far column of text near the top of the hide.

Gooseflesh warmed my arms.

He either purposely touched me or tried to get my attention. Especially after what they had to hear take place after I entered the bath earlier today. Damn them for their exceptional hearing.

"Do you see the circle containing the two slashes cut with a third?"

"Yes." Anything to get his addictive skin away from mine. Where was Borun?

"This mark notes time. It is a symbol of the year seventeen-hundred and forty-eight."

They kept time in a way similar to a method on Earth? She slid her gaze to his silver eyes.

His gaze lingered upon her lips.

Oh shit. Time to think fast. Talk about time. "How did the ancients calculate that measurement of time?"

He pulled his arm back across the leather, barely rubbing the back of my hand, diverting his gaze as if I wouldn't notice his touch. "We still use the method although most don't do more than count the years." He proceeded to explain they used a base-ten system with centuries and millennia.

The universe seemed to nucleate toward that particular method of noting time. But what of the beginning point? Was there some trigger event that set the scribe ticking away years on a rock or hide like the birth of Christ for the West back home? "What did they use to anchor their counting system? A monumental event is usually the zero point."

His eyes flashed appreciatively.

Was that respect?

"Explain what you studied to me?" He leaned onto an elbow but still towered over me.

"Culture. What it is to be human on my home world. How a group of people changes

through time. The measurement of time would be an aspect of the people.”

He nodded. “And you studied war?”

“Oh yes.” Enough to know I didn’t care for it.

“This war,” he waved at the scripts, “nearly annihilated the Luvks. We went through a period of offering our most prized high-castes as slaves to the Slakens. Daughters and sons. Anything to appease their voracious appetite for possessing our finest possessions.”

And my children are being born into this world. Where was Borun? He’d explain again how safe I would be without him. I shoved up from the sturdy table top and skirted the wood.

Lehd and Var shot me concerned glances.

These princes could kiss my ass goodbye. Borun had some explaining to do. I strode in and out of darkness into the bright light cast by the orb lights in my personal quarters. But Borun was nowhere to be found.

“He’s gone,” Mart said behind me. “He left for the Ice realm not long ago. He said to tell you he’d return in ten days. That you shouldn’t worry.”

Worry? I stood with my back to him and held up my palms.

They trembled.

Not at the thought of losing my blood mate.

The blood lust was talking.

And I’d already found myself entranced by Mart’s damned grin. What next? Just submit to desire? I turned to the red and purple pillows surrounding my fire pit’s golden flames and tried to descend upon them with as much grace and dignity as my needy body could muster.

Mart knelt beside me.

All those muscles bulged along the split running the length of his leather pants. Even more above his lean waistline. I couldn’t bring myself to look into his eyes. To see what those mirrors reflected of his thoughts. To know he could sense my dilemma. Or that he relished it. God, anything to avoid seeing what the reflection showed of myself.

How was I wrong in being attracted to the guards? They were my mates. My consorts. And that meant nothing to anyone back home because nobody knew. Who would care? My mother was dead. Yet my mother was probably the force behind my convictions. And principles were learned. I learned from my mother that men weren’t there for you, if only in how her life panned out. And I’d be damned if any suave bastard was going to get the best of me. But I couldn’t find one thing about these males that irked me. Other than the obvious that they were in line to prove willing mates. Could they leave me? Yes. But their culture placed them in my care. Why were the two so disconnected for me?

“Aisling?”

I’m not ready to talk to anyone. But he wasn’t going away. Nor was my blood lust. I had to think of something fast. I looked at him sideways.

Mart wore Lehd’s thoughtful expression.

My hands shook.

Crap. I pulled up my knees and locked my arms around them, tucking my hands into my elbows.

“You’re angry at Borun?”

What an odd question. “Wouldn’t you be?”

“He is Luvk. It’s our way.”

“The Luvk way to abandon a mate?” I snorted. “I left a planet full of males like that behind.” Okay, maybe I was stretching the truth to a generalization. But these warriors seemed

to think I was naïve. And I didn't blame Borun for escorting his sister. Borun helped a weaker female who probably faced one of the hardest things to happen to her in her life. Like me. But I couldn't afford to let Mart think I wasn't angry.

Mart's black eyebrows pinched together. "You've mentioned this from time to time. What do you mean?"

Telling him probably was cruel. Shocking. Why do I want to? Did the answer matter? I was being forced to change my worldview. "I never knew my father. He left my pregnant mother to scrounge for food and housing. To give birth to me and rear me alone. That isn't easy to forget."

Mart blinked and leaned upon the pillows at my side with enough ease to appear reclining at ease with his boots stretched out toward the fire. "This world you speak of once sounded so exemplary. But now all I hear is disconcerting. Females study war. Males do not care for their younglings? How can there be any logic if neither males nor females know where their duties lie?"

That's culture shock.

"These males you speak of have no honor." He sighed and hooked a finger at me, calling me over conspiratorially.

What did he want? What would he do? And now I was trapped with *them*. Alone. All five of my Royal Guards. Without Borun to cut them off at the pass. Just how do I hide my shaking hands? Or my goddamned pounding heart? Even worse, just what did Borun tell them before he left?

He kept signaling me to lean over.

Alright. What would happen? He'll be the gentleman or won't. And the way my hands are shaking, either would do. I carefully canted toward him.

He just laid there, propped upon his elbow, leather-encased legs crossed where they thrust away from his body.

That wild dark hair. Those black leather pants. He was *darkness*. And I was falling into him. God he was gorgeous. And I'm so damned weak. I managed to plant an elbow beside his and arched my brow inquisitively.

He moved his nose to within two inches of mine. "I don't trust Lehd," he whispered. "He's soft. Vulnerable to your smiles."

He was not going to attack poor Lehd. "You're awful. He's a big puppy. Bigger than you. He'd snap you like a twig if he knew you said that."

He snorted and extended a palm. "Give me your hand."

What in the hell for? "Maybe I'd rather give it to Lehd."

He just waited with his palm ready.

Obviously unaffected by my insult. Why not? How could the day get any worse? I placed my hand against his warm skin.

He curled his fingers around my palm. "That wasn't so bad. Was it?"

My heart took a nose dive and raced enough to answer for me.

He was such a wily pirate type.

"You're shaking, Aisling."

What went through his mind? "I'm not afraid of you if that's what you're thinking." Just afraid of myself. Of giving into the enormous fear of losing control.

"Borun explained to me what was happening to you."

Not what I wanted to hear. But his damned hand felt so good. All that warm supportive

skin. I just stared at the black stripes forming exotic points down the sides of his wrist.

His finger alighted under my chin and tugged my gaze back to meet his. "Tell me what you require to be comfortable, and you will have it."

Those gentle silver eyes begged I relent. Entreated me to cross over the line and just give into my soul's quaking message. "I need my mate here with me. And he's abandoned me."

"No." He shook his head, making his loose hair wag around his dark beard. "Borun will return. If he doesn't, I'll take my life to avoid seeing I lied to you."

My heart pattered in his defense.

No. I wouldn't let him kill his adoring self.

His fingers slid around my jaw line to gently cup my face. "I'll prove to you Luvk males are not like Earth males, that our mates are our very reason for existence." His fingers tickled into the hairs behind my ear, and his gaze followed where they wandered.

He sighed so softly I couldn't breathe.

Just make that beautiful sound again. I watched him study me. Waiting.

"We have so little here, Aisling," he whispered, running his other palm over the back of my hand to curl his fingers around my wrist and stroked my skin with a delicate flick of his fingers. His gaze slid back to mine. "So little." He leaned forward.

Closer and closer. His hand in my hair cupped my head.

Holding me while he brushed his soft lips against mine.

My heart liquefied.

Every part of my body ached to touch that mouth that gently worshipped mine. The mouth opening to me. The tongue tempting me to slip into the coma of him. My soul ached to dive into his. Pleaded with me touch his hair.

My fingers wove into the kinks of his silken tresses. Searched for something to hold onto. Anything to keep him there in reverence of our kiss.

The universe shifted and whirled with the moist heat of his mouth.

But he didn't disappear. I felt his iron body stretch the length of mine as his tongue explored my mouth, sucking on my tongue.

My soul gushed out of me so quickly I dared not release his, or I'd be doomed to dissolve into nothingness. I wanted him so badly that I couldn't move. Dared not open my eyes to find all of this a sick joke. Worse than Borun's departure. I hid in the darkness behind my eyelids.

"Aisling," he whispered against the corner of my mouth. "Do you want me to stop touching you?"

God don't. I slid a palm around his supple arm to his back and latched onto his harness strap. "No," I gasped into the darkness.

His mouth scorched kisses along my jaw to my ear. "No more fear," he whispered. "I'll take care of you, sweet one." His lips retreated.

He backed away.

What happened? I opened my eyes.

Brilliant light showered us where I laid against his body under his scrutiny.

Yes, he'd take care of me. And if he didn't hurry, I'd be the one doing the caretaking.

* * * *

Mart feared the wild racing of Aisling's heart would send her bolting for the forest if he slid his hands down the curves he'd fantasized about touching since he first laid eyes upon her. Since she'd chosen me as her consort, he gulped down a growl. But her beauty finally rested in my arms. Almost on my rigid manhood. And if she made the slightest move, she'd certainly

realize the kind of care I offered.

Oh her divine mouth barely gaped at me, sucking shallow breaths into soothe her soul. The soul that had escaped my touch for so agonizingly long. What would she allow of me this first time I held her? By her grip on my harness, she wasn't going to let me get away. Not like her foolish Marshal.

Her grip tightened on my leather strap, pulling, until she slid across my body to straddle my waist.

She stared down at me.

Blessed stars, just to touch her. But touching meant she might bolt.

She yanked at her hair pulled up neatly behind her head. The mass suddenly fell into one cascading waterfall of pure white waves. Her sky blue eyes watched me through the gently curtaining hair, the silk.

Gods to touch it. I almost had to sit on my hands to control the urge. Just not to frighten her.

Her hands fell to her waist to yank her white shirt over her head.

Nothing was more beautiful than the feminine white top she hid beneath her clothing. Somehow, her people wove flowers along the edges of what appeared to be a female's breeding shirt. And I couldn't wait for the news to leak out that she carried younglings. Her exquisite body in breeding garb would set the seven realms into chaos. We'd all have better things to do than sit around a guard's lodge and discuss writing.

"Mart." She grabbed my hand and lifted it toward her. "Give me your finger."

Anything she asked.

"Here." She tucked my fingertip between the curves of her breast, the sweetest curves I'd ever touch, beneath a small hard square, using her fingers to pull up my thumb and show me how the mechanism opened with a pinch, revealing the luscious bulges of the undersides of her breasts.

"You'll need to know that," she whispered.

The blood pounded in my manhood. And I couldn't breathe. Waiting any longer to touch her would be torture. To shove back that garment and cup those splendid mounds...

"Touch me, Mart. I'm yours."

The world slipped away. All that existed was Aisling. Her curves. Her shower of hair brushing my skin where she sat upon my waist as I slid my hands beneath the opening of her top. Along the rise of her sweetest curves.

Her eyes shut and her head leaned back.

Nothing was more beautiful than my mate in my hands. Except the feel of the rough beads of her taut nipples against my palms. Gods to roll her over and ravish her. But I didn't want to scare her after the days I'd spent trying to secure her friendship. Anything to reassure her I wasn't a beast she undoubtedly thought I was compared to the males back on Earth.

She arched her soft mounds into my hands, then leaned over, pushing my palms down. Down until she crouched over my body, those beaded nipples barely scraping my chest. Now who was the beast?

How could any warrior just lie here and wait for his prey? But the trap was what hunting was all about. She will be mine after this.

Her crystalline gaze locked on mine in the hungriest look I'd ever seen from a female. She crawled up to stare into my eyes, pressing the tip of her nose against mine. Her gaze raked across my face, to my mouth, where she suddenly devoured it with the heat of her own.

Hot. Ravenous. Everything about her kiss made me yearn to rip off my leathers and lie her on her back.

Her beautiful face backed away. She almost pouted with confusion. "I need you, Mart."

I'd been released from my shackles. I slid my hands down her lean back. Down the curves to her hard little ass, to press her groin into my aching manhood, and shoved up to stare into her eyes. We sat, measuring each other, until my swollen shaft throbbed against her.

Her eyes closed so slowly as if the anticipation of what I could do to her ate at her being. Her smooth hands slid up my chest into my hair where she pulled me down to stare at her, nose to nose. "I need you inside me, Mart."

No warrior could refuse her. I curled her legs around my waist. Their tightening demanded I comply. I rose, lifting her, carrying her to the sleeping skins. Borun's, yes. But the fool had left.

One of her palms slid down to my shoulder where she began to agonizingly pet my body. Not for long. I yanked off her boot.

She fumbled with her pants.

She was more than willing. I yanked off the rest of the boots between us and unbuttoned my leathers.

She rose onto her knees and reached to pull them down. "You're built like a god." Her hot palms slid onto my waist and beneath my pants. "Strong and glorious."

She'd better get my accursed leathers off.

Slowly, she pushed my pants down with the sides of her hands, running her palms down the length of both of my legs, stopping, planting that sucking mouth on my thigh.

She could be my goddess.

My knees buckled. I kicked off my leathers and knelt at her side. She grabbed my hand, laid back, pulling my hand with her, luring me along. I could either just take her quick or try to slowly suffer in making love to her.

"Mart!" she growled where her hair pooled around her head like a cloud.

The little queen. I couldn't help but chuckle.

"What is it with you warriors torturing your mates?" She spread her legs.

The word *mate* was all it took to land me inside a volcano where the heat squeezed at my hard shaft in such an intoxicating way I wanted to explode like the Smoking Lands. I drove hard and deep into Aisling's wetness.

She moaned and writhed, her hands gripping my ass with so much strength I almost choked.

She snaked her legs around my waist.

When did a female respond so willingly? I paused and stared down into her blue eyes.

"Mart!"

That demanding tone only made my body throb. I slid a hand along her inflexible arm to her rigid wrist. "I'm not going anywhere, sweet one. Ease up on your grip. I want to take my time." At least attempt to. We had ten days to figure out how to get used to making love like civilized people.

She sighed and her legs slid away, her palms dancing across my muscles. "There's a difference between taking your time and doing nothing at all."

Yes, there was. "I can't read your mind, Aisling. I can only fear I'm frightening you."

She rose to plant a soft kiss on my upper arm, watching me with her gaze. "From now on, remember I'm not afraid of you. *I need you.*" She settled back onto the sleeping furs and

matched my pumping with her small hips.

Need was a relative term. Especially in my case, I needed to furiously thrust along the channel of her hot vise. To drape her panting form with my completely satiated body. To... I couldn't stop pounding into pleasure.

She yanked at my halter on my back and cried out over and over.

Her body suddenly shuddered around my pulsing shaft. But she never stopped matching my movements. Never let go of me. She rode me extracting every drop of my seed from my body until I could do nothing but barely shove into her delicious heat and growl.

A blue light flashed between our bodies.

Only for the length of one breath.

And she sighed, watching me, clutching a fistful of my harness.

I dare not move. Not speak. For something passed between us. Something vaguely connected to that light.

Her fingers released the strap at my shoulder.

Blessed stars, I didn't want her to let me go. Nor would she get away. I bent my stiff elbows, sinking down atop her panting breast and tucked my arms around her.

Her hair smelled of meadow flowers where my nose rested against her ear.

She turned her gaze to me. "Thank you."

I'd never in all my days heard my mother express her gratitude. But Aisling wasn't a queen. "You don't ever have to thank me, sweet one."

"Isn't there some law about touching?"

Yes. But we were alone and she was ill. And we were mates. I nodded.

She slid a palm along my cheek. "Thank you for pushing me. I felt like I was going to die."

* * * *

Something niggled at the back of Aisling's mind while she scoured the Luvk scrolls with Mart later that night. He'd been more than adequate in bed once he'd loosened up and just run with his wants and desires. Two more times... And with the translation of the text, he'd slowly helped me reconstruct a scant lattice of Luvk history. But so many details were left to my imagination. And imaginations could get an archaeologist into trouble. I needed to look at the history a different way. "You really don't have any maps? Or do you keep those for yourself?"

"Just a moment." Mart scanned the others sitting around us, rose, and disappeared into the shadows beyond the fire pit.

Lehd stretched out upon his sleeping skins, one knee propped up with an arm rested upon it. Too sexy. He watched me with a hint of curiosity.

Or was that longing he shot my direction from the shadows? I hadn't thought much beyond lying with Mart in my furs. Mart had saved me from blood lust. He'd even proven genuine and loving. But now I faced the fact that the others would feel rejected. Especially Lehd. I'd probably always have a soft spot for him. I suppose I'd have to let him touch that soft spot. Later. When my hands started shaking.

Lehd just stared a hole through me as if he dared me to deny him his turn.

My heart sank into my gut, and a chill feathered through me.

He *could not* be denied.

Wouldn't.

Mart stepped between our gazes.

One muscled mass replacing another. I blinked to get back to business.

Mart unfolded a few leather scrolls and stacked the curling hides upon the table. "What do you want to know?"

Jesus. He had hidden a mountain of information. "Everything."

He chuckled a sexy sound deep inside his chest.

Another chill skittered through me.

These men were so damned seductive. Maybe that's why Queens took so many consorts. They couldn't choose just one. But there has to be some logic behind self-control and one mate. Or the standard mating system wouldn't have worked so well back on Earth.

Mart pulled one hide out of the stack. "Here are the realms."

Realms were good. "Can I write on this map?"

One of his black eyebrows arched.

Maybe he didn't want me to mark up his treasure. "I just want to add layers."

He sank in the chair beside me. "Of course."

That reply resonated with reluctance. "If you have something I can write on, I'll gladly make my own."

"No. What's mine is yours." He shot me a sparkling grin.

Dark and dastardly. Or just a bit territorial as if he knew exactly what Lehd had been up to while he foraged for maps. But Lehd had a lot of work to do to walk in Mart's boots after the way Mart made love to me.

"Well, then, where are the ruins?" I asked.

"I don't have a map of them."

Ruins must hold little significance to the Luvks. "Let's make one."

He nodded. "I know the general location of most ancient cities."

That's better than nothing. I grabbed my quill.

He pointed to the sketch of a square encircled with a circle on the east side of the map. "This is the realm of my birth, Sunrise realm." He leaned closer to me, his bulging biceps right beneath my nose, with the faintest growl in his throat. "The city ruins are here."

Was he staking a claim with Lehd's behavior across the room? Time to change the subject. I quickly made a dot where Mart's finger touched the map. "Okay, what about these other realms?"

Lehd was on his feet, crossing the space so quickly I feared a fight was imminent. "Don't forget the Sunset realm." He shot me a wink and planted a finger near another square inside a circle on the opposite side of the map. "Here is the location of our ancient city, Treklos. On the coast, Aisling. My clan ruled the seas."

Mart threw his head back laughing. "I don't recall that bit of history."

Lehd's gaze shrank to a slit. "Because the Sunrise clan was nothing more than cowards."

Mart's laughter died.

Blood was about to flow. "Var! Ovh! Proy!" Where in the hell were the other guards?

Chapter Twenty-One

The door to the guard's quarters flew open behind Aisling. Thank goodness, she shouted inwardly.

Golden Var stormed into the room wearing his war mask with some type of spear in hand.

He just stood there like I was in charge. "They're fighting." I pointed at the two children at the table. "Can the rest of you guys hang them from the rafters?"

Lehd made a yeah-right sound.

Okay, maybe he was as big as Borun. But three against one when the three were only an inch shorter had to equate to some type of advantage.

* * * *

Var almost spat where he stood looking at the two Royal Guards who had gotten him summoned before the Marshal. This was absolutely ludicrous, he thought. "*What are you arguing about?*"

Mart leaned back into the crook of his chair. "*He said the Sunset clan used to rule the seas.*"

"*They did,*" Lehd replied.

Aisling glanced back and forth between the dolts at the table and me. "I can't mindspeak." She anchored a determined gaze upon me. "You have to speak aloud."

"The dispute is as old as time, Aisling. And long since dead." I glared at the two guards. "Besides, it matters little which clan ruled what since the Queens claimed the thrones."

Proy darted through the bath's doorway.

Ovh emerged from the back of the guards' lodge.

Both simultaneously. "Mart and Lehd are frightening Aisling with ancient quarrels."

Proy and Ovh each took a stand beside the two guilty guards who now tried to act as if nothing had taken place.

"*What would Borun do to you if he was here?*" I asked them.

Mart smacked his lips.

Not the reaction I'd expect from a Royal Guard who finally mated. He and Lehd undoubtedly squabbled about female territorial rights. "*She chooses.*"

Both shot me petulant glances.

"*Let's hope this is the last time you shame yourselves before Borun returns.*" As if they thought bickering over ancient feuds would win a queen's favoritism. But it was good to see Aisling didn't respond to their actions. Although Queens caused nothing but problems. I nodded respectfully to Aisling and returned to my duty guarding the door.

* * * *

What in the heck just happened, Aisling wondered. I just asked where the ancient cities were located. And then the guards flipped out. Talk about jealousy. Okay, next time I need to mate, Lehd's up to bat. Even Stephen on the playing field. Whether Mart bitches or whines. But I'd finish the map to prove I was in charge. "Proy, Ovh, I need you to show me where the ruins of your realms' ancient cities are located."

Lehd returned to lounge deliciously upon his sleeping skins. Mart just leaned into his chair.

Proy and Ovh pointed to the leather. I drew dots, thanked them, and returned to the pile of maps. Proy returned to guard the exterior door to my personal quarters. Ovh just lurked.

Obviously to monitor whatever else occurred. Thank goodness. I could use some reason while dogpaddling in this sordid sea of sex games. I sucked in a deep breath and yanked out a map that had held some interesting dot patterns. "What is noted on this hide?"

"Sky demon attacks."

Mart seemed ready to cough up answers. Or was he embarrassed of his behavior. So why keep a record of demon attacks? "What does this tell you?"

"Where the attacks occurred. The different types of dots indicate when the attacks occurred."

Now that was intriguing. "Show me the changes through time."

Mart's clean fingernail slid between the symbols for each clan with a whole lot of confusing zigging and zagging.

"Okay, I get the point. This is too damned much information to pass on easily." She shoved his finger aside and focused on the dots.

The map must have been old. Some dots were darker than others. Some were round. Others were oval. There seemed to be more lighter round dots than darker ovals. Throw in the dots that appeared to have an X drawn through them and the map must have contained three waves of attacks.

"Which dots are oldest?"

"The faded circles. The ones that have been crossed through occurred a century later. The ovals were the final wave of attacks two centuries after the crossed out dots."

Why so long ago? And what about the recent attacks? "But you said the sky demons are still raiding."

Ovh sank into the creaking chair beside me. "They claim to have stopped raiding. However, small parties continue to come at night."

If the Slakens hunted or mined something, the attacks should be focused and reflective of that focus in the maps. "What do they want?"

"Queens' orbs. The magic crystals lighting the palaces." Both Mart and Ovh said the same thing simultaneously.

Those damned light crystals in my lodge? "Uh, so what do they want with them?"

"The few Luvks who returned from enslavement say they use the crystals for many things in their homes and cities."

Fuel. And I have lovely raid magnets floating above where I sleep.

"They don't have night vision, Aisling," Mart added. "It's easier to find the orbs at night."

"That doesn't make me feel better with those damned balls hanging in my lodge." And Borun so far away. But he said he chose my guards specifically for their strength. Surely, everything was alright.

"Don't worry, Aisling," Ovh said. "Sky demons don't attack palaces."

"Why?"

"The Queens are their chosen leaders. This is why Queens still own the crystals. They are never raided. You're at the palace. You're safe. And you have your Royal Guard," Ovh answered.

Then something else instigated the Queens' murders. Something non-Slaken. The parties involved may be trying to make the murders appear as if caused by the sky demons.

"What are you thinking, Aisling?"

Did I have a strange heartbeat? It couldn't hurt to see what they thought. "Since a lot of friction exists between clans," I shot glares between Lehd and Mart, "we can't assume the Slakens are behind the Queens' murders. Especially after what the Thunder clan did trying to capture me on the way here to Ishan's palace."

Lehd relocated to an empty chair around the table.

"Killing a queen is one of the worst kinds of crimes, Aisling." Lehd's words thundered from his seat beside me.

"Borun recognized all my assailants. He never mentioned any clan other than the Thunder clan. And the sky demons only raid occasionally. So, what's the point? If the Slakens can't have the Queens' orbs and they want the Queens in power, why would they kill them?"

"To cause confusion," Mart stated.

Confusion would arise regardless of who struck at the Queens. "Or the Slakens aren't behind the murders. Borun didn't tell me what the Queens think. What did he tell you?" Maybe they'd cough up the details.

"That the Queens are terrified," Mart announced. "Nothing like this has ever happened—"

"Until I arrived." I reached for a map's edge and saw my hand tremble.

Would there be no end to this sex madness? I flipped the ends of the stack of maps over and looked at the exposed half of each one. "What resources does each of these maps indicate?"

"Ores. Foods. Anything that might be of use to someone—"

"Who might want to invade other realms," Lehd blurted. "Why the Thunder clan when the Sunrise clan has maps such as these?"

Lehd would start another fight. "Wait in my personal quarters. I'll speak with you when I'm finished with Mart and Ovh."

Lehd shoved to his feet and turned with a grimace to disappear behind the thumping bath's door.

Mart would explain. "So when you didn't look happy about presenting your maps to the rest of my guards, you worried you'd upset some of them?"

Mart nodded. "These maps are only of historical value to me. I never wore the leader's mask and rarely had the opportunity to bring up anything my brood would care to consider."

Ovh snorted. "You should have shown her in private. Lehd's so young that he reacts before thinking."

Lehd is young? "Your Queens allow young sons to lead? Isn't that a bad choice?"

"Only if she is murdered by a consort," Mart said.

Why don't I like that answer? "It's obvious the Queens are annoying. But humor me. Why would a young son be used to protect a queen against a consort planning to murder his mate?"

Ovh's golden gaze shifted to Mart.

Mart inhaled and rolled his silver gaze to me. "The largest royal son is most likely to be strongest. Like Lehd. Because they are from different clans. A leader of the Royal Guards serves to monitor all the intimate interactions between the Queen and her consorts. Just in case a consort decides to kill a Queen for whatever reasons. That's why the largest son is chosen to lead."

A lump wedged into the back of my throat.
How cruel to force a son to live a celibate life and watch sex endlessly.
“You shouldn’t have said that,” Ovh growled.
“She needs to understand how the Queens and Royal Guards operate.”
Enough already. “Alright, the both of you, stop arguing.”
Ovh sighed. “I apologize, Aisling.”

Now he was proving helpful. Considerate. Whereas, Mart seemed to have a selfish streak to him. Maybe that was the difference between having white stripes and orange stripes. An orange male learned to be more patient by necessity while waiting in the back of the line. Like Lehd. “I’m going to speak with Lehd.” I shot Mart a warning glance. “And no I’m not worried about being alone with him. He’s not going to kill me. He’s made that perfectly clear time and time again.” Maybe kill me with kindness. But my shaking hands could use a little dose of Lehd. I strode to the door before either Royal Guard could stop me and reached a quaking hand toward the wooden slab.

Lehd stood in the darkness beside the pool with his hands on his hips.
So much for following orders. “I thought I told you to wait in my quarters?”
The door slapped shut behind me where only his form was sketched out by the pool’s light.

“I thought I’d better stay close enough to help if Mart did something foolish.”
A noble excuse was a noble excuse. But he needed to do what I told him to do. He was my guard. And my sanity required compliance. I stepped to the edge of the pool.

Borun hadn’t been gone half a day and everything was falling apart. Mart could have acted a little more sympathetic to the other guards since we’d slept together. Well, that was the answer. This big mass of muscles just needed to feel he got his fair share. I circled the pool.

He stood quietly.
Was this the way of my future? Smoothing ruffled feathers? Didn’t these guards share? Or would everything smooth over after I had mated with them all? I didn’t want to go there. But necessity keeps slapping me in the face. I stood toe to toe with him.

God I felt small. And almost a little like Borun was with me. Safe. “You should have done what I told you to do.”

He snorted, his head wagging a bit. “I’m a grown warrior. I do what’s best for duty’s sake. Protecting you is my duty.”

Thank God because those muscles were certainly all I could think about.
Duty. Or I’d have to rip him a new ass for doing whatever the Hell he thought important. I pivoted and paced out half the pool’s edge. All the way back to the sunken ledge where I sat to lather up with soap. Time to seduce him into sleeping with me. I yanked my tank top over my head, grabbed the heels of my boots, and pulled.

He followed my trail around the swirling water.
Slowly. His boots snatched the edge of the pool toward him.
I slithered out of my olive camouflage pants, kicked them aside onto my other clothes, and rose to face him in my bra and panties.

Especially since these males loved the white lace.
The pool’s glow traced the black stripes in his beard and across his arms.
He halted before me, his gaze anchored upon mine. “I hear every breath you take, every beat of your heart.” He reached out to curl a hand beneath my chin. “You don’t react this way to Mart.”

How smug.

His hand dropped to my side, sliding warmth and gooseflesh along my body to my waistline to snake around my lower back.

Arguing I felt the same for Mart would have been futile. My insides dissolved into liquid heat as his arm pulled me up against his chest where he could kiss me when he chose to.

His gaze slid down to my lace bra.

Hanging there with my feet dangling was the strangest sensation between plow-into-me erotic and my feeling a little at his mercy. But that's certainly what he wanted. A warrior like Lehd obviously preferred things *his way*.

His gaze slid up to my mouth. He licked his lips. "I don't like his scent on you." He lowered my feet to the cold stone floor and tugged off his boots.

The ache in my groin was so damned overwhelming that I couldn't unbuckle my bra snap. Or my hands quivered so much from blood lust I couldn't control my fingers. But the fact a queen had her largest son monitor her intimate relationships suddenly began to sound significant given Lehd's comment about Mart's scent on me.

He grabbed my cheeks and kissed me.

Long. Passionately. With so much emotion I groaned against the probing searching actions of his tongue. I snaked my arms around his neck and clung to his intoxicating kiss.

Lehd pulled me into his drumming chest and massaged my cheek and neck with his hot lips, then released me to stand before him. "I won't hurt you, Aisling."

My knees wobbled after his mind-numbing kiss.

The pain in his features set off another wave of lava rolling through me.

I know. Maybe I should have said the words because he couldn't penetrate my thoughts, but I focused on getting my fingers to work the bra's clasp. All I wanted was his hands on me. They had to feel amazing given the power of his kiss.

His pants fell to floor, and one by one he stepped each foot from the puddled leather.

Oh boy. Those legs... That amazing erection.

He reached for my hands, taking my wrists, lifting them over my head, and slipped the bra off with a grin, only to release me and jump into the whirling water.

Water splashed everywhere. Even running over the edge to my feet and clothing.

He surfaced, wiping the water from his eyes to watch me. Hungrily.

God I felt beautiful. Although, men had always looked at me that way. But Lehd was like Borun. Maybe young and hotheaded. But just as adoring. And enormous. Enormous made a girl feel safe in BFE outer space with sky demon raids out to collect her magic light crystals.

A chill tickled my skin into chilly attention. Among other parts of my body. Time to have Lehd make me feel safe and warm. I slid off my lace panties and stepped into the ledge's lapping water.

Lehd leapt from the water with his perky striped ass, heading into the room's darkness to return with a dish of soap bars.

Perky was good. And everything else about him was equally perky.

Everything.

He placed the dish at the pool's edge and descended to sit at my feet, staring up, taking my hand, pulling me down to straddle his lap in the pool's warmth.

God all the air was sucked out of the room. And more than a void stood between us. His cock was so damned engorged that I doubted he'd make it beyond lathering up his hands.

But he did. And went right to work on my neck, rubbing downward, down to sore

nipples that were so taut he spent a lot of time *washing* them.

I ached so badly with the lathering I almost mounted him. Just the thought of sliding along his hard shaft made my soul weep wave after wave of molten heat.

He slid his hands down my back to my ass.

His erection jerked between us.

Oh if he didn't hurry. I was so tired of these males and their *deprivation*.

His fingers slid between my cheeks and pulled them tightly so he could finger my sensitive skin around the pucker of my anus.

The blood in my womb pounded for him, begged he thrust inside me hard and fast.

Right now.

His hands slid around my sides to work my belly. And lower. But he stopped. His sensuous lips backed away until he stared so lovingly into my eyes that I almost keeled over into the water.

His fingers slipped through my curled pubic hairs, gently washing, rather exploring, all the way down to my nether folds.

I couldn't breathe. Didn't want to breathe. Just wanted to focus on him touching me, trailing inside me like a kid in a candy store.

Elation threaded upward through my body up to my head where all I could do was lean backward to let the euphoria root so deeply into my memory I'd never forget Lehd's touch, his kiss, or his eyes. Those mesmerizing golden orbs that followed me everywhere. Analyzing my every blink. Lehd would be my lover.

He was *the lover*.

And he could make love with his long fingers.

He toyed with me so deeply that I had to grab onto his harness to anchor myself as my hips rocked against his probing fingers. Anything to slow down the rising tide of bliss building in my soul. I needed him so badly.

"Aisling," he whispered into my ear.

I wanted all of him inside me. I grabbed his cock and ran along the long supple course of it with my hand.

"No." He shoved my hand away and kissed me deeper.

"Please," I begged into his mouth, yanking on his harness. "Please, Lehd. Don't tease me."

He shoved off the ledge, moving enough water to make bobbing waves that splashed the soap from my body, and left me standing in the pool with the water up to my chest.

The *deprivation* brought tears to my eyes.

He shot up from the water to tower a good foot overhead before me. "Aisling," he gasped, cupping my cheeks. "I made you cry."

"I need you." Didn't he understand? He was like a big goddamned golden retriever puppy that needed obedience training in bed.

He slid his palms down my arms beneath the water until he grabbed my wrists and hoisted me up by them.

My feet came off the pool's floor with the pressure.

What was he doing? Maybe I'd made a mistake about him.

He stopped where I looked him in the eye and lowered my arms around his neck.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "I didn't mean to frighten or hurt you."

If that plea didn't deserve tears, nothing did. I wrapped my arms around his slick wet

hair and clung to the strength in his broad shoulders.

He released me against his beating heart to trail his knuckles down my sides.

Help me, universe. I don't ever want him to stop.

He watched his hands slide over my hips, down to my thighs where he pulled up my knees and wrapped my legs around his waist before locking his gaze back on me. "I'm always here for you, dear Aisling."

His hips bent upward to me. Free-handedly, he slowly, purposefully, in one leisurely motion, slid the head of his cock into my core. I was so wet from *deprivation* that he had no problem with his measured penetration. His hard thickness felt so glorious I could only gape, holding my breath, watching my reaction mirrored in his handsomely rugged features. If angels sang somewhere in the heavens, their voices would have burst from our drugged expressions. But it is rumored only a few can hear angels sing. So, I waited for Lehd to growl a meaty song of possession.

His shaft's soft root finally spooned my tender vagina.

We gasped for breath.

My pulse beat with his deep within my soul.

Dear creative force is in the universe, thank you for Lehd.

He growled and backed up until he slid my legs at his back atop the ledge and slowly withdrew his amazing firmness.

It wasn't enough fast enough. "Lehd, on the furs."

He didn't argue. My back was on the skins before I could blink, his marvelous hardness still inside me. I slid my legs down, dropping my knees, and grabbing fistfuls of his iron ass.

If he'd only hurry.

His hot sucking lips fell to my neck, then he plowed into my spirit. Again and again. I matched his thrusting hips with the energy only blood lust could give me after a day with three different men. But something told me this day was unusual. Maybe it was Lehd. I grabbed two fistfuls of his harness and hung on.

He plunged his throbbing hardness into me faster and faster until we raced into the darkness of night. Until he drove away any fears I had of being alone while spanking me with the pat of his sac against my ass. Until I couldn't stop crying out for breath. And I came like a screaming banshee with his overpowering roar of possession in our blue flash of healing light. We clenched together so tightly that his trembling rigid body made me want to cradle him forever.

Was it possible anyone could love a person from one round of sex? It seemed to happen that way with Borun too. Maybe it was these men. Something about Luvk. But I didn't want to go back to wondering if it was darker than normal here in the land of tiger men. Just thinking about how adoring and protective these consorts were justified my choices. However, my Luvk mates had worked some magic on me for days before we'd found ourselves clenched in heated bliss. They'd courted me.

"Aisling?" His golden eyes watched me.

"Uh-hmm?"

"Tell me what else you like. Anything you want, dearest one."

I uncurled my death grip on his harness and slid my hands down the undulating muscles of his shoulders and arms.

His gaze followed my touch.

"I like you taking whatever you want."

His gaze slid back to mine and flickered with awareness.

He was so adorable. And Borun had said Lehd was my personal guard. “When Borun’s away, you sleep with me.”

He nodded in the darkness. “Mart may not like that decree.”

“I feel safest with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

“You haven’t eaten,” Lehd spoke into Aisling’s damp hair around her ear where we lay in her sleeping skins beneath the light orbs.

I wasn’t hungry, she noted. Just tired. And oh so content to snuggle into his python arms. “Who cares about eating when I can lie here with you?”

He growled low and deep. “I can’t lie. I’m starving.” He shoved onto his feet, flashing his striped ass and penis at me, and pulled on his pants.

“It’s nice of you not to flaunt your great fortune in mating around the others.” Especially for me.

He shot me an adorable grin, pivoted toward the bath door, and disappeared.

Now I’m in mate heaven. Literally, out in BFE outer space. I rolled onto my belly in the soft furs.

Was this what mating was like all over Luvk? Certainly not. I married princes. With nobility came luxury. I scanned the delicate murals on the walls, the brilliant lights overhead, and Borun’s humongous weapon display. Throw in the sensual furs that I stretched across and how could the factors not sum up to luxury? Who knew what else was in those magic chests across the room? Probably some other raid magnet like the lights.

The bath door shoved open presenting Lehd with an enormous turkey leg. Or something similar. The picture of him gnawing on the hunk of meat was pricelessly Oktoberfest—Viking chewing on large chunk of charred flesh. Come to think of it.

He sauntered over chomping wildly.

“Ravenous?” He ought to be after he took me again in here on the sleeping skins.

“Of course. Duty wears a man down.” He plopped down beside me and leaned a massive arm down to prop up his head while he lounged, devouring his meal.

“What kind of animal was that?” A little biology lesson never hurt a scientist.

He swallowed and shook the lumpy end at me. “It was a grazing beast.”

My stomach snarled.

He raised a black eyebrow.

“Really, I wasn’t hungry when you left.”

He handed me the leg and departed through the bath’s doorway.

The mass of flesh had to weigh two pounds. Throw in the thick bone and it was no wonder I had to hold it like a corn on the cob. But the succulent spiced flesh melted in my mouth. The babies were definitely happy.

Lehd returned to lounge at my side. He placed a wooden tray with flatbread and round green fruit between us.

“How long ago did the sun set?” My gaze slid to the crystal lights above us. “Mart said the raids—”

“I heard what he said.” His voice graded from jocular to serious. “I’ll be here tonight, Aisling. You won’t have to worry about anything.”

Maybe I’ll sleep with some clothes on. Well, now I could drill Lehd for information. “What were the different clans known for back when the Sunset clan was known for ruling the

seas?”

“Most for gold and gems. Others for ores. Var’s clan traded prized furs. And Mart’s clan had precious spices. The Queen’s orbs came from the Thunder realm.”

“So, do they still trade in these resources?”

“Most of the clans don’t have the people to do the work. We are much smaller in number now.”

“What changed your population sizes?”

“Some ancient cities held up to ten thousand people. But so many were killed in the wars that the populations never recovered. Queens coming into power changed things. They agreed to keep the warriors in the fields instead of mining and hunting. Both activities are now considered noble sport.”

Limiting the peasants’ activities seemed detrimental to the Luvk’s cultural health. Inhibiting the Luvk’s cultural recovery from conquest. “How large is each clan now?”

“The Thunder clan is the largest, almost one thousand.”

No wonder Kruk had so many warriors after me those first two days. But if they were wealthy because of Queen orbs that were apparently non-renewable resources, why was the Thunder clan the largest?

“I see your mind working, Aisling.” He chewed on a hunk of herd animal.

“The light orbs are almost gone.”

He watched me with twinkling eyes.

“But the Thunder clan prospers more than the others. How can that be, Lehd?”

He smiled a little and swallowed. “They charge fees to those traveling across the continent. Their realm is dead center of the world and quite treacherous.”

“No wonder Kruk is so ruthless.”

“He won’t touch you, Aisling. Borun has said this to us. And I say it to you.”

“So tell me about the Sunset clan.”

His eyes brightened into a warm gold.

Beneath the bright lights, his eyes looked normal instead of a misty reflective curtain. But who cared about normal?

“When I was a youngling, I traveled the entire realm with my father.”

“Your father? He was around?” Who would have guessed given the complex marriage system?

Lehd nodded. “He was sixty-three and insisted I see the realm.”

So noble males doted on their children. Why was that so surprising given a Queen’s consorts probably only got one chance at Breeder’s Rights for three months. If they weren’t productive, they undoubtedly had to wait until the Queen went through all her other mates’ opportunities to breed before getting back to the nonproductive ones. Talk about overwhelming. That’s just one more issue I’ll have to contend with among my consorts.

“Aisling?”

Lord, I hope he wasn’t talking while my thoughts drifted.

“Your mind seemed far away. You aren’t worried about sky demons are you?”

Not with him. Not really. But I still might sleep in some undies. Just in case.

* * *

Something loud pierced Aisling’s skull, waking her from a deep sleep. What was that horribly earsplitting sound, she wondered. I bolted upright next to Lehd’s shifting body.

“Come with me.” He pulled me to my feet and shoved my black leather robe onto my

arm.

Good thing I had a clothing gift or two lying around handy and had pulled on a tank top and panties before falling asleep. Lehd had balked at my dressing. You gotta love the guy. But I insisted. Thank goodness. I plowed forward in his wake. “What is that blaring racket?”

“Hurry.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me through the dark bath toward the softly lit doorway leading to the guards’ room.

Var already waited there.

Why?

The shattering noise stabbed at my brain. It sounded like it was right behind me. “What in the hell is that?”

Lehd dragged me past Var.

“Will someone tell me what’s going on?”

Var stayed at the doorway. “A raid. Stay with Lehd.”

Jesus Christ! I yanked on Lehd’s strong hand and hoped my ass wasn’t hanging out my lace hot pants while I ran for my life.

Lehd ushered me through the darkness to the very end of the curving space and shoved me down. “Under the table. Cover yourself with the robe. Slakens can’t see in the dark. Show nothing that reflects light.”

“This isn’t the way I want to die.” I crouched beside the darkness beneath the table.

“Aisling,” he shoved me toward the table. “I’ll be right here.”

Light glinted off something in his hand.

An extremely long curved blade.

“Goddamn it, Lehd, don’t you die.” I slid into the pool of darkness and draped the leather over my legs.

“I have no intention of drawing my last breath.”

Something heavy crashed near me. Outside. “Lehd?”

“Quiet.”

Why do I have to hide under a table? Because I have no idea what’s going on out there. Because I’m barely dressed. Because Lehd ordered me to. My little knives had nothing on Lehd’s big ass sword either. I’m out of my league on Luvk, relegated to hunkering under a table during a raid.

Unreal shrieks curdled my ear drums.

I covered my ears.

Still the horrific sounds made my skin crawl with gooseflesh.

The Slakens were weird creatures. Nothing as noble as Luvks. But stronger. That’s how the Luvks lost all those battles. What about my guards? Was someone dying now?

The noise abruptly ceased.

“They’re gone, sweet one.”

Lehd’s glowing golden gaze found me in the darkness. Hands slipped around me.

“Come to me.”

There was no coming when your bodyguard pulled you along. What about my other Royal Guards? “Is anyone injured?”

“Proy is dead.”

My heart took a dive.

Lehd stood me on my feet and lifted my gaze with one gentle finger to meet his. “It’s not your fault, Aisling. Raids are uncontrollable. Royal Guards serve to defend the vulnerable.”

Then why do I feel so responsible?

Lehd pulled the robe from my grasp. "Put your arms in the sleeves. I'll take you to assess the damage."

Damage? "What happened?"

"They took your Queens' orbs."

"I never asked for those damned things. In fact I told Borun I didn't need your mothers paying me to take you off their hands. And now what comes of it? Proy's dead!" Because of me. This is insane.

"Aisling," he whispered and pulled me into his warm python arms. "Nobody blames you."

Then why do I feel guilty?

"Come." He kept me tucked beneath his arm and led me toward the firelight's glow at the end of the curving wall.

We followed the wall around until Var's glowing blue gaze spotted us in the fire pit's soft light. He didn't say anything. He undoubtedly heard everything I said because he nodded at me.

Was that respect? I clutched my robe together and stayed under Lehd's arm.

The exterior door to my personal quarters laid on the floor of my room. A pair of legs wearing black boots and leather laid beyond the door in the moonlight.

Proy. I sucked in a deep breath and scanned the room for anything that might indicate an intruder had entered.

Just the darkness from the missing light crystals.

"Do you need anything, Aisling?"

I wagged my head.

"Come. It's been decided you'll sleep in the guards' quarters until the door is repaired."

I didn't have it in me to argue with Lehd. And all sorts of nasty insects might gravitate toward my fire pit. So, I agreed to the safety factor.

Lehd nudged me to his sleeping skins, crawled in behind me, and curled his body around mine.

At that moment, I realized how important Royal Guards were. How I'd been a fool for fighting every step of the way with them. How I'd never take for granted another moment with any one of them. I owed them as much as they claimed to owe me.

"Stop thinking, Aisling. Sleep." His big python arm drew me into his beating heart.

* * * *

Aisling awoke in a cold sweat. The blood lust, she thought. I rolled over to my sleeping guardian and placed a palm on his warm chest.

He growled a little gurgling pleasure sound and ran his hand across my knuckles. His golden eyes popped open. "Blessed sunrise, sweet one." He planted a soft kiss on my forehead and snuggled back down into the sleeping skins.

Oh no. Duty called. Why not send a direct message? I slid my hand down the front of his pants and found him ready for duty. Certainly the youngest of my Royal Guards was always ready. Waiting. I caught him smiling coyly at me.

"Not here," he whispered.

"What about my door?"

"There was little damage around the village last night. The sky demons came for your crystals and left. Ishan will send her men to repair the door." He shoved up on an elbow and rolled off the bed. "Come, Aisling."

He must be commanding me to avoid looking like I have blood lust. Although, they know nothing about my blood bond with Borun. I swung my feet to the cold stone floor where my bent knees pushed the sides of my robe open all the way up to my navel.

Well, if anyone wanted a cheap thrill, here's a shot of my hot pants. I scanned the room. The fire pit glowed a cozy yellow. Mart's maps piled across the table. Empty silver dishes glittered in the firelight. But nobody was up.

Shit. My syringe. If it was gone, I'd be beyond screwed.

Lehd extended a helping hand.

With his exceptionally gentle tug, I was on my feet, padding my way toward my fire pit. "I need to find something."

He didn't reply but led me on into the shadows of my violated room. Darkness loomed at every turn in the round space. All but in the sunlit doorway where Var's gold and black stripes stood on watch.

Someone else must have guarded the other door. "Has he been there all night?"

"Yes. And Ovh guards the other door. Mart is sleeping."

"Tell Mart to relieve one of them." I looked up at Lehd's golden gaze. "And you take over for the other one. I want everyone rested."

He squeezed my hand. "As you wish."

Four guards didn't feel like enough now. But I could handle the trials of blood lust enough to allow the others rest. We were a team. Yes. A machine. And keeping the gizmo finely tuned was my job.

My big bodyguard stalked into the shadows of the bath.

Time to search for my syringe and don some pants. Nothing had been disturbed. My combat boots were where I dumped them last night, beside the glowing pool with my syringe in the shaft. My olive pants even proved dry after Lehd's grand leap into the swirling water.

A form shifted in the guards' room doorway.

Ovh. He probably wanted to bathe. "Come in." I waved him inward.

He hesitated.

"It's alright." With my robe and underwear on, I couldn't claim to be inappropriately dressed. Especially since they had no idea that bras and panties were worn underneath clothing on Earth.

Ovh entered, closing the door behind him. He shifted in the shadows until the pool's glow etched out his wide black stripes on his orange arms and wide chest. His beard held more white than black beneath his golden eyes. A hint of hesitation.

He measured me. My actions. My motives. Lehd was youngest. But Ovh had to be much older. Wiser. And, God, the raging torment from celibacy that he must harbor after years of or even decades of leading his mother's Royal Guard.

He stripped down to his incredibly perfect birthday suit with his back to me at the pool's edge and slowly stepped down onto the ledge. The pool's light danced upon every line, angle, and curve of his exquisite musculature.

Oh, muscles. Goro had to know they were my weakness bringing me to Luvk.

My heart sank into the cold stone floor.

"I'm not young and brash like Lehd." He stepped off the ledge, falling into the water only to burst forth in a spray of droplets. He wiped his face and black hair to the back of his head, plowed across the pool to turn, leaning back against the pool's rim with both arms stretched out to anchor him to the curved edge, his gaze locking on me. "I'm not self-serving like Mart. And

I'll never be your Borun."

So much implication grounded that vague declaration. "I don't expect you to be like them." In fact, the more different the better. I'd have my various sources of information and emotional support. Luvk could suck a person dry with all its issues. And since the blood lust was calling, I could prove it to Ovh. I slipped my robe to the ground over my boots, stepped out of my panties, and dropped my bra onto the pile before turning back to his watchful stare.

What whirled behind the glowing veil he had for eyes? How old was he? How long had he been tortured with abstinence? He exhibited no sign he desired me. But any man who'd lived as long as he had under the circumstances he did would be completely capable of masking his emotions. So the truth of their war masks purpose finally surfaced. I stepped off the pool's edge into the warm lapping water of the ledge.

He didn't flinch.

Age did make a man wiser. I planted my butt on the cold hard pool's rim with my knees tightly clamped together and stared him down.

One of us would win this shootout. Albeit, he's got the gun. Hell, I'm not a Luvk. I don't even know where to begin defending myself on this planet.

"You're not like the Queens," he murmured.

"I said I wasn't. And I still don't wish to be."

He stood, shoving his elbows over and behind his head so far everyone in the other rooms could hear the sinew pop in his body. He stretched like a waking cat then crossed through the pool's shushing water to leap up to retrieve soap.

Oh my. My. My. I tried not to gape. But the orange males packed a mighty enormous gun.

My hands shook like a gun meter.

I snaked the traitorous bastards around my knees and pulled my chest down to hide my bare breasts.

Albeit, his gun was locked and loaded. If he wanted me, he didn't need do a thing to convey that message. Rushing this one on anything was stupid. He'd take what he wanted like Borun. *If he wanted it.*

He hopped back into the bubbling water and slid his gaze to where I obviously crouched. "Have I frightened you?"

Not really. Just intimidated me a little. "No."

He shoved the water aside as his broad chest and bulging arms headed toward me in the pool.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ovh headed straight toward Aisling where she sat upon the pool's rim with her feet in the water. His focused gaze and steady stride meant he thought of something. And I was offering, she thought. Yes. I was. And he could have whatever he wanted.

He halted before me, reaching, grabbing me under the arms with his big strong hands, and lowered me down to sit in the gurgling water covering the pool's seat. "You didn't seem so shy before." He pressed his hips against my legs.

All of his hips. Steely gun and all. Maybe I better come clean because this man wasn't one for playing games. "I understand now."

His black eyebrows arched.

"Why Luvk warriors do what they do. Why they protect the females." I placed a palm over his warm beating heart and stared into his eyes. "There's not one warrior on my home world who has the strength I've seen a Luvk wield." I slid my palm up across his supple skin, over the stiff leather strap of his harness, up his sinewy neck, to the softness of his wet black hair.

He never blinked, just watched me.

"But I don't want anyone else to die for me. Nor do I do want any of you to feel unwanted. Or dirty because of your stripes."

My hand trembled in his hair.

"You're shaking, Aisling. Have I done something to frighten you?"

I released my grip on his body and held my hands out between us.

The water's flurry of motion concealed the telltale movement of my blood lust tremors.

He took both my hands in his warm palms and rubbed his thumbs across my knuckles.

"Aisling?" His gaze pleaded with me. "Tell me what I've done to frighten you."

He could have me forever and always at that moment. "It's from my pregnancy." God, I was so disgusting with my *need*. Hopefully this rational man would understand even though I had to bend the truth. "It's called blood lust. And the only way to keep me from being ill is to..." I couldn't just look into those intelligent eyes and quasi-confess. So, I stared at his consoling hold of my hands. "Is to mate."

He pulled my arms wide, into an embrace that shook my reality like an earthquake, and he latched onto my neck with his hot sucking mouth.

Damn, these men and the way they kissed. All-consuming. Possessively.

If I hadn't been so quickly swept into the circle of his arms, I would have already lost my ability to think. To perceive. So, I knew he hadn't sucked the breath out of me when I arched my neck back to offer him every inch of my skin for easy access. And when I sighed, it was in relief and not that he'd released some lever and drained me of the pressure building from my blood lust.

But Ovh got all the glory for both.

His broad hands held my back, lowering me enough to nip and suck my unruly nipples into long peaks, over and over, he worked one then the other as if fascinated by them. Or starving for something my body wouldn't give him. Then he finally covered my mouth with his

soft hungry lips and thrust his fingers into my hair, holding my gaping mouth to his.

His tongue possessed me, claimed me the only way a lover's can.

I was so damned wet sitting in that water. So damned ready to feel him slide his gun inside me. To shoot my soul. I opened my knees, sliding my hands down to the curve of his iron back and grabbed two handfuls of steely ass.

He growled low and possessively, making my soul ache for his deep penetration.

Hurry.

He grabbed me into the air and moved so quickly that I don't think my racing heart managed a beat. We were on the furs. Me splayed out beneath his shadowy silhouette etched by the pool's light. His hands landed on my inner thighs, sliding down, down to where he stole my breath away. His thumbs caressed circles into where my legs joined my groin, among the tight curls of my pubic hair.

I shivered in the darkness, dropping my knees to the sleeping furs, giving my soul to him. If only he'd seize it.

I couldn't see anything but a hunched form between my legs and those two glowing embers of his eyes. Watching me. Not my dancing hips. He watched my body writhe from his touch. Then his gaze slipped away into the darkness of the room.

Just take me, Ovh.

His dark form lowered, and his warm tongue slid between my delicate folds, tickling, tracing a path along their seam.

I'd die if he didn't get to work.

He threaded his thumbs into the seam and splayed my sex to the universe.

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think about anything but what he *wasn't* doing.

Just devour me.

His hot mouth latched onto my clit with such sucking force I came off the furs to prop my arms up behind me and watch his golden eyes as one of the biggest warriors I'd ever seen knelt between my legs. He made my hips rock with so much force I thought I'd launch to the moon. He took me riding through the inky blackness of a need. Right up to the shining burst of orgasm where stars exploded behind my eyelids.

I collapsed upon the furs.

A dark threatening growl rolled around the room.

I felt the heat of his body as he crawled one hand after another over my body, never gracing me with one delicate whisk of his firm muscle.

Aging apparently did nothing to the Luvk male's body.

He nuzzled my ear, his growl gurgling until a rash of gooseflesh set off another wave of my fevered desire.

Somehow I lifted a hand to his loose locks and held his head where that possessive growl could speak to me. I turned to his ear. "You'll always be mine."

One of his arms locked under one of my knees. He turned my body slightly, rolling my hips toward him where he leaned on one elbow, and slowly pushed the smooth tip of his thick cock inside my aching channel. Loudly sucking in a breath. Inch by glorious inch, he claimed me as his, with a death grip on my ass that would be as deeply engrained upon my memory as my womb would forever yearn for reliving this moment.

He rolled my hips back to the furs and shoved me with the intoxicating softness of his root against my tender aching flesh.

God, I wanted him again and again.

Or the blood lust drove my hunger.

I slid my hands around his panting sides and up to his harness where I snatched up two handholds of stiff damp leather straps. And matched the rocking of his hips with mine.

He withdrew and thrust until a wave of consuming heat in my core warned I was facing the blinding orgasm without him. Not yet. He had to cross that line with me. I raked a handful of fingers into his hair, pulling his sweaty brow down to mine, to where his hot breath pummeled my skin, and I looked into those glowing eyes. "Ride me like your war beast, Ovh. Hard. Fast."

His growl rumbled to life like he kick-started his engine.

Nothing felt like Ovh unleashing his inner beast. He rocked my hips and stoked my flames with such unabashed fury that I had to snake my legs around his waist to hold onto him just so I could slip back into the dangerously delectable darkness that made me gasp and scream.

Once my bucking hips synchronized with his movements, the tsunami of release rushed toward me. I couldn't run or turn back from the smothering threat of rapture. Even Ovh's arms strained to hold him in position where it was obvious he wanted to flex his back and roar. But I had a grip on the back of his harness. So he looked into my eyes and went rigid inside me. Throbbing. Jerking. Honoring me with his singeing seed.

One day I'd nurture one kernel into the child of his heart and never let him forget he was a real man worthy of fatherhood. I ground my hips against his luscious hardness, shuddering each time he touched me *there*.

He began thrusting, milking himself through each pump of his groin.

I squeezed my inner muscles to hold him in place. To force him to stay inside me. To make myself tremble with each of his shamelessly wonderful tremors of ejaculation. His shaft was so damned thick I squirmed with each of its throbs. We tried to maintain our desperate thrusts but slowed to the point I could feel the base of his cock flex against my vaginal opening in his final dying throes of passion.

The blue healing light flashed between us like a notice that we'd bonded beyond sex. That we'd mated as lovers.

His hot chest folded down from where we were joined, onto my breasts.

That's where I wanted him, on top of me. With me. I slid my fingers free of his harness and massaged his trembling shoulders. "You're amazing, Ovh."

He thrust his nose into my hair and snuggled down until he found my ear. "Aisling. My Aisling."

Yes. I was his.

Tears warmed my eyes.

For a warrior who finally found solace in nothing more than sex with me. I slid my fingers into his damp tousled hair.

His mouth kissed my cheek, then sucked my lips until they were plump, and marched kisses across my other cheek to my ear where his whiskers and tongue tickled so delightfully that my nipples beaded.

He growled, undoubtedly sensing the hardness in my breasts, and crawled down to nibble and tug at one like a hungry child.

These men had been so deprived that I doubted I could keep more than a few content. The Queens were truly astonishing in that they could find happiness with so many men when all I could do was fear I'd never be able to please the five in my care.

Ovh slid his arms beneath my shoulders and knees.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

“To my sleeping skins.”

* * * *

After Ovh had his fill of her, Aisling wriggled out from beneath his python arm and dressed. The morning’s research time had been wasted, she noted. Okay, maybe not truly wasted. I’d managed to capture another sparkling star with hypnotic eyes and iron ass. Ovh was wonderful. And if I hadn’t already carried two babies, I held enough of his seed to give birth thousands of times over. He was *not* easily satisfied. Who could be after how many years of celibacy? Alas, he slept like a babe. So, I turned to my map on the table.

The table’s pile of leather documents was folded over and new tidy serving dishes were left beside them.

My gut snarled.

That’s two babies ordering pancakes and bacon. Unfortunately, the probability of filling that order in BFE outer space without a food replicator was nil. I pulled my hair into a ponytail and lifted the ornately molded cover on one dish.

Something yellow and green. It kind of looked like scrambled eggs. But I doubted there was anything similar between the two other than their glob appearance.

Food for thought one way or the other. Somewhere among the pile of maps and buried deep in my subconscious laid the answer to the raids. And the raid upon my lodge. Why wasn’t anyone else affected? It was if I was targeted. Just me. Not Borun. The Marshal. And can only mean one thing. The Slakens didn’t attack me because I’m a Marshal. They attacked where they were told to attack. *Someone* instructed them. *From this side of the portal.*

Var emerged from the shadows beyond the bath’s doorway.

The last of my Royal Guards to bed me. Distant though. I so needed to connect with him. Not for sex’s sake. For my own. Bonding with each one may be my only salvation given the madness unfolding around me. It’s obvious why having a mate from each realm would reduce the tensions among clans and with my position among the Luvks. “Blessed sunrise, Var.”

“To you as well. But it’s after midday.” He yanked out a chair opposite me at the table and began checking the vessel contents beneath each of the lids.

He pretty much ignored me. This wasn’t a problem. Really. More like a slap at my pride. I hadn’t done much other than insult them by denying their existence as my mates. Okay, I’m not a queen. But I did say repeatedly I didn’t want any consorts. I guess I’ll just have to ride out the wait with this one. Win his friendship.

Var settled down with scoop of scrambled egg stuff, what looked like chunks of white translucent protein, and a red fruit or vegetable.

Well we could begin our friendship over identifying foods. “What did you choose, and what else is here?” That should have left a lot of room for discussion.

He pointed at the yellow globs, “Curdled beast milk.”

My gut churned at the prospect of war beast cheese.

He pointed at the white protein lumps, “Fish. Apparently, Morna found some because this type is a staple in the Ice realm—my home.” Then he moved onto the vegetable or fruit. “And this is a fruit of a tree from the Sunrise realm.”

The Queens traded a lot between realms. “Is this a typical breakfast for everyone? Or just the sons of Queens?”

His brow furrowed slightly for a moment. “You aren’t like the Queens.”

* * * *

Var almost lost his composure and allowed his stoic facial expression to slip while sitting

with the Marshal. She'd managed to keep her head about her during the raid, doing anything but ranting that her crystals were gone, and chose to sleep with lower-caste Lehd instead of high-caste Mart after the chaos. She hadn't donned traditional brooding garb to flaunt her pregnancy. And now she sat pondering economics. Something was truly odd about her. Penetrating. I'm better off eating in my sleeping skins than risking her annoying interrogation. I rose to head back to my privacy.

"Before you leave, can you point out the location of any ancient cities on my map I'm creating?"

Anything to escape from the scrutiny of a female.

She flipped through the hides and pulled one out.

I pointed to the general location of the ancient city. "It was smaller than the others. But right on the water." The Ice realm never had a large Luvk population due to the climate.

She dabbed a black dot where I pointed. "And what about these other maps? Does anything seem significant to you?"

What did she care? Warriors worked with maps. I was obligated to scan them anyway. I stepped around the table to look at the notations, unfortunately having to stand beside her.

She smelled like meadow flowers and Ovh. She'd probably never scrub off the scent of the Smoking Lands he pounded into her five times before he crashed into a deep sleep. She had seemed to enjoy Ovh's attention, climaxing seven times herself. Ovh was a fool for baiting her affections with so much interest. Females were better off being quickly satiated and left to turn to another warrior. Especially with so many Lords afoot. As long as I can keep her away, I'm safe from her manipulation. And both Ovh and Lehd would ensure she was busy in their sleeping skins.

The door swung wide, casting sunlight across the space.

Mart eyed me in his war mask and reached out with his mind. "*Ishan has summoned Aisling.*" He closed the door and waited outside.

"*We're coming.*" I placed my plate back on the table top.

Aisling studied my face.

"Your presence is requested in the great hall, Aisling. I'll escort you there." Whatever joyous event this is certain to be. I donned my mask and nodded toward the door.

Not long after hearing about her summons, I led the Marshal, now dressed in her home-world's garb, across her lodge's threshold into warm sunlight.

Lehd stepped across our path. "You shouldn't go alone. Kruk is still here with his queen."

"*Very well.*" I nodded.

Lehd and I followed at the Marshal's heels.

"*Aisling's beautiful, Var. Why do you hold back from her?*"

"*I've lived long enough to know females are trouble. She hasn't ordered me to do anything. So, I fulfill my obligations as a guard.*"

"*I heard the rumors.*"

Cursed fire and spit, there were no rumors. "What do you speak of?"

"*How your mother fed the other Queens with your favors.*"

"*It's best not to give lies credence, Lehd. You'll learn that given you live a few more years.*"

Lehd snorted. "*I meant no disrespect.*"

But the fact the Queens leaked out the information meant others knew I was passed

around like a court slut. And to submit to a female was the last thing I intended to do.

Aisling approached the gaping great hall entrance. Lehd stepped before her and led her into the enormous space lit with Queen's orbs. Being the second largest male in the realms, Lehd caused quite a veil of silence to shroud the room. I wasn't but a finger's width shorter than the Sunset guard though.

All the Royal Guards canted forward to hear what Ishan and the other three Queens meant to say to the Marshal. Kruk stood at the edge of the crowd of guards, his blue eyes watching Aisling with a predator's stare. He'd bragged about how he almost dragged her to his lodge on his war beast. But the Royal Guards knew the Thunder clan vermin had no right to Aisling given she knew nothing about Luvk law related to masks when he met her. But like all Thunder clansmen, their ability to dig deeply beneath honor and uncover new ways to steal from others never dodged their Royal Guard leader, Kruk.

The Queens and their guards needed to return to their realms. Soon. Or there would be trouble. Much more than a raid on the Marshal's lodge for Queen's orbs.

"Welcome to the great hall again, Marshal Aisling. We haven't seen you in days," Ishan called.

Ishan emphasized the title *marshal*. Oddly enough.

"I've been busy. There is much to learn on Luvk."

"Oh? Are not the Royal Guards helping you? They can tell you anything you need to know."

Aisling sighed as if annoyed at Ishan's point. "Yes. They are extremely informative."

"And the raid last night, it was on your lodge. What is missing?"

"A life."

Aisling's simple reply was stated in such a manner she obviously meant to conclude the subject with nothing more than noting the loss of a Luvk weighed more heavily upon her than any energy crystals. She didn't care for death by her tone. Nor did she appreciate her guards being killed. Even one who hadn't mated with her.

"And your Queen's orbs?" Ishan poked further.

Aisling paced out an invisible path along the base of the platform the Queens lounged upon, then turned back with a suspicious smile with her arms snaked across her chest. "I find it ironic that the wedding gifts I receive from Queens bring a raid down upon my lodge that results in nothing but the loss of those gifted preciousities and the life of one of my guards." She pivoted like a soldier and marched back along the base of the platform. *Waiting for a reply*. The little Queen.

"Aisling, are you suggesting we caused the raid?" Ishan demanded, her reddening face livid.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Var couldn't believe the Marshal confronted the Queens before every nobleman in the realms except for Borun and the Ice realm Royal Guard. But there she stood, enraging Ishan and the others, he mused. And I hadn't wanted to venture out today.

Aisling halted, facing the Queens, and dared them to deny any part they may have played in the raid upon her lodge. "Wouldn't you come to the same conclusion?"

A presence pushed into my mind. "*Borun wouldn't like the way this discussion is going,*" Lehd said.

Nor would Ovh. The older males were always wiser. Lehd was surprising me though. "*Try to get her attention. Bring her closer to us.*"

"That's preposterous, Marshal. Nobody wants sky demons shrieking outside their lodges at night. Do you think we relish in our younglings quaking in their sleeping skins? Really, Marshal, you insult me to the fullest." Ishan twisted from side to side making eye contact with the three other displeased Queens. "You insult us all."

"I have no time for this," Aisling scoffed. "For whatever reason you all choose to lurk in this twisted reunion of clans, more power to you. I've got work to do." She slowly turned with her hands on her hips, meeting everyone's gaze as she scanned the room. "And when I learn who is behind the Slakens' recent raids and the murder of my guard, you have no idea what The Order of the Marshals will be able to do to you. Marshal technology comes from places you can't even imagine. And the technology is even more unimaginable. I promise that your strength as a warrior or political connections as a queen won't help you draw breath in the wake of the chaos you've created." She stormed past me, toward the doorway.

Lovely point.

Lehd and I kept at her heels.

Watching her tear apart the nobility with words made the trip before the Queens worthwhile. Maybe I was wrong about this female.

* * * *

Aisling paced back and forth in the guards' quarters, grating her teeth, wishing she had napalm to spit instead of her healing powers. The audacity of these queens, she seethed. I could have hurled knives at them all. "And to think they sat there so smugly. They're playing games with me."

"Forget what Ishan said," Lehd offered. "The Queens rarely make sense."

The pompous fools.

Mart leaned against the window opposite the table and sighed. "You shouldn't give them anything to hold against you. They can't be trusted."

"Are you warning me about something I should have realized on my own? After all, those conniving females immediately ensured they were all on an equal playing field by planting one of their sons in my care!"

A little light died in Lehd's eyes.

Hell. My anger always got the best of me. I plopped down on my knees before Lehd, took his cheeks in my palms, and planted a kiss on his soft lips.

He opened them to me for a moment and licked my lips.

The sneak. Cheating in between my therapeutic sessions. I patted his whiskers and rose to face my Royal Guard. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult you. I should just roll with the punches. I'm stubborn—"

"No, Aisling, the Queens are self-centered," Var said. "You said what they needed to hear. What everyone needs to hear."

There spoke my voice of reason.

He nodded once as if to reassure me I hadn't made a mistake.

"Borun would have had a fit." I laughed. Where was he though? And tonight I had to give myself an injection.

My heart sank.

So what happens now? "I have to stand my ground, or I become a puppet of the Queens."

"Yes." Mart shoved away from the wall. "Don't give into their ludicrous behavior. Or you'll never unite the clans."

He was the last person I expected to support me given he always seemed to be withholding something. I eyed him over.

He looked menacing standing there, head tilted down, arched brow. And he never tied his wild hair back. What was he? A renegade? Or his mystique was all part of his academic persona? I'd spent years mixing with academia and run across a few wild types like him before. Maybe I should be more careful with him in particular. Maybe he couldn't be trusted. "What do you suggest?"

Mart grabbed the back of an empty chair and leaned on it as if his thoughts weighed heavy on his shoulders. "I don't know what you're really thinking. You've been working on this map." He pointed at the sheet of leather. "And you ask us questions. But what does it all mean? We can't help you unless you tell us everything."

Maybe that's what he wanted. To know my motivation. "I don't know yet. It's just obvious my lodge was targeted for the raid. If the Slakens are working with the Marshals on their side of the portal, they wouldn't be attacking me. However, it looks like someone on this side is feeding them information or using them to cause friction among the clans. So, why would a clan target me?"

* * * *

Var shifted his footing where he stood with the other guards listening to Aisling. The Marshal was correct, he concluded. He reached out to the others' minds. "*Last night's attack may have been a scare tactic.*"

Ovh slid his gaze to mine. "*To make certain she knew her place. But you said she did anything but cower before the Queens and Royal Guards. However foolish it may have been, she's shown them she won't play their games. She's come to unite the clans and will not be swayed.*"

"*There aren't enough of us to send for Borun and protect Aisling. We'll have to deal with this the best way we can until his return,*" Mart said.

"Stop mindspeaking. I can't hear you," Aisling snapped. "I need you to work with me and not treat me like a simpering female. I may not be as tough as you all. But I can beat the best at throwing knives. And I can heal the wounded. Grant it, I pass out a few hours afterward. It's still a nice perk."

"What's a perk?" Mart asked.

“Something good.”

Mart nodded with a grin.

Not the most respectful reaction given the warrior was of noble training. The white and black striped Sunrise guard wasn't the best choice for Aisling given she had taken all the clan Royal Guard leaders as mates except from his clan. Grant it Kruk wasn't here. But Mart's self-centered high-caste behavior might cause problems. He had to be watched. And if necessary, taken care of. The last thing the Marshal needed was trouble from inside her lodge. I scanned the faces of the other warriors.

Ovh studied me.

How long had I been under observation? But I was not the bone of contention here. I'm for clan unification.

“Since my door is hanging back on my personal quarters, I'd like to be alone a while.”

Aisling left the room.

“*What should we do?*” Lehd asked.

“*Anything to keep the Marshal on the path to clan unification,*” Ovh said.

* * * *

Aisling sank onto Borun's sleeping skins and tried to forget about the tremors in her hands. Alone. Just for a while, she thought. Without some Luvk male breathing down my neck. The day had started out so well. Okay, minus my missing door and crystals. With the Queens out to sabotage my work, the day slowly soured. Why wouldn't they want their people safe? What did they have to gain from a fragmented Luvk population? The Slakens enslaved Luvks. How could slavery be better than embracing unity and freedom? Okay, maybe I'm sounding like a poster child for Western ideas back on Earth. But slavery can't be any fun. Or The Order of the Marshals wouldn't exist.

A knock rattled at the door.

The door whined. Orange light shot across the room.

“Time to eat, Aisling. I've brought my Lord's mate the finest of dinners.”

Morna. She might have answers. I sat up.

The woman's black and white dress hadn't changed a stitch since the last time I saw her.

“Welcome. I hope you can sit with me awhile.”

“Of course. You must miss Borun. His charm is so pleasing. I miss him dearly when he's away.”

Since cold sweat spritzed my brow, I couldn't agree more. All I had to do was think about the way he saved me and chills shook my core.

Morna descended by the fire pit's dancing flames. “Join me with this fine food.”

No problem. I sat on pillows at her side.

She handed me a covered dish. “Tonight, you dine upon the freshest fruit of the *Satia* tree cooked with seared *Crol* and *frule*.”

“Alright.” I think. My gut isn't complaining, yet.

The firelight gilded Morna's genuine smile.

As long as the food isn't strange. I lifted the lid to find something that looked like rice covered with vegetables and a slab of grilled fish. The moment called for a silent prayer to the universe for appeasing my finicky gut.

“Taste it. Taste it.” Morna nudged my arm.

I grabbed a spoon and stuffed a bite of meat into my mouth.

Yes, flaky fish-like meat fell apart on my tongue. I nodded to squelch the woman's fears

that the offerings on the plate were palatable.

"When you carry Lord Borun's younglings, I will insist the hunters bring you this fish every day."

She didn't know? Why the secrecy? The guards would know. I just nodded as if the prospect of eating delectable fish daily was wonderful. I swallowed my fish and smiled. "Have you heard anything about last night's raid? Like theories behind it?"

"Oh!" Her palm fell on mine. She leaned so close her lips touched my ear. "My maid's brother swears he saw Kruk, your betrothed, slip off into the woods four days ago. He arrived back late last night." She backed away, blinking matter-of-factly. "My ears are open always."

"Then send for Borun. I want him back." God, someone contact him.

Morna chuckled a content sound. "Of course. What female could survive aching for him in her sleeping skins? He is the magnificent son I never had." She stared at the fire, sighing.

"You had children?" I kept eating, hoping to keep her talking.

"Four daughters. All orange striped. Even now they aren't respected."

So low-caste sisters of queens and their low-caste daughters are tossed away like burnt food. What is Borun facing with Wryn? "Who did your daughters mate with?"

She sighed. "With commoners."

How insane. With all the Royal Guards pining away their lives, how could such an option be rational? The food suddenly tasted like ash.

* * * *

Borun pulled back on Jonner's reins and scanned the distant desolate valley lying beyond the edge of the last mountain's ridge of the Starry Sky realm. Just rocks and dust stretched out toward the distant white horizon, the Ice realm. Late tomorrow, I'd beat the setting sun to Var's deceased mother's palace. Luck be with us. For Wryn's sake. She wanted to journey this far as much as I did. But who could argue with Ishan? At least the Royal Guards of the Ice clan hadn't killed us en route. Instead, they'd offered protection and guidance in traveling the quickest route to the village. Meaning I'd be on my way back to Aisling soon.

The sooner the better the way my skin itched. The blood lust. Nobody rode nearby. Even Wryn sat on her war beast ahead of me. I had privacy to deal with my needs. I extracted the syringe and injected myself.

Almost instantly the annoying fire vanished.

I would have rather spent the time with Aisling. Surely she had accepted her guards by now. At least, Lehd. If I didn't believe that, my journey was doomed. That was the only reason I buckled and agreed to escort Wryn. Aisling needed to bond with her guard.

A war beast trotted past me to slow beside Wryn's.

The orange male was larger than Mart. Most were given they were bred for size, strength, and power. And Lok, Wryn's visitor, wore the mask of the Royal Guard leader now.

He was fierce in battle and never winced in a great hall. The guard would serve a queen well. Or his mate.

Were they mindspeaking?

Wryn shot me a glance over her shoulder.

Was that to see if I watched? Of course I did. I pushed out with my mind. "*What's wrong, sister?*"

"*Nothing at all, Borun.*" Her orange hair dangled down her back in a long ponytail like Aisling's.

My heart sank at the similarity. To hold my mate's silken hair in my hand. To look into

her eyes. The way Lok did with Wryn. If my escorting Wryn secured her a safe marriage with an interested male like Lok, the separation from Aisling wasn't in vain. Just torture. But two good things would result from the venture.

* * * *

Aisling strode through the shadows into the guards' quarters to get to the bottom of the secrecy in hiding her pregnancy. Morna had been more than helpful in providing gossip and general information, she decided. Now, my mates will fill in the gaps.

Lehd and Mart ate at the table.

"Var and Ovh are at the doors?" I asked.

Lehd tossed his spoon onto his plate and nodded, giving me his full attention. "How was Morna's visit?"

He should know. He's the guard at my door throughout the day. "Wonderful." I pulled out a chair and descended.

Both men watched me as if they waited for me to share the village news.

"She doesn't know I'm pregnant."

"Nobody does." Mart bit into a piece of flatbread.

Lehd leaned back in his chair. "Borun thought it safer if we kept the news secret as long as possible."

Why? "Because of Kruk?"

Mart's glowing gaze slid to mine. "To keep him out of your bed the way a queen shares her sleeping skins with her guards once she's pregnant."

Lehd shot Mart a shut-up-and-eat glare.

"Don't shoot daggers at me. We can't shelter Aisling when she needs to understand what's at stake to survive here."

That was the truth. "Mart's right, Lehd. And I thank you both for caring enough to look out for me in the ways you do."

They both turned intrigued masks my direction.

At least based on what I could make out given the sun had set and firelight didn't reveal much in their Luvk features in these murky shadows. "So," I leaned forward, "Morna says low-caste sisters are used to raise the younglings of high-caste nobles?"

They both nodded.

"And that low-caste sisters marry whomever will take them?"

Again they nodded.

The bobble heads. "So, I'd like to drop a seed that might grow into a wild and crazy vine. And perhaps, that vine might run rampant on Luvk. Consume all seven realms."

They waited, eyes glowing.

"If the Royal Guards became a council for the Queens, wouldn't they need mates? Wouldn't low-caste sisters serve a greater purpose politically in marrying into other clans?"

Their glowing gazes turned between them before locking back upon me.

"It's a thought. But most guards may find it counterproductive when they can wait for a Queen's favoritism," Mart concluded.

"Well, have you or any of your brothers ever contemplated having a mate all of your own?" Someone had to have brought up the subject at some point.

"You aren't happy?" Lehd asked.

Mart's eyes closed as if he were pained.

"I never said I wasn't happy, Lehd. And I'm not implying in any way that I'm going to

send you all back to your mothers. My guards are my guards. And that's the way things will remain. I have no intention of dishonoring anyone." Especially after Proyd died protecting me. "But it's just a thought to find purpose for the unmated. Low-caste sisters are just as important as high-caste brothers."

They nodded in unison.

"Are you talking behind my back in mindspeak?"

They both chuckled.

"Leave it to her to be suspicious," Mart said. "Yes, we are, Aisling."

Dammit. "Stop that. Or I'll just sleep with Ov'h."

"We were simply noting how you're so different from the Queens," Lehd offered.

"I'm not a queen. And since I'm the Marshal, I should note I've heard Kruk rode off four days ago on his war beast only to return last night."

Both men stared me down.

"It's four days ride there and back to the portal." I shoved up from the table top and shot Lehd a come-hither glance. "I hope you're up for night duty because there's no way in Hell I'm sleeping alone after last night."

He followed me into the bath.

The door thumped behind us.

Alone was good with just Lehd in the room.

Lehd grabbed my waist in the pool's soft glow, pulling my back into his solid chest and his hard *weapon*.

Capture me. Defeat me.

"Swim with me, sweet one." He growled softly.

He knew how to get my attention. The shot of Borun's blood had taken care of the shape shifting. But the tremors had only vanished for about an hour, then progressively worsened—the amount of time it took for Morna to lovingly share details on Luvk lifeways.

Lehd slid his hands beneath the hem of my tank top, his warm fingers onto my skin.

I squirmed with anticipation of his wandering touch.

His low guttural growl gurgled deep inside his chest.

Hot need shafted from my heart to my groin.

I leaned my head back and stared into his golden eyes as his hands slid across my ribs to cup my breasts. "Lehd," I groaned.

He toyed with my bra clasp until it popped free and his warm hands were on my breasts, cupping the swells, squeezing them. He rubbed his thumbs across my tender nipples. "Turn to me, sweet one."

"Oh, I'd rather you keep doing what you're doing." I arched into his touch.

He chuckled, pinching my nipples only to brush those amazing palms down my ribs to my waist and turn me to face him.

Not what I wanted. I opened my mouth to complain.

His fell over mine. His tongue thrust into my mouth, probing, possessing.

Yes, possess me. I snaked my arms around his neck and entwined my tongue with his.

He groaned into my mouth.

Oh, I loved the sounds he made. Kind of wild. Almost inhuman. But erotic.

He descended in slow motion, a hair's width from my skin, breathing hot breath along the way, igniting a rash of gooseflesh as if he inhaled it into his lungs with his breaths, only stopping at one aching nipple, exhaling. "You're so beautiful, sweet one."

Standing there was absolute torture. To grab his hair. To force him to latch on. To insist he suck the agonizing pulse from the heartbeat throbbing in my groin up to my thrashing heart. I wanted his weight on top of me. Inside me. That mouth devouring every inch of my skin. "In my sleeping skins, Lehd."

He swung me into his arms and carried me to my bed in determined silence.

Not fast enough. I don't care how fast he got me there, he just needed to make it happen. "Hurry," I groaned.

He instantly placed me on my feet only to yank off his boots and kick his pants aside. I tried to undress as quickly. But he was faster moving like some stealthy creature in the darkness.

The luscious darkness.

Darkness of panting and roaring.

His hands shoved me down and yanked the pants off my legs, spreading my thighs, crawling to where he wanted to be.

Right back to my breasts. Thank God. I loved how he fed from them like a hungry kitten.

He laid atop me with his delicious weight of corded steel and nipped, then tugged my nipple into a long peak and kissed his way over to the other stony bead to work it in the same fashion.

I slid my ankles around his thighs and just enjoyed his lavish touch. To keep them there. Or pretend to. I slid my heels higher, up to Lehd's firm ass, spreading my sex invitingly for him, and raked my fingers into his hair. "Oh, Lehd, make love to me."

He thrust his supple hardness inside me, in one slow measured stroke, along the silken path dampened by my need for him. Only for him tonight.

He began pumping, slow and steady.

"Oh, Lehd." I threw my head back and let him touch that little clutch of nerves deep inside me where my soul melded with his.

His lips sucked a pathway up to my neck and locked onto the beat of my heart in my jugular. The kiss worked like a homing beacon, showing him exactly where to focus the tip of his cock inside me, in quick measured strokes, making me pant for breath as he pounded toward my *heartsong*. Igniting my rising ecstasy until I couldn't fathom another moment of bliss.

I cried out, shaking beneath him.

"Shh, sweet one. Hush." His strokes lengthened for his pleasure. Played along my channel, drawing me deeper into his spell.

I wanted him. I wanted to feel complete *with* him again. I bucked my hips and clamped my muscles down around his solid shaft.

He rose on all fours and growled a deadly sound, pumping, thrusting, grinding his pelvis against mine in a wild move that I couldn't stop watching. His strokes quickened until another wall of rapture threatened to crash into me.

"Lehd!" I grabbed his halter and matched his thrusts.

There is nothing quite like the thrill of lying beneath a tiger pounding into you with his iron body while you grip his rocking hips with your legs, dirty dancing to a song only the two of you can hear. An internal song that throbs in your heart and roars in your core, deeply hidden from others, shared only with the one burying his hard flesh inside you. And Lehd could play wild songs with the fastest beats that amplify inside me until bursting forth in my cries of passion as the ecstasy he conjures within me ruptures into the bluest light between us. I clung to him shuddering, trying to match his moves as he wildly brought me to orgasm. Again.

My muscles clenched around his firm thickness and he throbbed, filling me with his seed.
Blessed are those who just give into the darkness of Luwk.

He forced his thickness along my channel again and again. Pulsing. Pounding. Over and over. Until my thoughts swam from the threat of *another* orgasm building deep inside me.

My sex machine. Yes. He had been an excellent observer with his mother. He knew how to work my body.

His body suddenly went rigid, and he froze overhead. "Aisling," he ground out, "how can so many not have felt what I feel when I lie with you?"

Oh they could. If they would just listen to an Earth girl and forget this ridiculous marriage system. "I don't really care at the moment. I'm lost in feeling this way with you. Again and again."

His low chuckle rumbled through the shadows of the room.

"I shall grant your wish, sweet one, because I can't get enough of you. Release me." He wriggled his hips.

What did he have in mind? I dropped my knees away.

He shoved up on his hands and knees and slowly kissed his way down my chest, stopping to suck each nipple in one slow movement, then onward down to my navel. He trailed his tongue around the edge then down further through my tight curls.

Dear God. I don't think I have the energy in me to get eaten by Lehd. I sucked in a deep breath.

His tongue slid between my folds and sought the bud of my clit in one delicate motion. I writhed in the furs on the tip of that respectful tongue.

He slid his warm palms along my inner thigh until he could gently spread my folds with his fingertips and nibbled my nub ever so gently.

Nothing comparable could make me ache like being eaten. Eaten by one of the biggest strongest toughest males on the planet. He made me feel safe and made me explode with completion.

His hot mouth made me dance and cry. Made me beg. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't see. All I could do was rock against that amazing tongue and pray for mercy.

He brought me to climax twice before he released me and thrust inside me, again, riding, plunging, burying himself to the balls with the frenzy of a man bent on making me his. Claiming me. Ensuring I didn't need anyone but him. As if he *needed* me to say I loved him.

I grabbed his head, pulling handfuls of his hair down until he looked me in the eye with those golden eyes. "I love you, Lehd. I love you," I whispered. History had shown respect and appreciation were truly enough to equal love. But there seemed to be more than that inside me.

His release came so ferociously that I grabbed his ass and held him inside me. We stared at each other, waiting, feeling his seed pump into me.

"I'll carry your youngling too, Lehd. I promise. Soon." Just don't get yourself killed before I give Borun his children.

He collapsed on me in a panting sweaty heap of muscles.

My guardian angel. I'd give him all I could of me. Although what I had would be divided among five others. I slid my arms around his limp body and pulled his ear to my lips. "You're mine, Lehd."

Those words made my heart sink with realization. He was mine to love and care for.

"I hear your *heartsong*, sweet one." He wrapped me in his python arms and rolled us onto our sides where he tucked his knee between my thighs and sighed. "Stop thinking, Aisling. I

won't get any sleep if you keep seducing me with your heartbeat."

* * * *

Days didn't rush by while Aisling waited for Borun to return. One dose of his blood remained in her syringe before her big shift, she noted. And I couldn't find my spare vial of Borun's blood after the raid. Not that I'm afraid. I just haven't been fortunate enough to experience the new beastly me. I need a distraction. Like spending time with my loves. Yes, I love them. I realize that now. Focusing on my layered map today had been equally distracting. And then Borun arrives... Sometime. Please, universe. Is a day early even possible? Albeit, tomorrow is day nine. I'll be pushing the last minute on day ten with shape shifting. But he'd said it would take ten days. So, why am I wondering if a day early is possible?

Because I'm losing my mind on the back forty in BFE outer space. I pushed the guard's door wide to find all but Mart seated at the table.

"Blessed sunrise, Aisling," Ovh called.

I shot him a smile.

Surely he knew I'd snatch him into a corner today and give myself to him. Lehd may be young and accommodating but Ovh was just loving. All he wanted to do was ensure I was happy. Extremely happy. Who would complain about that?

Lehd and Var gnawed at meat on bones. Var nodded at me. And Lehd just ate after waking up and taking care of my morning tremors. With what he did to me each night, the warrior had to be ravenous. I sat in an empty chair and unrolled my map.

"You stare at that map too much," Ovh said.

One day I'll realize what I'm missing. "The answer's here. Maybe I just need to go over everything again with Mart. Or have him add some new historical layer?" I sighed and met Ovh's golden gaze. "But there's definitely something I'm missing. Any ideas?" I slid my gaze to each one.

"Tell me what you noted on the map." Ovh leaned toward me on his elbow.

Okay. After eight days scrawling on leather, someone is asking me about my work. Helpful curiosity is a good sign. I slid the leather toward him.

"Of course you all helped me locate ancient cities with each realm. I have noted waves of attacks. They seemed to work from one point in an ancient city early in history, outward to the closest ancient cities that I'm calling city states—"

"What's a city state?" Lehd asked.

"A city run by a noble, usually a king. It is surrounded by agricultural land that feeds the city's occupants. These city states aren't true states but have many of the characteristics. So, I'll leave you with that for city states." After all, the Luvks probably never reached state level. The Slakens saw to that.

"What do you call our realms now?"

Lehd meant what the term was for these queenships. "Chiefdoms. A chiefdom is much smaller than a city state and run by a person born into power. So are city states. But chiefdoms are smaller. Thank the Slakens for that. They strive to keep your groups small and disorganized enough to prevent you from joining forces." Or so the Slakens appeared to. And did an excellent job at it.

My gaze glided back over the layers of attacks. Everything shifted through time from focused areas moving outward, spreading to consume the entire continent. Why? The portal was on the other end. Unless there was another portal.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Aisling's heart clenched where she sat, staring at her map and pondering the existence of a second portal. Another hidden gateway into the Luvk world would provide the Slakens a lot of stealth factor when coming to collect their loot. And a portal in a remote location would really help with the raids. Where could it be hidden?

"What is it, Aisling?" Ovh asked.

I met their worried gazes. "There's another portal."

My guards wagged their heads in unison, chanting a silent no.

"Aisling, we've lived a thousand years since the attacks began and nobody's found another portal," Ovh said. "Certainly someone would have found one."

"Has anyone cared to look?" If they even thought to.

The men cast glances between each other. Even Var, my voice of reason beyond Ovh's wisdom.

Var placed the piece of flatbread he'd been eating upon his breakfast and met my gaze. "If you think there is one, another portal would explain many things."

I searched the map for clues. "Maybe a portal is where the attacks began. In the southernmost part of the Sunrise realm. Where's Mart? He should think about this. He knows the history of Slaken attacks better than I do." And maybe he'd thought about a second portal already. Maybe he's hidden that from me all along.

Lehd rose. "I'll relieve him. He can help you. But let him eat and sleep today, Aisling." He shot me a warning glance. "We're short a few warriors."

Okay, I was pretty dogmatic with my research. But somebody around here had to think about more than sex. Especially when we were surrounded by lies and video tape. Figuratively speaking. "We just need to find it and destroy it."

The room rumbled with laughter.

If they thought they were going to laugh at me, they were mistaken. I shot them daggers. "Laughing just might find you staring down a second portal. Do you want to look foolish then?"

Their laughing died quickly.

Ovh shook his head. "We can't touch or see the only portal we know exists in the Starry Sky realm. How do you think it's possible to destroy one?"

"Something had to cause the portal. Create it. It didn't just suddenly appear one thousand years ago." Or so I hoped. If we could close it, the attacks would end. And Luvks could live more peacefully. Why did that sound insane? Maybe because they are so violent. But it wasn't my place to choose their path for them. Or maybe because closing the portal meant I may never return to Earth.

* * * *

Mart helped narrow down the choices for Aisling's plan of exploration. They'd have to wait for Borun to return though, she decided. I wasn't about to set out across wild territory without my blood mate. And a fifth guard. Borun had left me once already. Not again. So, I set to planning the order in which we'd search the ancient cities for portals. After all, the cities were where the raids began. Slakens started harvesting the energy crystals from individual residences,

emptying a city of its light sources, and moving on to another place to mine the Queens' orbs.

Maybe the known portal close to the Sunset realm and set in the Starry Skies mountainside was actually a decoy? Could the Slakens have been smart enough to open two for the sole purpose of surprise?

A chill feathered along my skin.

I needed to discuss this with Borun. Actually, I just needed him with me in bed. I could taste the salty metallic tinge to his blood. I could feel his pulse beating in my palm. Where was he? Just one more day.

The door swung wide.

Lehd filled the sunlit doorway. "Borun's arrived, Aisling."

Thank you, universe. I leapt from my chair and ran toward Lehd's body guarding the sunlit edge of the exit.

Lehd pointed me onward.

To Borun's terrifying emotionless mask where he straddled his menacing war beast in his brilliant orange stripes. He slid from Jonner's back like nothing bothered him.

He could act a little more excited. Like me. I hopped into a run and threw myself into his python arms.

"My heart drums so loudly, little one, that I can't hear your *heartsong*," he chuckled.

He didn't need to after I ran through his village like a pathetic puppy. "I missed you." So much that tears warmed my eyes. "Don't you dare leave me again." Yes. I missed him. He and everyone had to see in my actions that I loved him.

He lowered my boots to the ground, looked at me with those normal golden eyes I can see in the daylight, turned me toward the guards, and walked me back to our lodge.

Lehd nodded at him. "It's good to have you home, Borun."

"It is good to arrive bearing good news. Come, listen." Borun shoved me through the guard's doorway and into the shadows with both solid hands.

My days of ruling the roost were over. I had to go where he commanded. But who was upset?

Lehd strode in behind Borun. Both whipped off their masks.

My heart choked as I looked upon that face that made me love Luvk.

He must have felt my *heartsong* because he scooped me up into his arms and devoured my mouth. The world started spinning as he sucked every thought I had of anything away into him. Only his soft lips and probing tongue existed.

My womb quaked like jelly.

I had to grab a fistful of his soft hair to hang onto him before my body slithered away. From him. My blood mate.

He backed away and lowered me so quickly that I hung in shock, released his hair, and landed in a chair.

My other mates watched me with glowing eyes, gazes that studied my reaction to Borun. They couldn't understand there was more between Borun and I than sex and respect. Blood lust bound us at a more intimate level.

Borun knelt beside me, studied the aftershock of his kiss on my face, and exhaled possessively.

There was no denying the crackling energy between us. Or he smelled Lehd on me.

Borun scanned the other's faces. "Wryn was accepted by the Ice clan. Happily. Allowing me to depart a day earlier than planned."

“Lok is strong. He will protect her,” Var said, emotionlessly, with a nod.

Borun chuckled. “I watched him seduce Wryn en route to the palatial village. None of his half brothers dare cross him.” His gaze slid to mine. “Aisling, this is the first low-caste Queen in history. Change is upon Luvk.”

If the firelight would have reached his face and driven back the shadows consuming his features, I knew his mask would twist with enthusiasm. His voice was drenched with the drug. I laid a palm on the corded muscle of his arm.

His eyes flickered like I shot a bolt of electricity through him.

His intoxicating skin lured my hand down along the steely length of his forearm to his hand where I curled my fingers around his knuckles.

His eyes flashed again. But he turned back to the men. “There are a few other younger orange daughters of the Queens. We could encourage the Queens to arrange marriages...”

Not good. They needed to focus on forming a council of adults, males with duties to keep them challenged. Whatever type they fancy though. “Uh, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I squeezed his hand.

Five pairs of glowing eyes turned to mine.

Double not good. “Listen. They’re children. Younglings. Is it right to wed them off for a political advantage?”

Nobody blinked.

It’s a standoff. “Okay, explain to me why these children will want to be part of arranged marriages.”

“Because low-caste females are shunned by their mothers when it comes to creating political alliances,” Mart explained. “You said yourself Morna spoke of these things with you. For the low-caste princesses, this is a chance to place them in power and seat thrones with level-headed females.”

Why did that sound odd coming from Mart? He seemed trapped in his superiority before. In his whiteness. But now he pushed for change. Maybe there was more than a seductive self-centered soul hidden beneath those stripes. “Fine. But arranging the marriages will instigate favoritism among low-caste females, and they won’t be so level-headed after they’ve been pampered by their doting power-hungry Queens. I say just let it go and let the mothers marry off their daughters later. See how things play out.”

“Maybe she’s right.” Borun studied my hand.

My white hand. I gulped at the pure color of it. “Back on my world, my skin might be the choice of colors but we lie in the sun and change it to the golden color of Var’s stripes.” I shot him a glance.

The Ice warrior’s features shifted curiously.

“It’s true.” I held up my other hand, unwilling to let go of Borun’s handhold. “This skin is considered sickly on my planet. Nobody would dare walk around with this pale flesh with our ideas of beauty.” I chuckled. “Isn’t it insane how differently cultures can evolve to perceive the same thing in such a different way?” And here I was pushing the Luvks to change. Against everything I ever believed back home. It wasn’t my place to make them alter their culture. “Look, I don’t like feeding you ideas and causing social upheaval. But something is going on. The political powers aren’t going to be placated with a few arranged marriages.”

“Time, Aisling. Arrange marriages give the clans time,” Var said.

For what? “What kind of time?”

“Time to allow us the chance to ensure the wrong clan doesn’t end up in power.”

Was that what everything was truly about? Between the raid the other night, Kruk's departure, the Queens' murders, and the determination of those warriors trying to capture me once I passed through the portal, Var had to be right. "Well then we'd better come up with a solution before someone else dies." I slid my gaze to Borun's. "Proy was killed in a Slaken raid a few nights ago. I'm fairly certain Kruk was behind it."

Borun studied the ring of eyes around the table. "Should we replace him?"

The question set off a series of shrugs from my guards.

What were they saying in mindspeak?

Borun shot me a speculative glance. "Little one, I can request another Royal Guard for you if you like."

No. "Five are enough." The thought of my juggling another sex-starved male boggled the mind.

A low chuckle curled around the room from Borun. He squeezed my hand beneath his two wickedly dancing eyebrows.

Royal Guards thought of nothing but sex. Grant it, Queens did by default simply because their guards thought of nothing else. "Stop it. I have more to tell you."

"More?"

"There's a second portal." I reached for the rolled up leather of my map.

All the warriors began sighing except for Borun.

"Don't listen to them, Borun." I shook out the leather and pointed to the Sunrise clan. "It's somewhere down here."

"She wants to start searching for a portal in the ruins, Borun," Mart clarified.

I scowled at his patronizing tone. "No sex for you for a month!"

He shot me a dismissive look.

Var burst into laughter.

Like I could hold sex over Var's head. "So much for respect when my voice of reason laughs with the rest of the guards." I shot to my feet with map in hand and went to my personal quarters.

Borun didn't follow me for a few minutes.

Have your testosterone-imbued discussion. They were probably talking about how I was a stupid female. The chauvinist dolts.

The squeak of Borun's boot announced his presence behind me where I fumed, sitting near the fire pit. He descended, wrapping himself around my back to sink his mouth to my neck, his whiskers tickling up a chilly wave that coursed through my body.

I shivered and grabbed his arms that snaked around me.

His massaging hands worked at my breasts. "Don't be angry with them, little one. They do what's best for your safety."

"Don't make me snort. They've been treating me like an idiot every time I mention a hidden portal—"

"Hidden?" he whispered against my ear.

"To function as a secret entrance for Slaken raids. The type of attacks through time indicates they move outward from the same point, moving farther only when they've taken everything they've come for. It's a simple explanation."

"When I have finished with you, you will show me this map."

He didn't laugh. He didn't discount my perspective. He just slid his warm hands beneath my shirt and twisted the clasp of my bra.

When his hands slid beneath the cups to mold to my breasts, I ached so badly in my groin that my soul melted into my panties. “Borun,” I groaned, turning my body to face him.

His eyes begged I touch him, kiss him, cling to him. “You mated with them.”

It wasn’t an accusatory statement. Just more like he knew. “I don’t want to talk about that now.” I just wanted to push him backward and ride him into the ground.

“They care about you the way I do, Aisling. Don’t be angry with them.”

“I’m only going to be angry if you don’t make me cry out your name one time for every day you’ve been absent from my sleeping skins.”

A low growl gurgled in his chest. He grabbed me against his bulging pectoral muscles, pulling up my shirt, and yanking it over my head.

That’s my Borun. A mate who knew exactly what *he* wanted. I slipped off my bra and ran my hands over his shoulders until I could pull the tie from his queue.

He watched me touch him and studied my gaze as my movements shifted.

I shook out his hair.

The firelight kissed his features as if he were some kind of golden Norse god with sharp cheekbones and full lips. Maybe it was his glowing eyes. But Borun was my first and last hero with his wild orange hair and python arms. Like Atlas merged with Hercules. And the longer I stared into his probing gaze, the more I wanted him to hold me forever. Keep me safe. I stretched up a few inches to nip at his lower lip.

He just watched me nip and nip at his mouth.

What entranced him? “Borun?” I waited for him to react.

He slid a hand up to cup my face and turned my head as if he searched for something important.

Maybe a flaw? The way I’d been acting about sex certainly stamped me flawed. Feral. Fevered. But what darted behind those misty eyes?

“We’ll leave to search for the portal tomorrow,” he whispered.

What?

My heart raced.

“You and I have business to tend to first.” He leaned my head to the side and latched that hot sucking mouth onto my neck.

He didn’t care I reeked of Lehd. He just wanted me. Now. And I wasn’t complaining.

He raised me up until I crouched on my knees as he hungrily nibbled my nipples into peaks, back and forth between each breast like a man starved for nourishment. Or he wanted me so damned wet that he could just ram into me and burst.

The thought made me ache so deeply that I almost fell to the floor.

He shoved me to my feet where I could look down into his serious golden eyes, and he turned to my boots, yanking them off like slippers.

I felt drugged.

Lazy.

So ready to be taken that I could only look at him.

Begging him to hurry.

He pulled off my pants and snatched me into the air.

“Here, Borun, here by the fire.” Moving to the sleeping skins meant I couldn’t see his body. Without the light orbs.

He halted and studied me.

“I can’t see you in the dark.”

His breath knifed.

Did he realize I loved seeing his stripes?

He knelt, placing me gently atop some pillows, tugged off his boots, rose, and slowly peeled off his leather pants. Inch by glorious inch. Revealing his mesmerizing body I so desperately needed to touch.

My heart raced at the unmasking of his muscular build enhanced by all those incredible stripes, even more so by his engorged shaft.

My Norse god stepped out of the pool of leather at his feet and shoved a foot between my legs to push them apart.

No problem. I granted his wish.

He descended, kicking the pillows beneath my knees out of his way.

What was he up to?

He slid a hand beneath one of my knees and raised it only to settle his soft lips against my inner thigh. Slowly, methodically, he kissed a trail of smoldering gooseflesh down my leg. Down to where my body subconsciously took over and blindly rocked. Begging for him.

When he reached the end of my thigh, his presence slipped away, only to begin the same torture on my other leg. It was so overwhelming I had to shut my eyes, dive into darkness. Whine. "Borun!"

His mouth came off my inner thigh. "One."

Oh. Dear. God, Luvks could count.

He slid his fingers into the tender nether folds of my sex and circled my nub with a fingertip then returned to the spot on my inner thigh, kissing while working his finger in mind-numbing circles at my clit.

I thought I'd lose my mind gasping for breath. Somehow I sucked in a deep one and tried to hold back my pleas. But he was so damned dogmatic. I needed his hard shaft inside me. I grabbed fistfuls of fur and rocked my head back and forth.

But his touch was too overpowering. "Borun, please, I need you."

"Two."

I bucked against his finger where he pinned me to the pillow and climaxed with a thousand stars shooting behind my eyelids.

But he didn't ram his steely cock inside me. No, he latched that hot mouth onto my aching nub and sucked me back down into the darkness. Head under. Gasping at air. I became his. Again and again. He claimed me as I gasped his name. Marked himself with my scent. Rubbed away any vestige of the others until I couldn't lift my head from the pillow he so graciously placed me upon.

Somewhere inside me, my soul rallied a second wind, and I wrapped my legs around that mouth and rode it until my building orgasm peaked so explosively tears came to my eyes.

He must have seen the tears because he crawled up to run the tip of his pointed nose along the length of mine, staring into my eyes. "Little one, forgive me, I've hurt you."

How could my heart melt again? "No. It's just too much at one time. Please, inside me. I ache for you." At least, he hadn't said *five*.

He gently slid his thick shaft into me, ever so carefully. "Blessed stars, you're so wet, Aisling. My Aisling. So hot. So soft."

I clenched my inner muscles around him.

He hissed. "I dreamt of you doing that every moment of every day we were apart."

"Then you know never to leave me again."

He growled and began his plundering of my soul. Gaze locked overhead on mine. Knees leaning into mine, holding my sex completely open for his pleasure.

I wanted to grip his harness and ride him. "Let my legs free, Borun."

A wicked grin split his cheeks. He found the little spot that made me whine and focused short strokes there. I peaked so rapidly I couldn't beg him to stop. To come with me. Instead, I wilted into his elbow and closed my eyes so I could just enjoy being with him.

* * * *

Borun drove deeply into his mate's slick softness, watching her lie quietly and contentedly beneath him. Her *heartsong* had quieted to a calm beat. Hearing it rattle upon my arrival was a far greater gift than anything he could have imagined. And now she stretched out in a pool of long blonde hair with her beautiful breasts calling to me. Not far below, my younglings' mark shivered beneath her knifing breath.

Her blue eyes popped open.

She focused on me and started rocking her hips with my movements.

The sweet little sounds she made noted I'd struck another chord inside her and stood plucking the strings like a master court *Hrindlian* singing for her supper. I'd give her something to dance about. I shifted away from her knees onto mine and leaned into her, thrusting, lunging, plowing into that clenching womb trying to milk my seed into her.

Her legs slid around my ass to trap me, and she grabbed her favorite handhold on the back of my harness. Her taut channel tightened more, almost choking the pulse from my erection. I had to push harder. Faster.

Her sweet little sounds amplified to demanding tones that yearned for me to hurry.

A tightness in balls made me throw my head back as my body flexed to shoot my seed with an unyielding squeeze. I could only pump into her channel and strain, pushing, trying to leave every bit of my soul therein. Every drop of adoration, love, and respect she deserved. Because she'd learned to accept Luvk life. Learned to accept me. And she kept grinding my aching shaft with her amazing hips.

The blue healing light flashed between our bodies as my last thrust died inside my mate's heat.

"Oh, Borun," she whispered, sliding her palms down my chest. "Nothing makes me feel like you do. And," she whipped out a small knife, "we have business to take care of." She quickly slashed a scratch on my arm and leaned to suck blood from the crack's beading seam.

Nothing more erotic than a female's mouth sucking a man's body existed.

I went rock hard inside her.

"I hope you aren't tired." I chuckled.

"I never am after the blue light flashes."

Healing and energizing. Her magic light could move mountains. Since she'd only shouted my name seven times, I had more work to do since I'd been away nine days.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"It's got to be in the Sunrise realm," Aisling said to the five warriors leaning over her map later that night after Borun had finished with her. Why did my mates hesitate in agreeing with me about the portal so much? I'm not a moron.

Mart shot me a glance. "Aisling, I spent most of my youngling years wandering around those ruins with my father. I'd know if there was a portal inside."

"We leave at sunrise," Borun announced and rolled up the map.

At least my blood mate believed in me. Why was Mart so determined we not search for another portal in his homeland? I headed back into the bath, stripped off my black robe and lingerie, and hopped into the churning water.

By the time I surfaced, Borun stripped off his pants. And Ovh. And Lehd. Apparently our relationship went beyond nudity to communal bathing. It's not like any of them hadn't seen me nude. Or in my most vulnerable state, legs splayed wide to their adoration. And why should all three of them in the bath with me prove a problem? Unless they ganged up on me. And Borun was here to protect me. I grabbed a spot at the pool's rim and watched them undress as the warm water caressed my body.

An orange stripe fest unfolded before me. These Queens were insane. Who wouldn't want the biggest toughest most doting males on the planet even though they were keel-me-over gorgeous in their orange birthday suits? And really all were just sweet as could be.

Borun shot me a half smile and hopped into the water. Lehd and Ovh were right behind him.

The waves they kicked up knocked me about a bit. I just propped my derriere on the sunken ledge and enjoyed the view.

Sexy hunks, gods, surfaced for air, wiping their drenched hair back from their faces.

Oh, I could get used to communal bathing. But with a long ride by war beast looming in the morning, this might be my last real bath for days. I need to find the soap. I shoved up, grabbed the soap dish, and turned to find all three warriors watching me exactly the way I had been hanging on the pool's rim watching them.

I suppose turnabout is fair play in community baths. Besides, their interest was kind of nice. I reclaimed my seat and rubbed up a frothy lather with a bar of soap.

Ovh kind of moseyed past me, slow and deliberately. I grabbed his muscled arm and turned his back to me where I could scrub his shoulders with my fingernails.

He proceeded to lean down, against the ledge and my knees. "A little over to the left, Aisling."

I gulped down a giggle and scratched where he instructed.

He didn't turn, try to kiss me, or anything. He just sighed and wandered off.

Lehd let no time go to waste in backing up with a wicked grin. So I went to work on his shoulders. He groaned and shifted his shoulder blades so much I ended up massaging his muscles. But who's whining when getting to touch one of Luvks' national treasures?

Borun just hung out lounging on the opposite side of the pool. So, I lathered up and shoved underwater to swim across the pool to his side. He grabbed me around the waist as I

surfaced and pulled me against his warm solid side.

Not a bad place to be. But Lehd and Ovh were watching. I tried to act mildly disinterested.

Borun lifted my chin with a finger, smiled, and shoved me off toward the center of the pool.

Right past Ovh.

He latched onto me, sliding me up his curves, and planting his soft lips over mine, perfectly, precisely, adoringly.

My heart melted as his thick tongue possessed my mouth. Every modicum of my remaining willpower to just bathe with my mates vanished. Morphed into Ovh and his kiss. And I snaked my hands around his shoulders to clutch his dripping black hair. To hold onto that hot mouth that drove my need wild.

His python arms slid around me, locking my waist to his at the water's dancing surface. I didn't feel like I was slipping. I just ached to feel that iron body sink into mine. I wrapped my legs around him and locked his beating heart where he couldn't escape.

He groaned the softest sound into my being.

The sound of desire.

Need jolted through my core.

He backed away, releasing his conquest of my mouth, gazing into my eyes where he held my groin's pulse beating against his solid abs with both of his python arms.

We were alone in the pool now. The others had vanished.

He smiled one of those gentle smiles only Ovh could manage and blinked a satisfied blink.

Take me, I'm yours came to mind. "Ovh," I whispered and ran my palms down his chest, across his throbbing heart.

He just stood there, watching me touch him and his harness.

"I've really grown to appreciate these halters," I cooed.

He slid his fingers across the back of one of my hands, pried it off his supple chest with a thumb, and lifted my palm to his soft lips. The kiss he planted there was so passionate tears warmed my eyes.

He slid the palm across his bristled cheek where he leaned into my hand.

It's funny how something so sweet can hit me so deeply in the groin. Make me ache. Make my heart burst into a million overwhelming drops of magma. I couldn't breathe. All I could do was slip my other hand to clutch his face and pull his nose down to touch mine.

All the sadness and loneliness in him seemed to wash away in that pool like he'd gone through some sacred rite of passage. Transformed. He was so different from the others. So *deprived*. I just wanted him to tuck me into his bed and cuddle up to me. To make him whole. "Ovh," I whispered near his lips.

"Yes?"

"In your sleeping skins."

He sighed the softest sigh.

His heart was mine. Totally. Completely.

He didn't seem to want to release me. To move. But something tore through him with a quake, and he swung me into his arms to lift me from the pool.

We stood in the darkness long enough to dry off.

I scanned the shadows for any sign of Borun.

He'd obviously departed to give me time with Ovh.

Ovh hefted me into his arms again, carried me to his bed, and gently lowered me against his chest onto his furs where he began burrowing his nose into my damp hair.

The heat in his breath warmed my skin so much I trembled.

He pulled soft furs over my body and ran his palms down my back and up my side.

I love you. Your hands on me. The way you look at me like I'm going to disappear. But the words evaded my mouth.

He slid his hand to my shoulder and leaned to the spot to tenderly kiss my skin. Over and over. Moving down the length of my arm. Kicking up a rash of gooseflesh over every inch of my being.

My nipples were so hard it hurt to inhale and stretch them.

He bent my elbow, lifting my forearm enough to reach where he wanted, his massaging lips kissed a pathway up my inner arm, pausing at the pulse in my wrist, heading up to my palm. He lingered there, sliding his golden gaze to mine, then slid out the tip of his tongue to lick between my fingers. One by one, he sucked each finger into his hot mouth.

I ached so much for him I would have straddled him if he hadn't leaned over me and pinned my hips to the bed.

He watched me as he made love to my hand and made me ache for him.

My body writhed beneath his intoxicating mass and unyielding golden gaze.

A low growl rumbled through the darkness.

Thunder warning in my darkness. Heaven. I closed my eyes and drew deep breaths in said darkness. He could take all the time he wanted as long as he loved me like this.

He slid my palm across his cheek and into his damp hair as he leaned down to rake my nipple with his teeth, growling so softly. Chugging. Almost purring.

Oh for this moment to never end.

He slid his knee between mine and gently climbed between my thighs as he tugged at the heartstrings attached to that nipple.

I could have cried out I loved him. But his magic felt so wonderful. I just wanted to lie there listening and submit to his passionate possession.

He rubbed his shaft's smooth head through my folds until he locked into position and slowly tilted his hips, driving his unbelievably thick hardness inside my sensitive flesh. He had amazing self-control, incredible in how he could make me groan so long with each of his initial penetrations. I just laid there writhing around him like a virgin clutching blindly for something to grip during his ravishing.

His lips feathered across mine as I squirmed beneath him. "Aisling. My Aisling," he whispered against my cheek and buried his nose into my ear. "I can't wait any longer." He shoved up.

He went right to the spot inside me where an experienced lover knows to work, and he fiddled the wildest tune for my heart until I clawed my fingernails into his clavicles and went rigid beneath him. But he didn't stop. He fell onto his forearms and kissed me so deeply that I had to breathe air from his lungs as he began our wild ride across the darkness.

There was nothing like the power surge I felt each time a Luvk began seriously thrusting into me. My hips rocked against the amazing strength. And Ovh's affectionate seduction only amplified my *deprivation*. I tightened my grip on his harness, bent my knees like a jockey, and relished every time his body firmly patted mine at the root of our addiction.

I didn't have to squeeze my inner muscles because he was so thick. I just laid there and

let him fill me over and over with every hard thrust and matched his increasingly aggressive moves. I couldn't bite back my groans.

He craned his head back and roared, bursting inside me.

My Ov'h went rigid, his shaft straining and throbbing where it barely fit in my channel, pulsing and thrashing while his body flexed in focusing every ounce of his remaining energy on planting his seed inside me. I ground my hips against the wonderful straining pressure buried in my body and slid my hands down to his iron ass where I tried to pull his amazing cock deeper inside me.

If only he could keep the mindboggling sensation going for an hour. I'd throw him on his back and orgasm again and again.

He started pumping his hips again, milking himself into my body to drain every drop of himself into my soul.

Thank God. I stopped holding his ass and started rubbing the two mounds of muscle.

His moaned, his gaze dropping to mine but he looked over his shoulder at my hands and threw his head backward as if he loved to be touched.

The blue light shone between us. Just enough to illuminate the proud angles of his face before handing them back to the darkness of the guards' quarters.

Finally, he sighed a dying groan.

The big warrior had fought his battle well. I reached out to him.

He carefully draped my body with his amazing weight, his trembling body.

"Sweet, sweet Aisling, I didn't think you'd want me tonight," he whispered into my ear. My heart clenched.

Although Borun kept me busy all afternoon, I knew Ov'h would be wanting time with me. Mart wasn't that big of an issue. He didn't do more than smile sinister smiles. But Ov'h's expressive eyes haunted me. And I'd had time to recover from the afternoon. "It isn't a matter of want. It's more a matter of capability."

He rolled onto his side and pulled me against his body. "You're extremely capable."

I wiggled up to look into his eyes. "Just how long were you the leader of your Royal Guard?"

"Twenty-eight years."

"That's a long time to want to love somebody, Ov'h."

His arms tightened around me.

"I meant it when I said I'd always be here for you. Anytime you want me, anytime you need me, I'm here."

He rolled a hand into my hair and tucked my nose beneath his chin.

"And even though you don't believe there's a second portal, I still love you."

A chuckle rocked his chest and my body.

"Sweet, sweet Aisling. I'd ride anywhere on the planet to chase your wild dreams."

"You keep pulling tricks like what you did to my hand, and I'll be the one doing the chasing."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

By the time Borun stared at the forest covered mountain of the ancient city, he'd decided humoring his mate in search of this hidden portal was probably the best thing they could be doing. Albeit, it took almost ten days to reach the ruins, two days faster than being held stalled at the Thunder bridge connecting Sunset realm to Sunrise realm. But Kruk seemed to be busy with his warriors elsewhere. What they were up to was a mystery. Probably strategizing another sky demon attack. At least they weren't here, harassing my mate's beating heart wrapped around my back.

Mart's war beast stopped beside us, and he shot me an imperious stare with those gray high-caste eyes. "Are you certain you want to search here? It's dangerous. There are some treacherous areas inside. Aisling shouldn't go in."

"You're not leaving me out here," she snarled.

The feisty little thing. "We'll take care. Nobody wants anything to happen to our mate."

Her grip tightened around my waist for the length of a breath.

Just a little hug of acknowledgement.

Mart sighed. "Why do you think I point out the dangers?"

"I'll be alright, Mart. I've studied in ruins from two different cultures. Both built stone structures."

Mart's annoyed gaze slid to her. "Very well. I guess debating the situation further isn't going to do anything but waste time." He kicked his mount into a trot and moved toward the gaping cave of an entrance.

Could Mart be hiding something though? Clans often had secrets. But the truth was probably simple. And Aisling had to realize Mart only worried about her safety. "Little one—"

"I know. He worries about me. I'm not angry. I just want to get this over with."

We left the war beasts outside to guard the entrance and traveled deep into the dark bowels of the ancient city. Many passages had been blocked with rubble. Others only partially. Mart navigated the murky shadows as if he'd lived there every day of his life. All went well until we had approached a narrow passage requiring we crawl on our hands and knees.

"Uh, I don't know about that way." Aisling scratched the back of her head.

She'd passed through dark corridors with nary a hint of *heartsong* to note she cared. Now her heart beat like a war drum. I extended a palm and stared her down. "We go together."

She stared at the palm.

"It's not long, Aisling," Mart announced. "*Just a few minutes crouched over,*" he said in mindspeak. "There's something I want you to see."

Lehd and Ovh towered attentively behind Aisling's shoulders.

Well, Aisling could handle a few minutes bent over. "It's got enough clearance that you can stop and sit if you need to."

She crouched down beside Mart at my foot and studied the space.

"I thought you'd studied ancient cities back on Earth," Mart picked at her.

Probably to annoy her into leaping into the tight space.

"I did." She growled. "But I didn't kill myself in the process. All I see down that black

tunnel is suicide.” She turned to us. “Anyone else? After all, you’re the ones with night vision.”

“It was your choice to search for a portal,” I said.

The petulant smirk on her face only made me want to laugh.

“Alright. But you’re the smart ass who’s got two babies to lose.”

She really didn’t want to crawl through darkness. Probably because of her limited vision. Not to mention her claustrophobia. We could take turns carrying her on our backs. I eyed the others then ended up watching Aisling’s angry mask melt into pure dread. “You go with me.”

Her brow arched curiously.

I pointed toward the tunnel. “Mart, you’re first.”

Mart disappeared into the darkness.

Probably to prove he was as significant as the rest of us who’d been leaders for years. I squatted beside Aisling and tapped her nose. “Lehd’s next.” I waved him on.

Lehd took a moment to pet Aisling’s cheek before the darkness swallowed him.

I looked for Ovh and Var. “I’ll be slower. But you both follow.” They knew I meant take care of trouble from their end.

Both nodded.

I crawled into the shaft, stopped with my boots at her feet, and fell on my gut. “Climb aboard, Aisling. I’ll carry you.”

“You’re kidding? We’ll grow old together in there before you reach the end with me on your back.”

Enough of the complaining. “Get on, or Ovh will put you on.”

With much noisy fuming, she straddled my back and slid her arms beneath mine to grab the front of my harness, burying her nose into my back.

“Calm yourself, Aisling. We’ll be there before you know it.” I started crawling.

Her weight wasn’t that much to bear. Although, she clung to me with so much angst I knew I’d have raw cuts where my halter’s leather straps gnawed at my skin. And blow dust from the thick layer covering the stone floor out of my nose for days.

“Oh shit,” she gasped.

“What?” Ovh barked at my heels.

“We’ll have to do this on the way back.” Her breathing hitched.

“Stop it, Aisling. You’re scaring yourself for nothing. We’re almost to Mart.” I hoped. I couldn’t see around the bend ahead. With the limited lighting from scattered sunlight, seeing in the darkness wasn’t so fruitful.

By the time Lehd lurked at the end of the tunnel, I was ready for Aisling’s curves to climb off my body. Lehd snatched her up like a war beast’s saddle and hefted her to her feet. She clutched his chest.

Fine. I do all the work, and he gets the glory. My elbows would bear scabs for days. I got my boots beneath me.

She turned to me and slid those warm arms around my chest. “Thank you.” She smiled at me even though she probably couldn’t see any of my face. “I know you love me now.” She actually chuckled.

Her hands trembled.

She’d have to wait to treat her blood lust. Tonight we’d share blood. So, there was time. She’d just have to wait until we crawled out of the city and had a safe place to mate. But she had questioned my love. “You questioned that?”

She giggled and stretched to her tiptoes. “Actions speak louder than words, or so wise

men say,” she whispered. “Actions like when you told everyone we’d mated and we really hadn’t. Just to save me. You big puppy.”

Although the act was futile given the guards’ hearing.

Lehd shot me a questioning glance.

What could I say? “Kruk couldn’t be trusted.”

“You lied to secure First Mate Breeding Rights to her?” he laughed.

Ovh rose up behind me. “I would have done it.”

Aisling shot him a smile. “I know you would have, Ovh.”

Enough of this dawdling. “Let’s go.”

Mart led us through two more doorways into an enormous pitch black space. So dark I couldn’t see anything. Aisling’s grip on my back’s harness never wavered.

She halted when I did.

“Where are we, Mart?” I asked.

“Just a moment. I have some torches.”

The sound of measured footfalls bore witness to Mart’s journey across the cavern’s darkness. Something wooden rattled. A hiss whispered. And yellow flames burst into a dance so far away I doubted any of the warriors could clear the distance in one leap.

Mart’s ghostly features hovered above a torch he held to the flames.

Aisling’s grip on my harness slithered away. She stood in the golden glow of the fire, half hidden by my arm, eyes wide with wonder. “Where are we, Mart?”

“My father never knew what this chamber was used for. So much time had passed, the knowledge of the chamber’s function had been lost. But you always seem to offer a new perspective. I thought I’d bring you here.” He carried a torch to her.

She took the wooden handle.

One by one, we all grabbed our own torches and paced around the walls of the space. A strange linear structure made of metal ran low along the length of one of the walls but didn’t touch it. Aisling seemed most interested in the object.

I stopped beside her, casting more light with two torches combined. “What is it?”

“It looks like some kind of control panel.” She looked at me and must have realized I had no idea what she spoke of. “And it’s awfully clean given it’s sat here for a millennium. The dust should be as thick as the dust on the floor.”

True. I’d crawled through the silty layer back in the tunnel. “Do you think someone was here doing something?”

She glanced at me sideways. “You think like an archaeologist.”

“So what are the circles?”

“Buttons.” She wiped some fingers around the buttons. “I can’t read the words.” She turned to Mart. “Did your father know what these said?”

Shadows clutched at Mart’s features more so because of his loose hair. I couldn’t read his expression.

He stared at the lines and dots.

Would he lie? Was he thinking up something to say?

“Trigger. But it’s upside down.” Mart shifted his footing. “Father never said much about it.”

* * * *

“Holy shit.” We’re all screwed, Aisling thought, shoving her mates toward the wall. “Everybody behind this control panel.” We’re all going to Slaken if we don’t hurry.

“What?” Borun blurted.

Their enormous bodies didn’t move much beneath my palms. But Lehd did as instructed quickly.

Finally. “Please, this thing activates something. And I’d be hard pressed to wonder what!”

The warriors shot knowing glances between each other and followed my instructions. Surely the portal, if we’re talking about a portal, stood in the center of the space. That would mean there would be less trouble with moving objects. Or big-winged bastards hell bent on causing trouble.

“What are you planning to do, Aisling?” Mart stared at the trigger.

Like I’d go to Slaken from a secret portal. That’s going to win me a celebratory welcome. “I’m not touching anything. I don’t want anything to happen to anyone. And, I wonder if there are footprints in the dust. Incriminating footprints.”

Mart stepped around the control panel, lowering his torch to inspect the central floor.

He was insane to move into the area most likely used for transporting objects. “Have you lost your mind? We’ve already walked there.”

“No.” He kept his gaze locked on the ground. “They come late during the night. We have some time before the sun sets.”

Fine. Look for a few minutes. How much time before sunset though? “I don’t want to be in here after dark. Let’s come back in the morning.”

A sound shifted in the darkness.

Borun pushed me back behind him. Lehd and Ovh stepped back beside me, blocking me from anyone in the room.

And shit, there was someone in the room!

Everyone focused on the murky shadows overhead.

“I was wondering if you’d ever come.” a male said.

Mart gasped. “Calen!” His torch flashed in motion beyond Borun’s body.

Who was it? And how dangerous was he? I glanced up at Ovh.

Ovh wagged his masked head.

Something thumped.

Okay, I’m not moving pinned in on all sides, but what was that? “Mart?”

“It’s alright, Aisling. It’s just my brother.”

Brother? Or half brother?

“Where is the little Marshal? I’ve been waiting to speak to her,” the newcomer Calen asked in a weird evil cartoon character voice.

Gooseflesh prickled my skin to chilly attention.

God if I could just lean into Borun’s back and snake my arms around his waist.

“Why?” Borun growled.

“To unite the clans. That’s what she said she’s come to do. And I’ve been waiting sixty years for the opportunity to arise. We need off-world assistance. And her commander promised that.”

“When?” Borun snarled. “You weren’t privy to those conversations.”

“Calen, stop toying with them,” Mart commanded. “If you want to speak with my mate, drop the ridiculous camouflage. Act normal.”

“Normal?” Borun spat with a threatening tone. “Act? What’s going on?”

“When my brother’s alone with me, he acts sane like any one of us,” Mart said.

“Will you speak to me, Marshal?” Calen’s voice shifted to a low steady sound.

Normal. *Oy!*

My hands shook with need.

We had to get out of here. Before things shifted into total chaos.

Borun looked over his shoulder at me, taking a step aside, revealing the tall black and white masked male standing before me opposite the control panel. Firelight flickered beside him from Mart’s torch. Mart stood shorter, at Calen’s side.

“It’s alright, Aisling,” Mart said. “He won’t hurt you.”

That has yet to be proven.

“Yes, little Marshal. I need you alive.” Calen stepped toward me out of the dome of Mart’s torchlight into shadow.

Like a lion ready to pounce. Why did he need me alive?

Three steps later, his footsteps penetrated Borun’s dome of torchlight.

Something about him seemed familiar. His height. His build. The way his body moved like a cobra ready to strike.

He stopped, leaning down to plant his palms on the control panel.

Hell, he needed to look out for the trigger. “Be careful!”

His gaze settled down to my eye level as he placed his palms on the control panel’s dusty surface, avoiding the buttons. “These controls haven’t worked for a thousand years.”

That’s when I saw the three holes on the side of his mask. The plain mask. The mask worn by the warrior who approached me in the first set of ruins the day after I arrived on Luvk. The Sunrise lead Royal Guard. What did he want? He’d seemed so safe before. Surely he was now. I looked into his glowing blue eyes. “I remember.”

He nodded ever so slightly.

“What do you remember?” Borun demanded.

I couldn’t pull my gaze away from Calen’s. “Calen was the warrior in the Hall of Wisdom.”

Borun’s arm slid before me and shoved my body backward. He was in Calen’s face before I could blink. Growling. Hiding me once again.

“I don’t want to hurt your mate, Borun,” Calen said calmly. “She is the only person who can help us unite the clans. Come out, little Marshal. Come out before the Thunder clan kills off the rest of the Queens and takes control of the seven realms.”

Such a measured challenge had to have truth behind it. I’d probably piss off Borun. But this warrior could answer a lot of questions. I slid my palms around Borun’s waist and tried to squeeze under his python arm to face Calen.

“No, little one. He’s been mad for nigh thirty years now. Everyone knows he’s insane. Stay where you are.”

Something wasn’t right here. “But insane Royal Guards wouldn’t be allowed to wear leader masks. His mother had to have known he acted this way.” I wiggled beneath Borun’s arm. “Why does she allow him the power if he can’t help her? They’re working together.”

Borun’s arm curled around my back and pinned me tightly against his side.

No problem. Calen couldn’t pry me loose if he tried.

Calen studied me, leaning over the control panel. “I was married off twice to infiltrate other clans. The Queens weren’t too happy with my mate *behavior* though. So call me insane.” He chuckled.

Mart stepped up to Calen’s side and shot him a death stare. “I’m starting to wonder if

you truly are mad, brother. Aisling isn't a queen. Show her some respect."

Calen sighed and turned his head to his brother. "The fact I've waited here for your arrival shows I'm respecting her authority." He slid his eerie glowing stare back to me. "I hoped you would learn enough of the written Luvk language to prove what I overheard in the Hall of Wisdom—that you were here to end the sky demon raids. That you would read enough between the histories and symbols to realize another portal existed. That you would find your way here where I waited to confide in you. Proof. I needed to know your intentions weren't self-gratifying like those of the Queens. Sit and speak with me, Aisling. There is much to say. Things even my little brother wasn't taught by our father."

"What?" Mart scowled.

Calen's stare never dismissed mine. "Things the first son of a priest is taught. I am Father's first son. I am the keeper of truth. All other sons are merely keepers of history."

Things were really getting confusing. "But Borun said there was only one Royal Guard left born to the line of warriors who read Luvk's ancient language."

"That's because this one is insane," Borun spat through grated teeth.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After great pains to travel back through the maze of shadows and darkness, Aisling's guards led her out into the waning sunlight. The day was shot, she choked down a groan. Night loomed with two bright moons. And the possibility of a Slaken raid, she noted. And we stood in a dangerous location at the ruins' entrance. "Let's find another place to discuss things. I don't want to be standing in the ancient city's entrance if sky demons go flying through it."

The warriors didn't grumble.

We rode ten minutes into darkening sky, halted in a grove, and sat among the shelter of tree trunks tightly packed together. Mart built a fire while the others kept close to me and Calen. It was more than obvious that Borun kept the largest guards protecting me.

I studied Calen's behavior. Nothing looked odd. He was as formal and polite as my mates. "You said the Thunder clan is behind the murders?"

Calen held out his hands and signaled for me to keep my voice down. He nodded too. "No Queens means no squabbles." He leaned toward me. "And maybe you'll be frightened enough to leave Luvk."

But they were clueless to the fact I could never leave my blood mate. Not that I'd ever thought about leaving. Especially now after hearing so much more. The Sunrise Queen was as shady as the Thunder clan. And that it would benefit the centrally located Thunder clan to have the Marshal frightened off the planet so the Thunder power figure can rule the seven realms after murdering all the Queens. Or was the power-hungry clan the Sunrise clan? "Just what does your mother get out of the secrecy, Calen?"

My hands began shaking so badly from the blood lust that I had to clasp them together under my knees. Biology could really get a girl into trouble. My body didn't care that I needed to appear level-headed. It shivered and shook.

Cold sweat beaded upon my brow.

Calen leaned closer, setting off Borun's warning growl. Borun immediately silenced.

Damn their psychic abilities. "Are you mindspeaking? Because I can't, and it really pisses me off that you do that in situations where I need to be privy to any details in a discussion." Or *deprivation* is getting to me. I can't afford for Calen to learn about that little secret. Not until his true motive is clarified.

Calen chuckled a bit. "We've said nothing that makes a difference, Aisling. I told him I needed to speak softly." He leaned so close onto an elbow that I had to cant down to cover the rest of the space. Right down to a few inches from his face.

"The Sunrise clan created the portal," Calen whispered.

Not the Slakens? The Luvks did this to themselves? I looked into his eyes.

Nothing but the insistence of truth danced in those glowing orbs.

His eyes offered shady illumination. Light one dare not trust but must to find valuable explanations. "And?"

"Seven great grandfathers back, my ancestor led the priesthood."

Priesthood? Maybe the Luvks had been more socially complex than city states. Time would tell. I nodded for him to continue.

“The priests struggled to find a way to unite the clans.”

As Calen did now.

My gut sank.

Could I trust him?

“And in creating a portal to tap into each clan’s palace in order to link all of us in a way that we could communicate more easily, the Sunrise clan punched a hole into the Slakens’ world.”

My gut twisted at the irony of trying to solve one problem and creating a million more. Just like the luck of human nature.

“So each of the first sons of my great grandfather has been saddled with the chore of finding a solution to the problem. To closing the portal.” He stared at me with such intensity that I couldn’t breathe. “Until he draws his last breath.”

“You want me to close the portal?”

“Help me find a way.”

“I’m not that kind of scientist. The other Marshal was. But Luvk ended up with me. I studied people. Not machines.”

Calen’s stare just watched me. Waited.

Was he waiting for me to come to the conclusion I had no choice? After sixty years of carrying his forefather’s load, he could probably wait forever. “We’ll speak to my commander. The Marshals have many scientist who can help.”

I had to believe the history he shared. What would he gain if I chose to help him close the portal? Security for all Luvks. Was that a bad thing? A Marshals’ goal was to create a comfortable environment for a planet’s population. Would Calen help do that? “Calen, my job is to help transitional populations work out their differences and find a way to make all their people happy. How do I know whether you’re working for the Sunrise clan or all Luvks?”

“My people are all Luvks. The priesthood initially struggled to find a way to unite the clans. I am of the same inclination. My quest is sacred. Tell me what I can do to prove this to you.”

Which clans evolved into statehood with a priesthood that wielded enough technology to create a wormhole machine? And was the priesthood truly out for the greater good of the Luvks?

His gaze slid down my body, over my breasts, and across my hips.

A chill shook me.

Borun growled.

Calen’s gaze snapped back to mine. “No, you don’t look like a queen. But you can make the others listen. You can help me unseat the selfish females and bring peace to the Luvks.”

My skin began to burn like ants bit me all over.

Not blood lust!

Movement burst from behind the trees into the firelight.

Warriors.

My mates leapt to their feet and lunged into the invading force. Even Calen. Driving the tide of angry warriors back from me. Back into the darkness beyond the firelight.

Nausea roiled through my core. Again and again.

Dear God, what was this? It was different. All consuming. Overwhelming.

My knees shook.

I bent over, bracing my hands on my thighs.

The acid billowed toward my mouth, and I spewed.

Relief wafted through me.

Thank goodness. Nobody could look out for me in the mayhem but myself. I scanned the crowd of clashing metal and writhing muscles.

A body already lay on the ground. Black and white. He wore a smallish axe at his waist. I could use an axe for protection. I snatched it up and tried to find a place to hide, from where I could defend myself.

The fire pricked at my skin again.

Undoubtedly the blood lust.

Rather, a warning of the shift that was upon me. A blood libation would make it go away. But transforming might give my mates an upper hand. I'd wait. Just in case. Better to wait in the center of the mayhem. I hurried back to stand beside the fire's searing heat.

My guards kept the warriors back for the most part. Until one broke through and ran toward me.

I raised the axe to hurl it.

Calen threw something the firelight danced upon at the intruder. The spinning disk whizzed and sliced through the man's chest only to rebound like a boomerang. Calen caught the object and shot me a defiant stare before turning back to the fray.

What was his look for? He deserved a thank you for the maneuver nonetheless. Maybe he wasn't so bad. Or he was working on creating invisible strings to play me like a puppet.

Another warrior lunged for Var's back.

Not my guards. I hurled the axe with all the force I could muster.

It thumped between the warrior's shoulder blades.

The warrior crumpled into a heap at Var's feet where Var shot me a stare that harbored anything but awe. I think. Or it could have been a thank you. But I'd like to go with the awe because I was pretty damned good at throwing knives.

Var turned back to our attackers.

Hands grabbed me from behind.

Pinned my arms down and began dragging me off. "Borun!"

Blood splattered me. The pressure disappeared. I was left standing with Lehd and Ovh towering over two Thunder clan decapitated bodies.

Blood bath summed up the evening.

Thank goodness for big orange tiger warriors...

An itch on my arms began to burn so deeply my gut churned.

Now was the time to inject myself with Borun's blood if I could. I scanned the battle scene.

Mart's body had been cut in two. He lay next to his brother's boots where Calen struggled to fight off two warriors.

No more of my mates. Nobody else would die. If it meant my shape shifting would make a difference, I had to try it. They could use some help. And that's what were-mates were for. Big hairy war beasts had nothing on a were-assassin. I just never shape shifted before. I had no idea if I was going to be able to cull my friends from my foes. But the Marshals always said a person kept their wits about them after a shift. I had to try to help my mates. At least try. Shit.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Some ungodly roar blared behind Borun where he battled with a Thunder clan warrior in the dark forest. Nothing on Luvk made that sound, he thought. I grabbed the warrior's sword arm, shoving the sword's long blade aside, and peered back at Aisling.

She was gone. Or hiding behind the hugest hairiest war beast I'd ever seen. But this was no war beast. War beasts stood on four legs. This creature had two beneath its tooth-laced maw.

Aisling had said she'd look like a war beast if she shape shifted. Let's see who she attacked. See if the strange creature's targets revealed its identity. I pushed out with my mind. *"Don't injure the creature."*

The beast turned where it stood taller than Ovh and Lehd, and grabbed the warriors fighting them like squabbling younglings. But she didn't badger them. She quietly took them by the scruff of the neck and hurled them into the forest.

Ovh and Lehd just stared up at her.

"Don't fight it," I warned in mindspeak.

The creature turned toward me.

The warrior I held began squirming. *"Let me go."*

"Afraid?" Borun turned to the black and white warrior's golden gaze.

Fear glimmered in the warrior's eyes.

I let him go. *"Run, coward."*

Someone grabbed me, lifting me. I landed slung over the creature's shoulder.

The creature roared again.

My mate undoubtedly.

The Thunder clan ran in every direction.

She probably scared them to death throwing the toughest Royal Guard in the seven realms over her shoulder. But everything was safe now with our attackers' retreat. "Aisling, put me down."

She let my body slide down her arm, and she stood perfectly still, looking at me with those pale blue eyes. "Blood," she said rather clearly.

I whipped out a clean blade, sliced my arm, and scraped some blood onto the glinting edge.

Her knees knifed. She sank to the ground, reaching for the blade.

Her other guards began to step closer. Carefully.

"It's Aisling," I said in mindspeak.

She took the blade and licked the blood from the edge.

Suddenly, almost instantly, the fur melted away into the flawless white skin of my nude mate. But she went limp. I squatted and grabbed her, supporting her shoulders.

She looked into my eyes kind of groggily and licked her lips. "Nobody else dies for me." She passed out.

* * * *

Var struggled between sitting and holding Aisling's hand while she was unconscious and storming off to find something to kill among the trees. But the events weren't showing she was

narcissistic. She'd thrown the axe that killed the Thunder clan warrior who could have killed me. I might be as dead as Mart if she hadn't handled the weapon like a Royal Guard.

But I didn't want to look weak now. I just sat there as Borun spoke with Calen while Lehd and Ovh were on watch. Anything to look normal. To appear the same strong warrior bothered by nothing. Ready to react.

However, when she said *nobody else dies for me*, I should have chased off after the retreating Thunder clan warriors and killed them all myself to prove myself worthy after my distrust. But here I sit shamed for doubting her.

A presence pushed into my mind. "*You should sleep, Var. You'll need to relieve one of the others soon,*" Borun said.

I nodded at him.

But sleep wouldn't drive away the thoughts keeping me awake. Aisling and I had things to discuss. Yet, those things would have to wait until she was safe back in her lodge.

* * * *

Aisling awoke with a start, bolting upright inside warm sleeping skins beneath a starry sky. She wondered where were the men were. Was the Thunder clan gone? Dead? I scanned the sleeping mounds of my guards.

"Lie down, Aisling. Sleep. It's over," Borun said, snaking an arm around her waist and nudging her back toward his warm solid body.

But Mart was dead.

My heart sank.

"Lie down, little one. Try to sleep with me."

He had to have heard my heartbeat. I sank down into his warm furs next to his even hotter skin.

But Mart died with my stupid insistence on searching for a portal. Me. I was the cause of his death. I snuggled my nose into Borun's neck to avoid that discussion.

His fingers wove into the loose hair hanging down my back, and he pulled me as close to his beating heart as he could, leaning his lips down to my ear. "Shh, little one. It's over," he whispered.

How could someone's death I caused ever be over? "For Mart." I'd failed another guard.

Warm tears stung my eyes.

"No." Borun squeezed me ever so slightly.

"What happened after Mart's death? What did the others say when they realized I could shape shift?"

"You took them by surprise. And me. But the Thunder clan left because of you. We might all be dead if you hadn't shifted."

Dead. All of us. God, if Borun had died... I slid my palms across the supple iron of his back and tried not to think of anything else. I had him. I had the babies. And Ovh, Lehd, and Var. We were all a happy family. Well, maybe not Var. But he and I were friends. I sniffed to clear my nose of the residual tear-induced sniffles. "What now?"

"We go with Calen. He insists we work with him now that he's witnessed how your powers terrify the Thunder clan."

What did that entail? Coercion because he knew what I become? But Calen had saved me in battle. What was going on with him?

"Roll over," he whispered. "So I can hold you. I want you to sleep."

I rolled and laid my cheek on his bent upper arm. His arm pulled me into the spoon of

his body.

What if something had happened to Borun? “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Borun, after my boot ripped to shreds and I lost the syringe. I’d have two days. Just the amount of time I had from the last blood exchange. Unless I had some vials of your blood... And then, when the blood ran out, I’d turn into a raging beast craving nothing but your essence. Only yours would keep me from shifting. I would kill Luvks trying to satiate my blood lust.”

“What do Marshals do if this happens to their mate?” he whispered against my ear.

“Suicide takes care of the problem.” But how would I know if I’d even consider suicide? I’d never had to face that one yet.

He nuzzled my ear with his nose and scratchy beard. “Then let us ensure you don’t have this problem. That’s what Ovh, Lehd, and Var are here for. We’ll all take care of you.” He kissed my cheek. “Now, sleep.”

In the morning, I popped my eyes open to find Calen sitting near the fire, watching me in my sleeping skins. Borun didn’t growl but pulled the skins around me as he crawled from our bed to sit between Calen and I.

Thank goodness. I almost felt like meat.

My hand shook.

Joy. Now let’s all learn about the Marshal’s sexual appetite.

“Does she shape shift often?” Calen asked Borun.

So that’s what he was after? Information. Well I didn’t have any answers written on my body.

Lehd stepped to my side, crouched, and handed me my backpack. “Blessed sunrise, Aisling.”

I shot him a smile. Clothing might make me feel better. I quickly dressed in tank top, khaki pants, and my standard black were-assassin boots. Apparently, my olive drab pants and combat boots were torn during my transformation into a were-creature. And undoubtedly the syringe was gone too.

As if Borun could read my mind, he turned and handed me the syringe with his long striped arm. “It’s full.”

I tucked the syringe into my boot and crawled over to Borun’s back, rising on my knees, propped against Borun’s shoulders to meet Calen’s blue gaze.

His eyes were the same color of mine. Sky blue. No telling what else he hid under that mask. Probably the thinnest high-caste black stripes to match the ones on his arms and legs. But I wasn’t about to unmask another male.

“Well, little Marshal, what do you think of Luvk now?” Calen asked.

He hadn’t reverted to using his strange cartoon character voice. But something in his question hinted at last night’s happenings. “I became a Marshal to serve a higher purpose in life. That’s what I’m doing. Working to end the raids on Luvk. If that includes dealing with clan hostilities, so be it.”

“The warring nature of the clans must be focused on the sky demons.”

Borun rumbled to life. “So we’ll go to the Sunrise palace. Learn what it is you have hidden from all Luvks throughout your life.”

That didn’t sound safe to me. Especially with the hint of subterfuge directed at Calen. “I don’t think so. Why should Luvk’s Marshals affiliate themselves with Calen’s mother? That may be exactly what she’s wanted all along. How do we know we can trust him?”

Calen growled a soft gurgling threat. “I do not lie, Marshal. Grant it. I may not be held

in the highest respects because of my feigned lunacy. But I am serious about uniting the clans. I don't need my mother to help achieve that feat."

Borun sat in silence.

Maybe my were-mate allowed me to respond. I'd certainly not pass up the opportunity. Alas, I can't make a mistake. Calen must be part of the solution if his life has been spent trying to resolve the issue of the portals. That was his sole purpose for existence. Duty. And I understood duty. But what if my mates were correct about Calen's sanity? I'd have to test him. "Then close the portal. Prove yourself to the others."

Calen nodded once and stared a hole through me. "I have tried for sixty years."

He couldn't possibly be that old. He looked just as young as Lehd.

"Can The Order of the Marshals help?" Calen asked. "Anything to end the sky demon raids. To cease the cycle of pain instigated by my ancestors so long ago."

Maybe. "I don't know what they're doing. We're so isolated here. But if I can contact them, I will request assistance."

"Then go, back to Ishan. And continue to defy her. For the Queens are what keep us trapped in this cycle of madness."

Without Mart, I was dogpaddling in a whirlpool of foreign symbols. I needed Calen to continue teaching me the written language. "Borun?"

He turned his gaze to mine.

My blood mate wasn't going to like what I said. "Speak with me."

We backed up a good twenty yards, Lehd, Ovh, and Var joining us in a ridiculous football huddle where I stood dwarfed before four towering males in wicked masks like a miniature quarterback.

"Listen," I whispered. "He knows what Mart knew about the written language. I need his help."

Borun's groaned. "No, little one. You can't be suggesting..."

All the other warriors wagged their heads.

With those damned masks in the way, I had little else than the body language to go by. What were they thinking? I only required Calen's guidance in reading the history. "Look, I don't want another mate. I have enough already. But I need what's inside his head—"

"He's insane, Aisling," Borun snarled.

"Then why is he the leader of the Sunrise Royal Guard?" Who would allow him power of the sort? A queen wasn't that crazy.

The quiet males looked between each other and back at me.

"See, you have no answer." I looked at each pair of glowing eyes. "I have you each to protect me." No matter how foolish my proposition was.

"No," Var growled.

So much for my voice of reason taking my side.

"We found the portal. Now let's find a way to close it." Var shot the others an insistent glance. "We know all we need to know."

Not true. "But what if there's something else I need to make everything work? What if—"

Var interrupted me by whipping off his mask and grabbing my cheeks, staring into my eyes with insistence. "Gaze upon my face. What do you see, Aisling? This is fear. Fear for your life. You don't know *what* he wants. What if Calen is the warrior murdering the Queens?"

I couldn't stop looking at the seriousness on his face. The truth was we couldn't know

what Calen wanted until time revealed the details. "I have to do my job. My mates are here to help me do that job. I trust you will protect me, Var."

Var's blue eyes begged me to stop speaking madness. "What is your job, Aisling?"

Something in those eyes had changed, softened, and pleaded with me for reason. "To help Luvks achieve an environment in which they can operate as they deem fit and not by Slaken interference. If you want to be able to unite the clans, we have to close the portal. I can't do that when I'm swimming blind. And none of you knows what Calen knows. I need Calen's help."

Var sighed, allowing his hands to drop away. "This is a mistake."

Not if Calen lives at Ishan's palace in another lodge. I can use him but limit how much he can use me. "Everything will be alright." I shot them all a reassuring glance and turned to Calen.

He sat casually leaning on an arm with the other hung over a knee he had thrust up in the air.

Watching us. He'd undoubtedly heard everything. Maybe not my thoughts. But he knew what was coming. I strode to face him, kneeling before his conspiratorial gaze. "Come back and help us close the portal on my terms, Calen. My terms alone. You will not live in my lodge. You will not be my mate. I need an advisor. That would be you, the first son of the last Sunrise priest taught the ancient secrets and wisdom. Luvk's harbinger of truth. And here's my truth. Now that Mart's gone, I only have you for guidance. I can't close the portal without your help." I stared him down.

He made a smacking noise and shifted to sit upright. "Well, hear my terms."

"No," all four of my mates blurted simultaneously.

Borun's hands slid beneath my arms and hefted me to my feet. "We're leaving now."

* * * *

By the time Aisling stepped through the doorway to her familiar lodge, she was ready to scrub off what had to be almost a month's worth of grime. Okay maybe life hadn't played out that horribly, she thought. There were many opportunities to bathe along the way. But a bath in warm swirling water with amazing floral suds would certainly make my aching body feel better. And squeaky clean. But I'd give Goro a good shock and see if he'd come running. I pushed the button on his communicator gadget and hurried toward the bath.

My pool was full of gorgeous tiger bodies. Even Var. Oh well, if he was going to linger in the water with a determined female afoot, he'd just get an eyeful. I caught Borun's attention. "I summoned Goro for what good it will do. We would have been better off with Calen here to help."

All four warriors glared at me.

"Are you being territorial in reference to Calen? Or is this reaction something else?" I yanked off my boots and stripped, tossing them the cold shoulder.

"He's mad," Borun said.

What does using that excuse gain my were-mate? Protection for his children? Or me? I turned to find Borun's smirk waiting at the pool's ledge.

The others lathered up and ignored me.

So much for my defenders. "Fine, Borun. You run the show. I'll just sit around and wait for your next command. I couldn't possibly know what's important. I'm just a stupid female good for nothing but breeding." Like I would ever just sit around and gestate. I stepped into the lapping water.

His annoyed gaze followed my descent. "I don't command you. I protect you. You

presented Calen with your terms. He argued nonnegotiable terms. We weren't going to allow him to force you into something you didn't want."

"Dammit, I know that." Why did Borun have to be so damned logical?

"What is *dammit*?" Lehd asked from nearby.

"Cursing." Why couldn't I just be content with an easy job back on Earth? Back where you bought a hamburger on the way home and watched the six o'clock news to find to your horror another idiot had done something you had no control over. But you were safe in your home with your hamburger... Because I'm a psychic misfit. And space just offered way too much intrigue.

"You're quiet," Borun whispered beside me, his warm arm touching mine.

"I don't want to be quiet. I want to scream. To yell about how frustrated I am. Why can't we just close the damned portal? Because Calen refuses to work with me. Maybe there is something else in his refusal. Maybe he wants a piece of the pie. Dammit. So do all males consider females potential mates on Luvk?" I rubbed a bar of silky soap up my arm without looking at Borun.

"Royal Guards do," he whispered.

All except Var. But Var was something else. Maybe Borun just tried to calm me down with his voice. I loved that quiet voice. He certainly knew that since he could hear my traitorous heartbeat.

Borun eased up to claim a seat beside me on the ledge.

I suppose the discussion was dead. Killjoy. But I loved Borun. Wouldn't trade him for anything...

He slid an arm around my back to bend my waist against his side.

Oh! I'd rather be alone to grind my teeth about the lost possibilities with Calen's help. But how do you tell an enormous tiger man that when he's all cuddly?

"You're angry with me?" he asked.

Lying wouldn't help when your audience could hear your *heartsong*. "A little."

He chuckled and pulled me to straddle his lap where I couldn't do anything but speak with him where I faced him. "You are a stubborn little thing."

"That might be what saves your ass in the long run." I smiled and smeared his bearded cheek with suds.

"Calen can't work with you unless he agrees to your terms." With a wink, he plucked my soap from my grasp and proceeded to bathe me.

It was a nice apology. Who would balk at a little delicate massage? Albeit, he couldn't cook. But I'm not complaining.

Lehd and Ovh departed in great leaps.

Undoubtedly resigned to the fact Borun would have me after bathing me. So, I settled into his capable massaging hands.

* * * *

Var hadn't wanted to speak to the Marshal until now. But her First Mate had his hands on her across the pool, Var thought and grated his teeth. Borun always had his hands on her. Var choked back another sigh. Nobody else could say anything to her whenever they wanted to. And I'd never be able to thank her for saving me with that axe.

Borun's gaze rolled up to her face and caught my eye past the side of her head.

Curses and spit. I tried to look away.

Maybe my joining them in the bath today had been foolish. Awkward. But Aisling

hadn't been in the room when I leapt into the water. I had no idea she would join us.

Borun slid Aisling to the ledge and dove into the water.

Why? I belonged here. By right, I could enter the bath when the others were present. Even though Aisling and I hadn't mated.

Borun swam back and forth across the pool without surfacing, back toward me to burst upward before me, shot me a commanding glance, and leapt from the pool.

"Borun?" Aisling seemed perplexed where she sat covered in lather.

The door to her lodge thumped.

Borun was gone.

She sighed, slipped from the ledge to disappear underwater.

Speaking to her began to seem as foolish as joining them in the bath today.

She rose, pushing her wet hair over the back of her head, thrusting her perky breasts high, and wiping the water from her eyes.

Beautiful breasts. Everything about her was extraordinary. Including the fact she hadn't displayed one typical characteristic of a queen.

Her gaze locked onto me. "Are you alright, Var?"

Chapter Thirty

Var almost choked where he stood before his nude Marshal's breasts in the bathing pool. He couldn't avoid answering the female who risked her life to save his. Now was the time to tell her everything, he thought. "Yes, I'm alright."

"Then why do you look like you want to speak with me or vomit?"

My heart sank. But why should her reply make a high-caste prince feel like a youngling? "I do."

"Oh?" She walked toward me. "I'm glad you finally decided to speak with me." She smiled.

I'd better just say what I came to say, or I'd be tongue-tied like a youngling. "Thank you for saving my life with that axe back at the ruins."

She halted and looked at me sideways. "I'd forgotten about that. It was an awful night." She gulped. "Mart died. I guess I haven't thought about it much. Maybe I should."

A caring female wouldn't want to relive the memory. "And I want to apologize."

Her head tilted curiously. "Why? You've never done anything but voice a valued opinion. I'm grateful for that, Var."

Admitting one's true feelings was difficult, even when those feelings had completely changed. I looked her in the eye. "I didn't trust you. Not until you saved my life."

She nodded slowly with understanding. "I had wondered why you were so aloof whereas my other mates readily welcomed any attention from me. Your actions are completely warranted given this violent world you live in. I can't begin to imagine what happened to you to make you behave so guarded toward me. I guess it's the Queen position I don't like to think I hold."

I nodded to avoid admitting what my mother had done to me.

She returned to the ledge and reclaimed her seat, facing me. "You can have anything you want of me. Like the others. You do more for me than I could ever repay you in kind. So, you see, I understand the value of mates and don't want you to ever feel used."

If a warrior could have cried, I would have then.

My heart rammed up into my throat.

"You're quiet, Var. Is there something profound you'd like to say like you typically do?" She fiddled with her hands in her lap as if she contemplated running from the room.

She must have felt pretty awful sitting there, nude, wringing her hands, wondering what I was up to. I tried to gulp the cursed lump from my throat so I could speak. So I could keep from having to lift her chin and gaze to mine. But touching her was dangerous. All that beautiful skin... And warm curves.

She cleared her throat and rose, turning, stepping from the bath.

Don't go. "Wait." To speak with her alone. I'd be a fool to pass up this opportunity.

She turned to me, those almost-hurt blue eyes almost glowing in the pool's white light that gilded the bends along her body.

What had I done? I was always the one pointing out how the others frightened her. And here I am stoking her sadness. I hurried to climb onto the pool's ledge and stand before her.

Maybe just admitting why I was aloof would be easiest. "Among my mother's guards,

there were few she could use for political advantage.”

Aisling stared into my eyes a good head shorter from me where she stood at the rim of the pool. Her gaze began to pinch with realization. “High-castes? You mean your coloring?”

She did understand. But I wanted her to understand my caution had been founded in something deeper. A betrayal so horrible that I feared bonding with her. “My mother forced me to sleep with other Queens that took a liking to me.”

Aisling didn’t flinch. “Without the security in marriage? No wonder you didn’t want to have anything to do with me.”

“But every word you utter, every action you take, everything you do is for my well being. Nothing like my self-centered mother.” I wanted to draw her delicate curves into my arms, to make her feel my sincerity in my rattling heartbeat.

She sighed. “Mothers are an enigma. My mother died because she couldn’t stand being separated from her sister. She left me all alone to find my way in life. I was an adult though.” She smiled. “That’s why I became a Marshal. I didn’t have anything left on Earth. So, you see, I understand that mothers can make strange choices.”

How could she say she had nothing left on her home world? Were the warriors there so blind they couldn’t see her beauty? Or her warrior’s heart?

We just stood there and stared at each other.

She reached out to lay a palm against my cheek. “I’ll always be there for you.” She reached up with the other palm to hold my face in her hot hands. She petted the thick stubble of my beard with her thumbs. “Always, Var. Just tell me what you want. I can’t read minds, or I’d have already found a way to make you happy.”

My heart thrashed.

All my blood raced to my groin.

She stepped to the absolute edge of the pool’s rim, pulling my face down to hers, kissing me with the softest lips, her gaze locked upon mine. “Always,” she whispered against my mouth.

Blessed stars, I ached to feel the warmth of her body. To lean my ear against the beat of her heart. To curl up in sleeping skins and hold the female who would save me from myself. I slid my hands across her back, down the slender slope to the curve of her ass, and ran my fingers around her cheeks to pull her body against my aching shaft.

She sighed into my mouth and closed her eyes.

Her *heartsong* dipped and silenced only to begin a beggar’s beat when my touch wandered across her curves.

She wanted me. And nobody was forcing us together. I could have stood there forever holding her against me, probing her moist mouth with my tongue, staking claim over what was rightfully mine. But it’d been so long since I mated. And her hands were all over my ass. I had to be careful not to throw her down and plow into her wet heat.

* * * *

Aisling clung to the strangely reclusive male’s steely body who just shared his darkest secret. What a secret, she thought. And I wasn’t going to let him walk away. Not until I’d made certain he understood not all women were like those who’d hurt him. And after that heart melting kiss... He’d liquefied my insides to the point if he didn’t lie me down and pound into me, I’d never let him kiss me again.

Var stepped up the six inches to the pool’s rim and nudged me backward with his iron body. His stiff erection poking my belly like a dull but soft blade.

Where was he going? I stared into the blue glow of his eyes, stepping where he guided me away from the pool's light.

He slid his palms up to my waist and turned me toward the stack of furs in the bath's dark shadows.

Thank God. He needed me. And I knew I'd never get any sleep without finishing what was undone between us after he initiated the peace talks. Especially the way his strong hands kept touching my body like I was fragile. Pushing me back into the darkness.

My calves bumped the soft furs.

His dark silhouette leaned its glowing orbs down. So far down they vanished as his lips touched mine. He sighed the hottest gust of breath and devoured my mouth.

There couldn't be anything left inside me as my organs had dissolved.

Oh. Dear. God. I opened my mouth to him and grabbed his blond hair. Damp hair. Anything to hold him there. He should be touched. Kissed. Roaring his ass off on top of me. I tried to pull him down. But he lowered me onto my back with two strong python arms, pulling his lips away, just leaning over me.

"Var," I groaned and reached for his black face. "Come here."

He didn't make a sound. The blue glow of his eyes popped into view. "Do you know how beautiful you are, Aisling?"

Not good. Taboo subject. Beauty seemed to be the root of all evil in his life. "Thank you," I whispered and slid my palms up the undulating muscle of his arms. But chitchat was not what I wanted.

Sex.

Right now.

He sighed and settled the magnificent weight of his body upon mine.

Why the hesitation? "I'm yours, Var. Anything you want. Anything."

One of his hands curled around my breast and he thumbed the nipple.

If he'd only just ram that firm shaft inside me. But he'd been so abused. I'd just let him take his time and petted his shoulders, winding my fingers into his hair, and pulled his stubbled cheek down to mine.

He growled softly and nuzzled into my ear. "Aisling."

The big guy just needed me to love him. I kissed his jaw. His neck. The beat of his pulse in his jugular. His bobbing Adam's apple. The hollow of his neck. The swell of his breast. His beaded nipple. I kissed and kissed all of his supple flesh he offered me until his muscled body writhed against me.

He growled a steady gurgle, latched his mouth onto my neck in typical Luvk male fashion, and sucked so hard that I hissed.

My heart reappeared to dissolve beneath his scorching lips, pooling between my legs.

"Var, inside me. I want you inside me," I gasped and squirmed.

He growled even louder. His hand slid down between my legs to investigate every inch of my sex. To toy with my clit until I squirmed and squealed.

I mindlessly bucked my hips beneath his belly.

"Aisling," he whispered against the swell of my breast, his whiskers raking my tender skin until my nipple beaded so tightly I couldn't breathe. But he never relented his conquest of my sex.

I felt so empty without him inside me. So tortured. Was this some game he played with me?

He snatched up my nipple between his teeth and pulled and sucked.

My womb ached so badly for him I almost called for Borun. For help. Almost stopped believing Var wanted to be my mate.

Suddenly, Var slid the smooth head of his erection across the notch of my sex and locked it into place, his glorious mouth teasing me more, devouring my neck.

Oh the damned anticipation. I lifted my hips against his firm presence and waited to be taken.

He shifted overhead, staring at me, snuggling his nose into my hair. "Aisling." Slowly, he glided his iron shaft into my aching channel.

Ever so slowly.

Possessing me.

I bent my knees, allowing them to fall to the furs, spreading myself wider for him. To feel only him penetrating my soul with his deliciously engorged shaft, sinking deeply into the darkness of Luvk.

And heaven found me in the darkness. Nobody could ever convince me I made a mistake choosing to submit to all my mates. I moaned.

He growled and thrust himself the rest of the way inside me with one swift rock of his hips, all the way to his splendid root.

My mind whirled. "Oh, Var," I whispered, "I want to be yours."

He turned his blue gaze to meet mine. "You are."

My body ached around him. He was like some phantom mystic settling upon me to shroud me in his therapeutic energy, to bury something magical inside me. And my soul pulsed with each of the medicinal throbs of his heartbeat.

He sucked in a deep gasping breath. "Hold on to me, Aisling."

Dear God, yes, to be ridden through his darkness. I grabbed two handfuls of his halter.

Arching his hard body, he wildly withdrew and rubbed marvelous friction along my channel.

How wonderful it felt to finally wrap my legs around his strong lunging hips. How his iron shaft slid to that hypersensitive bundle of nerves deep within my soul and rubbed it into a raging fire that made me rock my hips as fast as he moved his.

He shoved up to arms' length, away from my grip on his harness, and his gaze vanished as he ignored me and vanished into his own world.

My invisible sex god pounding into my aching flesh... Laboring, building a wall of need inside me stroke by goddamned stroke. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't stop rocking to get the tip of his amazing shaft right where he made me cry out his name. Over and over, I couldn't stop crying at the feet of his glorious temple.

He groaned, his lower body shoving my tender flesh with each of his extremely focused lunges as his body stiffened and strained to burst inside mine.

My god of darkness was climaxing too. I clamped my muscles down around his hard shaft. Held him. Loved him. Until I couldn't see anything but stars inside my mind.

He roared as I screamed. His body went rigid. His throbbing cock ruptured inside my soul.

The blue light flashed between our humming bodies, illuminating the stripes of his corporeal self. How he was as vulnerable and real as I was. If the light could heal anything, I hope it healed his heart. Gave him peace. Or just made him content with me.

Slowly, he began to pump his jerking erection, milking it of any remnant seed while I

matched each move of his magnificent iron hips until there was nothing left of him but his sighs and groans.

Var sank on top of me, settling down to lay his cheek atop my heart.

I slid my palms across his damp back. My mate's shoulders. I would love him as much as the others. He was gorgeous. His body felt amazing. But to say anything meant I might utter something one of those horrible queens had said. So, I just let him catch his breath and lie with me.

My heart still ached for him though. Worried he wasn't comfortable.

"I'm alright now, Aisling. Don't worry about me." He slid his arms around my sides and beneath mine.

He cradled me as much as I did him.

He definitely seemed better. I slid my fingers into his hair and scratched his scalp. "I'll never stop worrying about you."

He grabbed me up, rolling, stopping where I lay inside the circle of his python arms, both of us at eye level. "It's my job to do the worrying."

Four princes worrying about me? By the intensity of Var's stare, I knew I was in the best hands.

* * * *

Borun sat near the heat of his hearth inside his lodge wondering how the clans would come together in the future. Was unification even possible?

A presence pushed into his mind.

"*Calen's arrived*," Var said in mindspeak from his post outside the door.

Three days had passed since we arrived home and all things became normal once again for Aisling. Now Calen would bring back all of her ideas and guilt associated with how she could solve Luvk's problems through him.

She foraged through a chest by the fire's dancing flames. She'd finally given into curiosity and accepted the gifts from each queen. But Calen would set her off on another round of debating responsibility. "*I don't want Aisling to know*," I said to Var.

"*Neither do I*."

"Borun?" Aisling called from across our lodge where she held up a breeding top. "What's this?"

"Like your bras."

She shot me a doubtful gaze. "And when do I wear it?"

"It's for women who are breeding. You wear it with a breeding skirt."

"To supper? Around the village? You're kidding, right?"

The shock in her voice made me laugh. "No." And as slim as she was, she'd have the entire village staring at her as she walked among the lodges parading her high-caste beauty and the mark of the younglings brooding in her belly. Maybe I didn't want everyone to gaze upon her flesh. She'd never know I lied. "It's for when we're here."

"That's good to hear." She returned to foraging through the trunk's contents.

Something thumped outside.

"Borun," someone yelled.

Curses. Calen. Undoubtedly voicing his summons to announce his presence to Aisling. Aisling shot me a knowing stare.

"Stay here," I ordered.

She nodded.

I opened the door to find Lehd and Var blocking Calen from my lodge. Calen stood weaponless except for the curved battle claw at his hip. He stared at me through his Royal Guard mask with a body at his boots. A black and white warrior at his feet. Kruk.

"He's dead," Calen stated and tossed a Royal Guard mask on top of the body. "Kruk won't bother Aisling again. I want to talk to the Marshal."

Calen was a fool. "No."

Aisling shoved between my arm and Var's. "What?" She gasped at the lifeless carcass.

Did she never listen? I shoved her arm back into the lodge.

A strange whir hummed through the air.

"Did you hear that?" she blurted, searching the clear blue sky.

"I've never heard that sound before," Var said.

"It's a shuttle. A spacecraft." She tried to shove past my elbow.

Not with an insane Royal Guard afoot. "Wait inside." I pushed her back into the lodge, blocking her smirk with my body, and closed the door at my heels.

"Borun! It might be someone from The Order of the Marshals. And the Orders' Marshals have the knowledge to close the portals!"

Chapter Thirty-One

Aisling didn't know what to do sitting there with her four mates across the fire from Calen. But Calen had killed Kruk, she kept telling herself. *For me.*

A chill feathered across my skin.

Calen saved me from Kruk. What did that prove? The act amounted to something.

Borun leaned toward me just enough to warm away the chill where he knelt on bended knee, ready to pounce.

"I've sent for the Marshals," I said, staring into Calen's blue gaze. "I can't do anything else until I hear from my commander." Although, my mates wanted Calen out of here. Calen obviously meant business. And he'd killed the one Luvk who held my future over his head.

Calen measured me with his gaze as if he knew what I had just been thinking. That I owed him a favor.

What whirled in his hidden thoughts? Had he protected me with Kruk? Dare I believe that?

Calen shifted, unfolding a leg where he sat. His long black and white arms almost hypnotized me in the shadows the way shadows moved upon his skin. Almost fooled me into forgetting his bizarre behavior. "I can't unite the clans alone," he finally said.

Borun growled a deep sound in his chest.

Lehd rose to his full height as if something else was clarified in mindspeak.

But what if the truth was Calen could unite the clans and just needed our assistance? I slid my gaze to Borun.

He focused solely upon Calen.

My husband, the hunter. My guardian. "Borun?"

"No, Aisling," Var said without one drop of emotion.

"He can wait for your commander," Borun ground out.

There was no bargaining with any of my guardians. I met Calen's unwavering gaze. "Find a place to wait. When my commander arrives, we'll see what is happening on the other side of the portal. Until then, my hands are tied." But, at least, Kruk was out of the equation. Somehow, Calen would get reciprocation for that little favor.

Calen sighed, rose, and left with Lehd, Ovh, and Var on his heels.

Borun cast off his mask, grabbed my chin, and tilted my gaze to his. "Well done, little one." He kissed me quickly on the lips. Softly. Not enough to set off a round of mating. Just enough to show he was happy with my actions.

Oh to have married a man who couldn't kiss. I could make some serious decisions with that deal.

"Aisling, your commander is meeting with Ishan. We have been summoned to the great hall," Borun announced.

I really hate telepathy. "Alright. I'm ready to find out who arrived in what spacecraft."

All of my mates followed me to the great hall. Fortunately, Kruk's body had disappeared. That was one less thorn in my hide. But I could breathe easily now.

Now to get Goro to work on the portal from the other side. Thank goodness, Goro and

two other male Marshals stood on one side of the platform where the Queens lounged. Those females would be happy to hear Kruk was dead and they could return to their realms. We claimed a place to stand before the Queens.

The crowd of Royal Guards silenced.

Goro nodded at me and joined us where we stood. "Johnson has been working with the Slakens since my departure. I trust you've news for me."

Ishan might go radical with news of a second portal. "Yes. We should speak privately."

"After I've convinced the Queens that I'm making progress. I see the matriarchs are still huddled together here in fear of returning to their provinces."

"Oh yes. But my news could change everything," I whispered.

He pivoted to the four watchful females. "It's been a long and arduous journey trying to bring order to the chaos of two worlds, including your own. I think you will be as surprised to learn what I have. My Marshals have been working with the Slakens to stop a secret movement among their population."

The Queens rustled upon their thrones but didn't interrupt Goro.

"The majority of the Slaken population disapproves of the invasion of your world. However, a group of renegades furtively raids your realms. How? My operative has married into the Slaken government and uncovered a second portal. A portal the Slaken government knew nothing about. And unfortunately, had nothing to do with the raids for centuries. So, they again invite a marriage between Slaken and Luvk nobility. A union to create peace."

Oh shit. Frenyl is out of the marketable female loop. Wasn't she the only acceptable match to the Slakens? Where would Luvk find a marriageable female to marry to a Slaken noble? What else could go wrong? I certainly wasn't about to take on a Slaken prince too. I had enough mates already.

But it was good to hear the second portal I detected had been part of the raids. That Mart hadn't died in vain. That everything I did was for the greater good of Luvk. So where did that leave Calen? What was I going to do about Calen? And just what did he intend to have me do to help him achieve his goals? Maybe all those problems just vanished with Goro's announcements. I realized Goro had been speaking.

"So, what will we do?" Ishan asked.

Goro stared down the Queen where she lounged upon her dais. "Send another female. Send a queen to wed the Slaken nobleman. Offer yourself." He pivoted and met my gaze like he'd just dropped a bomb and waited to be blasted across the large room.

Or worse. Don't you dare suggest I take on this Slaken mate.

"Come with me, Aisling." Goro strode past me.

Another bullet dodged. I followed my commander with my mates on my heels. Goro led us aboard the shuttle where we waited for debriefing. Or the standard horrible news...

The spacecraft was larger than the one that had brought me to Slaken. But it had to have a food replicator. And although I wasn't showing a micron yet, I could eat like a horse with two babies in tow. Okay, maybe my fevered sexual appetite required I eat more too. I hurried through the shuttle's cool dark interior to where the food replicator better be stored.

Steak. Hamburger and fries. Fried chicken. Coffee. Chocolate cake. Where's the damned food replicator?

"Aisling," a familiar voice called.

Darla. In her black leather, Goro's level-headed brunette mate still looked as formidable as the day I met her. Even after she'd been through a pregnancy. And shouldn't she be raising

her infant? Dragging a child of legend around the universe to go visiting friends isn't particularly safe when a monumental event is supposed to occur in the child's future. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to check on you. After Goro told me you were his best choice for this assignment given you're so open-minded, I thought I better come see for myself just what he'd done with my favorite little healer." She halted a step away with her infant daughter bundled in her arms.

So that was what landed me this job. "You know how I have no business opening a tuna fish can let alone touching an injured person." I smiled at the joke.

Darla chuckled and scanned my wall of masked mates standing behind me. "And you have your own little army now?"

Did she know *what* they were? Would she care I had multiple mates? "They're my mates."

She froze for a moment then blinked. "Four?" She canted toward me. "Aisling, do you really need four?" She smiled thoughtfully. "Albeit, they are large and, oh my God, I'm into muscles."

I choked back a snort. "Actually, I had six at one time. Let's just say life on Luvk is brutal."

Darla giggled a little and covered her mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh. But you'll be happy to know Goro got a good shock when you pushed that button." She winked.

A mere electric jolt was nothing compared to the culture shock I experienced.

"I heard that." Goro brushed past us and shot his mate a wary glance, motioning us deeper into the shuttle. "We came as quickly as we could. It's one hellacious trip jumping quadrants from Four to Nine. But Crellon secret technology makes the impossible happen." He scanned the ceiling, then slid his gaze back to me.

Now that the Marshals located Luvk, the portals were no longer important for traveling between worlds. "I found a second portal on Luvk. We must close it at once. But there's a priest who says the doorway needs to be closed from the Slaken side."

Goro nodded and nudged my elbow toward a black seat. "Sit. Listen. I've brought additional Marshals to help you until Johnson has deconstructed the portal from his end. And yet even more Marshals are guarding the machine he's disassembling. We want to know how the portal works. So, we need to take our time. However, raids will be impossible now. So, sit back and visit with Darla. She has a wild idea. She wants to raise Lianna here."

Darla smiled the craziest smile at me and sank into a seat at my side.

Darla had no idea how different life was on Luvk compared to Earth. Especially for her daughter. Thank goodness Lianna had dark hair. She wouldn't be perceived as a Pure Heart no matter how pale and plain her skin color. "Why Luvk?"

"Titan is so cold. The Marshals don't marry and have children there. I need a place to raise Lianna among children."

Oh boy. "Where do I begin? The Luvk culture is very different from where we grew up. And for girls, I just don't know if you understand what you're getting into with that suggestion." I scanned my male entourage's wall of masks and leather pants then turned back to Darla. "Is there more to the legend of your child changing the universe, Darla? If you raise her here, I can't imagine her values being anything but warrior values." I met Darla's adamant brown gaze. She meant to make her idea happen. "You really need to learn about the Luvks before you make that decision."

"We need a place unknown to the rest of the universe," Goro interjected. "Straightarrow and Trekaar raise their child of legend in secret. We must do the same."

They should just relocate The Order of the Marshals here. Additional psychic mates would help settle bickering among the seven realms. The clans probably wouldn't even need a council then. Goro could recruit from the surplus of Royal Guard warriors. Royal Guards could have their own were-mates. Problems solved. I met Borun's gaze. "I have an idea."

He snaked his bulging striped arms across his chest.

That action definitely held more warning than cynicism. I couldn't help but smile a little. "A moon is an excellent hideout, Goro. But why not train Marshals here? There's an enormous pool of telepathic unwed males who need purpose in life. If we can bring peace to this world, those males will have the opportunity to join The Cause and find mates they so desperately need."

All my mates shot curious glances between themselves.

Were they contemplating jumping ship? "Don't get me wrong," I warned. "I'm not releasing any of my mates from their duties."

Darla burst out laughing. "Hell, who'd give up four husbands who looked like that? Those pants alone are to die for. Do all Luvk males dress like this? Let me tell you, the psychic females from earth will line up to join the Marshals if they catch wind of these terminator types."

Goro inhaled. "Do you see why I need to get her off that moon? She claims to have cabin fever." He pivoted, the tails of his long black coat whipping around to snap at me. "I'll speak to you alone, Aisling."

Why did I suddenly feel like new orders were on the agenda? As long as they had nothing to do mating with Slakens, I'd be fine. I followed the snapping heels of Goro's black boots into an empty private cabin full of plastic crates.

The shuttle door whisked shut at my back.

The impenetrable mask the commander wore only made matters worse. Hell, I know what's coming. "I can't marry the Slaken. Forget it, Goro. It won't work. My mates despise them."

"That's not why I've brought you here to speak secretly."

Secrecy? Not a word to ease my churning thoughts. I stared into the commander's fiery conspiratorial orange eyes and waited for the bomb to detonate.

"Calen is our problem." Goro's mask never flinched.

My heart did the wincing for him.

"What about Calen?" I asked.

"He is uniting the clans as we speak. Many royals acknowledge his priestly training as his right to reign over the clans."

I hadn't caught wind of the shift yet. Anything to bring the clans together was good though. "What do you have against clan unification?"

Goro exhaled ever so slightly and bore holes through me with his penetrating gaze. "The Queens are losing ground as Calen rallies the Royal Guards to action against the Slakens. He's killed Kruk of which such a feat has gained him the respect he requires to oust the Queens from their thrones. At this moment, the Royal Guards listen to Calen and ignore their mothers' summons." Goro scratched the black hair behind his ear and paced out a short path among the crates. "Your mates are privy to the mindspeak I'm receiving. And this is not a joke when I ask you, Marshal Aisling, what do you have against clan unification?" His stern gaze riveted upon mine.

“Me? Absolutely nothing.” How dare he ask. “But it isn’t my place to resolve the conflict between the clans. I’m only here as the Marshal to handle off-world aggression. You know my ethics are the strongest given my education. I’m an observer and suggestion box. Only. Not the person who makes choices for the Luvks. Albeit, I’ve provided them with many options.”

Goro’s head swung left until only his left eye studied me relentlessly. “Calen is claiming Luvk’s throne. The Queens are being replaced by their sons. The rest of their sons have formed a council. And there is nothing to seal the changes in place except an heir to the kingship.”

Kingship? “Calen’s King? Why does this have anything to do with me?”

“Calen wants the heir to be birthed by Luvk’s Marshal,” Goro stated flatly.

“Impossible. Absolutely so. My mates will not allow it.”

“The decision isn’t theirs. You make the call. You’re their *Queen*. For the greater good of planet Luvk, you must bear the child of Luvk’s new king.”

He had to be joking. “But marrying the planet’s ruler goes against Marshal Code. Marshals are forbidden to hold both were-assassin power and the power of a monarch. The duties of each job conflict.” Wasn’t that how Voldon rose to power and set off the Blood Wars ages ago? How the Marshals originated?

Goro eyed me warily. “It’s done. You give him a child. And he goes his way. No other ties. He will only bed a female he trusts. He distrusts all noble Luvk females. You are the only option to give him his heir. And, if all goes well, the ancient kingship will be rejuvenated.”

“Please don’t do this to me. Calen could very well be insane.”

“In a little way, each of us is insane.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Aisling choked on her heart where she stood before her mates' unmasked worried features in her guards' quarters. They had to hear my *heartsong*. They had to know my announcement was killing me.

"What can be so horrible? Tell us, little one," Borun insisted.

Oh, the fact I must mate with Calen. But I'm not supposed to actually keep him around like my mates. A Marshal marrying a planet's ruler is out of the question. That's a conflict of interests gaining the Marshal the wrong type of power within a culture. No, I'm just supposed to bear Calen a child. One. And then I'm off the hook. I sucked in a deep breath and looked into each set of glowing eyes. "Maybe we should sit down."

The warriors eyed each other and descended when I did.

All I could think about was the ridiculous lines from *Ring Around the Rosie*. I'd definitely been hit by the annihilating rays of a proverbial torch—burned to nothing but ash. Ashes. Ashes. Aisling's falling down.

Universe, save me.

"Tell us now," Borun demanded.

"Goro has ordered me to produce, I mean give, Calen an heir."

The shadowy room was so silent I could hear nothing but the pop of the fire's disgusted retort to the ridiculous plan to appease a planet's whining noble...

My mates just stared at me.

They had to be arguing and cursing up a storm in mindspeak.

Borun rose gracefully and disappeared through firelight and shadow to the bath.

Gone. My Borun left me. For good? I'd die without his soothing voice. His hot breath on my skin. The way he wrapped himself around me at night to keep my dreams from distorting into nightmares.

My heart slowly dropped in an aching swan dive toward my gut.

What had been said among my mates? I studied each one's unyielding gaze and fought a wave of fear trying to kick up choking tears from my chest into my throat and eyes. "What did he say?"

The trio rose, silently, grabbing weapons, yanking on their masks, and went their way.

Gone, all of them. My hearts. Kicked to the corners of the continent because Goro couldn't keep his nose out of Luvk affairs. Why? What did the Order of the Marshals stand to gain from my loins birthing an heir to the Luvk throne?

Or worse. Was I just divorced?

* * * *

"*She's crying,*" Lehd said in Borun's mind. "*Borun, we can't leave her in there now. Alone. She hurts. Can't you sense it? Even if her reaction is caused by her brooding body, we can't abandon her.*"

"*I'll return as quickly as possible.*" Borun headed to Calen's temporary lodge and shrugged off Lehd's thoughts. Mother in all her glorious wisdom had given the priest king housing near her quarters. Was this a tactic to spread her legs for Calen? To gain power in our

shifting political arena? If so, that explained Calen's insistence on bedding Aisling instead of a conniving Queen. But I wouldn't know until I faced him. And asked him.

The dark wood of Calen's door shut out the sunlight. But nothing else in the silence I heard facing the thick impenetrable slab of *Whatel* boards. What dwelled in the lodge's silence? I pushed out with my mind. "*Calen, speak with me. It's Borun.*"

The door squealed, falling inward. Calen's blue gaze bore through me from where he studied me through the holes in his leader's mask.

Nothing need be said. He had to have expected me to show myself after he convinced Goro that Aisling was the only vessel capable of carrying his youngling.

"*Come in.*" Calen stepped rearward, allowing me room for passage.

Why did he still wear the mark of power in the mask from the Sunrise clan? He'd broken tradition and demanded his mother step down for him to take power. Therein lay another mystery to solve while I'm here. I crossed the shadowy threshold of Calen's lodge.

He waved me toward the flames in his dancing hearth.

"I see my mother hasn't moved in," I jested drily, with my voice in order to isolate our discussion from eavesdropping telepathic minds.

Calen chuckled. "She's tried every day since my arrival." His footfalls followed me across the space toward his hearth.

My gut curdled at Ishan's pathetic attempt to grasp for control.

Well, never pass up an opportunity to satisfy your curiosity. "Why haven't you accepted Ishan's offer?"

"She can't be trusted." Calen sank onto a pillow two steps away from me and waved for me to follow his lead.

I knelt instead. Just in case I'd need to slit the fool's throat. "You know why I'm here."

Calen yanked off his mask and locked his gaze upon mine. "I don't want my heir to have ties to the Queens and their horrible leadership practices. All I ask is for one heir. One for luck. Each noble son needs only one heir. I do even more so. I'm uniting the clans as the priest who knows Luvk's lost history. I must pass on my knowledge to my youngling. It's the same with those Royal Guards who have chosen to join the Order of the Marshals over forming a Luvk council of nobles."

What will Calen do if the youngling is female? If the Queens lose power, a daughter will do nothing for him now that females do not rule and priests need sons to carry Luvk's knowledge. "How do you know the youngling will be this male you seek?"

Calen stared me down with a gaze as sharp as a dagger. "I can only hope there will be no problems. If the youngling is female, I'll start a new tradition. That's what the future is about, molding new traditions. Maybe the Marshal's idea of creating a priesthood and teaching young males Luvk history is the solution. I won't know until I have a youngling. A daughter can be wed to the next king... Whether son or daughter, I must have an heir."

Why did the bastard have to be so agreeable? "I'm totally against this, Calen. But you've skirted Aisling in this little procreation venture. And she's threatened. I have no choice but to allow her to do as she is ordered by her superior. My choice is not selfish. Mine is one meant to comfort and protect my mate. She's my mate. Not yours. You can never comfort and protect her because I refuse to allow you rights of a mate. You will only be allowed in my lodge to breed with Aisling."

"You can't decide that," Calen said smugly.

"All of Aisling's mates have. You skirted her for Breeder's Rights with nothing but your

lust to purchase your access to her. Very well. We decide everything else.”

“What if Aisling decides to take me as a mate, *completely*?”

She knew better by her mates’ reaction to this catastrophe. “That won’t even become an issue until you’ve earned her trust. Because, Calen, since you understand the concept of trust so much, you can certainly grasp the significance of my words. Listen closely. You will not have breeding access to my mate until she has recovered from bearing my younglings. This is *my right*. I make the choice. And when she has fully recovered to mating status, you will be summoned to breed with her. You will have the three months to plant your seed during breeding sessions monitored by all four of her mates. If and when the breeding mark appears on her belly, you will remove yourself from our lives. She will not be bothered with your unusual behavior—”

“And when my heir is born?”

“If you produce an heir by Aisling within that three-month breeding period, and if Aisling births the youngling, the offspring will be raised by Luvk tradition at the mother’s lodge until the youngling reaches ten years of age. At my lodge, Calen. You may send a woman of your choice to rear the youngling with values you find acceptable. Even live nearby if you must. But you will only have sexual access to my mate for the one term of breeding until she is or is not fruitful. If you request anything else, you’d better speak to Aisling instead of her commander. Or we’ll fight this out like warriors. And you know I’ll win.” I rose and turned to return to my lodge.

* * * *

Lehd couldn’t stand hearing his mate sob. The pitiful sounds stabbed at his soul until he left his post at the door and entered the guards’ lodge.

She sat on the dirt floor, back to him, leaning against the wall and his elevated bedding with her arms up as if she hugged an invisible person. But truly just cried into her forearms.

Sun’s jest! How could they all abandon her while Borun laid out the rules for Calen’s access to her? I yanked off my mask and hoisted her lightweight form into the air.

Her body stiffened, and she met my gaze. Tears would have washed paths down the cheeks of a person who’d cried. Not on Aisling. Not after we’d abandoned her here far too long. Every space of her cheeks glistened with dampness.

“You came back?” she whispered.

Curse Borun for making us guard all the doors during daylight hours when the world was crashing down around our mate. I planted a kiss on her cool salty cheek and sat upon my sleeping furs, drawing her warm soft curves against my chest. “I never left, sweet one.”

She tucked her nose into my neck and burrowed in as if to ensure she had claimed a grip on me so I could never leave. “Where,” she gasped and sucked down a long breath, “Where did everyone go?”

“Borun is clarifying to Calen how he may deal with you during breeding. And the rest are guarding the doors.”

“Borun is?” she asked with surprise.

“Yes. And we should all beat him for making you cry like this.”

“No fighting.” She snaked her arms around my neck and kissed the pulse buried there into a pounding throb with delightfully soft suction. “Although, it’s adorable how you want to defend me.”

My heart shimmied with a sigh.

Not my throbbing groin. It drummed.

"I just want my mates with me." She planted another evocative kiss on my jaw line and turned to flutter her lips against the rim of my ear. "I know you'll protect me from Calen."

I raked fingers through the mass of her loose white hair, again and again. "Oh yes. Every move Calen makes will be so scrutinized and monitored so much that he will probably abandon his plan and leave you before his seed has taken root. Just because he asks for Breeder's Rights doesn't mean he'll be happy with the process."

Her warm giggle tickled my earlobe. "Is that what you've all planned? You could have let me in on your secret instead of leaving me here to expect the worse."

That Borun. I grated my teeth.

"Oh," she scolded, pulling my cheek toward her.

Her haunting blue gaze sucked the anger out of me before she planted her mouth over mine as if she could read my thoughts. Or just *knew* what I was thinking with those omniscient eyes.

The door shoved inward.

Borun stared us down from the sunlit doorway.

"*I told you to guard the entrance, Lehd,*" Borun said, grabbing the door's edge and shoving it shut, softly. "*I see you're as determined to bed Aisling as Calen.*"

Aisling just watched us.

"*That isn't fair, Borun. You didn't have to stand outside the door, listening to her cry.*"

"*Well she isn't crying now. And no longer needs to be.*" Borun switched to speaking with his mouth. "Calen has been dealt with. He will have Breeder's Rights after Aisling heals from birthing my younglings. And if his three months are fruitless, he will abandon his ridiculous endeavor. All is resolved, little one."

Aisling's eyes widened then shrank back to normal. Her hip scooted into my aching arousal and she turned back to quickly brush a kiss across my lips. "What were we doing?" she whispered.

Borun sighed. "I'll guard the door."

Borun must have realized Aisling needed some attention after her ordeal he had instigated by purposely leaving her to wonder what unfolded as he tended to Calen. All the better for me. I sank my lips to the delicate skin beneath her jaw line.

Soft. Throbbing against my flesh.

"Oh, Lehd, you are so perfect." Her fingers thrust into my hair and pulled at my war braids. "You make me melt," she groaned against my ear.

The wetter, the better. I could just lean her over the bed. Pound into her from behind.

My manhood lunged.

Not yet. Not until I had her gasping for more where she clung to me. I massaged the throb down her neck with my lips to the hard line of her collarbone and flicked my tongue out, over and over, back and forth along the solid bone until my tongue's tip thrust into the little depression at the base of her neck.

"Lower," she whimpered and slid her palms down to the bulging muscle in my upper arms. "So perfect, Big Boy," she gasped into my ear. "Inside me, Lehd," she groaned. "Please, I want you inside me."

So little patience. I yanked off her shirt and peeled off the undergarment cupping her succulent breasts.

Mine. So mine. I leaned away from the heat of her body and gazed between her extended arms at the two sweet mounds dotted with taut beads. Mounds that had grown so large

from brooding I almost couldn't hold them in my hands.

She threw her head back and groaned in anticipation, arching those hard nipples up for my view, never giving up on her palms' quest to memorize the undulating musculature of my arms.

For a taste of her soul. I leaned down and latched onto one nub with my teeth.

She squirmed until she slid a leg across my lap to where she straddled my erection, arching her back more, tilting those glorious nipples up for my pleasure. She leaned back onto her palms where she planted them on my thighs.

My manhood throbbed at the feast presented before me. I held the bend of her lower back in place with one hand, sliding the fingers of the other down beneath the edge of her pants to finger the crease in her ass.

My beauty ground her hips against my aching arousal, teasing me with the image of her breasts presented as a veritable feast. I bent to devour one mound, grinding the taut nipple between my teeth, cupping the other breast, squeezing it.

She groaned and rocked her hips.

I wanted her pants off. I wanted her on her hands and knees. On my sleeping skins. I wanted to plunge. Over and over. Until I planted my seed and slapped her ass with my balls. "On your feet, sweet one," I whispered against the curve of her breast, licking it for good measure.

She moaned and rose, dragging the other hard nipple across my cheek.

Purposely. Like I'd be tempted to yank her back to suckle like a youngling. Not today. I wanted to plant my root deeply in that hot womb. "Take off your pants."

"Oh," she sighed, playing with the closure of her Earth garment, turning, wiggling her hips slowly, shoving down the pants, revealing the delicate dark undergarment I wanted to tear off her divine body with my teeth. She swayed her hips so much I rose to slide my palms across the velvet of her iron ass.

"That's it, Lehd. Touch me." She shoved that sweet flesh into my hands.

Oh yes. I fully intended to touch her. "On my sleeping skins."

She shot me a seductive smile over her shoulder and began to sit on the edge of my bed, luring my hands along with her retreating flesh.

"On your hands and knees," I ordered.

Her smile curled with conspiracy. She presented her rump to me and ran her splayed fingers across the little black panties hiding her spirit's entrance.

Blessed sun, the desire on her face made my seed swell my manhood to the point of bursting. I pushed her needy fingers off her ass and ran my hands over the swells forming her seductive backside.

She gasped, arching her back down, thrusting the object of my attention more so into my palms. "Hurry, Big Boy."

Her wet panties proved her need matched mine. I curled my fingertips beneath the edge of the black lace, tugged her undergarment down past her toes, and extracted my aching shaft from my leathers.

She thrust her soft wet skin against my turgid flesh. "Oh, Lehd."

That's what I wanted. My mate enchanted with me. Only me. At the moment. I slid the tip of my arousal into the dampness between her sex's folds and locked the head into her firm notch.

She jerked backward, impaling her hot silk a few inches.

So much for patience. Since when was life dictated by patience anyway?

Her demanding sheath quivered around me.

My body shivered in anticipation. I rammed forward, sinking until my root slapped against her sticky skin.

“Oh, Lehd, I like it when you’re needy.” Her body tensed, squeezing my thoughts into numbness.

“So needy.” She rotated her hips.

Gods. I couldn’t wait. I thrust my hips. Again and again. Ramming balls deep into the tight channel to her soul. Until she groaned pleas for completion.

Her body clamped even more tightly around my sensitive jerking rod and trembled.

So mind-numbing. My thoughts were lost to sawing into her tight flesh. If only the moment were one that never ended. But then there’d be no reason for stealing away with my mate into corners...

My seed burst inside her.

My hips ceased to care I milked my seed with her clenching channel. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t draw breath. Could only lean over her gasping hard body and gulp air near her ear.

“Oh, Lehd, life without you would be torture.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Almost a year later...

Aisling placed the tiny duplicate copy of herself into the curve of her were-mate's bent arm and shot him a smile. "The girls look so small when you hold them. I can't believe they're six weeks old already." And he was so gentle with the twins.

Borun breathed deeply then smiled carefully. "Sit with me for awhile." He nodded toward the pillow at his side. "How do you feel?"

I felt as though I'd fully recovered from childbirth. But that wasn't why he asked. "Sick. The trembling hands are the worst part though. All the suffering with four mates seems so ridiculous." And the breastfeeding only made me crave sex more. But Calen would be arriving soon. Whether my mates liked it or not, I'd have a warrior around who could satiate my blood lust.

Borun's stare only magnified the itch clawing every inch of my skin. "Don't turn to him unless you must, little one. Calen might have been King for a year, but we can't trust him."

Borun seemed a little jealous. Or was that fear dancing in his eyes? "I'll be fine. It's just something I must do until I'm pregnant."

"Never submit to him alone, Aisling," Borun insisted with his concerns.

Yes, fear lurked in that warning. But what could I do? My commander had sanctioned the mating. I had been ordered to carry Calen's child if possible. "I'm just a surrogate. I'll carry the youngling if I can. And Calen will reign over the united clans."

Borun stared at me blankly. "Aisling, I am so grateful for my younglings. Calen would be nothing but grateful as well given your body is fruitful. But I can't bear the thought of anything happening to you. You must swear you will not agree to any of his ploys to secret you away for sexual pleasure. He cannot be trusted. Your dealings with him must be monitored by all your mates. We will protect you."

"I'd be a fool to risk losing what I have with you and the babies." I scanned the shadows of my lodge, settling my gaze on my daughter's little bundle of orange stripes, then sliding it to the other stripe-less miniature version of me. I didn't want to risk the loss of any of my mates. My life was so perfect. Except for that little blip of Calen. And I was about to face my blip.

"Calen has been summoned," Borun said a bit grimly.

"Already?" I whispered and stared into his golden eyes.

"You will be safe," Borun managed to utter normally.

Probably for my sanity. But Calen had managed to work a strong friendship with Goro and the Marshals once the Order relocated its training facility to Luvk. The Order landed its metal structures near the portal I had passed through. And Calen lived outside the Order's walls, almost as if he were part of the Order, until the year played out and I was ready to breed.

Talk about waiting with a wolf drooling at every corner.

But my mates accompanied me everywhere. Protecting me. Loving me. As much as they could without penetration. And Darla's little gift, crates of impossible-to-acquire Earth items, only compounded my problems. I'll just call the gifts treasures. I didn't gain too much

weight. Like what does a pregnant Earth girl do when getting her hands on peanut butter, potato chips, dark chocolate, and candy corn? Gorge. The clothing was more my problem. Lots of cargo type pants I loved. I'd worn them since birthing the babies. Borun was extremely fond of the pants. But Darla's vicious sense of humor in bringing along a crate of lacy lingerie had been the thorn in my husbands' sides. Apparently, I taunted my mates with glimpses of lace-stretched chest or ass to keep them chomping at the bit to mate with me the moment the mark of a youngling wove across my belly. The universe had to be repaying me for the favor with Calen now.

Why Calen now, universe? Albeit he had been the force behind clan unification. Not me. I served as the go between bridging the forces that needed assistance closing the portals and the forces that could shut them down. So maybe I played some role in helping Luvk reclaim its identity. All because of Goro. But where was Goro's plan heading now? I felt destined for the sacrificial altar, spread-eagled, butt naked. And Goro doesn't seem to care.

"Calen's here, little one. He's waiting in the guards' quarters."

Joy. Where are the ropes to bind me to the slab of stone?

Morna hustled through the door, chuckled at the babes, and carried them to their Luvk cradles waiting near the fire's glow.

"The bath?" Borun asked.

Two simple words that meant one hell of a lot of stress. "Okay. I can do this." I sucked down a deep breath.

Borun waved me toward the pool's white light in the darkness.

Thank goodness for the shroud hovering over the bubbling water's glow.

Borun's hand landed upon my shoulder. "Ready, my love?"

Something choked my heart. Squeezed it beyond measure.

"I think so," I managed to squeak out.

He grabbed me into a monstrous hug and rubbed his lips against my ear. "We'll be here. Don't worry," he whispered as if to conceal his words from the rest of Luvk ears.

Then I was standing again. Alone in the darkness beside the churning water. Waiting. The sacrificial womb.

An eerie hum vibrated throughout my body.

An omen? Or unadulterated fear? I peeled my clothes off, leaving my lingerie. White. The color that always made Luvk warriors drop and writhe on the stone floor. Maybe I'd earn some gentleness from Calen with the silk?

The shadows shifted.

Probably not my Borun. I grabbed the clip in my hair, pinched to offset the mechanism, allowing my hair to fall around my breasts. Why in the hell couldn't I look at Calen?

"You're afraid of me," he said.

Damn my thrashing heart.

"Only a fool would hurt the one true treasure in the universe," he whispered and slid his fingers under my chin.

Carefully. I gulped down a yelp.

He turned my gaze to meet the silver glow of his blue eyes. "Can you understand what it's like to live sixty years and have nothing but a nagging mother and two wives who repulse you to the point of sickness? So ill I was that I demanded divorce."

What did that mean? He truly despised his Queen mates?

His gaze never wandered from mine. Never released mine.

He took the two steps to face me head on, turning my chin with his hand, the whisper of the grinding sole of his boots shushing at the pool's gurgle. "I swear you will feel my respect for you. You will know how much I envy your mates." His touch fell away.

My mates. Were they close? I scanned the unyielding darkness for any sign of stripes or movement.

A touch chilled my waist.

I flinched and shivered.

"It's alright," Calen pulled me against his warm steely body, his hands sliding around my back, wrapping me into a warm embrace, smothering the light with his supple muscles.

So damned many wonderful muscles.

He held me, hugging me, rubbing my back. "Sit with me," he finally said and descended with me in his grasp, pulling me onto his lap. I sat there, legs hanging off one side of his body, staring at the stripes on his chest. "You're safe with me. I killed Kruk to protect you."

Everything in my being resonated truth about his statement. Dare I believe him? What if he lied and I leapt into the darkness by handing my heart to him?

"There's a place in the Sunrise realm my father took me when I was a boy. I remember the way the trees bent to touch the soil that fed them. The way the mushrooms, that is what you call them on Earth, I think, popped up beneath the overarching leaves. This was the one place I ever felt as if I had my father's full attention."

What was he talking about? I slid my gaze over the silver ring of his harness, across the turn of his chin, up the black stripe of his moustache, to meet the silver curtain cloaking his blue eyes from my view.

"That's where I learned a priest's truth. A priest's first son learns these things in secrecy. But I don't think there is reason to carry on this tradition now that the portals are gone. Do you?"

He's asking my opinion? As if I was the one with answers? Why would it matter what I thought? "It's not my place to change Luvk tradition."

He touched a fingertip to the corner of my eye and traced a tickling shiver down my cheek to my chin. "Your arrival changed everything."

Maybe it did. The portals are gone. Any remaining Queens are overshadowed by Calen. And many of the Royal Guards line up to mate with unmated Marshals through volunteering for Marshal duty. There's no need for a council to help run Luvk affairs. Only time would show how much my presence disturbed the natural order within this culture.

"What are you thinking?" Calen whispered.

I pulled my gaze back from the curve of his shoulder and stared into his eyes. "That I hope I didn't cause too much damage here. Truly, it's unforgiveable given my beliefs."

He sighed softly and leaned his forehead toward me. "This is why I trust you."

My heart rattled, trapped inside my chest, unable to flee.

But how would I look if I retreated?

His forehead halted against mine. He gazed into my eyes, his eyes but inches away. "We have much in common. You and I."

Why couldn't he just get on with mating? My damned heart was melting.

"Only you can relate to my life. The detached feeling. As if I lived to infiltrate, never feeling a part of things. And all the while, knowing I was the only person who could make the madness end."

His palm fell over my hand.

Was he searching for a connection between us? Trying to make our mating more than just simple fucking? This warrior was manipulating me. Or loving me.

"I need you, Aisling."

For what purpose?

His eyelids shut, and his forehead slid along my temple to rub the side of his head against mine. "I've waited a lifetime to find a female I could trust to lay hands upon me," he whispered into my ear.

A chill shivered out every pore of my skin at the mention of touch between males and females. And lifetimes were eternities on Luvk compared to Earth life spans. Did he imply he'd never been touched? Impossible given the Queens were so narcissistic. And he'd been mated off twice. The Queens would never take into account a warrior's feelings. How could he have avoided sex with two Queens? He was lying. Manipulating me. Had to be. End of subject.

His free hand glided up my back to gently pull my head away from his, bending my neck a little. Just enough to plant his moist lips on my pulse.

God. He homed right in on the place that sent my molten heart flooding my panties.

My heartbeat vanished into a hot deluge while he suckled at my jugular. If he didn't hold my head up in the crook of his hand, I would have fallen. Backward or forward. One way or the other. I was putty in his grasp. Literally, gasping for breath. Squirming in wet panties.

Oh yes, he knew how to sexually please a woman. The liar.

His kiss broke away from its hold. His lips fluttered against my damp flesh. "Your skin is an aphrodisiac, Aisling." His hand gently moved my head so he could latch those lips onto the sensitive skin beneath my chin.

Oh, lord. He sucked the life right out of me. I felt like I was falling. Falling into him. I ached so deeply in my groin that I almost groaned. But choked the tattling sound back. Just to keep from appearing weak.

The world kept sinking away. Tugging me along. But Calen caught me. Holding me there with his divine mouth and strong arms. Oh, to touch his body. To move that reverent mouth down to my engorged breasts. To give into my fears and allow him to have his way with me in his darkness.

His lips massaged kisses into my neck down to my Adam's apple while his beard brushed the sensation farther into my soul with an army of goosebumps.

He used the rash against me. Unseating my last nerve. Licking at the hollow of my neck. I groaned, falling, reaching for the strength in his shoulders to anchor me in his arms as my groin ached for him to root himself inside me. To stabilize the torquing world before I was lost in another dimension. The dimension of lust. His darkness.

Calen had no intention of letting me go anywhere.

Thank. God. If he didn't get busy, I was going to have to take command. Or maybe that was the crux of the problem. Maybe he had never had sex before. Could that be the truth staring me in the face at the moment? He'd killed Kruk to save me. And now he'd gotten me right where he wanted me. But he didn't know what to do.

Something squeezed my heart.

Maybe my soul. I'd have to help Luvk's King.

* * * *

His body rock hard and throbbing for release, Calen struggled with his instincts to rip off the delicate fabric covering Aisling's breast and sex. The act would be unforgiveable, he thought. A desecration to the Queen who would carry my youngling. If the Gods took pity upon

me and graced me with such a prize. But life had proven me with duty more than punishment for the stupidity of my great grandfather. A youngling to pass on a priest's legacy would be the ultimate gift for a life well-spent. A sign my efforts weren't vainly futile. But Aisling's *heartsong* revealed her terror in mating with me. I had to be strong for her. Control my desire to *finally* unite with a female. I had to love her, or walk away. And, Gods, waiting a year to touch her had been more excruciating than waiting sixty years to plant my forefathers' seeds. Especially since all four of her mates hovered nearby. The long blade of Borun's scythe could decapitate me in one swipe.

"Oh, Calen," Aisling moaned, sliding her hand up to my neck, shoving my face down her chest.

To those breasts, bulging with the milk her body used to soothe Borun's younglings. Did she offer the same placation to me?

Her hand fluttered to the scrap of clothing covering her bulging breasts. "Like this." Her fingers curled around the squared bit between her breasts and pinched.

The clothing popped loose.

She sighed softly as if released from a binding.

I peeled back the thin cloth to rub the hard nipples with my palms.

She groaned and leaned those domes into my hands. "Careful, if you squeeze them, you'll make the biggest mess," she chuckled.

Only a fool would waste blessed milk. I grabbed her waist, hefted her upward, stared into her hooded blue eyes, then set her back down, straddling my lap.

She almost looked me eye to eye.

With hunger. She lunged toward my mouth, covering it with hers moist warm lips, sucking, licking, thrusting her tongue against mine.

Could she desire me at long last? Of all the blessed gifts. I matched her enthusiastic maneuvers and pulled her body against my hard shaft.

"Oh, Calen, inside me. What's taking you so long?"

I could have laughed. Could have leaned her slender form backward onto my knees, slithered off those small pants she wore, and thrust my aching shaft inside what was renowned as the most coveted womb in the seven realms. But I wanted her to know I could be trusted. That I would make a valued mate. I am worthy of her service. I returned her kiss quickly and pushed down to the delicious skin of her neck.

"Uhm, that feels good," she whispered. "Remember that spot."

A mate deserved to feel good. I'd make her feel like she couldn't live without me. I kissed a path down the soft skin of her chest to the valley between her sweet breasts.

She groaned, thrust her fingers into my queue, and yanked my hair at the roots. "That's it, Calen."

Oh, yes. My mother went insane when her warriors suckled her breasts. I just needed to use what Aisling begged for to win her favoritism. At least, enough to grant me the coupe of living among her mates. I latched onto one taut nipple.

Salt-tinged liquid squirted into my mouth.

Aisling hissed, throwing her head back, tearing at my hair. "Oh. That's it, Calen."

All the forces in the universe tensed around my erection.

Holding out would be difficult given my manhood threatened to spill my seed in my leathers. But I'd milk the moment for all I could. I sucked the nipple as far as I could into my mouth and sipped on the nectar of life.

“Calen,” she moaned over and over.

I slid my fingers down her bowing waist, across the strip of cloth at her hip, through the only silken curls I’d ever touched on a female, down farther to her velvety nether lips, where I dared to feel the slick heat of her sex. Gods, was I truly sitting here?

She squirmed, staring at me. “Take off my panties.”

With a wild movement, she assisted my carrying out her command. She took no time in hopping to her feet, taking my hand, and leading me to the pile of drying skins next to where Borun stood against a wall. His presence went unnoticed by my Aisling or she chose to ignore him and stretch out on her back, spreading her legs slightly, one knee propped into the air, staring for me as if she waited.

Nothing would stand in the way of my taking this exquisite female. I knelt and tickled her clit into view while her hips rocked beneath my fingertip. Nothing was as beautiful as a warrior’s female writhing beneath his touch. She lay completely at my mercy. Vulnerable. My mate. And I intended to show her nothing but my touch could squelch the fire I lit inside her. I slid between her spreading legs and latched onto her salty nub.

She squirmed against my teeth, driving my engorged manhood to lunge.

Oh, yes. She wanted more. I’d nibble her succulent knot of flesh until she begged me to enter her wet heat.

“Calen!”

Such a cry demanded I mount her. To ride her. Envelope my pulsing shaft inside her warmth and feel her hot essence quiver around mine. I rose to lock the head of my aching erection into her warm little sex’s notch.

She groaned, her breasts heaving. “Hurry,” she gasped.

Oh the need in that word. I rammed inside her tight slick channel. So dampened with her *need* that a fool would have lost his seed. But I could hold out. Yes. I had to. Or she’d know this was my first time.

She reached for me. “Come here.”

What a welcoming sight. I leaned over the grooves of her ribs, the dark circles of her knotted nipples. She grabbed two handfuls of my harness and bucked her hips with mine. Grinding. Driving me mad with the proof of her desire. Just to touch her soul. To cradle her *heartsong*. In a dark deep place no others but her mates could touch. That was love. That was *Aisling*.

She began crying little sounds of pleasure where she laid in a cloud of white hair, her beautiful body rocking beneath mine. Quicker and sharper came those sounds of pleasure.

Pleasure for joining. With me.

Pressure built in my groin, pushing along her tight channel.

Not yet. I wanted the sounds of her desire for me engrained upon my memory. I sucked in a deep breath to hold back my roar and molten seed, but exploded inside her.

She cried with my roar, yanking on my halter.

A blue light flashed between us.

We rocked together, our hips melded in sacred dance, pumping every drop of life’s essence from my body until she stared up at me with those blue eyes. Eyes full of awareness. And I knew life would have never been anything if she hadn’t walked through that portal. That she would birth a new awakening to the reality of all Luvks. That my seed would take root.

* * * *

Aisling wanted to do nothing but hold Luvk’s new King where he lay upon her trembling

body. Rub her palms down the quivering muscles of his back as he embraced me while pinning me down so I couldn't escape, she thought. As if I would. A strange realization dawned on me while he stroked my body into need for him. He'd never had sex before. That meant he'd never used the Queens the way they'd used others. He was older than my mates. Lived a longer life of celibacy. All for the greater good of his people. That had to account for something noble in his character. What had Goro said? *Accept that with every turn in life, we sacrifice a bit of our souls for the greater good. Even to the darkness. Blessed are those who just give into the darkness of Luvk.*

For Calen, he seemed to have sacrificed everything to close the portals and give his people security. So what if he looked insane in the process. He protected Luvk with that façade and celibacy. Obvious in our intimacy.

A form shifted overhead in the bath's darkness.

Golden eyes glowed, moving toward me.

Borun's orbs.

He began to kneel, stray light making out his features.

Not now. Leave us to our business. Calen needed me. Needed a woman he could trust. And if that's all Luvk needed, I could be her. I shook my head careful not to let Calen know I communicated with someone else.

Borun nodded and melted back into the black void beyond the pool's glow.

"A Marshal can't mate with a ruling figure. It goes against Order rules," I said.

Someone cleared his throat.

Borun. Well, he'd just have to deal with the fallout. Because I wasn't going to torture another male I'd taken to my bed by forcing him back into celibacy.

Calen rustled against my breasts, turning his silver gaze to mine. "This is what Goro said."

"Well, I'll have your youngling, given the time and your enthusiasm. But know I won't cut you off at that. I felt your vulnerability. Know you can come to me as long as my mates aren't interjecting their Breeder's Rights."

Something popped next to me.

Hollow. A thump. Like the end of a pole. I ignored it. Because it was Borun. And he'd be mine forever. He was just going to have to get used to my weak emotional character.

* * * *

"What possessed you to bond with Calen so? You know how we feel," Borun demanded where he threw himself atop a purple pillow beside our personal quarters' dancing flames.

His glare only made me want to shove him back and take his cock in hand. Play with him until he called out my name to catch his seed. I tried not to reveal my thoughts with my heartbeat. But his glower melted into speculation.

"You know we can't mate, little one. Calen has yet to mark you with his youngling."

Oh, but I could help him release his frustration. I tried not to laugh.

He pointed a finger at me. "You are a wicked female. Shall I call you Queen Aisling?"

"I don't think so." I slithered over to settle against his firm chest. "But you couldn't see what I could feel, Borun. He's as miserable as you were. As the others. And I love you all. Why can't I give him some of my soul every so often? He's king for Christ's sake. He'll tire of me soon when I wrinkle with time. Hell, he's got a whole planet's worth of females to choose from."

Borun snaked his arms around me and snuggled me close. "You are too kind, little one.

You take on too many mates.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You told me I might wind up with fifteen. Five is nothing. Or four with a fifth who just shows up on occasion. Besides the kingship is purely ritual. Calen doesn’t act as much more than a figurehead. He is a priest. And priests might be powerful and persuasive but rarely do they rule states. Calen is a relic. A fountain of knowledge. And everyone kneels before him to sip from the well. It’s not like I’m going to get any perks from easing his sexual frustrations. I’m actually helping the Luvks by making Calen a happy man. So snuff that fear. I’m just doing my duty.”

Borun snorted and wove his fingers among mine on one hand. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Too late. Luvk already happened. And my joining the game here had nothing to do with you. I’ve found myself a family. What more could a girl ask for?” I didn’t dare say I loved him the most. Those squared Luvk ears lurked everywhere, eavesdropping through walls. Surely Borun knew he was my favorite. Besides, Calen would be off dealing with leadership soon. I’d be snuggling next to my big were-mate every night while incubating Calen’s babe. How crazy it is in retrospect. I came to make a difference and can’t seem to figure out how. I’m a breeder. Plain and simple. But Johnson couldn’t have done more. He would have been suffocated by a queen. Nor would he have come to the conclusion to look for a second portal because there was no reason he’d ever have studied Luvk’s ancient history. And Calen wouldn’t have been drawn to Johnson. The portals would never have been closed. Maybe there was more to my presence than I’m giving myself credit for. Especially with my Borun. I leaned up to plant a kiss above the coarse short beard on his cheek. “I love you.”

“Little one, stop or I’m going to roll you over and show you exactly how Calen needs to love you. He didn’t pay much attention while guarding his mother!”

True. Calen could use a little sexual tutoring. I burst out laughing. But I was in trouble by the devilish gleam in my Borun’s glowing eyes. He definitely knew how to bring me to orgasm over and over without spilling one drop of seed. “Don’t you dare interrogate me. I didn’t sign up for *deprivation*.” But he didn’t need to know I said that to set off another round.

The End