

# her Battle Lord's Desire

(Book Two of the "Battle Lord" Saga)

By

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# The Battle Lord Saga

The Battle Lord's Lady Her Battle Lord's Desire A Battle Lord's Heart

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### Chapter One Last Hope

"Sir?"

Yulen glanced up from the diagrams and sketches scattered over the table in front of him. For some reason his Second appeared more agitated than usual. Yulen's brows knitted as he lifted his chin. "Yes? What is it, Cole?"

"Sir, we have guests at the front gate. They're asking for Atty."

This time one eyebrow traveled skyward. "Are they...?" Yulen began.

Mastin nodded. "Yes, sir. They're from Wallis."

The Second turned and followed the Battle Lord outside and to the main gates that were opened. Standing outside, just beyond the gates, two men in a single horse-drawn wagon sat waiting. As Yulen drew closer he immediately recognized one of the men, and a big smile creased his face.

"Fortune Kalich! Welcome back to Alta Novis. Please, come inside!"

It was apparent the one man was relieved at such a positive response. However, he remained cool and aloof. His companion also seemed surprised by the warm greeting, although he continued the scan the battlements overhead for any sign of aggression or trickery. They had willingly and purposefully come to the compound seeking help, but they knew there was always the chance they could just as easily find a sword at their throats or a knife in their intestines.

Several months had passed since they'd returned Atty to this man she claimed was her husband. Since then they'd received no word from anyone, which was why they had expected the worse.

It wasn't until present circumstances forced them to realize they needed help, and they needed it now. And the only possible person who could help, *if* he would help, was the Battle Lord of Alta Novis. Atty's husband. Thus, with prayers and hopes that this man, who had taken one of their own to wife, would give them what they sought, they had set off on their mission.

The decision had created major havoc and turmoil within the Mutah community. Which was why Fortune Kalich had volunteered to be the one to approach D'Jacques, as regrettably as he'd hated the prospect.

Slowly, and with obvious caution, both men climbed down from their wagon. Fortune started as a soldier took the reins of their horse. Yet the warrior displayed no visible signs of distrust as he calmly began to lead the horse into the compound. Giving the Battle Lord a wary glance, the Mutah introduced his companion. "D'Jacques, this is Bertrand Fairchild, a friend and fellow member of the hunters caste."

Yulen greeted the man with a deep bow of his head. "I'm honored to have you here. I hold an especially high regard to those of the hunters caste." He held out a hand to direct them into the compound city. "You've had a long journey, and I'm sure there's a very good reason for it. Come inside for something to eat. How long do you plan to stay at Alta Novis?"

Fortune bit down on the inside of his cheek, hoping it would quell his nervousness. The last time he had been inside the tall, fortified walls, he had been accompanied by over a thousand armed Mutah warriors. Today, it was just he and Bertrand, and a covert glance at his friend proved he was just as jittery. However, they were damned if they'd let D'Jacques become aware of their hesitancy.

"With luck, we hope to be back on the road to Wallis in the morning," Fortune responded. Yulen paused in surprise. "So soon? Surely you can stay a couple of days. I know Atty will be delighted to see you when she returns."

Returns? Fortune narrowed his eyes at the man. "She's not here?" he asked, unable to take the chilly edge from his voice. If the Battle Lord noticed his caution, he never showed it.

"She should be back shortly. She's usually back around this time if she leaves out before dawn."

Yulen continued to lead the two men past the stables and the soldier's barracks, down the narrow road to the main lodge. As they passed the other soldiers they got the stares and occasional guarded looks they expected. But something had changed since his last time inside, Fortune realized. Something that neither frightened nor put him on guard. Something...tangible.

It was Bertrand who picked up the thread of conversation. "You mean she's no longer here? Or just temporarily absent?" he repeated.

Yulen shook his head and smiled. They'd reached the main hall. Directing them inside, the Battle Lord called out for food and drink, even though it was clear midday meal had been some hours before, and the evening supper was still a couple of hours away. "I meant she's not here at this moment," he finally answered.

"But she *does* live here?" Bertrand emphasized. His eyes scanned the walls of the main hall where a vast array of armament hung in sections around the room. In particular he saw where the outline of a crossbow on a nearby wall gave mute testimony that the weapon once had graced that spot. He nudged Fortune with a double-jointed arm, and nodded at the image.

Yulen gave them a small, amused smile. He had seen where their investigation had taken them. "Yes," he answered in a softer voice. "My wife and I reside here. In this lodge."

My wife and I. The acknowledgment set Fortune's teeth on edge.

The Battle Lord led them over to one of the long tables near the fireplace. Several large sheets of paper with drawings and diagrams on them were scattered across the planking. Yulen carefully gathered them together and rolled them back into a tube, which he secured with a length of leather lacing.

The two men took a seat across from him as a large, matronly-looking woman brought them a tray. Giving each of the newcomers a bright smile, she looked over at the Battle Lord for confirmation. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes. Thanks, Berta. That should hold them over until supper. By the way, what are we having?"

The woman snorted. "What do you care, sir? You're going to eat it anyway. But if you're so determined to know, it's the two ground lizards Madam caught yesterday."

At Yulen's pained expression, the housekeeper raised a hand to reassure him. "Trust me, sir. Once you see how she's having us fix it, you'd never know it wasn't farm-raised."

Yulen chuckled. Turning back to the men eating at the table, he noticed their wide-eyed expressions but made no comment, allowing them to continue with their meal uninterrupted as he went over to stand before the small fire.

It was only the early part of September, but the evenings were beginning to turn chilly, if not uncomfortably cold. Although there were at least another couple hours of sunlight left before dusk, a wind had kicked up from the northwest, bringing with it the smell of another change in the weather. Yulen suspected it would be an early and long winter for them.

A fresh-faced soldier entered the main hall and approached the Battle Lord to let him know the visitors' horse had been settled for the night, and the wagon was left tied to the stables. "Shall we go ahead and resupply them with provisions, sir?" he added.

The comment surprised the Wallis hunters.

Yulen shook his head. "Not yet. Thank you, Hampstead. That'll be all."

The soldier nodded and hurried out. Fortune watched him go. "What was that all about, D'Jacques?" the man asked.

"You mean about the provisions? Why shouldn't we supply you for your trip home?"

Fortune pulled his hands away from his meal and got to his feet. "What kind of trickery are you pulling, D'Jacques? Why the niceties? Why the hospitality?" He waved at the tray of food. "Is this stuff poisoned? Is that what you have planned? To keep us off-guard and unsuspecting while you manage to have us conveniently disappear?" He was not prepared for the flash of sorrow and anger that appeared on the man's face. But he could not let go of forty-seven years of oppression quite so easily.

"Where's Atty, D'Jacques? Where's my goddaughter? Where is she, in truth? Why not go ahead and admit to us that you've done something with her? Why not tell us she's dead, and we've managed to fall for your—"

Outside the main hall's large double doors that had been left propped open came the cry Yulen had been waiting for.

"Battle Lady about!"

Before the call had faded, a familiar and beloved figure literally came bouncing into the room, all out of breath and flushed with her latest conquest.

"Yulen? Where are you? Oh, there you are! Oh, *God*, Yulen! Have you tried this crossbow? This thing is *mar*velous! Come outside and look at what I bagged—"

Atty stopped dead in her tracks as she spotted the two men sitting at the nearby table. Her eyes widened in shock. "Fortune? *Bertrand!*" Squealing with delight, she tossed the crossbow onto a nearby table and descended on the hunters with undisguised joy, hugging them both in turn and smothering their faces with kisses.

Fortune could only stare at the woman, speechless. Not only was she alive, she literally glowed with health and happiness. Gone was the woman of five months ago, a creature pale and weak after battling a major poisoning. Vanished was the woman who had begged at the feet of the Council of Elders to be returned to the enemy stronghold, to the man she claimed had total possession of her heart.

Even more astonishing was the realization that her hunting prowess and abilities appeared to be even stronger than before, despite the surety they were supposed to fade away with her deflowerment.

Atty saw his look of incredulity and snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Hey, Fortune! You look like you've seen a ghost!" She giggled again, giving him another squeeze for good measure. "Oh, you guys look wonderful! What brings you to Alta Novis?" She leaned back and glanced at her husband for an answer, seeing as the other two were a bit on the dumbstruck side at the moment. He answered her with a quick shrug.

"Atty?" Fortune swallowed thickly. His hands cupped her beaming face, and he stared into her bright eyes. Several tendrils of dark, indigo-colored hair had escaped her braids. He tucked them behind her ears. Finally accepting the fact that she was whole and happy, he pulled her into his arms to hug her. "We've missed you, girl," he murmured against her cheek.

"I've missed you all as well," she whispered in return. Suddenly, her mercurial mood became playful. She stepped back, pulling on his hands and jerking on his arms to bring him to his feet. "Come outside and see what I caught!" She danced away from them, heading for the door. They had no choice but to follow her outside.

Already her kill had attracted the attention of the soldiers in the compound. But, then again, whatever she brought back usually attracted a lot of attention. Today was no different.

The snake was a good twenty feet long, and at least as big around as a man's thigh. She had tied a rope behind its head and dragged it back to the compound behind her horse. Yulen observed the crossbow's arrows protruding from each slitted eye.

"Two arrows, Atty?" he teased with a grin. "Getting extravagant now?"

Atty gave a noncommittal shrug. "Damn thing wouldn't go down. Besides, they were little arrows. Snakes don't know they're dead when you hit the brain."

Something in her tone of voice gave Yulen pause. Leaning over so he was close to her ear, he whispered, "If ever, for one minute, I think you're putting yourself in unnecessary danger, I'm personally going to lock you in our bedroom for your own safety."

"For a week?" she giggled, and glanced up at him from the corner of her eye.

"Ohhh, at least," he promised, smiling.

Behind them the Mutah hunters watched the interaction between the two. Although they couldn't hear their conversation, there was no way they could deny the obvious display of affection between husband and wife.

Reluctantly, almost grudgingly, Fortune Kalich felt the tension of his distrust begin to loosen, uncoiling like the snake that had given up its life at Atty's hands.

"Hey, Atty! You know the old saying!" someone called from the crowd of soldiers. In unison, they began to chat the old saw. "If you kill it, you clean it!"

Atty rolled her eyes before flashing her husband an apologetic smile. Her Ballock dagger slipped into her hands like a live animal thirsty to do its work. Without another word, the warrior woman walked over to the carcass, slicing through the rope that attached the snake to the saddle of her mare with a single stroke. As a soldier took the horse's reins to take the animal to the stables, Atty began the task of disemboweling the creature before hacking off its head and skinning it.

Yulen turned away to return to the main lodge as several women from the compound hurried past him with large bowls to hold the meat. Silently, the two Mutah hunters followed him inside.

As they entered through the doors, they found the Battle Lord issuing orders for them to be directed to their own quarters. "Dinner will be in a couple of hours. I know the road from Wallis is a long one. Berta will show you to where you can rest and refresh yourselves until the meal is served. Afterwards we can sit down and discuss why you're here." He flashed them a quick but apologetic smile. "If you'll excuse me, I have a few things to tend to." The two men watched as the man hurried upstairs to his own suite of rooms, closing the door behind him.

"Sirs?"

It was the servant woman who'd brought them a tray. She gave a little wave for them to follow her, and led them to a room on the opposite end of the main lodge. When the men entered their room, both hunters started and turned to stare at each other.

"This isn't what I was expecting," Bertrand admitted to his friend. Compared to what they expected, the guest room was opulent. There was a single bed, but it was enormous, and

with a thick mattress. Their furnishings also included a bowl with a washstand, and a small writing table with two chairs.

"Neither was I," Fortune reluctantly conceded.

They removed their weapons belts and outerwear, and took advantage of the bowl of fresh water to get rid of the grime of the past few days from their faces and hands. Bertrand found that one of the windows overlooked the main corridor leading to the soldiers' barracks. He gestured to Fortune, who joined him.

There was little trace left of the snake except for the pools of blood that several servants were quickly covering with dirt before scooping it up for removal.

"Do you think there's a chance he'll offer his help?"

Fortune let out a small, whistling sigh. "I think our prayers have been answered, old friend."

It didn't surprise him to see tears welling up in his companion's eyes. If truth were told, he felt like having a good cry himself.

#### Chapter Two Her Past

It was a little more than two hours later when the two Mutah hunters were awakened from their rest by the sounds of activity in the main hall of the lodge. Quickly they pulled on their boots and weapons belts before opening the door to their room and walking directly into the hall itself.

A few soldiers already eating stopped momentarily to peruse the two visitors, but went back to their dinner and conversation once their curiosity had been satisfied. It was understood that if the Battle Lord had them quartered in the guest rooms, it was safe to conclude they were meant to be there and posed no threat.

Cautiously Fortune and Bertrand walked between the long tables now filled with talking and laughing soldiers enjoying their evening meal. The smell of food cramped their stomachs, reminding them of why they were here.

"Sirs?"

A young man tugged on Bertrand's sleeve. He was fresh-faced and wore a simple dagger at his waistband. A warrior in training, the men surmised.

"If you'll follow me, please. The Battle Lord is waiting." The pre-teen crooked a finger at them and proceeded to lead them through the throng of men to a table closer to the fireplace. The hunters immediately remembered it as the same table where they'd had a quick snack earlier in the day.

Yulen watched as the two men from Wallis approached. His trained eye could see the tension and animosity of earlier were gone. They appeared more relaxed, more at ease with their situation, and he knew why.

"Gentlemen." He waved at the bench on the other side of the table. "I detest formality. May I call you by your given names?"

"What do we call you?" Fortune snapped back. Immediately he regretted his hostility. He lowered his head, hoping Bertrand would cover for him. The last thing they needed to do was to anger this man who was their last hope and possible salvation. Atty or no, he would have the final say as to whether he would willingly risk the lives of his men for a compound full of mutants.

To their astonishment, Yulen chuckled at the outburst. Fortune glanced up to see an amused smile on the man's face. "Are you certain you're not Atty's father?" Yulen asked. "You two are almost like peas in a pod."

Fortune turned red. "Admittedly, Atty isn't anything like her parents. Eenoi was a sweet, gentle-hearted woman who never raised her voice, even with a child like Atty. And Dayman was a rock of patience with her." He sighed loudly as he took his seat. "She's so different from her sister."

"She had a sister?" Yulen inquired.

"She hasn't spoken to you about her family?" Bertrand inquired, folding his hands on the table in front of him.

The Battle Lord shook his head. "I've tried to get her to open up about them, but so far I've had little success. Last April was...quite traumatic for us. We're both still in the process of healing," he admitted softly. "So if there's anything you can share with me about her past, I

would greatly appreciate it." He eyed the man with the lion-like tail. "You were made her guardian after she was left orphaned, correct?"

Fortune nodded, pausing when a servant brought everyone a plate of food. "Dayman and I were childhood buddies. Best friends growing up. His family moved to Wallis when he was an infant."

Yulen gave him an odd look. "Where did they move from?" he inquired.

"North Crestin. It's about a six or seven day journey."

Fortune watched as a peculiar look came over the Battle Lord's face. A momentary twinge of fear squeezed its fingers around his gut, until Yulen bit his lower lip, his eyes hooded. "Forgive my observation, but now a lot makes sense to me."

"And that being?"

"No inter-breeding. I take it there's many other Mutah compounds I don't know about?"

"Ask Atty," Bernard told him, his tone of voice cautious. "She's been as far as San Remus." They had never imagined they would be telling a Cleaner about the existence of other compounds. Well-hidden ones, at that, and as guarded and fortified as Wallis.

As if realizing the importance of the information they were revealing to him, Yulen flashed them a crooked grin. "I take it, if there's a North Crestin, there's also a South Crestin?"

Bernard barked with laughter. "Close, but no. There's a West Crestin, however."

Chuckling, Yulen turned the conversation back to Atty's parents. "What was her father's mark?" he inquired.

"He had twelve fingers and fourteen toes," Fortune told him. "He also had two navels, but that's inconsequential."

"And her mother? Eenoi? That's a beautiful name."

"She was a beautiful woman," Bertrand confessed. "Her family was long-established Wallisites. She was what we refer to as a pseudo-normal. She bore no outward mark."

"But she was Mutah? How could you tell?" Yulen leaned over the table, fascinated by this part of Atty's life he had yet to discover.

Bertrand giggled. "Oh, you could tell when you were around her. She sort of had this aura about her. And she could grow the damndest things. Put two completely opposite plants in her hands, and I'd swear two months later you'd see the fruit or bloom of their union. Eenoi especially loved brown roses. Grew them in big pots by the front door of their home."

"Brown roses?"

"Brown as dirt," Fortune confirmed.

"You said Atty had a sister," Yulen continued. "Older or younger?"

"Younger," Fortune said. "Look, there's something you need to understand..."

"Yulen," the Battle Lord supplied with a smile.

"Yulen. Our birth rate barely keeps pace with the number of deaths in Wallis, and at other Mutah compounds, as well. The infant mortality rate is more than seventy percent. We are blessed if one out of every four births lives more than a few months. A Mutah child who survives his first year is a reason to celebrate. If we are hit with a devastating disease, or if we lose a goodly number of us through other means like attacks from wild animals or..." He stopped suddenly and bit his tongue.

Yulen immediately realized what the man had begun to say. "You mean, if you were attacked by Cleaners," he said.

The Mutah nodded. This was strange and forbidding territory they were treading, he realized. And yet, such a frank and open discussion about such things seemed long overdue. The Battle Lord showed concern and sincere interest in what he had to say, which gave the man the courage to continue freely.

"Before Atty was born, Eenoi had lost three previous pregnancies. It was a miracle Atty was ever conceived."

"Why do you say that?"

"She got a severe infection after her third miscarriage. Our doctors told her she would never be able to bear a child. She was devastated by the news. Children are our most precious treasure, Yulen. They are our future, and not being able to bear any is tantamount to ending that family's lineage. You can't begin to imagine how thrilled we all were to hear Dayman's news that Eenoi was expecting again, after seven years of marriage."

"I can imagine," the Battle Lord answered in a low voice. "Go on."

It was Bertrand who continued. "Atty was a fighter from the moment she was born. A real little survivor. Bald as an egg. The doctors could see no outward sign of her mark, not at that time, anyway, so it was assumed her mark would be inward like her mother's. It wasn't until she started to grow hair that we could see the doctors were wrong...sort of."

An eyebrow went up. "Sort of?" Yulen echoed.

Fortune shook his head, engulfed in memories. "She killed her first prey when she was two months old." Looking up at the astonished look on the Battle Lord's face, he grinned. "It was a scorpion, as big as your hand. The damn thing had managed to crawl up the side of her cradle undetected. It must have been pure instinct for her to grab its tail with one chubby little hand and its body with the other. She tore the thing apart, but it managed to get in one quick pinch before it died. It was Atty's cries that alerted her parents to it being there."

Yulen looked suitably impressed, enough to where Fortune smiled and continued.

"As soon as Atty was able to walk, Dayman took her on excursions outside the compound."

"What did he do for a living?" asked Yulen.

"He was a furrier. Not a hunter, and not a member of the caste. That's for the hunter warriors who swear to protect and defend the compound. But he was a damn fine tracker and trapper. He taught Atty all he knew about his trade, and she took to it like a fish to water. When she got old enough to handle a weapon, he made her first longbow and taught her how to shoot it."

Bertrand interrupted with a cackle. Slapping his companion's shoulder, he commented, "Remember that skunk?"

The memory brought out a fresh round of laughter from the two men. Grinning, Yulen tried to wait out their chuckles, and failed. "What about the skunk?" he urged.

Shaking his head, Bertrand confessed, "Atty must have been, what? Six or seven? Anyway, she wanted to show her father how she was old enough to go out on her own. Of course, when her parents found her missing, they were frantic with worry. We sent an entire legion of men out into the forest to hunt for her. It was only a couple of hours later when here she comes through the front gates of the compound, dragging this...how big do you think that skunk was. Fortune?"

"It had to have been at least two hundred pounds. And she was just a slip of a girl, maybe all of sixty pounds soaking wet, pulling this thing for I don't know how far by its tail. And *reek!* 

Oh, good heavens, it was the most awful smelling thing you could ever imagine. But she'd caught it and killed it, and, by God, she was going to bring it home to show it off to her parents if it was the last thing she was gonna do!"

"That smell lasted for at least three days," Bertrand added. "I remember Eenoi mentioned Atty got a spanking within an inch of her life, but she never lost her pride over her first conquest. And there was no disguising how proud they were of her."

Yulen laughed aloud. It was so much like his Atty, yet it was fascinating to hear about her life as a child. "You...you have yet to tell me about her younger sister," he reminded them as he gasped for air.

"Keelor," Fortune nodded, suddenly sober. "Atty was eight when she was born. A sickly child for all her life, but so beautiful. Very delicate, very elfin-like. She had these transparent ears that almost looked like butterfly wings. Very large, very fan-like. And she had these wide eyes that sort of sucked you into them. Keelor worshiped her big sister. Where Atty was strong and independent, Keelor kept by Eenoi's side and learned how to cook and sew and tend to the crops planted outside the compound. Atty adored her. She would do anything for her. Sometimes Atty would tell her she was going out to get a rabbit or something like that, and Keelor would beg for a souvenir, like a tail or an ear or a feather, and Atty would bring it to her."

Having done a quick mental tabulation, Yulen commented, "Keelor was twelve, then, when she and Eenoi disappeared?"

Both men nodded. "The day before you and your men arrived. It was the next day when the council appointed me as her guardian. You attacked our compound that night." Fortune looked at the paleness that had come over the Battle Lord's countenance, and he wondered if the man had ever been aware of the magnitude of destruction he'd caused.

"Atty is the last of her lineage. Dayman had been an only child. Eenoi had had an older brother, but he'd died of tree fever when he was a child. And then, when the council made clear their belief that Atty would lose all her abilities and skills to hunt once she gave herself to another, Atty swore to remain chaste, in order to protect the compound. We never thought she would..." His words trailed off as he averted his face to hide his tears, which threatened to embarrass him in front of the company of soldiers. He was not surprised when Bertrand reached over to clasp his shoulder. But he was taken completely off-guard to feel another hand warmly grasp his other arm.

"Here she comes now," Yulen told them.

They turned to see the young woman come down the staircase where she was hailed and greeted by several of the men seated. Confidently she walked among them to shake their hands, giving them all a warm smile, and playfully slapping a couple of arms. A couple of teasing jabs were thrown at her. She easily gave a few taunting remarks of her own in response, which were answered with more than a few chuckles.

She had undone her braids, letting her hair flow freely over her shoulders, and exchanged her blood-splattered clothing for a fresh set of clothes. And from the blush on her cheeks, it was evident something else may have happened in the brief couple of hours since her return.

When she got to their table, she gave both men another hug and a kiss before taking her place on the other side of the table, next to her husband, who had resumed his seat.

"You didn't wait for me?" She stuck out her lower lip in a playful pout.

Yulen snorted softly. "Lazy bones gets the scraps. You took your sweet time coming down."

"You just wait, Yulen D'Jacques," she threatened him with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "Next time you come home all tired and bloody and wanting a quick nap, see if *I'll* let you get any rest!"

"I didn't hear you objecting."

For his remark, she jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. Laughing, Yulen leaned back as a plate was set in front of her and Atty began to eat. "Okay, my inner radar is saying you three have been talking about me. Good things, I hope."

"I was being given a very brief but succinct retelling of some of your childhood antics," her husband tattled.

"Such as?"

"Something about a skunk?" He gave her an amused grin over his mug.

Atty slapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, no! They told you about that?" She turned on the two hunters across from her. "And I thought you were my *friends*!"

The men laughed at her embarrassment, which she tried to cover up as she resumed eating.

"By the way, Berta was right," Yulen told her. "The lizard is good the way you suggested she cook it."

Atty nodded and shrugged her shoulders. "I'll be curious to see what she does with the snake tomorrow. By the way..." She rolled her eyes toward their guests. "Did I miss anything else besides you telling tales about me behind my back?"

Bertrand gave his companion a look that passed the obligation over to him. Fortune responded by clearing his throat. "We came here on a errand of mercy," he began.

Immediately he knew he had both of their attentions. Atty continued to eat, since the rest of them were almost finished. His eye also caught the Battle Lord's arm as it curved protectively around her waist.

"We came to ask for your help."

"What kind of help?" Yulen asked.

"In the past three months we've been besieged by Bloods. They've raided our fields and attacked the compound to the point where we're literally trapped inside our own walls."

"Any casualties?" Atty inquired softly.

"Just Pillan...so far," Bertrand told her.

Shoving her trencher away from her, Atty pressed her napkin to her mouth. "Pillan? Oh, please, not Pillan."

"We can't get out to hunt for food. The crops are ruined, so there will be no harvest this fall. There's no rhyme or reason to when they attack. It could be broad daylight or dark of night. Three of our best hunters tried to go out and see what they could bring back, but the Bloods attacked them. Jacktin and Karle are still hospitalized, but Pillan didn't make it."

Fortune felt his blood begin to boil as he recalled what the horde of aberrant mutants had done to his friends and fellow caste members. He didn't need to relay that information to Atty yet, although he guessed she would find out sooner or later.

"How long have you been on starvation watch?" she asked softly, her eyes filling with tears.

"Four weeks," Bertrand told her. "The Council of Elders met to see if there was some kind of plan we could think up to help get us through this coming winter. To all extent, it looked hopeless...until Fortune mentioned the Battle Lord."

Two pairs of eyes turned in his direction, but Bertrand continued. "We didn't know if you were alive or dead, Atty. The last time we'd seen you was when we'd returned you here to Alta Novis, and since that time we'd gotten no word as to whether you were still alive, or how things were with you. But Fortune said there was a small glimmer of hope D'Jacques might give us some measure of help, if for no other reason than he was your husband...and the fact that he'd come all the way to Wallis alone and unarmed to find you when we'd taken you back after your poisoning."

Yulen lifted his chin but remained silent. He would not let them know Mastin had accompanied him to the compound. Until now, he had believed his going there to see what he thought would be Atty's grave had been a fruitless mission. Apparently it had reaped some benefits. Beneath his arm, he could feel Atty tense up at the man's last remark.

"And you never told me he came for me," she reminded them, her words tinged in bitterness. "All the time I was healing, you knew I was calling for him."

Yulen turned his head suddenly to stare at her in surprise. Vaguely he remembered her telling him the same thing, but at the time it hadn't sunk in.

"You knew how badly I needed to be with him," she accused. "You knew, but you never said a thing. You just let me lie there, believing he'd just let me go. Believing he never cared enough to come see if I was still alive or dead."

She paused to cover her face with her hands. A silent sob shook her shoulders, and Yulen squeezed her waist sympathetically.

"That's true," Fortune admitted, sincerely sorry they'd given her such false impressions. "We were wrong. Forgive us."

"And then you made me go crawling to the Council to beg to be brought back." She looked up at them with anguish written on her beautiful face. "Why, Fortune? How could all of you have been so...callous?"

"He was the enemy," Fortune began.

"He was my *husband!*" she emphasized. "Why did the Council relent anyway? What made them agree to bring me back? Do you realize that if we'd been an hour later, Yulen could have been dead?"

It was Bertrand who dropped the final bombshell. "The Council relented because they felt you were..." He bit his lip.

"Felt I was what?"

"That you were...no good to them anymore. That, because you'd taken D'Jacques as your husband, and had consummated your marriage, that—"

"That my abilities were gone? Just as the Council had believed all my life? As they had led *me* to believe?" Atty gave both men a disbelieving look. "Is that what they were thinking? That since I was no longer a virgin, might as well take her back to Alta Novis because she was damaged goods and could no longer provide for the compound once she got better? And now you come crawling here, asking us to help you, even though you thought I was no longer worth anything? Let's appeal to Yulen because, maybe, *maybe*, he'll feel some sort of responsibility and help? Well, *screw you!*"

Leaping to her feet, Atty bolted from the table and ran upstairs, slamming the bedroom door behind her. The main hall grew quiet, every eye turned toward the table by the fireplace.

Yulen slowly got to his feet and stared down at the two men still sitting in stunned silence. "If you'll excuse me, gentlemen," he said stiffly, then left them alone to go upstairs.

It was a full minute before Bertrand turned a pale face toward his companion. "What do you think, Fortune? Is there a chance now we'll get the help we need? Or have we just sealed Wallis's fate?"

Fortune Kalich couldn't answer. He was too busy condemning himself for his stupidity and pride, which had caused so much heartache in the past, and now would probably be the downfall of two hundred and forty more souls.

## Chapter Three Going Back

Yulen walked into their bedroom to find Atty standing by the window overlooking the compound. Her whole body trembled with suppressed rage and tears flowed silently down her face. Closing the door behind him, all he had to do was raise his arms toward her. She came into his embrace without coaxing, lifting her face to bury it in the warmth of his neck and shoulder.

He held her for as long as she needed. They were allowed that luxury now. After so many tumultuous days and weeks, after all the suffering they had been forced to endure so they could finally live as husband and wife, they had paid the price to be given their moments of joy and comfort.

He stroked her soft hair as he bent and placed tender kisses along her hairline above her forehead. Atty clutched him, pressing her body along his, seeking his warmth as much as his solace.

"Damn them," she finally whispered.

He heard her sniff and felt her wipe her face with the sleeve of her shirt.

"Talk to me, Yul," she asked softly.

"Don't you think it's time we went to Wallis? This time together? Presented as husband and wife? I'm sure our entrance will generate sufficient awe and jealousy, don't you think?"

She pulled back a ways to stare up at him. "You would do that?"

"For you I would, my love. Not so much for them, but for you. After all, they are your people. And initially I did promise them my protection."

"Yeah, until they swarmed Alta Novis and threatened to destroy you and this compound if you didn't give me back to them."

Yulen sighed. "It's your decision, Atrilan. I won't try to sway you. Buuuuut..."

She giggled as his arms tightened around her. "Buuuut?"

"But you *are* the wife of a Battle Lord. And I've never had the chance yet to present a full guard of honor before. I think this would be a pretty good time to see how many jaws we can drop to the floor."

"What's a full guard of honor?"

He looked down at her with a devilish grin. "You'll never find out until I show you."

"What are you thinking, Yul? Tell me what's going on in that head of yours."

"I'm thinking...I'm thinking that it's time you saw just what a Battle Lord is capable of showing. You want pomp and pageantry? My beloved, you have no *idea* what power you wield. The last time I was part of a full guard of honor was back when my father was still alive, and he took us to visit the Battle Lord of Long Martine. I was twenty-two, and I was damned impressed, let me tell you!"

"But we're heading into the enemy," she reminded him.

"We'll let them drop their jaws, too," he murmured, bending lower to find her lips. "Trust me, Atrilan. As my Battle Lady, allow me this chance to show the people of Wallis what kind of husband you fell in love with. I, too, have something to prove to your Council of Elders after they denied me even seeing you."

He found her mouth, found her ready for his kiss and the way he pressed her firmly against his body. He ran his hands up her back, bringing one warm palm up under her jaw and behind her

head to cradle her tightly to where he could kiss her so thoroughly and deeply that she was unable to breathe. Lifting his head, he gazed down at her face, to see how her thick, dark blue lashes fluttered against her cheeks, and her mouth, still wet, remained parted for him. Slowly she opened her eyes to find his blue-gray ones smiling into hers.

"Well? What did you decide?" he murmured, smiling.

"It was so wrong what they did to us," she said.

"I agree. After what we'd already been through, they were wrong to keep us apart. But you have to admit, they finally did return you to me."

"Yeah, but they only did it because they thought I was no longer any good to them."

Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her again, this time not so deep or slow, but enough to keep her off-center. "Remember what I told you back during that time we were locked in here?" he asked when he pulled away the second time.

"We talked about a lot of things," she smiled. "That is, when we talked."

Yulen chuckled. "I told you what was past was over. Gone. Let's learn from what we've been forced to endure and use it to make us stronger for the future. Your life, as it was in Wallis, is gone. Your parents and Keelor...they're no longer part of your life."

At the mention of her little sister's name, he saw tears well up in her eyes again. Undaunted, he continued. "The same goes for me, as well. My life before you is no more. *I've* changed. *You've* changed. We're not the same people we were before we met. And for that I'm so grateful."

He kissed her once more, aware of her hands reaching up to clasp his holding her face. "You. Me. Together we're a force to be reckoned with. Let's march to Wallis and show them what we've become. We'll take enough supplies to help them through the winter, we'll repel the Bloods, and then I'll leave behind enough men to see them safely through to the spring thaw. What do you say, my beautiful love? Ready to thumb your nose at the Council? To be honest, I would give my right arm to see the look on Piron George's face when we present ourselves."

Caught up in his enthusiasm, Atty nodded as she threw her arms around his neck and melted into his next kiss. Yulen lifted her into his arms and took her over to their bed that was still rumpled from their earlier bout of lovemaking. Laying her across the quilts, he stretched out beside her and held her tightly against him.

"When should we leave?" she whispered against his lips when he finally released her.

"Did you say they were on starvation watch?"

She nodded.

"It doesn't sound pleasant."

"You mean you've never had to be on one?"

"No," he shook his head. "Not that I recall."

"It's when you assess what food you have left, and then you tally how many people there are, and divide it accordingly. Ration it per meal, per day. Then you stand by and wait for it to run out. After it does, you begin to tally the dead." She shivered in his arms, and an alarming thought came to him.

"Atrilan, have you been on starvation watch before?"

She gave a little nod. "Twice. It was during the second one when I decided to hell with the Council, and I went out by myself to bag something to eat."

"How old were you?"

She paused. Yulen felt her nuzzle his neckline where his shirt lay open at the collar. After another minute, she softly answered him. "Last year."

Involuntarily his hands pressed her closer. "What put you on starvation watch? Another attack by Bloods?"

"No. Wolfen. A whole pack of them."

Yulen felt himself shiver. He knew for a fact that in the past more than one compound had been totally devastated by the roaming packs of mutated animals. Especially in the winter when food was scarcer. "What happened?"

"I got a small buck and barely made it back to the compound with it before the pack descended. That was when the caste decided I could join them if I went out and killed one of them."

She saw her husband's eyes widen with shock. She nodded at his unanswered question. "If that was what it took to gain entry, I wasn't going to back down. I might not have gotten another chance."

"Damn them!" he whispered heatedly.

"But I got one!" she reminded him, grabbing the neck of his shirt and giving it a little tug. "And because I took just the head and left the rest behind, it seemed to satisfy the rest of the pack. The next day they were gone, and the watch was over."

"But how many of your people had to die first?"

"Just three." She paused, reflecting over the past. "Three that might have been saved if I'd gone out earlier to hunt."

She gasped in pain as his fingers dug into her upper arms. Yulen shook her, forcing her to look him in the eye as he tried to suppress the anger that had suddenly swept over him. "No, Atrilan. Don't you ever, *ever* assume the blame for their deaths because your so-called high and mighty caste forbade you entry into their elite little group. Those three deaths were never your fault, do you hear me? *Not yours!* The blame falls on them and their damnable ideal that women had no place in their company. Your skills have outshone them all. Your bravery is more than all of theirs combined.

"I can recall like it was yesterday when you told us you were the only shooter on that roof. That all the other hunters were gone, and there was no one else to defend your compound. Do you understand what kind of bravery that took? Can I even begin to make you realize how innocent you are? And yet they consistently refuse to accept any responsibility of their own. For their own actions."

He pulled her against his chest where she could hear the rapid beating of his heart. "We're going back to Wallis," he stated flatly.

"Even if I say no?" she reminded him gently. "You said—"

"I know what I said. I take it back. We're going, and when we get there, we'll show them how wrong they were to deny you. To deny us. We will show them, and then we'll beat back the Bloods while we're at it. And then, maybe then you'll be given the respect you deserve."

"Screw them," she said.

"Good choice of words, Atrilan. Screw them," Yulen echoed hotly.

The room grew quiet as they lay in each other's embrace. Without warning, Atty was beset with a fit of the giggles. Unable to stop himself, Yulen burst into laughter as well.

Rolling over on his back, he pulled Atty onto his chest where she rested her head in the hollow of his shoulder as they continued to chuckle. After another minute or two, they managed to wipe the tears from their eyes and catch their breaths.

"Want me to go downstairs and break the news?" he asked her.

"No. Let me do it. By now they're probably so down in the dumps they'll agree to any terms. Besides..." She lifted her face to smile down at him. "Don't you have to start getting everything ready for us to leave?"

Yulen agreed. "If we're going to present a full guard of honor, it's going to take some preparation. But we can't take too much time if Wallis is already on starvation watch. I don't want any more of your people's deaths on my conscience because we were tardy in replying."

She watched as he bit his lower lip in thought. "Come on, Yul. Why not delegate some of that work? I can help. And I betcha Madigan will, too."

He nodded. "Isn't Liam supposed to be back from Bearinger sometime tonight?" Atty nodded. "Good. Well, then, best we got started."

In one smooth move he got up from the bed, lifting her with him.

"After I tell them we're going, what do you want me to do next?"

"It's going to be a long night, my love. Which will make for an even longer day tomorrow. I'll leave you in charge of getting together two wagonloads of provisions for your people, since you know better what they can use."

"Two wagons, including the one Fortune and Bertrand brought?"

"Three, including theirs." He gave her another tender kiss, but not before his eyes glanced back over again at the tousled bed. There would be no more lovemaking that night, and already he was bemoaning the fact. But he knew that once he revealed the secret he'd been keeping from her for the past few months, she would be more than willing to help him make up for it.

Giving her a playful swat on her derriere, Yulen exited the bedroom. Atty was right behind him. Together they descended the staircase as the soldiers who were still eating gave them a wary glance. They were used to the Battle Lady's quick temper, having seen it flare up several times. This time it appeared D'Jacques had managed to soothe her ruffled feathers in record time.

Atty started toward their table where she'd left the two Mutah hunters when she noticed it was empty. Hoping they were back in their room, she wove her way through the crowded floor and paused at the closed door. Taking a deep breath, she knocked in the code used by the caste. A second later the door flew open.

"We're leaving tomorrow," she told an astonished Bertrand. Having said that, she went in search of Madigan to ask her what a full guard of honor entailed.

And would it mean she'd have to wear a dress?

### Chapter Four In Preparation

"Welcome back, Doc!"

"Hey, MaGrath! Glad to have you back!" another soldier called down from the battlements as the tall, lean physician passed through the main gates.

MaGrath waved at them as the mare lumbered down the main thoroughfare. Chalke and Yinger, his two accompanying armed escorts, were just as happy to be back as he was. Verris was going to need a lot more help with getting Bearinger's state of affairs in order. Since the old Battle Lord's demise, and Yulen's claiming the compound as part of his holdings, the place was slowly going to hell in a hand basket. While admittedly Verris was more than capable of running the small city, it needed a ton of work just to get it to that point where it was once again self-sufficient. After five months of rule, there was just as much work to do in Bearinger now as there had been in April. It would take years before normalcy could reign again.

MaGrath shook his head, weary beyond words. Where would he begin to explain to Yulen how bad a shape the place was in? There wasn't a portion or area that wasn't in dire need of repair or replacement in one way or another. Collaunt's tyranny had dragged the compound as far down into ruin as it possibly could. If there was any good news to impart, it was the fact that the two hundred or so inhabitants were extremely grateful not to be under Syrus Collaunt's maniacal thumb any longer. They were free of the man who'd bled them dry, and they were more than willing to embrace their new Battle Lord.

And after two months of backbreaking work, and tending to the injured and infirmed, as well as getting the almost nonexistent clinic back up and running, he was eager to return home. To his own bed. To Madigan's arms.

"Ho, MaGrath! Made it back just in time!"

MaGrath's head jerked up. Through his exhausted daze he finally began to notice the beehive of activity within the compound. He pulled up his mare and dismounted, throwing the reins to the stable boy who'd emerged to take his horse. "What's going on?" he asked a soldier rushing by with a small barrel full of arrows.

"The Battle Lord gave word for you to see him the instant you returned!" the man answered instead, and hurried on his way.

Oh, God, what's Yulen gone and done now? he mused to himself. It was long past ten p.m. Normally at this time the compound would be winding down from the day. Evening shift would have just gone on duty. People would be preparing for bed.

None of that was happening.

Reaching the main hall, he saw where the front doors had been propped open. A stream of people were coming and going like an overactive ant bed. He stepped into the room and stared wide-eyed at the frenetic flurry. After some moments he spotted Yulen at the far end of the room, at the table by the fireplace. He had four men with him. MaGrath recognized them as some of the Battle Lord's older guard, men who had fought under his father's command before D'Jacques' death. Even at this distance he could tell there was a tremendous amount of excitement going on. He could feel it in the air like an enormous static electrical current from a passing thunderstorm.

For a split second he felt his stomach tightening up with dread, until he clearly noticed no sign of a frown or grimace. Unbelievably, these people were working like busy beavers with smiles of anticipation. "What the hell?" he murmured to himself.

"Liam!" Across the hall, Yulen was gesturing for him to join them. He, too, wore a big grin on his face, and that set MaGrath's teeth on edge.

"Scuse me, Sir!" Young master Owens somehow managed not to knock him down on his way out the door with a fifty-pound sack of flour on his shoulders. Throwing his arms up, the physician gave up trying to make sense of out anything and made his way over to the back table where Yulen greeted him with an uncustomary hug.

"Liam! Good to see you in one piece. Don't unpack your bags just yet. We're heading out first thing in the morning for Wallis."

"Wallis?" A sick feeling dumped itself into his stomach. "Oh, God, what's happened to Atty?"

Yulen gave him a questioning look, then burst out laughing. "No, no! Nothing bad's happened. At least, not yet. So get that hangdog look off your face. Liam, do you remember Fortune Kalich? Atty's guardian?" He gestured to his left where for the first time MaGrath noticed the Mutah hunters from Wallis. The man next to Kalich, the one with the horn-like protrusions on the top of his head, he didn't recognize.

As if reading his mind, Yulen explained, "The man with him is Bertrand Fairchild. Bertrand is also a member of the hunters caste. They came seeking aid. Gentlemen, our illustrious physician, Doctor Liam MaGrath."

The three men shook hands, and MaGrath gave the other four soldiers within the group a good once-over. "Voght. Siemens. Tyler. Plath."

"Doc," Wade Siemens greeted in return. He looked back at the Battle Lord. "Anything else, sir?"

"That's all I can think of at the moment," Yulen informed them before they dismissed. "But if you remember something I've overlooked, get back with me immediately."

The four soldiers nodded and dispersed, leaving MaGrath just as confused as when he'd arrived.

"Will someone tell me what in the Sam Hill is going on?"

"Be with you in a moment," Yulen promised as he began to lead the two Mutah hunters outside.

Liam remained standing alone in the middle of the main hall as people bustled around him, all with a singleness of purpose, and he totally in the dark as to what was going on. But whatever it was, it appeared it would happen at the crack of dawn. Frustrated, he placed his hands on his hips and debated whether to go ahead and head home, or to remain where he was and wait for Yulen to get back. That is, *if* he got back. The man was notorious for getting sidetracked. On the other hand, Madigan may have an inkling as to what was happening. There wasn't much in the compound she wasn't aware of. "I give up," he muttered, and left for his own abode.

Since his marriage to Madigan, she had moved into his suite of rooms on the backside of the main lodge, which were adjacent to the small office and clinic where he practiced his medicinal arts. A single door enabled MaGrath to move from work to home, and from the clinic into the main lodge. Yulen had promised his mother to have a door cut in the back wall of the main hall to allow them easier access straight their rooms to the interior dining room, rather than having to

go into the clinic first. In her last letter to him, MaGrath had learned that the Battle Lord had made good on his promise.

Someone had delivered his saddlebags while he was in the main hall. They rested on the small bench in front of the door. MaGrath threw them over his shoulder and walked into his living room, and right into the middle of another hectic scenario. This one, however, left him speechless.

"Liam! Hi!" Atty chirped from where she stood near the fireplace.

"Liam!" Madigan got to her feet and rushed over to give her husband a warm kiss hello. MaGrath accepted her offer, and added a hug.

"Will someone please tell this old man what is going on? This place is moving so fast, I'm starting to get a headache just trying to make sense of it all!" He looked around his living room, at the bolts of fabric lying on the table and chairs, and glanced back again at Atty standing on the footstool. "Am I dreaming, or are you wearing a dress, Atrilan?"

"Do you like it?" She held up her arms and slowly turned around for his inspection.

MaGrath swallowed hard. It wasn't difficult to tell her the truth. "You're an incredibly beautiful woman, bluebell. What's the occasion? Renewing your vows?"

Madigan giggled and slapped him on the arm. "Yulen's taking her back to Wallis to present her in a full guard of honor."

"He what?"

At that moment there was a knock on the front door, and Seth O'Meyers, the compound's tailor, let himself inside. "Oh, hi, Doc! Welcome back! Just get in?" Without waiting for an answer, he hurried over to where Atty was patiently waiting for him to finish pinning the hem on the gown.

"I think that'll get it. Take it off easy, Madam. I should have this finished in another couple of hours."

Atty nodded and disappeared into the bedroom to change clothes.

Another knock sounded at the door, and this time it was Phillip Van Der Slaw. He was cradling something wrapped in a black velvet cloth in his hands.

Madigan threw up her hands and ushered the man inside. "Oh, let me see! Did you use the dark topaz like I requested?"

"Better," the jeweler smiled. "I happened to have a sapphire that turned out to be perfect for it. Do you think the Battle Lord will object? It'll cost him a quite a bit more than the topaz, but I'm certain he's going to like it much better."

He unwrapped the object from its velvet covering, and held it up for Madigan and MaGrath to see examine. MaGrath immediately recognized the tiara circlet Madigan had worn on ceremonial occasions when she had been the wife of the slain Battle Lord, Yulen's father. In the center of the silver band there used to be a dark purple amethyst. Replacing that stone was a deep blue sapphire of a hue the same color as Atty's hair. Madigan gasped at its size and beauty.

"Oh, my, Phillip! I think you've outdone yourself. Atty?"

The Mutah woman was coming out of the bedroom to hand over the dress to the tailor just as Madigan was calling to her. As Seth rushed out the door to finish the last details on the gown, Madigan held up the circlet for her to see.

Atty stopped in mid-stride, her eyes wide in wonder. "What's that?"

"It's yours by right now as the new Battle Lord's Lady," Madigan told her.

"Mine?"

"Come here. Let's see how it fits on you."

Obediently, Atty stood before her and let the woman slip it over her forehead, where it rested right above her brow.

"Oh, my, a perfect fit!" Turning the woman around, Madigan gave her a little push in the direction of the mirror on the wall. Atty walked over and stared at her reflection. Wild deep blue hair framing an oval face with large, blue-gray eyes gazed back at her, and all were crowned with a circlet of polished silver inset with a sparkling blue gem the size of a small egg, and the same color as her mane. In the candlelight she almost looked like someone regal and important.

"Ho-ly crap!"

Her awed exclamation was enough to make them laugh in response. Madigan gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Yulen is right. It's time you learned what kind of power a Battle Lord wields, and what you, as his wife, are entitled to. It's a big responsibility, Atty. Hold it carefully in your hands, and keep it close to your heart."

Atty nodded as she continued to stare at herself in the gilded mirror. She didn't need to be a mind reader to know the woman wasn't talking so much about her responsibilities as she was talking about Yulen himself. Their love was their most precious possession, and she alone had that power over him.

"Look. I hate to break up this little get-together, but I'm dog tired. Rumor has it we're getting to head for Wallis at first light, or am I just delightfully delirious from exhaustion? Atty, can you give me a few more details, please?"

She turned around to face him. "Two of my fellow caste members from Wallis arrived today, seeking help. Bloods have besieged my old home, and the compound's been placed on starvation watch. Unless we go there and defeat or drive the Bloods away, everyone in Wallis will die. Yulen and I promised to go and help. We're taking three wagonloads of provisions with us as well. Oh! Madigan! I forgot! Here!" Atty took off the circlet and dropped it in the woman's hands. "Pack it for me, would you, please?" she called as she rushed out the door. She was gone before she could get a reply.

MaGrath gave his wife a weary look. "Wallis, huh? Any idea for how long this time?"

Madigan gave her husband a rueful smile. "Sorry. I would hazard to guess until the siege is over. I'm sorry you haven't had sufficient rest, but if it's any consolation, I went ahead and set out some medicants I thought you might want to pack."

"It's nearly eleven. Any chance the other half of the compound will be coming through the door tonight?" he groused good-naturedly.

Madigan shrugged. She picked up the length of velvet and began to polish the circlet before wrapping it back up. "Once Seth finishes the presentation gown, he'll be taking it directly to their rooms. I need to drop this up there, as well. As far as I know, my job's done. Why do you ask?"

Kicking the door closed behind them, MaGrath took his wife in his arms and pulled her tightly against him. "Good, because it's been two long months since I've felt your softness, and I'll be damned if Yulen is going to drag me off to Wallis before I've had the chance to taste you again," he told her in a low, throaty voice a second before his mouth found the silken length of her neck.

Madigan giggled softly and surrendered to his kisses. They had at least a few hours to themselves before he would have to leave, and neither of them was willing to waste a moment.

### Chapter Five To Wallis

Despite his dire prediction, Yulen managed to catch a couple hours of sleep before they had to start out for Wallis. Trudging upstairs, he'd found Atty already in such sound slumber she never moved when he climbed under the quilts to join her. He barely remembered drawing an arm around her waist before he, too, succumbed.

It was Berta knocking on their bedroom door that woke them. Quickly they dressed to go downstairs and join their men in a hearty breakfast. Conversation was nonexistent, to be saved for the monotony of the journey on the road. Once he was certain everyone was accounted for, Yulen called for the caravan to form in the courtyard for one last check. The moment he made the announcement, he knew who was missing. "Liam, did you see which way Atty went?"

The physician glanced up from where he'd been saying goodbye to his wife. "I thought she went upstairs."

Nodding his thanks, Yulen hurried to the bedroom to find her digging through the drawers of the bureau. Frowning, he watched her riffling through their clothes before finally asking, "Did you forget something?"

"I can't find my little green bag."

"What little green bag?"

"You know the one," she told him without looking up from her search. Finding no success in the bureau, she turned and bent down to check under the bed. "It has the little brown button on the front. The one you told me looks like a bear."

"Oh, yeah," he nodded. "No, I haven't seen it. Why? Is it important?"

She paused to give him a guarded look. "It has my herbs in it I use for cooking," she admitted, but for some reason Yulen suddenly felt he was getting only half the truth.

"Why can't you just use herbs you find out in the forest?"

"Because these are out of season. They're not available this time of year." Atty let out a frustrated sigh, pounding her hands on the side of the bed before getting to her feet. "Damn."

"When did you last see this bag?"

"Yesterday," she said, rather vaguely.

"Look, Atty, we don't have time for you to be looking for an herb bag. There's over two hundred soldiers waiting for my command to head out, and the sun's already beginning to top the trees. We need to get moving *now*."

Taking one last look around, she gave an irritated stomp of her foot and left the bedroom with Yulen right behind her.

They mounted their horses, and Yulen gave the signal to advance. Once they were well away from the main gate, he gave a second signal, and the caravan upped its pace, determined to make the normally five-day journey in four. Time wasn't a luxury any longer. It was a commodity.

"We're bypassing Foster City," he told the small group riding in front with him. "By not stopping there this evening, we can make at least another ten miles before darkness forces us to stop."

Fortune Kalich nodded. Despite the knowledge that he and Bertrand were safe within the Battle Lord's ring of protection, he was leery about approaching another Normal compound even

with the man's reassurances. He glanced back behind where Bertrand rode behind him. They'd been given their own horses, their wagon being drawn in line with two other wagons nearer the middle of the caravan. All three conveyances were heavily loaded with food supplies. A fourth wagon a little further back held other supplies and armament intended to be used on the trip.

Bertrand saw his look of disbelief and nodded. It was still so sudden, finding themselves back on the road with over two hundred armed soldiers. Turning back around on his horse, Fortune stared at the couple at the head of the line.

He was not a difficult man. He was not known for his temperament. He loved Atty as much as any father or substitute father could. Every action on his part had been to protect her, and Fortune prayed she understood that. On the other hand, he was ready to admit he had been wrong. Maybe he had first been aware of it when the Battle Lord had willingly entered Wallis unarmed and alone. Or maybe he had gotten his first inkling when the man had tearfully entreated the Council to see Atty. All doubt had been wiped from his mind when Tory had come to him that evening to let him know what a group of heartless sons of bitches he and the entire Council was.

"I want you to go in that bedroom right now and listen."

Fortune glanced up from polishing his knives to see his wife standing in the doorway to the bedroom. Her fists were clenched at her sides, her face livid.

"Why?"

"Just...go!"

Sighing, he got to his feet. There would be no peace in the house until he did as he was told. Resigned, he walked past his wife and into the small spare room where they'd placed Atty to rest and recuperate. She was still extremely weak, but the doctors were certain they'd managed to come up with the right concoction to counteract the devastating effects of the Borash she'd ingested.

In the dim light, sustained by a single candle by the bed, he could see her pale face twisted in pain, even in sleep. Sweat glistened over her skin. Her damp hair surrounded her head like a dark halo.

As he stood there, Atty moved slightly. She gasped, and in a raspy voice called out one word. One name.

"Yul!"

She gasped again, coughing until it turned into a sob, and she began to weep in her dreams. Her face contorted again as her nightmares refused to leave. Her body remained helpless in the poison's grasp, yet her mind knew she was alone. Totally alone. Ripped from his arms as painfully as if her flesh had been torn from his.

"Yul..."

Turning around, Fortune could see the tortured expression on Tory's face. Her own tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"You had to bring her back here," she heatedly accused him.

"It was not my decision," he tried to tell her.

"When is your stupid, insensitive, heartless Council going to realize that you may have signed her death warrant by bringing her back here? He came back here for her. He risked everything to come here. And your Council sent him away without any surcease? Without even acknowledging his request? Without letting him know she was still alive? That man came here thinking she was dead!"

More tears poured down her face, and she stood facing her husband with undisguised bitterness. Fortune could only stand in mute acceptance as her truth sank in.

"If Atty dies, it won't be because of the poison. It won't be because of D'Jacques. It'll be because your great, all-knowing, wise Council can't see past their hatred to recognize the fact that if there had ever been a chance for peace between us and Normals, they killed it just as surely as they're killing Atty! And when she dies, all of that will die with her! And I will personally hold you and George and every man on the Council personally responsible!" Tory promised him between her own heaving breaths.

"Tory..." He reached for her, hoping he could soothe her anguish. To his astonishment, she stepped back and waved him away.

"No. No, Fortune. There's a lot more at stake here than you and so many others like you realize. Atty took him for her husband, and there was love between them. Do you hear what I'm saying? They love each other. Atty gave up the most precious thing she had. Her skill. She gave it up for him. A Normal. A Cleaner! Do you have any idea what she sacrificed?"

"What do you want me to do?" he asked her.

"Go to the Council!" Tory nearly shouted at him. "Go find D'Jacques and bring him back here! Or go get a wagon and take her back to his compound! I don't know! All I care about is Atty's health and happiness, and she will have neither one as long as she's made to stay here. Dearest heavens, Fortune! Hasn't she been made to suffer enough?"

Behind him he could hear Atty writhing. Crying. Pleading. The next morning he'd gone to Piron George and asked for an emergency convening of the Council. It had been that afternoon when, in the middle of their discussion, Atty had appeared in the doorway of council lodge. She was trembling and barely able to stand, but she held her chin high as she slowly walked down the center aisle, past the seated crowd, and approached them unannounced. Reaching the dais, she sank to the floor, supplicating herself before them.

"Please. Take me back to Alta Novis."

"You are not one of them," George had gently tried to remind her.

"You're wrong," she told them. "I am one of them. And he is one of us. Without him, I am nothing. He is my breath, my blood, and my heart. Take me back and let me die there. There is nothing here for me any longer."

"If we take you back, you can never return. You'll be one considered of the enemy," George told her.

"So be it," she announced with finality.

The next morning they loaded her into a wagon, and with four escorts began the journey back to Alta Novis. As the days passed, Fortune could swear she appeared to gain strength, as if each successive mile renewed her. So that by the time they reached the outlying fringes of the compound, she was able to stand on her own and walk the rest of the way by herself, carrying her new longbow and quiver of arrows she demanded to have, for a reason only she understood. The disgraced hunter woman ready to rejoin her battle warrior husband.

They watched until she entered the compound gates unchallenged, then turned around and began their long trek back to Wallis.

That had been five months ago. Fortune blinked and shook his head. It was all still so much to take in. Still so much to comprehend and believe.

What would Tory say when they got to Wallis?

A movement from the corner of his eye attracted his attention. He glanced up to see Atty bringing her mare around to ride next to him. She had a playful look on her face he immediately recognized. The memory of another time when she'd given him that same look brought an unexpected smile to his face.

"Double Dutch?"

His mouth dropped open. "For over two hundred grown men?" he asked incredulously.

"I take up the challenge!" Bertrand shouted, bringing his own mount up next to them so that they were riding in tandem.

Atty slid her eyes back to Fortune and grinned mischievously. He could see her hands tighten on her reins. This was the old Atty. The Atty he knew and had grown to love. A better, stronger, womanly Atty, all because of D'Jacques.

"Oh, hell, yes, I take the challenge!" he shouted, and dug his heels into the horse's ribs.

Atty let out a whoop, and all three hunters bolted down the roadway, passing the lead horse and Yulen as they raced forward, leaving behind the swiftly moving caravan in a cloud of dust. Yulen watched them go with a big smile on his face.

"What was that all about?" MaGrath asked him, moving forward so that he rode next to the Battle Lord.

"Double Dutch."

Behind them Mastin and Siemens remained attentive. They were just as curious as the doctor, as were the rest of the men who had witnessed all three Mutahs' disappearance.

"You're going to deliberately keep me in the dark, aren't you?" MaGrath accused him.

Yulen nodded. "Yeah. And I'm enjoying every minute of it," he smirked. Seeing the physician's peeved expression, he laughed aloud. "Oh, cheer up, Liam! This is going to be one journey I don't mind making, and I have a feeling it's going to be one unforgettable adventure!"

### Chapter Six Liam's Decision

Atty and the other two Mutah hunters were gone most of the day. When the caravan stopped for midday meal, Yulen half-expected for his wife to pop in for a few minutes. With any luck they might have been able to find a secluded glen for a quick lovers' rendezvous. But as the hour went by, and there was no sign of her or her fellow caste members, he tried to hide his disappointment. He would have succeeded except for MaGrath's sharp eyes.

"At least you get to bring your wife along," he grumbled.

Yulen gave him a sympathetic pat on the back as he headed for his horse to tie his water bottle back on the saddle. "I'm sorry this had to fall on you so soon after your return from Bearinger."

"You aren't the only couple still on their honeymoon," MaGrath continued to grouse.

Yulen threw his friend a concerned look. The man's complaining was something he expected. More often than not, his off-the-cuff remarks contained a grain of truth that, with time, grew into pearls of wisdom. This time, however, the Battle Lord sensed an unspoken decision the man had made without consulting him first, and Yulen grew concerned.

Within ten minutes camp was broken down and the caravan was back on the road. Once he had made certain everyone was accounted for, Yulen brought his horse alongside MaGrath's and locked into step.

"I'm tired and in no mood to talk," the physician immediately let him know.

Yulen nodded and remained quiet. It wouldn't take long before the older man realized his friend wasn't budging.

"Are you needing me for anything specific? Or are you hanging around because Atty's not here, and I'm your second choice?"

Yulen grinned as his eyes swept the road ahead. "Maybe both," he admitted. "Maybe neither. We've been together as friends too long for me not to know when something's weighing heavily on your mind."

MaGrath held his tongue. They continued to ride in silence. Behind them they could hear the low murmuring of the soldiers as they filled the long hours of riding with conversation, jokes, and anecdotes.

Another dozen miles passed beneath them. At the head of the line Mastin had taken point. Somewhere ahead of them Billings was on reconnaissance. Yulen was satisfied momentarily. He wondered how the hunters were faring. Would they have gone their separate ways? Or would they be hunting together? Atty had only given him a sketchy description of what she had planned.

His mind swept to the evening. He had to figure out a way to keep Atty distracted until he was ready to spring his surprise on her. Only three people were aware of what he had planned, but MaGrath probably had the best chance of keeping her away from the encampment. Yulen knew he could try, and maybe it would be for the better if he did it alone. Already he could feel himself anticipating the warm firmness of her body.

No. He shook his head as he argued with himself. Chances were likely someone would seek him out with a question or problem that needed his immediate attention. It might even spoil

the surprise. It would be best to let Liam keep her occupied. Of course, he would have to play it by ear, Yulen determined. But a back-up plan was always wise.

Turning to MaGrath, he started to voice his suggestion when the physician softly commented, "This is going to be my last caravan, Yulen."

If there was one thing his father had taught him, it was to listen twice as often as he spoke. It wasn't much later that he'd learned the longer he kept mum, the more information he could glean. Human nature abhorred complete silence, and when there was no conversation, if he waited long enough, conversation eventually ensued. People tended to view quiet listening as acceptance, and that was when Yulen could usually gain the most valuable information.

MaGrath was a sucker for this technique.

"Did you hear me?" the physician inquired.

Yulen nodded.

There was a long, drawn-out sigh. "I've lost count of the number of excursions I've gone on, not counting the ones where I've accompanied you. I'm ready to quit going on the road. I want to stay home with my practice. I want to stay home with Maddy. MacIntyre's ready to get his feet wet. I'm twenty years your senior, and I'm beginning to feel the wear and tear." He gave the Battle Lord a regretful glance. "I'm sorry, Yulen. I hope you understand."

"I do," Yulen told him sincerely. "And I'm going to miss your razor wit, not to mention your wisdom."

"I'm just quitting the traveling. I'm not kicking the bucket," MaGrath snapped, adding a grin. "MacIntyre's a good man, despite my grouchiness. You'll work well together."

"I know. He's learned much under your tutelage."

They allowed another quarter mile go by before they spoke again.

"Your domain is growing," MaGrath observed.

"And it may grow even more," Yulen informed him. When the older man cut him curious look, he said, "Wallis is coming under my protection. Despite present circumstances, our treaty still holds...somewhat. I plan to renegotiate it while we're there. And then...I was thinking about including a few more compounds in with it."

"A few more compounds?" What compounds?"

"Mutah compounds," the Battle Lord answered casually, giving him a smile. "You didn't think Wallis was the only one of its kind, did you?"

"To be honest, I've never thought about it. Whenever in the past your father came across a Mutah community, it was more like a village hidden in the woods. Wallis is the first fortified city I've encountered. So there are other Mutah compounds? Any nearby?"

Yulen nodded. "I know of one that's five or six days' journey. There's another one that Fortune mentioned that might be closer. I'll have to ask Atty. He told me she'd been to it. If I can get the Council to agree to contact them, and if we can all meet and come to some sort of mutual understanding..."

"Good heavens, Yulen, do you know what that could mean?" MaGrath swallowed hard. "But your biggest battle isn't going to be bringing the Mutah into the treaty. It's going to be convincing people like Zane Batuset and Logan Farr and what's-his-name, from Van Cleve."

"Thom Arbreth."

"Yeah. Arbreth. How do you plan to convince them to stop their annual sweeps and to embrace the Mutah just as if they were ordinary people?"

"They are ordinary people," Yulen responded.

"On the *inside*," MaGrath pointed out the obvious. "You're trying to overcome three hundred years of fear and prejudice. In my book, that's called biting off more than you can chew." "I promised Atty I would try."

MaGrath gave a short, humorless bark of laughter. "Okay, and I'll be the last person to say it's not a noble effort. But do you honestly think you can accomplish something so grandiose in such a short lifetime?"

Yulen turned a haunted but determined face to him. "If someone doesn't try, nothing will ever be accomplished. If I don't try, no one else will. If I can at least put the plans on the table, maybe someone else will step up in my place when I'm gone and see that those plans are completed. Think about it, Liam. If I had told you last winter I was going to fall in love and marry a Mutah woman, what would you have thought?"

"That you were either drunk or mentally ill. All right, you've made your point," MaGrath relented. Several more minutes passed before the physician casually asked, "Any idea when you'll be heading out again?"

Yulen shrugged. "I'm not making any more plans until we see how this thing with the Bloods is resolved."

"Think Atty is happy going back, despite the fact that the Council told her she'd never be welcomed?"

"That's why we'd planned on giving them a guard of honor. Of course, it won't be as grandiose as I would've liked for it to be, considering the time restraint, but I'm going to enjoy seeing her thumb her nose at them." Yulen grinned. "Atty has no idea what it means to be my wife. For this once, I want to surprise her."

"You want to spoil her."

"Hell, yes. She's had a life no one should be forced to endure. Even the way we met, how we fell in love, and all the pain she's suffered...I swore to her that week after your wedding she would never need, never want for anything ever again. At the time she thought it was a very sweet gesture on my part." He snorted. "She wants to go with me on every excursion I plan. Nothing would make *me* happier. But eventually I'm hoping she'll remain back at Alta Novis to tend to other things."

"Other things?"

"Yeah," Yulen said in a low voice. "Like maybe one day we'll be lucky enough to have a family."

The simple confession struck a chord deep in MaGrath's chest. Perhaps it had been an old man's wish, or maybe it was because he knew how deeply Madigan wanted to see Rory's lineage continue that he had hoped there would have been good news awaiting him when he returned from Bearinger. After all, it had been five months. Maddy had discovered she was pregnant with Yulen a scant two months after she and Rory had taken their vows.

Yet there was no denying Atty's internal workings were a complete mystery to him. He had received absolutely no teachings whatsoever as to how different Mutah anatomy was from theirs, although there was no denying it was. For one thing, their genetics were so skewed, there was no way to predict what form of mutation each generation would inherit.

He glanced over at the pensive look on the Battle Lord's face. Yulen knew the risks. So did Atty. It was only because of their love for one another that they were willing to jump that chasm. Now, if nature would only take her natural course, because the two lovers were definitely

doing their rightly duty to try and conceive. At least nightly, MaGrath smiled to himself. Sometimes more often than that.

"Battle Lady about!"

Yulen had already pulled ahead before the shout went out. MaGrath glanced up at where the road crested a few hundred yards ahead. In the distance a lone figure on a horse stood waiting for them. As the caravan advanced toward them, two more figures on horseback emerged from the wood and joined her. A large, shadowy figure on a travois rested behind Atty's mare.

Ignoring the other two hunters, Yulen swept his wife from her saddle as he galloped by. Atty threw her arms around his neck as he brought his stallion to a halt and turned it around. They kissed deeply in greeting as he cradled her in front of him with his free arm.

"Looks like you had a successful hunt," he smiled into her eyes. He quickly examined her to see if any of the bloody streaks smeared across her face and arms were hers. Knowing what he was thinking, Atty shook her head.

"It was a team effort," she told him. "We all came out unscathed. Promise."

He drew up to where he could see the enormous wild sow lashed to the travois. The arrow in the eye was definitely Atty's trademark kill. The slash across the throat was not. The animal's huge lower incisors were crusted with blood. He glanced up at the two other hunters. "Are you gentlemen all right?"

Fortune appeared startled by his question. "Yeah. We're fine. Like Atty told you." He and Bertrand were still reeling from watching Atty at the hunt. The Council would turn on its ears when they heard the news.

"Good." Yulen flashed him a grin. "We'll go ahead and break for camp and get this pig cut up for cooking. Otherwise it'll take all evening if we keep it whole."

Reaching over to grab the mare's reins, he tossed them to Bertrand, then headed back to the caravan where he signaled for a full stop. Foster City lay behind them. Even though they hadn't made the extra dozen miles he had hoped for, they'd made good time otherwise.

Besides, he couldn't wait to spring Atty's surprise on her.

And then, there would be tonight.

#### Chapter Seven Her Denial

Atty heard him coming up behind her. She could tell it was him without having to turn around because of the way he walked. He would have made a good hunter, given the right training and upbringing, she mused. He already knew how to tread so quietly that crispy fall leaves underfoot wouldn't crunch under his boots, and small limbs wouldn't snap under his weight.

"You're gonna have to do a lot better than that if you don't want me knowing you're trying to sneak up on me," she commented with a grin.

There was a small snort of amusement. "What if I wasn't trying to sneak up on you?" he asked. "What if I just wanted to stand here and watch you?"

"Watch me what?" She glanced at him over her shoulder. "Wash the blood off my hands? Gee, doesn't take much to keep *you* entertained, does it?"

Yulen chuckled. "Actually, I came over to ask you out to dinner." Now it was Atty's turn to chuckle. He continued. "The first couple of portions are about ready. Did you have anything to eat today?"

"I had enough at breakfast this morning to sustain me," she said.

"You eat like a horse, Atty, just to sustain your metabolism. I know you must be starving by now."

She straightened as she got to her feet. After kneeling and bending over for nearly an hour as she and Fortune skinned and quartered the hog, and Bertrand delivered portions throughout the encampment, her back and shoulders were beginning to protest.

"That's the problem with marrying someone. They get to know you too well. You can't keep anything secret anymore." She followed up her gripe with a warm smile as she wiped her damp hands and arms on the hem of her tunic. "Okay, wise guy. You're right. I'm hungry. What do you mean, ask me out to dinner?" She glanced around at the surrounding wood. "Aren't we 'out' already?"

Her husband got a funny look on his face, as if he was relishing a private joke he had no plans on sharing with her. "That's another problem with marrying someone. She tends to rub off on you. *I* cooked tonight, and I need your expert opinion on whether the final result is palatable or not."

Atty raised both eyebrows his way. "Oh, this ought to be good. *You* cooked?" Gesturing down at the gore and the remains of the hog at her feet, she asked, "Do I have enough time to get this buried?"

He held out an arm to her. "I'll get one of the men to dispose of it. Come."

Grabbing her water bag, Atty walked over to where he took her hand and began to lead her toward the far end of the encampment, near the head of the line where she knew he liked to bed down for the night. Unlike many Battle Lords who preferred for safety's sake to bunk in the midst of the soldiers in case of attack, Yulen preferred to be on the fringe, prepared to help provide the first line of defense. It was one of the many idiosyncrasies she'd come to learn about him, and one of a hundred reasons why she loved him.

After listening in night after night as Yulen's men gathered in the main hall and talked as they ate, she'd come to learn much about the man she'd fallen in love with—his preferences, his

habits, when it was time to run for cover when a particular look of anger came over his face, and when it was okay to ease off a bit because he was in an unusually good mood. From what she could tell, he was having a lot more of those good mood days than he'd ever had in the past few years. Naturally, the soldiers all attributed the new warmth and brightness at Alta Novis to her, although she normally shrugged it off with a wicked smile and said it was more likely due to the fact that a satisfied spouse was very much a docile spouse, a remark which gained her a hearty laugh and acceptance into their confidences.

Glancing upward, Atty noticed the unusual brightness in the stars, despite the number of small campfires all around, whose lights normally dimmed the night sky. She suddenly shivered, and Yulen whispered, "Cold?"

"Nights are getting chillier," she admitted.

"Don't worry. You'll stay warm enough tonight," he promised.

Atty cut him a look while biting her lower lip. This was going to harder than she thought.

A few soldiers bid them good evening as they passed by. Yulen signaled to one of the newer recruits and ordered him to bury the pig's remains to prevent other scavengers from approaching the encampment. The young man nodded, repeated the order as required, and hurried off.

"Did you enjoy yourself today?" Yulen casually asked her.

She smiled. "Yeah, I did," she admitted, realizing she hadn't been aware of how much she missed going on the hunt. "It's been a while since I worked in team. Anything happen while I was gone?"

"No. Liam and I had a nice long talk, though."

She looked at him. "About?"

"He's wanting to hang up his saddle."

Atty stopped, pulling on his hand so that he also stopped and turned to look at her. "He doesn't want to go out anymore?"

Yulen gave her a sad shake of his head. "He's deserved the time to stay at the compound and take care of the people. Alta Novis is growing, Atty, in case you haven't noticed."

"Yeah, I've noticed." They resumed their walk. "I saw those pictures you've been studying of late."

"Diagrams. They're diagrams and blueprints."

"For what?"

He sighed loudly. "We're going to be expanding the forest wall another five hundred yards. That'll give us enough room for more homes and shops. We've grown by another hundred and twenty people in the past few months, quite a few of them from Bearinger. I'd also like to build another lodge adjacent to the first one."

"Another lodge? What for?"

He looked at her. "For us."

Atty stopped in her tracks again. "What do you mean, for us?"

"Exactly what I meant. I don't like having our quarters directly over the main hall. My great, great grandfather founded Alta Novis, and back then it may have been the safe thing to do. Then again, the compound only held a total of a hundred people, including soldiers and public. Today we have over four hundred soldiers, not counting another four hundred plus additional population. I want to get you out of the lodge and into a place with a bit more privacy."

"What would you do with the upper rooms?"

"Use them as guest quarters. What do you think, Atty? Ready to move into slightly larger accommodations?"

"When do you plan to start construction?" she asked.

He gave her a bemused smile. "I already have," he told her. Seeing her eyes widen in surprise, he admitted, "I ordered the carpenters and engineers to begin marking off the new compound wall and the floor plans to the new lodge while we were away. Hopefully, by the time we return, they should be finished laying the foundations. With decent weather, we might be able to move in by December."

"What about the back wall of the compound?"

"I've never done anything like this before, so I'm really just guessing at this point, but we should be completely re-fortified by March or April, at the latest." He smiled to himself. "Our first anniversary. Atty, do you remember the date we married?"

"I'm sorry. I...don't remember much about that day. Forgive me," she confessed in a small voice. She felt him squeeze her hand.

"It's okay. Someday we'll be able to talk more about it. It takes time to heal. But, for the record, it was the twelfth." He squeezed her hand again. "Keep that date in mind."

"Why? Planning on doing something special on that day?" she half-teased.

"Yeah. I plan on giving you a decent wedding. One with all the pomp and pageantry you could ever imagine. And one where you're *awake*," he laughed.

They passed several more campsites and neared a small stream where Atty hoped to get a drink. She suddenly felt dry.

Rounding the grove, she was so intent on spotting the running water she was only half-aware of Yulen slowing down. She glanced up, and her eye caught something fluttering from beneath the forest canopy. Turning her head, her jaw dropped open in total shock.

"It's a bit late, Atrilan, but I promised you a wedding present," his voice drifted over to her.

She was vaguely aware of him dropping her hand as she stepped toward the tent nestled amid the trees. At first her mind argued that it wasn't what she thought. Glancing back at her husband, he also seemed to read her thoughts.

"It's yours, my love."

Of course, it had to be hers, she told herself. For one thing, it was blue. All shades of blue, from pale and icy to almost midnight black. It was also bigger than Madigan's, but not by much. Instead of one middle tent stake, there were two, and above the roof of the rectangular structure, twin pennants of half-blue and half-red, the symbol of Alta Novis, flew from the poles. Where Madigan's purple swatches were interspersed with gold, the blues were shot with white. No...silver.

She reached out with a tentative hand to touch the wall of the tent, just to reassure herself that it really existed. "This...is *mine*?"

"Well, actually, I was hoping you'd let me share it," he teased her lovingly. "Wallford, the man who designed and made Madigan's, also designed and made this one. He made quite a few changes in the structure, so the men were able to get it pitched in half the time it took to raise Mother's. That's a nice convenience. Ready to go inside and look around?"

"It's bigger than hers, isn't it?"

Yulen had walked over to the far end of the tent to show her where the entrance flap was. "Putting the doorway here gives you the whole of the tent to withdraw into. With Madigan's, the flap in the middle wasn't practical." He held open the doorway, and Atty ducked to enter.

Because of the location of the door, the interior appeared bigger and deeper—enough to require two center poles to hold up the higher roof. Directly in front of them a brazier glowed from its pit in the ground. Behind it a low table was set for two. Atty looked to her husband for an explanation.

"The floor can be pulled back to allow for a small brace of coals when it gets too cold." He gestured to the back of the tent. "The bedding area is to the rear." His voice dropped to a more sensual tone. "Want to go look?" He smiled tenderly as he reached for her. "I've been waiting a long time to spring this on you, Atrilan. I hope you're happy with it."

She went into his arms willingly, lifting her face for his kisses. "This is...more than I ever expected," she admitted almost shyly.

"I promised you I would do everything in my power to make up for what you've had to endure," he murmured into her mouth. "I hope I've kept my promise, and that every night has been a gift of love to you."

She couldn't refuse his love nor the persuasive power of his mouth. Despite his strength, he held her tenderly, one hand brushing the loose hair away from her face before threading his fingers through the strands gathered behind her neck. He was mesmerized by her rich, blue locks, and often at night or whenever they were alone she would feel him playing with it, braiding it, or combing it for her to get out the odd tangle or knot. As much as he enjoyed tending to her, there was no denying the comforting sensations she got from his ministrations, especially after a long, hard day.

Atty subconsciously pressed herself against his body, and immediately she was aware of his growing erection stiffening along her belly. Sighing loudly she moved back slightly to give him an apologetic smile.

"You were right. I'm famished," she admitted, hoping to direct his attention back to their supper. Unfortunately, Yulen would have none of it. Lifting her off her feet, he claimed her lips again, and Atty felt herself succumbing to the intensity of his passion. Throwing her legs around his waist, he walked over to where the bedding was located and fell onto his knees into the midst of several pillows. There he pressed himself against her as he began to assault her neck and the erogenous zone below her ears. She could feel him grounding his hard erection into the seam between her legs, until she could feel his heat stroking her. Making her wetter and more excited. Weakly she beat on his shoulders and tried to wriggle free of his overpowering sexual energy. It was a battle she knew she would quickly lose if he didn't heed her request.

"Yulen..."

Surprisingly, he released her and lifted himself off of her, sitting back on his heels. Atty could feel her head swimming. Her own body was betraying her, leaving her weak in the knees and with a hot moistness between her thighs. Looking up at him, she begged him with her eyes. She watched as he stared at her with a mixture of sadness and unleashed desire, and she shuddered under his stricken gaze.

"Atrilan?" It was a question filled with disappointment.

"Can't we just...just eat? For now?"

"Are you all right? Are you sure that sow didn't hurt you? Or you didn't get injured on the hunt?"

"I'm okay," she tried to assure him, when it was not okay. When all she wanted to do at that moment was to bury her face against his neck and let him make love to her amid the sky-colored pillows and blankets until every bone in her body was as soft as butter.

"Then why—"

She hurried to sit up and placed a hand on his lips. "It's..." she began, then stopped and tried again. "There's so much going on right now. Please, my beloved. Give me a little time."

"Should I get Liam?" he persisted. Their bodies were so close to each other, she could feel his heat as he fought to keep from taking her again. His hands resting at his sides continued to open and close into fists as he resisted touching her. Atty found herself erotically intoxicated by him, as he always had been able to do to her with a kiss or a look or a touch. As he would always be able to do. It took every ounce of willpower for her to break contact with him and move back, getting to her feet. Yulen reacted as if she'd slapped him. He got unsteadily to his feet.

Sensing he was about to leave the tent and fetch the physician, she grabbed him by the arm to stop him. "No, Yul. I'm fine. Really! There's no need to get Liam when he won't find anything wrong with me."

Yulen stared at her for another long moment before he said in a low voice, "You've never turned me away before."

"I know," she nodded. Damn, but she couldn't stop the tears from filling her eyes, or the heated flush that was spreading over her face and skin. "I'm sorry. Please...forgive me. But I promise you, it won't be a long wait."

"A *long* wait?" he echoed. "What's going on, Atrilan? Don't you desire me anymore?" She nodded, cursing the tears now sliding down her cheeks. "I do desire you, my love. Please. It's just that there's been so much happening in such a short time. I need time to think. I need time to...to accept what's happening. Remember what I told you the Council said? That I wouldn't be welcome back? That I would be considered the enemy if I returned to you? My own people, Yul. They turned me away, and now we're going back. Don't you think I'm feeling scared and...and apprehensive? Don't you think I'm wondering if we're doing the right thing?"

Her explanation touched a chord inside him, and Yulen raised her hands to his lips.

"You're right. I've been inconsiderate. I'm sorry, Atrilan." He took a deep breath and let it out shakily. "Let's go ahead and eat, and we can talk some more about it. Perhaps that will help."

He led her over to the low table, and Atty sat down on one of the crushed velvet pillows. She wiped her face with her shirtsleeve and removed her boots, tossing them to one side, and allowed herself the luxury of being barefoot as her husband brought over their dinner from where it sat on the brazier. To her amazement the food was good, and she complimented him. Dinner conversation then turned back to the compound and its expansion.

"Atrilan, there's something you need to be aware of when we go back to Wallis."

"What's that?" She took a deep draught of water from her cup after noticing its sweetness. She'd never be able to drink water again without testing its taste beforehand.

"I'm going to be claiming it under the banner of Alta Novis." He watched for her reaction to his news. To his surprise, she seemed nonchalant about it.

"I suspected you do would something like that."

"You don't mind?"

"Why would I mind? I know what kind of Battle Lord you are. By putting Wallis under your sovereignty, you're guaranteeing the compound's safety and the well-being of all its inhabitants."

"But do you think the Council will see it that way?"

"What? You think the Council is going to object to you coming in—"

"To us coming in," he quickly corrected her, smiling.

"Six of one, half-dozen of another, Yul. But I do think you're right about the Council. They've sustained their own little demi-god status for generations. And although I think Piron George means well, they were so unfair to do what they did to us." Her eyes misted over at the memory.

"I'm still leaving them in charge after we're gone. They'll just have to answer to me now."

"But that means you're going to have to re-negotiate the treaty." Atty snorted and made a face. "Some treaty. Why don't people just call them for what they are? Veiled threats."

"Despite that, I've upheld my part of the treaty. I returned you. In fact, I'm doing so *twice*. I have not attacked another Mutah compound, and I had my men withdraw from Wallis as they initially requested. Of course, now with the threat of Bloods, they're going to have to get used to having my men around because I'm not leaving them unprotected."

"You know many will see the soldiers as an overt act of hostility," she said.

"That's their problem, not mine," Yulen commented, unperturbed. "They asked for help, and they'll get it, but on my terms." He nodded at her empty plate. "Get enough to eat?"

"Yes. Thank you." She watched as he rose to lay the dishes on a mat just outside the door. "That reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Shoot."

"Who does the dishes?"

She heard him chuckling. "We have some of the soldiers-in-training do them. It's a humbling experience, having to care for the horses and do the more menial chores around the camp, but it's excellent training." He gave her a crooked grin. In the glow of the four lanterns hanging from the roof, their only sources of light, she could see how the healed scar on the side of his face sometimes kept his lips from drawing all the way up. Suddenly she got the impulsive wish to kiss it.

"What are you thinking, Atrilan?"

His unexpected question took her by surprise. She lowered her face, wondering how to answer him. "Will you still stay here tonight with me?"

His reply was long in coming. "Do you want me to?" he asked softly. An underlying sadness tinged his words.

"Please don't make me face a night without knowing you're near. I don't care if you're on the other side of the tent. Just knowing you'll be there if I have another one of those dreams..."

This time he leaned forward and took her hands in his. "Why haven't you told me you were still having nightmares, my love?"

"Not as often. Most of the time they wake me up before I cry out and wake you, like they used to. But all I have to do is hear you breathing, or feel your warmth, then I can go right back to sleep." She gave a small shrug of her shoulders, keeping her face averted from his. If she looked into his blue-gray eyes, she knew she would lose herself in them. And then it would only

be a matter of moments before she would lose herself in his body. Thankfully, Yulen gave her hands a squeeze.

"Very well. I'll stay in here tonight. So if you need me for anything..." He left the invitation open. Suggestive. She knew exactly what he meant. There was no way she could help the way her heart leaped at the thought, or the way her skin tingled in anticipation. Gritting her teeth, she tried to beat down those feelings.

"Thank you." Raising her face, she waited for him to kiss her. But when he got to his feet and left the tent instead, a sudden tightness in her chest threatened to cut off her air.

It would be two more days before they reached Wallis. Two more days, followed by two more nights. Two torturous nights.

She prayed she would be able to hold out. Even moreso, she prayed Yulen would understand and forgive her.

### Chapter Eight Sneak Attack

"Atty, time to wake up."

Drowsily, Atty rolled over and blinked the sleep from her eyes. Her brain acknowledged the fact that her husband had just left the tent without giving her a good morning kiss, which he always gave her. He'd also used her shortened name, and not her full name, which he kept for their more intimate and personal moments, despite the fact that they were alone in the privacy of the enclosure. The realization saddened her as she got to her feet.

A fresh set of clothes lay on the large pillow next to her. She quickly dressed and threw some cold water on her face from the basin in the small bathing area at the rear of the tent. Leaving her hair unbound, she emerged from the tent to see the men having breakfast. A few feet away, Yulen and Liam were seated around the campfire, in deep discussion with Mastin. Forcing a smile on her face, she went to join them.

"Morning, boys. One day, Yulen, I'm going to twist your arm to see if Berta can't come along with us, just so she can feed us waffles in the morning," she told her husband as she accepted the bowl of oatmeal he offered her.

Liam grinned. "You and your waffles. How are the new accommodations, bluebell?" "Very comfortable, thank you. Cole, were you in on the secret, too?"

Mastin's smile was her answer. Tossing a lock of hair back over her shoulder, Atty rolled her eyes. "Please tell me I wasn't the only one in the compound who didn't know about it."

"Actually, it was just me, Liam, Cole, and Madigan," Yulen admitted. "I didn't know exactly how I was going to keep you occupied long enough for the men to get it erected. Thank goodness you solved that problem for us when you brought down that hog."

Atty smiled. "You're welcome."

Yulen handed her his mug of coffee with honey already added. Their fingers touched briefly, but she could feel the electricity go all the way down her arm to spark hot between her legs. She made the mistake of glancing up at him, to see his eyes reflecting his own hunger. Involuntarily, she shivered.

"Better wear a light jacket," he murmured. "It'll probably be raining later today."

"Oh, great," she grumbled, adding a grin and hoping she had been able to mask her desire. She watched as he hurried off to check on the progress the caravan was making getting back on the road.

"Guess that's my cue," Mastin excused himself. "See you again in a little while." Soon after he had left the fire, he was giving orders to have the tent lowered and packed.

Atty glanced over at the physician, who was scraping the bottom of his bowl. "Yulen told me about what you said to him."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Any entreaties for me to reconsider? Any beseeching requests that I go on just one more?"

She took another sip of coffee. "Why should I? Unless you're wanting us to."

MaGrath shook his head. "No. It wouldn't do any good anyway. My mind's made up." He looked at her in that way he had that always pierced any façade she managed to erect. "Something happen last night I need to know about?"

She debated with herself as to whether or not she should confide in him. It was a brief skirmish. "Not now, Liam."

"Oh, geesh, please don't tell me I have to add the words 'marriage counselor' to my shingle."

Atty drained her mug and got to her feet. "Not now, Liam," she reiterated.

"It's been a long time since I haven't seen Yulen come out of the bedroom without a smug look on his face. This morning he almost looks like his grumpy old self before he met you. And I can guarantee you, Atty, if I've noticed it, the soldiers most likely have, too."

She shot him a look that let him know he'd touched a nerve. It also told him to back off. Now.

"All right." He threw his hands up in defeat. "Sourpuss noted. I think I'll take my place around the middle of the caravan today, just so I'm out of the line of fire. But, Atty, if our going back to Wallis is going to bother you this much—"

"Not now, Liam," she said for the third time.

It seemed to do the trick. The physician threw the rest of his coffee over the fire to douse the coals, and tossed his breakfast dishes onto the pile on the ground before heading for his horse.

Atty stood watching his back as he walked away. Just beyond him she spotted Yulen speaking with Mastin and two lieutenants. Seeing her husband standing there in the pale morning light, in a long-sleeved tunic the same red-gold color as his hair, she felt an emptiness inside her that surprised her. Her whole body felt spent and lacking. She had no idea how many times she had awakened during the night and listened for the sound of his breathing as her skin tingled. She'd lost count of how close she'd come to crawling over the narrow mountain of pillows that separated them and surrendering to his body. By morning they would have made love at least once, nuzzling and talking and stroking each other long afterward until they either had fallen back asleep, made more love, or had been forced to arise and face the coming day.

This holding back was killing her. It was also telling on Yulen. Averting her eyes, Atty went to find her mare. A good hunt today would help keep her mind off of her worries.

There were over two hundred soldiers riding on this trip, and nearly a fourth of them were newly appointed. Most of them were young men of Alta Novis, men born and raised within the compound, and wanting to serve under the Battle Lord and protect their homes, rather than take on a profession or service within the city itself. Young men on their first mission away from friends and family, green and raw but compensating for their inexperience with enthusiasm and loyalty. Yulen had felt that the ride to Wallis would be a good trial by fire, especially if they encountered Bloods.

Letting Mastin know of his displeasure at their tardiness, he let the Second handle the trickle-down, knowing that the next time they needed to break camp, it would be done in record time.

Atty let the lead pass her before joining Fortune and Bertrand in line. "We were hoping you'd come see us," Bertrand told her. "We have a favor to ask."

"I'm listening."

"We want to take up the hunt today without you," Fortune broke the news, and waited for her reaction. What he got he didn't expect.

"Without me?" she repeated, as if he'd punched all of the air out of her.

"We have our reasons," Bertrand said. "But they have nothing to do with you or your abilities. Well, actually, they have everything to do with it."

"I don't understand."

"You're too damn good," Fortune informed her. "Bert and I want to go out and prove ourselves to D'Jacques and his men, without you. We're caste hunters. We earned that right on our own. We simply want to prove we're more than capable of feeding them. Do you understand?"

"Of course I understand. Actually, you're paying me a compliment."

Bertrand smiled. "Not angry?"

Atty tossed her head. In the weak sunlight her hair was nearly black in color. "Disappointed, but not angry. I was looking forward to another day like yesterday."

"Do you ever go on the hunt outside Alta Novis?" Bertrand asked.

"About once a week, when I get the itch to get away and keep my skills honed. Did you happen to notice the weaponry on the walls of the main lodge?" Both men nodded. "I've sort of made it a resolution to try and learn how to use each of those pieces. It's been fun, working my way around the room. I've gotten all the way up to the crossbow."

"So the next piece would be?" Fortune smiled.

"The mace. At least, I think it's the mace."

"Fortune, we need to be going," Bertrand reminded him. If they were going to feed all two hundred plus men, they needed most of the day to find enough game, or big enough game.

Nodding, Fortune reached over and placed a hand over Atty's where they rested on the horn of her saddle. He started when he saw the slender ring on her left hand, and an old memory came back to haunt him. Quickly he squelched it. "Are you certain you're not mad at us for not taking you along this time?"

"Not if you don't make a habit of it," she teased with a hint of seriousness.

When the two men took off, passing the lead, she noticed Yulen's glance of surprise her way. When she didn't reply, he pulled up the stallion and waited for her to make her way up to him.

"They want to prove to you and the men they can be just as successful on the hunt without me," she commented when they were within earshot of each other.

"You do have a way of stripping away a man's pride," he said off-handedly.

The double entendre was not lost on her. They continued to ride together without further comment, until Yulen pulled over from the line and waited for her to join him. There they could keep even with the caravan, but speak in private.

"Atty, I been wanting to ask you this," he began, and hesitated.

She kept her eyes on the road ahead, afraid to look at him when every nerve in her body wanted to lead him deep into the forest to where they could find a small clearing and share the heat of their bodies as they gave in to their desires. Unconsciously, she lifted a hand to her lips as they tingled from the thought.

"Are you going to deny me tonight?"

Her hands were cold as they gripped the reins. "Yulen..."

She didn't need to say anything more. The one word, and the tone of her voice, had given him his answer. A darkness seemed to close over her as she watched him knee his horse and gallop to the front of the line, leaving her behind. Dejected, she continued to follow the caravan. She didn't feel like conversing with anyone, and by setting herself apart from the rest of the group, they would respect her silent request by leaving her alone.

The miles passed uninterrupted.

At noon, Yulen called a halt for midday meal. Atty pulled up her horse to find him and MaGrath already in deep discussion around a small fire. As she approached, they barely glanced at her as they continued their talk about pharmacology. She ate in silence as she listened, when the hairs on the back of her neck began to rise. Carefully she scanned the perimeter of the camp for some sign as to what would have given her warning.

The feeling grew until it drew an icy finger down her back. Slowly, almost casually, she pulled her Ballock dagger from her waistband, keeping it concealed between her thighs. Her bow and quiver of arrows were tied to the mare a good fifteen feet away. She'd need a diversion in order to reach them.

"Yul."

She knew she would get his immediate undivided attention by using the diminutive of his name, the name she used exclusively for when they were alone. Slowly she lifted her eyes until they locked with his over the fire. Without moving her head she glanced sideways toward the opposite side the road. Silently she formed one word with her lips.

Bloods.

Yulen stood and stretched out the kinks in muscles stiffened from the ride, keeping his actions slow and relaxed. Behind his back he signaled to Mastin, who was always on the alert in case the Battle Lord needed him.

Atty continued to appear as if she were eating as she moved the plate to the side. As MaGrath caught sight of her dagger, he straightened up. It was then he noticed the cautious, preparatory movements of the troops behind them.

"Well, I'm going to go check on those medicants to see how much I have with me at the moment," he announced loudly, getting to his feet. Atty could see his hands shaking as he tried to wander off to where his horse was tied alongside Yulen's.

Looking back at her husband, she saw where he was waiting for her signal. An unspoken question passed between them.

How many?

She masked her shrug by rolling her head around, as if trying to get rid of the tenseness in her neck. The queasy sensation in the pit of her stomach was growing. She was the prey now instead of the huntress, and it was a feeling she hated more than she feared. Atty clung to that hatred and allowed it to fuel her anger.

Now she was relying solely on her instincts. The Bloods were staying downwind from them, preventing her from catching any part of their fetid stench. Bending over, she laid her plate on the ground as if she planned to reach for a second helping. She paused, closing her eyes, and allowed that part of her which was the ultimate hunter to take over.

A second later she hurled the dagger into the bushes across the road. A gray-skinned Blood erupted from his cover with a high-pitched scream, the blade of the Ballock embedded in his right eye socket up to the hilt. Before he hit the dirt, she was running for her other weapon.

The soldiers spilled into the road as the wall of Bloods jumped from their cover. Their advantage of a surprise attack had been foiled, forcing them to try and compensate with the full force of their numbers. Unfortunately they had grossly underestimated their enemy. Thinking the caravan was merely a minor militia on the road, the Bloods had expected little resistance. What they hadn't planned on was meeting over two hundred highly trained and mostly seasoned warriors, or the arrow-spewing Mutah woman who brought them down like shaking apples from a tree.

The skirmish was over within minutes.

Atty flexed her fingers as the adrenalin continued to pump through her. She was breathing heavily as she scanned the bodies lying in the dirt, watching for some sign or movement that would alert her to a still-living enemy. At the last second she heard the footsteps behind her, and she whirled around, crouching low, arrow nocked. Expecting her reaction, Yulen expertly knocked the longbow aside and pulled her against his chest with his free hand. Without a struggle she gratefully surrendered to his kiss as she felt his tension and worry drain away. They were both splattered with blood. His left hand and arm, and the sword he still gripped, were coated in ichor. Finally releasing her, he stepped back as Mastin and five others approached to relay their reports.

"So far no casualties," Mastin told the Battle Lord. Glancing at Atty, he asked, "How'd you know?"

"She just does," Yulen told his Second. "How many injured?"

"Three, two seriously. MaGrath is tending to them as we speak."

"Did any Bloods survive?" Atty inquired.

The Second shook his head. "None that we know of. Why?"

"For questioning," Yulen again answered for her. "I'd like to know how long they'd been tailing us, or if they'd just now come across us."

Atty laid a hand on his chest. "Fortune and Bertrand."

He nodded his head. "They're experienced. Didn't you tell me they were the cream of the caste? If they'd come across them, I'm certain they would have avoided detection. Don't worry about them, Atty."

"What do you want us to do with the dead? Leave them be?" Mastin inquired.

"No. Drag them into the forest. Let the scavengers have a feast, if they'll have them. Order the men to clean their weapons and remount. We need to make up lost time."

After the men had left to follow through, Atty felt his arm where it rested around her waist give her a squeeze. She looked up into his pale face. "Stay beside me the rest of the way?"

"What if they try to attack us from the rear?" she asked.

"I'll put Mastin back there. I want you where I can keep my eye on you," Yulen ordered. Smiling, Atty reached up to touch his scar with a fingertip. "I miss you," she whispered so only he could hear.

"Not as much as I miss you," he whispered back. "It's been a ghastly day so far. Please, don't make us wait any longer than we must."

"I promise. Once we reach Wallis and everything is resolved..." She left her comment open. She didn't need to tell him what would happen after their arrival. He knew as well as she did that her self-imposed celibacy would end. And, needless to say, neither one of them would get any sleep that night.

# Chapter Nine Wild Mint

Fortune and Bertrand returned to the caravan by mid-afternoon. Both horses were burdened down with over fifty rabbits and squirrels, which Yulen ordered taken to the fourth wagon to be cleaned and gutted and prepared for supper that evening, rather than having to do it when he decided to break for camp.

Both Mutah hunters had been unaware of the Bloods, or of the attack on the caravan. Apparently they had just missed being detected by the deviants.

"Do you think they could have been an advance party?" Mastin voiced aloud.

"There's no rhyme or reason to what they do," Atty spat. "But I'm willing to guess they were attracted by our fires and happened upon us. No way they would have attacked our men with so few in number if they'd been aware of our true size." She glanced over at her husband. "I wonder if they were part of the group responsible for laying siege to Wallis."

"Well, until we can capture and question one, we'll never know," Yulen told her. "I'm going to check on the injured. Stay here until I get back," he told her. Gesturing to Mastin with a tilt of his head, the Battle Lord galloped back to where MaGrath was caring for the wounded men.

Atty looked down at her once-white tunic and wrinkled her nose. At times like this she wished she could be like the men and just change into a clean shirt. Instead, it would have to wait until they set up camp for the evening.

"You're pretty astonishing, if you don't mind my saying so," the Second confessed.

She looked at him, eyes wide. "Why would you say that? Because I was aware of the Bloods before anyone else?"

"Because you act as if what you do is the most natural thing in the world. Isn't there anything you can't do that you wish you could? Or anything you've never been able to accomplish?"

"Oh, yeah," she laughed lightly. "Lots of things."

"Like what?"

"Like, I'd make a pretty poor housewife if I was forced to fit that role. My mother could sew and keep house and do all those things you'd expect a wife and mother to do, and she did it all so easily. Me, I can truss up wild turkey or pig before cooking it, but my handiwork is crude. I'll sweep a floor, but the rest of it..." She gave an exaggerated shudder. "Ugh. No thanks. That was one of the biggest reasons why I took my oath of chastity when I became a hunter. There was no way I was going to be someone's wife if it meant having to do all those menial tasks that would keep me tied to being indoors and out of the fresh air where I wanted to be."

"But you don't have to worry about any of that, being the Battle Lord's Lady," the Second pointed out.

Atty gave him a small smile. "To be honest, Cole? I never thought about any of that when Yulen told me what he had planned for us." At Mastin's upraised eyebrow, she nodded. Other than her husband and Liam, and in some respect, Madigan, Cole Mastin was the only other person who knew the truth behind her and Yulen's history.

"So, pardon my asking, Madam—"

"Atty. I want you to call me Atty. Madam is Madigan," she laughed softly.

Mastin grinned. "Okay. So, pardon my asking, Atty, but you agreed to marry the Battle Lord, even though you detested the thought of what you might have to do? I don't understand."

"You have it wrong. I didn't agree to marry him despite what I thought being a wife would entail. I'm saying the whole idea never entered my mind when I said yes."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"You were willing to give up your entire way of life, without a second thought?"

"Scary, isn't it?" she grinned at him. "And on top of that, there was all that nonsense about me losing my abilities if I gave up my virtue."

"But you believed it," he reminded her.

"Hell, we *all* believed it." She wiped an errant lock of hair out of her face and glanced up at the sky. The clouds were beginning to grow darker, threatening rain and perhaps another chilling wind. From the corner of her eye she saw him slowly shaking his head. "What?" she asked.

"I was just hoping that when I fall in love, the woman I choose will feel that same way about me."

Impulsively she leaned over in her saddle to give his shoulder a quick squeeze. If she could have reached his cheek to kiss it, she would have. "Thank you, Cole. I think that's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Amazingly, Mastin's face turned a bright red. "If you'll excuse me, I need to check on the men at the rear." Instead of taking his place at the tail of the caravan, as Yulen had ordered once they were again on their way, he had convinced the Battle Lord to put two of his most trusted lieutenants there. The suggestion seemed to satisfy the man.

Atty watched him back away and turn around to wait for the line to pass. The little talk with him seemed to have buoyed her mood, and she didn't actually detest the weather when it finally began to drizzle. Digging her hands into the pockets of her furry vest, she led point until Yulen joined her nearly an hour later.

Because of the weather, he called for an early stop when they reached a large grove of sycamore. All throughout their traveling Atty had been enjoying the patchwork of color in the changing leaves. For some reason she loved the fall, although she wasn't so keen on the winter, just because of the brutal cold. If Yulen planned on having their new home finished by December, he'd better hope they had a mild winter, or at least a long span of tolerable working days.

As she started the fire and began to prepare a rabbit the way she knew he liked it, she watched as four men under Mastin's watchful eye quickly erected her tent in a nearby clearing. She was unaware of her humming until MaGrath joined her.

"Oh, my, aren't we in a good mood this evening." He held out his hands to the fire. "Egads, but it's going to be a bitch tonight."

She hesitated. "What is?"

"The rain. Not to mention the possibility of another cold front. You know, Atty, normally we don't make these treks this time of year. The weather can get real nasty in a hurry." He motioned toward the rabbit with a movement of his head. "What are you serving with it?"

"I don't know yet. I need to go out and see what I can rustle up." Getting to her feet, she wiped her hands on the thighs of her pants. "Can you watch the meat while I'm gone?"

"Sure. Just don't be long. Old men need their company."

Snickering, Atty grabbed her bow and quiver and disappeared into the forest. MaGrath didn't have to wait long before the Battle Lord joined him.

"Where's Atty?"

"Out hunting for vegetables. Pesky little things. You have to run them into the ground before they'll surrender."

Yulen chuckled out loud. "Stay by the fire, old man. Keep your bones warm."

"Where are you going?" MaGrath asked, seeing the man heading into the forest himself.

"To see if she needs any help," came the enigmatic answer.

Making a face, MaGrath wrote them off, knowing it would be at least an hour before they emerged from their token search. Supper would be late again, but this would be a good time to run an inventory on the contents of his medical bag. He didn't want to touch the crate of supplies he was taking to Wallis if he didn't have to, but another run-in with the Bloods might force him to.

\* \* \* \*

Yulen paused when he was far enough away from the light of the campfires to shut his eyes and wait a few seconds before opening them. After they had adjusted to the darkness, he advanced further into the deepening gloom, listening for where Atty might be. Knowing she was searching for roots and vegetables, he told himself she wouldn't have wandered too far off. Sure enough, he spotted her just beyond a strand of poplar. She was kneeling down, picking a few leaves and bringing them to her nose. Quietly he leaned against a tree to watch and observe. At almost the same time she glanced up and saw him from across the way, a pale gold figure in the moonlight.

"Don't you have anything better to do than stalk me?" she asked dryly. She spoke low, but the sound carried.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "I just wanted to convey the men's thanks to you." "For what?"

"For spotting the Bloods. We could have suffered many more casualties if you hadn't sensed them when you did."

"Tell them they're welcome. Look. I found some wild mint. This'll go well with the rabbit."

He walked over to where she knelt and crouched beside her. Taking the sprig from her hand, he twirled it between his thumb and forefinger, sniffing it while she picked more of the herb. "Atrilan."

When she glanced up in surprise, he leaned over to taste her lips, now cold and wet with rain. She pulled back slightly before reaching up for him, and he heard her softly moan in the back of her throat. Unable to stop himself, Yulen reached out with his other hand and cupped one round breast where it was revealed beneath her sodden tunic. Her breath hitched at the touch and the warmth of his hand, and Yulen felt the nipple grow taut in his palm.

"Atrilan..."

She shivered in his arms, from the power of his mouth taking hers, and Yulen pressed her tightly between his legs, along his hardening length.

"Nooo," she breathed, even while her body strained against the confines of her wet clothing.

Yulen bent over her as he dropped to his knees, pulling her upward to feel her breasts firmly against his chest. He dropped the sprig of mint, searched for and found the waistband of

her pants, and slid his hand down inside, past the softness of her belly, until his fingers reached the satiny curls between her legs. Within their soft strands her moist fire grew hotter with his touch. Sliding a finger between her folds, he found her nub already stiff and pulsing. Lightly he began to massage it.

Again Atty groaned. Her hips moved with his fingers as the dizzying sensations overtook them, and she became lost in the maelstrom of emotions he was bringing out of her. She clutched his shirt across his shoulders as his tongue began to plunge into the depths of her mouth and his fingers began to demand entrance to the depths of her tight channel.

Yulen shuddered as her scent and her muskiness filled him. Together they lost all track of time, all sense of the present. All they could feel was the rising fire consuming them, demanding a release they couldn't ignore.

Until a voice behind them politely cleared its throat.

Yulen froze. They were both breathing heavily, and it took him a long moment to collect himself. "Who?" he whispered in Atty's hair.

"Cole."

Straightening up a bit, he angrily demanded, "What?"

Mastin stood his ground, although he knew he had encroached upon something so private, he could very well be in danger of losing his ranking.

"Forgive the intrusion, sir, but Pirkins is fading. The doctor wants you to come be with the man in his last moments."

Bending his head so that his forehead pressed against her neck, he slowly removed his hand from her pants and gently pulled away from her. Looking down at her, he noticed she kept her eyes averted from his. "Sorry, my love," he whispered. A quick glance down revealed he was far from being decent enough to follow the Second back to where the physician had set up his makeshift clinic, but he had no choice. Getting to his feet, he brushed off his knees before offering her a hand up, which she declined.

Through her lashes Atty watched at him go with Mastin. She had almost made a mistake, betrayed by her own body and her overwhelming hunger for him. She hadn't been prepared for what he had done, or for the exquisite feeling of drowning in his desire that had washed over her.

Quickly she gathered the rest of the mint, along with her bundle of baby squash, and hurried back to the campfire, determined not to let it happen again until she was ready to surrender.

By the time Yulen and MaGrath returned to their campfire, Atty was ready to serve them. They ate in relative silence in the wake of the death of one of their men.

"I'm sorry," Atty finally said, hoping it would break the uneasiness among them.

"It was a stupid death," MaGrath commented bitterly.

"He was inexperienced," Yulen reminded him. "The fault lies with me for letting him come with us." He paused, then added, "Constance will be heartbroken. Vicktor was her only son." He looked up at his wife. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Atty. If you hadn't been aware of those creatures when you did, the death toll could have been much higher." Putting his bowl down, he apologized for not finishing the meal. "It's good, Atty, but at the moment I have no appetite. I think I'll go check on the rest of the men."

"Good idea," MaGrath commented, also putting down his bowl before getting to his feet. Leaning over, he gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. "Get inside and dry off. You'll catch your death if you stay soaked like that." Atty nodded. After the near incident in the meadow, she no longer felt any hunger for food. When she had glanced up to see her husband approaching their fire, it was if they were back kneeling in the muddy patch of mint, devouring each other as though they hadn't eaten in months.

She went inside the tent to look for a towel. Inside the flap, she removed her boots, and noticed someone had placed a brazier in the ground, near the doorway. Already the interior of the tent was warm, chasing away the goose bumps from her arms. Finding a towel in the small bath area, Atty plopped down on one of the larger pillows and started drying off her hair, lamenting the fact that she'd worn it unbraided all day. Not a wise move, she lamented in hindsight. There had to be a hundred tangles in it.

As she continued to rub the rain out of her hair, the heat from the coals suffused her senses, sending warmth into her flesh, down into her very bones, until she found herself unable to keep her eyes open. A quick nap, she told herself. A brief nap, just until Yulen returned. The pillows were soft and dry...warm and inviting.

She was asleep almost instantly.

### Chapter Ten Tunsul Leaves

It was the feel of his lips on her throat that awoke her. She tried to roll over, only to find her body trapped between his and the pillows beneath her.

"Yul?"

"You taste...so good," he murmured against her bared skin. He reached down and pulled her tunic up above her breasts. Released from the dried warmth of the material, her nipples hardened in the cooler air. Yulen dipped his head and placed his mouth over one pale pink bud.

Atty had no idea how long she'd been asleep, or what time it was now. All she could feel was the wonderfully familiar sensation of his velvet-rough tongue on her skin as it raised goose bumps in its wake. One hand had dipped between her legs and was pressing knuckles against the fabric that was already hot and moist from her anticipation. At some point she groaned, and the sound was an aphrodisiac to his ears.

"I want you, Atrilan," he breathed. His passion echoed in her heart, her most vulnerable target, where she knew that, if he wanted to take her against her will, she wouldn't fight, wouldn't do anything but gladly lose the battle she'd tried to fight for the past two nights.

"No, Yul. Please, no."

"But you want me," he told her, bringing his lips to her ear as he pressed himself against her, rubbing himself along her skin.

Atty felt her fingers reach for him, but she forced herself not to let him reach her lips. If he claimed her mouth, she would be gone. She had no power to resist once his kiss reached her innermost soul. No power to deny him. No power to hold back. No power but to give in to the strength of his love.

"Don't do this to me," she begged weakly. His lips on her breasts, his teeth tenderly biting her swollen aureoles and sending fingers of fire and ice throughout her body. Her skin was aflame, her muscles frozen.

"Admit you want me as much as I want you. Beg me to make love to you, Atrilan. Tell me you want me inside of you. Tell me...tell me..."

She whimpered in physical pain. By denying him, she was denying herself, and the agony she felt was almost unbearable. Too late she realized her body was placing itself in his hands, and Atty tried to stop his fingers from unbuttoning her pants.

His hair was wet where it lay across her shoulder. She could smell him, smell his earthy masculinity, smell his skin and his warmth as he leaned over her, and his hands began to push her pants down over her hips and buttocks.

"Yul!"

"Tell me."

"No," she breathed, damning herself as her hips raised involuntarily as he lifted off of her momentarily. She could hear him removing his weapons belt, dropping it beside them, then begin to remove his own pants. "Please. Not now, Yul. Please."

"Why?" He finally paused to breath the question against the satiny column of her neck. He pressed his lips to where her pulse beat at the surface, licking the tiny beads of perspiration forming there.

Why? How could she tell him without losing his love, perhaps forever?

Too late, she felt him move himself into the juncture of her thighs. His thick erection sought her depths, but somehow she managed to keep her legs tightly pressed together as the head of it buried itself like a wedge between her folds. Her thighs were slick with her own juices, making his burrowing easier.

Atty cried softly. He was holding down her hands, his fingers entwined with hers as he held them to her sides. She was virtually a prisoner to her own lust as much as she was to his.

"Why should I stop?" he whispered again. He moved his hips into hers, pushing his hardness further into the triangle of soft curls. Another inch, and he would inside her. "Tell me to stop. Tell me you don't want me. Tell me you don't need to feel me inside of you, bringing you as you're bringing me. Tell me you're not excited. Tell me you're not aching for me as terribly as I ache for you. I want to feel your heat, Atrilan. I need to feel you around me. I need you to milk me dry when you come. Make love with me, my beautiful Atrilan. Help me make deep, long, slow love all night with you."

She tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Two sides of herself were at war, and neither one would win. Not now. Not tonight. It was torture.

Yulen dropped himself upon her, propping most of his weight on his lower arms and elbows, and began to rub his naked body along hers. The fire inside her was all consuming. She could feel her legs begin to part, and knew all was lost. She arched her back and cried out as tears rolled down her face.

"Oh, God, I thought you loved me," she sobbed out loud.

Her cry was like a bucket of cold water. Instantly, Yulen released her and rolled off. Atty turned onto her side, away from him, and curled into a little ball. She could hear him breathing heavily as the minutes passed. Then, as quietly as he'd entered the tent, he rose, pulled his pants back on, and left without saying a word.

Despite the brazier, she felt chilled. Her fingers found a blanket, and she drew it over her as she began to shiver. She felt hot and cold at the same time. She couldn't stop shaking.

Perhaps it was minutes later, or maybe it was an hour later when she heard the door flap move aside. But this time it wasn't Yulen's footsteps she heard. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw MaGrath walk over to where she laid curled up. Casually, he sat down on one of the nearby pillows and crossed one leg over the other, hands in his lap.

And then he watched her and waited.

Pulling her tunic back down over her breasts, Atty rolled over and wiped her face with a corner of the blanket. The physician stared back at her in that calm, unhurried way he had before he tended to ream out the person responsible for making him angry.

To her surprise, his first words were neither sharp nor heated.

"The first time I realized Yulen was falling in love with you was that night he kept going back to that little shop where you were being held prisoner. It was like he was looking for any excuse in the book to approach you. And when he finally did go inside to take the ropes off your wrists, for a split second I saw him reach for you, as if he was going to take you into his arms. I don't think he was even aware of his actions." MaGrath nodded. "That's when I first suspected. It's as close to love at first sight as I've ever witnessed. Want to know when I knew he was a goner for certain?"

Slowly she nodded.

"The night you cooked that squirrel you'd killed. After I had taken the bandage off your face. I saw the look in his eyes as he studied you. I saw the way he reacted when you handed him his trencher, and your fingers touched. It was like watching lightning strike."

He cocked his head to one side, as if examining her. "I never found out what happened between the two of you that day you saved him from the bull ferret, but I know it cemented whatever feelings were growing. What happened out there, Atrilan, if you don't mind my asking?"

She licked her lips. Hearing him use that tone of voice tonight was a strange but somehow comforting occurrence. "He kissed me," she replied softly.

"Ah." He smiled. "The first kiss. Well, Yulen's always had a reputation among the woman as being a phenomenal kisser. Of course, I wouldn't know first-hand." He grinned again, and was pleased to see a small twitch at the corners of her mouth. "So, tell me, Atrilan. When did you first realize you were falling in love with the Battle Lord?"

He waited for her to collect herself. For her to open up, which he knew she eventually would do with a bit of coaxing. There were only two people left in the world she trusted enough to be totally honest with, and she was married to the other one.

"When he took the ropes off my wrists," she admitted. "He...he turned his back to me. And I wondered how it would feel to kiss the back of his shoulders."

MaGrath nodded. "And when did you realize you were hopelessly in love with him?" She drew a trembling breath. "When he beat Karv senseless."

The physician's eyes widened. "You saw that?" Until that moment, he had always believed she had been unconscious.

Atty nodded.

Sitting up, the physician leaned over and laced his fingers together to hook them over one knee. "Okay. Now the hard part. Yulen is worried sick about you. He says you've lost all desire for him, and he's beginning to think you're no longer in love with him. He's terrified he's losing you."

A look of absolute anguish came over her face. "No! That's not true! I swear on my father's soul, Liam! I love Yulen more than I could ever believe possible."

"Then what's the problem, Atrilan?" he asked gently.

She raised her hands to her face and took several deep breaths to try and calm herself. Yulen thought she no longer loved him? *Oh, dear God*.

"Liam, are you familiar with tunsul leaves?"

"Tunsul leaves. Maybe. Sometimes your people call plants I'm familiar with by names I'm not. What are they?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "They're little round leaves, about the size of your thumbnail."

"What are they for?"

This time she bit her lower lip before replying. "Every morning you chew one. You chew it until you get enough spit to make a mash, and then you swallow it, leaf and all. It doesn't taste bad."

"What are they for?" he reiterated, although he was beginning to get an inkling as to what her answer would be.

She cast him a sidelong look. "They're to prevent pregnancy," she whispered almost too softly for him to hear.

"It's a contraceptive, you mean?"

Atty nodded silently.

"Go on. I'm listening."

Throwing a lock of hair back over her shoulder, she continued, keeping her eyes averted, unable to look directly at him as she confessed. "They only grow six months out of the year. In a little carpet in certain parts of the forest. My mother told me about them when I began to have my flow, just before I took my oath of celibacy. But before then, we went out and she showed me how to gather them and dry them so that when they stopped growing, I could have a supply stockpiled to last me until the following spring, when they'd begin blooming again."

"How long have you been taking these tunsul leaves, Atrilan?"

Surprisingly, she gave a little laugh. "You know, I never really had thought about them until the day you and Yulen saved me from Collaunt's cell. When I was coming around to meet up with you after escaping from the compound, I blundered into a small patch of them. And I remembered I was no longer...pure. And that there was nothing keeping Yulen and me from making love the way he'd been promising me. I remembered what Mohmee had told me, about how babies were made. So I picked a handful to take with me. And then, later the next day, after I ran off from the caravan, while I was hunting, I found some more, and I stuffed them in a small pouch and put them in my saddlebags." She snorted, blinking back tears. "When Fortune brought me back to Alta Novis after I'd recovered from the poisoning, I found the leaves still there in my bags where I'd left them. So it wasn't difficult to start taking them again."

"So you've been taking these leaves to keep from getting pregnant. What has that got to do with what's been happening on this trip?"

Finally Atty turned her face to look directly at him. "I couldn't find my pouch of leaves before we left Alta Novis. I've been hoping that once we get to Wallis I'll be able to find some to tide me over until we return."

"They're out of season now?"

"Yes. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless there's something you can give me."

From the reaction on MaGrath's face, Atty had her answer. "Please, Liam?"

"I just want to know why you don't want to get pregnant." This time there was no mistaking the bite of anger in his voice.

"How can you ask me that? Just *look* at me!"

"Have you spoken to Yulen about this?"

"No." She emphatically shook her head.

"Why?"

"Because I'm scared!"

"But don't you think he's already realized the possibility that any child you have could be Mutah? I know for a fact he wants children. He wants children with you. Don't you think you owe him the chance to at least make a valid argument about you taking a contraceptive?"

MaGrath sat up as she approached him, eyes flashing. "Listen to me," she replied heatedly. "I took my required courses in science. They taught me genetics. I know the odds are fifty-fifty our child will bear some sort of mutant mark. And the odds are one hundred percent that child will bear my genes, and possibly bear Mutah children of her own. But that's not what frightens me, Liam."

"Then why not have a child?" he spoke gently.

"Because I'm terrified of what our child might have to go through," she said in a shaky voice. "I've had to endure broken bones and excruciating pain, and so much humiliation just to be able to love Yulen. Can you imagine what our child might have to face? At least I grew up where my difference was not a stigma. I was allowed to feel good about myself, and not be afraid to stand up for what I believed in. Your people tried their damndest to beat it out of me. They tortured me, and they dragged me through verbal mud. Well, I can't bear the thought of a child of my flesh having to go through all that. I can't allow him to be punished or made to feel ashamed simply he or she was born different!"

Crawling over the pillows, Atty reached out to place a hand on his knees. "I know you have something in that bag of miracles to help me through this. Please, Liam. *Please*."

To her shock, he shook his head. "I can't, Atty, and I won't. At least, not until you talk this over with Yulen. Then, if the both of you are in agreement, I'll concede and give you what you want."

"It's not Yulen's choice!"

"Oh, but I think you're wrong," MaGrath argued as he got to his feet. "Yulen wants children. He wants to continue his legacy and the Alta Novis dynasty begun nearly a hundred years ago. More than that, he wants you to be the mother of his sons and daughters. If you're going to deny him that dream, at least love him enough to let him know."

He started to leave the tent when her next words stopped him cold.

"Do I have the power to give you a direct order?"

Slowly he turned around to face her. "Yes, you do, although I had hoped our friendship and love for each other would supercede that."

Her face fell. "Then I ask you as the man who is the closest thing I've had to a father since I lost my own. Please don't tell Yulen any of what we've discussed here tonight. Please."

MaGrath sighed heavily. "Patient-doctor confidentiality. You have my word. But, Atrilan? Talk to Yulen. He's terrified right now. He needs your reassurance that he hasn't lost you." The physician swallowed hard. "When you were dying from the poisoning, we almost lost him, too. His heart is forever bound with yours, and if he loses you, his own death won't be far off. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Atty smiled through her tears. "Yes, I do. Just...just let me be the one to break the news to him."

"You have my word," MaGrath promised.

"Liam? What will you tell him in the meantime?"

"I don't know, but I hate lying. I guess that's why I never was a decent poker player, either." That being said, he exited the tent, leaving her alone to her thoughts. Overhead the rain began to fall harder, reminding her that Yulen was out there somewhere, wandering around in an emotional fog. Believing he was alone. And deathly afraid.

Scrambling quickly back into her clothes, Atty left the tent to search for him.

## Chapter Eleven Last Breath

"I went through hell for you, Yulen D'Jacques!"

From the cover of the small trees, Atty watched his reaction at her declaration. Sometimes the woods provided the perfect echo chamber, the kind that stymied even the most experienced hunters, keeping them off-centered and unnerved as the sounds they were trying to pinpoint seemed to be coming from every direction at the same time. Yulen happened to be standing in the middle of such a natural acoustic resonance in the midst of the encampment where he was giving Mastin and a half-dozen other soldiers some instructions.

It hadn't taken her long to find him. But it had soon become apparent there was no way she was going to be able to get him aside privately to let him know how wrong he was.

How he was so very, very wrong.

He's beginning to think you're no longer in love with him.

She had to convince him. Make him realize how strongly she still loved him. Let him know how great a hold he had on every part of her.

As she watched, he was turning around, seeking her, wondering where she was hiding but unable to detect her presence. The men beside him seemed as curious, a few flustered, but all of them intrigued by her announcement.

"I have been beaten...tortured...poisoned...dehumanized," she continued hotly, unaware of the angry tears heating her face. "At any time I could have left. I could have run away. Just...disappeared, never to be seen or heard from again. But I stayed! I came back! *Because I love you!*"

Yulen stopped; his hand began playing with the pommel of his sword. It was the only outward sign he gave which showed how deeply troubled he was. Lowering his head, his eyes shut, she saw him pause and wait for her to continue.

"I love you, Yulen," she repeated in a gentler voice, and listened to it ring in the cold night air. "I don't care if I have to tell the whole damn world. I've taken everything thrown at me, and I'm still here! I've even killed for you. Don't you think there isn't a day that goes by that I don't wake up and wonder what led you to me? What made you choose me? Or what made me choose you? When there is every reason in the world for us to hate each other, and every reason for us be deadly enemies? What happened that you should be the only person in the world to claim my heart?"

Her throat unexpectedly closed up, forcing her to swallow hard several times before she could say more. Her skin felt fevered. It wasn't difficult to tell him the truth. What was impossible was trying to guess how much of it he believed.

"If I was to be taken away from you right now, right this very minute, and I was told that I would have to endure it all over again...*all* of it...the beatings, the humiliation, the broken bones, Collaunt, the agony...if I was told I would have to go through all of it again before I could come back to you, Yulen, I would not hesitate *one heartbeat* to face it all again. Not if it meant that, in the end, I would be returned to you. Because you still wanted me. Because you still loved me."

Rising from where she'd taken shelter in the thicket of blueberry bushes, Atty stepped out of hiding and began to approach him. Yulen whirled around and froze to stare at her as she

stopped more than a dozen steps away. The rain had soaked everyone. Her clothes clung to her like a sheath of ice, and she found herself shivering from both her fear and the weather.

The look on his face was unreadable. It was too dark to see his eyes, but she refused to take her gaze away from them. It she couldn't convince him tonight, she would spend the rest of her life trying to convince him, if that was what it took.

"So don't you ever, *ever* again think that I no longer love you, do you hear me?" she demanded, fists clenched at her sides. "Because I will love you until the last breath has left my body. Until my heart is stilled forever. Only when you place my lifeless body on the funeral pyre, and set it aflame, then...*then* I will stop loving you."

She shook her head, unable to stop her tears from mixing with the rain as she vainly tried to keep her shoulders from hitching with her sobs.

"Only then will I no longer love you, Yul. Only then. You must believe me."

Her voice faded. She could no longer feel or think or speak. Her world was centered on his paled face as he stood ramrod straight, staring back at her, with little more than the width of the road separating them.

In the distance the sound of thunder rumbled in the darkness. A bitter cold rush of wind swept across the encampment, forcing Atty to fold her arms over her chest. A second later she was swept into his embrace and lifted against his chest as his lips found hers. By this time she was shivering so uncontrollably, she could barely feel her own hands as she sought the curve of his strong shoulder and the warm hollow of his neck.

Dimly she was aware of him lifting her legs and striding across the road, through the thicket, carrying her past the campfires until they reached the tent. As he brought her inside, he sat her next to the brazier before disappearing into the back momentarily. He soon returned with a dry towel and began to briskly rub the circulation back into her body.

Silently he removed her tunic and dried her off, finally wrapping her in the towel's warmth. Next he began to undo the buttons on her pants. Atty lay back and quietly allowed him to minister to her as she shivered from the cold. She couldn't speak, not when her teeth chattered so loudly.

Sliding her pants off, he drew up a blanket and pulled it around her. When she was tucked in, he strode back to the rear of the tent and returned with another towel. This time he began to dry himself off.

Atty watched him strip. She drank in the sight of his naked body, something she hadn't studied in a long time. He had a beautiful body, with strong, muscular arms and a wide chest. Fine golden-red hairs covered his chest, and a thin line of them ran down past his navel before spreading in an amber gold halo around his penis that, even when not aroused, was impressive. His thighs were equally muscular, his legs long. It was easy to see he got his height from his legs.

There were several small, whitish scars along his ribcage, and a few longer ones on his thighs and upper arms. Not to mention the really ugly one on his lower back. Battle wounds, now healed and almost forgotten. Yulen had once told her his proudest scars were the ones she gave him whenever her nails dug into his back. At first she'd been taken aback at the realization she'd drawn blood during their most passionate moments. Later he had made her promise never to hold back on his account.

When he finished drying off, he crawled underneath the blankets with her and drew her into his embrace to share body heat. Quietly she rested with her head in the hollow of his shoulder until her shivering abated and she could no longer keep her eyes open.

Vaguely she could feel his breathing slow. It gave her hope, knowing he was staying the night with her. Touching her. Holding her. Caring for her.

No sound from outside the tent permeated their sanctum. The lanterns' lights above them had been dimmed to where she felt like she was suspended in a warm, gentle bath. The sound of his beating heart gave her a sense of security she hadn't felt in days.

Nuzzling his throat, she kissed it tenderly as she sank into sleep. But not before she heard him murmur huskily against her temple, "I believe you."

It was all she needed to hear.

### Chapter Twelve Amassed Force

Dimly she could sense his fingers combing through her hair, untangling the knots left in it from the night before. The feel of his gentle ministrations lifted her from the depths of sleep, and Atty reveled in the cocoon of warmth surrounding her. Smiling wistfully, she stretched against his length, and realized he had buffered himself from her with one of the soft blankets.

His fingers continued to play with her tresses. Atty gave a little purr of pleasure.

"The sooner we get on the road, the sooner we can reach Wallis," he whispered, adding a tender kiss to the tip of her nose. It tickled, making her giggle.

"I embarrassed you last night, didn't I?" she asked him in a small voice. "I'm sorry."

"Actually, I think you embarrassed my men more than me. I know for a fact Fortune and Bertrand looked dumbstruck."

Opening her eyes, she saw the face of her husband less than a foot away. He was lying on his side, resting his head in the propped-up palm of his hand. In the single lantern light remaining, his eyes were almost silver in color.

Lifting his hand from her hair, he traced the contours of her face with the back of his fingers. "Will you tell me soon what's been going on, Atrilan?"

She nodded, licking her lips. "I promise. Soon."

Her answer satisfied him. Leaning over, he teased her lips with his, forcing her to roll over closer in order to claim their first good morning kiss in days. Sighing contentedly, she watched him kick off the coverings and get to his feet. As usual, a clean set of clothes was sitting just inside the door flap. Tossing hers on the warm spot he'd just vacated, he began to dress.

"I'm going to order the tent razed the moment I step outside," he warned her with a grin.

"You wouldn't!" she dared, eyes widening. However, by the tilt of his head and the twinkle in his eye, she knew he was serious. Scrambling out from beneath the blankets, she hurried to get ready.

Yulen chuckled and left the tent, emerging into what promised to be a bright fall day. Not far away, MaGrath was tying his bedroll over the back of his saddle. The physician glanced his way.

"No need to thank me," he wryly smiled. "Just wait 'till you get my bill."

"I'm going to pick up the pace a bit. I want there to be enough daylight left for the guard of honor when we finally reach Wallis."

MaGrath nodded. "Is Atty emotionally ready for this?"

"Try me," she dared him, coming up behind her husband. "Is there any coffee left?"

Observing the direction of the physician's pointing finger, she went to fetch a cup, waving a hand in acknowledgment when Yulen called to her to bring him a cup as well.

"Yulen?"

MaGrath waited for the man to drag his eyes away from the figure walking away and give him his full attention. "Word's gotten around the camp about Atty's little speech last night. Want to know what the men are saying?"

"Right now, Liam, I don't give a damn what they're saying." He finished buckling on his weapons belt and adjusted it about his waist. Making it clear that that part of their conversation was over, Yulen signaled for Mastin to send his men over to strike the tent as all around them

preparations were being made to get them back on the road as quickly as possible. He was up in his saddle, watching to see how long it would take them to finish breaking down the camp this time around when Atty brought him his cup and an apple. Along with a shy smile. Giving her a smile in return, he took his breakfast from her so she could mount her horse and join him.

Mastin had done his job well. Yulen made a mental note to thank his Second for the vastly improved time as he raised his arm and signaled for them to pull out. Once he was certain they were on their way, he left the head of the line to run his usual check, leaving Atty and MaGrath at point.

Atty watched him go as she tried to weave her unruly locks into a halfway decent braid. A few dozen feet behind, Fortune and Bertrand rode with their weapons at ready, knowing they were growing closer to Wallis. They gave her a look she couldn't read, but it sent a shiver of anticipation through her. Without conscious thought, she pulled her bow and quiver from where she normally kept them tied to the side of her saddle and set them across her shoulders in preparation. MaGrath saw her get ready.

"We're going to meet up with more of those things, aren't we?" he asked her.

"Maybe. Maybe not." She cast another look down the road where her husband had disappeared. "Maybe the sight of our forces will frighten them away. I don't know so I can't say for certain."

Pulling back on the reins, she waited for her fellow caste hunters to catch up. They seemed to know her question before she voiced it.

"We have no idea how many there are, or where they could be," Bertrand told her. "So far they've only struck during the night. Sometimes right after dusk, sometimes around midnight. Twice in the wee hours."

"But not in the daylight?" she queried.

Fortune shook his head. "So far, no. Not this time, anyway. Of course, that may have all changed since we managed to sneak out to come to Alta Novis."

Atty bit her lips in thought. Wheeling her horse around, she began to trot toward the end of the line. Normally the soldiers rode side-by-side in twos in a caravan, the wagons in the line taking up the same width as two mounted horses. This morning was no different, except for one very important detail.

Yulen was near the end of the line, talking to his men there, when he heard the horse coming quickly toward him. Seeing it was his wife, he backed off and waited for her to join him.

"Have the men keep their weapons at ready," she told him once she was near enough to be heard.

Immediately his eyes swept the road and surrounding forest. "Do you sense something?" "Not quite. More of an uneasiness. I can't explain it, but I'd feel a lot safer with the men prepared."

He had noticed her wearing her own weapons. Nodding, he gave the command, sending it up the ranks to the head of the line. Yulen never questioned her judgment, never doubted her sixth sense. It had saved them too many times in the past. Drawing his sword, he galloped back to the front of the line and gave the signal to increase their speed.

As they progressed closer to the compound, Yulen was acutely aware of how Atty and the other two Mutah hunters patrolled the perimeter of the caravan, moving up and down, and back and forth, watching the forest and roadside with an intensity that was almost hypnotic to watch.

He made the decision not to stop at noon, but ordered the men to eat in shifts on their horses. As expected, the day grew warmer, forcing him to finally call a halt for a brief rest and water break at a hidden springs Atty pointed out to him.

"It's been a while since I've been this way," MaGrath commented, coming up behind where the Battle Lord was standing in the shade of a large oak. "Does any of this look familiar yet to you? Bring back any memories?"

"Plenty," Yulen told him cryptically, taking another swig from his water bag. "Some pleasant, some not-so-pleasant." His attention was on the three hunters standing in a row beside the road, facing the forest. It appeared as if they were listening for something. Their unusual behavior had not gone unnoticed by the physician.

"What are they doing?"

"I don't know," Yulen admitted. His eyes were riveted on Atty, on the way she was concentrating, using her entire body to sense, to feel, to see, and to hear. Her knuckles were white where she gripped the longbow she held at her side.

They remained that way for an extremely long time. Although Yulen wanted to get back on the road, he hesitated to break their concentration. He trusted Atty's instincts even above his own. When she was satisfied it was safe enough to resume, she'd let him know.

Suddenly, as if someone had given a signal, all three Mutah relaxed and stepped back. Fortune bent over, his hands on his knees, and drew deep, gasping breaths. Bertrand dropped to the ground and lowered his head, looking drained and partially unconscious.

Atty walked over to where he stood to wrap her arms around his waist and lay her head against his chest. White stress lines paled around her eyes and mouth. Her skin felt cold and clammy. Silently he held her until she was ready to pull away on her own. Nearby, Mastin and his two lieutenants patiently waited for the Battle Lord's command to mount up. It was clear to all that the hunters' surveillance was over, and it had taken an enormous toll on them.

For several minutes Yulen held his tongue. At last Atty raised her face, keeping her cheek on his tunic. "They're gone," she whispered.

"Gone?"

"Moved on," she added softly.

"South," Fortune informed the Battle Lord as he and Bertrand came over to join them. "Big mass. Maybe four, five hundred all total."

Yulen fought not to reveal his sudden fear. "You're sure?" He could feel Atty's arms tighten around his waist. Normally he wouldn't question her, but with the enormity of what they were telling him, he needed to hear it again to believe it.

"They've left the area. More than likely the siege has been lifted," she told her husband.

Yulen glanced up to catch Mastin's nod. The order would go out immediately for the men to stand down. "Why didn't they attack us?" he wondered aloud.

"Because we were quiet," Fortune informed him. "You have great instincts, D'Jacques. You ordered your men to cease movement at the most critical moment. Because you called a break, we weren't moving on the road, or they would've known we were here." He shuddered. "We narrowly avoided a massacre by minutes. Our own."

Over their shoulders he could see MaGrath and Mastin pale at the news. Word would reach all the men of their narrow escape before they were back on the road. Yulen involuntarily held Atty tighter. "Is it safe to continue?"

"Yes. But it would be wise if Fortune and I watched your back. We've never heard of Bloods backtracking, but we never knew they would lay siege, either." Bertrand scratched the small, horn-like protrusions above his eyebrows. "I'm ready to be home."

Holding out a hand, Yulen offered to shake theirs. "I extend my thanks to you both for your services. You've proven yourself invaluable."

Fortune grew flushed. "Our thanks go out to you, D'Jacques. I wouldn't doubt that the biggest reason the Bloods have moved on is because they've gotten wind of our approach. Even though they had the numbers and probably could easily have overwhelmed us, your trained warriors might have been enough to turn the tide in our favor."

"But not without massive casualties. Thank heavens we'll never have to find out if that's the truth," Yulen breathed.

"If you hadn't agreed to help us, Wallis would still be on starvation watch," Bertrand also commented. "We owe you a tremendous debt."

"You owe me nothing," Yulen spoke sincerely. "You gave me back my Atrilan. The debt has been paid. I didn't agree to help you because of your situation. Let's make that very clear. Everything I do for Wallis, I do in Atty's name."

Nodding, Fortune turned to return to his horse, with Bertrand right beside him. Looking down at his wife, Yulen was met by her clear gaze. It was an open, honest look, and one filled with more than a trace of love.

Not a day would go by when he wouldn't discover something new or different about her, he realized. And since her public declaration of her feelings for him last night, Yulen had felt an ever-increasing sense of pride and affection for his wife. Was it possible to love someone more every day? Was it possible to care so much for another person that life no longer held any meaning if she wasn't there?

He thought he'd learned the truth to such thoughts when he had believed she was dead. The agony he had endured had been worse than any torture man could devise. It had been a wet rot that had begun in the heart and spread slowly, oozing over every nerve and muscle in his body, eating him alive from the inside out, until there was nothing left. He didn't know how much longer he would have survived if Atty hadn't returned to him when she did.

It was a moot issue now, anyway. As long as she loved him, he didn't care who knew or what they thought about them. With her in his life, *as* his life, day would always follow night, and nights would always find her in his arms. And they would endure. Together, never apart. Never again.

Bending over, he kissed her tenderly, then walked her to where her horse was grazing by the side of the road. As he watched her mount, he remembered he'd promised her he would try to make every day of their lives together a gift. A gift of love and acceptance, of mutual discovery, and of shared beauty. All of that would begin again once he learned to trust her enough to wait for her, to wait until she was ready to accept him back into their bed. When *she* was ready.

Whatever it was that was holding her back, he had to show how much he loved her by being patient. No more entreaties, he vowed to himself. No more moments of forceful possession.

"I love you," he whispered up to her as he handed her the reins. She gave him a tired but glowing smile. "I believe you," she whispered back. It was turning out to be a beautiful fall day.

## Chapter Thirteen Grand Entrance

It was late afternoon when the forces from Alta Novis reached the cut-off from the main road that would lead them to Wallis. Yulen had the men pull into a closed circle to begin preparations for the guard of honor. Because of the lack of time given them initially to prepare a full pageantry, it wouldn't take long this time for them to get ready. Nevertheless, Yulen knew that what they would bring into Wallis would more than suffice. A guard of honor was meant to impress, and he was damned if he wasn't going to present Atty to her people, and especially to the Council of Elders, in style. He just hoped that some day he would be able to do it again with all the bells and whistles attached.

Because of the lateness of the day, he had a small area cordoned off with blankets from the tent so Atty could be afforded some privacy to change and get ready. As he and Mastin checked on the details of the caravan, Fortune and Bertrand remained on their horses, watching the spectacle unfold before them.

At first they had decided to go ahead to Wallis to let them know of their arrival. But the events of the past few days had changed their minds. Fortune smiled, thinking of the look on the Council's faces when they got a look at the woman they fully expected to be dead, if not a shell of her former self. More than that, he wanted to see his wife's face when she saw for the first time in almost half a year the girl she'd fought to save. She had known, Fortune admitted to himself. Tory had known all along what the power of love could do. He smiled again to himself. It was going to be a joyous homecoming.

\* \* \* \*

Yulen pushed aside the blanket and walked into the tiny interior where Atty was trying to get the last of the buttons fastened on her gown. It was immediately clear to him that she was not having much success, and he chuckled. At the sound of his laughter, she whirled around, a lock of hair escaping the knot at the back of her head to cascade over one bared shoulder. Seeing her husband in full dress armor, she gasped lightly. "Holy crap!"

Yulen chuckled again and reached out to turn her back around before helping her with the last of the small pearl buttons. She glanced over her shoulder to see him grinning. "I didn't know you had that," she admitted.

"Then you didn't snoop very well," he teased. "It's kept in the closet of the bedroom."

"I snooped. I didn't see it."

"Do you remember a large leather case on the floor in the very back?"

"Is *that* what was in it?" She wriggled her hips to adjust the flow of the skirt. "Damn thing was too heavy when I tried to move it. I just didn't check it out any further."

Finished, he gave her a playful swat on the rear. "Done. Let me see you."

Atty turned around as she smoothed out the material, then glanced up to see how he would react to her first real fancy dress. She wasn't expecting the look of raw desire that filled his eyes before spreading over his face.

"Oh, God, Atrilan. I had no idea," he breathed softly. He stepped forward, leaning over, and kissed her, holding her face between his hands. Atty gave in to his kiss, not resisting the urgent hunger behind his mouth. When he finally released her, her eyes were bright, her skin a fresh pink color.

Yulen let his eyes take in the sight of her. Madigan had been right. The light blue velvet material had been the perfect choice. The long sleeves were elegant, as was the fitted waistline. The slightly gathered skirt that flowed down to the ground curved gently over her hips and buttocks. But it was the neckline that gave him pause. The bust was low, leaving her shoulders bare, and giving up for view the upper swells of her breasts. What would be presented was a mature Atrilan, the huntress made a woman, with a woman's body and a woman's sexuality. Unable to help himself, he traced one soft curve in her décolleté. A trail of gooseflesh followed in the wake of his fingertips.

"Do you like it?" Atty asked, smiling. His touch was like fire on her skin.

"You are...not the girl I married," he grinned with difficulty. Seeing her like this, with the secrets of her lusty nature securely concealed yet, at the same time, hinted at by what was allowed to be revealed, he was unable to stop his own body from reacting to her. Thank goodness the heavy ceremonial armor would conceal any visible signs of his response to touching her, holding her, and kissing her, and not being able to do anything other than that. His body was battling frustration and an erection with neither side giving in.

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" she laughed lightly. She pulled at the knot at the nape of her neck, releasing her hair. It flowed over her bare shoulders like a small cape, ending just below her elbows. Hair the color of the sky on a perfect fall day.

Morning glory hair.

"Most definitely a good thing," he assured her huskily before stepping back. If he didn't put at least some distance between them, there was the good chance he would pin her to the blanket-covered ground and take her before she could put up a fight.

He reached down to pick up the small box sitting on top of her pile of discarded clothing. Opening it, he lifted out the silver circlet with its sapphire stone. Carefully he placed it on her forehead, checking to make sure it was securely set in place. "Do me a favor, my love? The entire time we're in Wallis, I want you to wear this. Will you do that for me?"

Atty smiled tenderly and impulsively kissed the inside of his wrist that was bared beside her face. The spear of electricity that race through his veins had a direct effect on his lower anatomy. Frozen in shock for the moment, Yulen wondered how he was going to walk out of the curtained hideaway, much less pull himself into a saddle.

"I would be honored to wear it, just as I am proud to be presented as your wife," she murmured.

Yulen started, then laughed nervously. "You know, you have a point there. This *is* the first time I've presented you as my wife." Their presence in Alta Novis had long been such an accepted thing, that the initial moments of awkwardness at their first formal presentation as husband and wife to the citizens of the compound had never been an issue. The first time he remembered waking up and leaning out their bedroom window, and hearing the far sentry call out "Battle Lady about!" with the same nonchalant tone as when he himself was being announced had been a moment that had been a surprising yet comfortable adjustment.

Once the people of his compound finally accepted Atty for who she was, and for what she meant to their Battle Lord, the days that followed had allowed him and Atty the freedom to let their love grow as they began to discover and learn about each other.

Wallis and its people had never been privy to that. They knew nothing of the Battle Lord the man or the husband, except for that one day when he'd gone back to their compound, alone and unarmed, hoping to see the body of his wife because he'd believed she was dead. And before that...

Yulen shut the past out of his mind. They were being given a fresh start and a new beginning in the place Atty had known all her life as home. Her people would see her in a new light, with a future that promised to be even brighter. And he would be there beside her, presenting her with pride and love and a genuine sense of curiosity. While they were here, he wanted to learn all he could about this enigmatic, beautiful, incredibly brave woman he'd married, and what better time would there be to find it out?

"Time to set them on their ears," he told her in a conspiratorial tone of voice. Atty giggled nervously. Yulen caught her hand and looked at her in surprise. "I don't believe it. You're nervous?"

She nodded. "I don't think I've had this many flutterings in my stomach since you took my virginity down in Collaunt's cell," she admitted honestly.

Yulen stared at her. Sometimes her bluntness was refreshing, sometimes it was unexpectedly brutal, but it was always pure Atty. He would have her no other way "Come. We need to be on our way."

Taking her hand, he led her out from the temporary shelter and over to where her horse had been readied. He kept his eyes on her, on her reactions, and on the obvious surprise and delight that was revealed in her expression as she began to notice the details being erected.

The small bay mare had been brushed and now stood waiting, draped in a full coat made to resemble the half-blue, half-red banner of Alta Novis. Atty turned her head to see Yulen's stallion nearby, also groomed and similarly dressed.

"I'm going to place you side-saddle," he told her. "Once we enter the gates, just follow my lead and stay next to me the whole way. Got it?"

"Got it. Anything else I need to know?"

"Yeah. Know I'm getting a big kick out of this," he grinned. Giving her waist a squeeze, he lifted her effortlessly up into her saddle.

By the time she'd settled herself to where she wouldn't fear sliding off, Atty looked up to see the blankets had been removed from the trees, and the men were beginning to move out. She froze and turned around as she noticed the transformation that had occurred while she was getting dressed.

Every man was wearing his battle armor, shined to a mirror polish. Every horse wore an abbreviated version of Alta Novis's colors across their flanks. Atty's eyes went back to her husband. He did not wear his battle armor, but another set that was emblazoned with scrollwork and ornamentation across the chest, shoulders, and stomach. It was also almost pure gold. With his reddish blond coloring and the definitive scar down the right side of his face, he was an impressive, almost frightening and formidable figure.

Atty moved up next to him as he pulled on his armored gloves. "You're completely oblivious, aren't you?" he smiled as he asked her.

"What am I oblivious to?"

He pulled on the other glove. "The reaction of the men." Giving her a wink, he grabbed his reins. "Procession out!" he called.

Atty automatically gave the mare a nudge forward, but from the corner of her eye she caught sight of the soldiers as they fell into formation beside and behind them. It wasn't until Mastin took his place directly behind the Battle Lord, passing through her field of vision, that she

finally got a small hint of what Yulen meant. "Why are they staring at me like that?" she hissed at him as they entered the wood on their way toward Wallis.

"You have no idea, do you?"

She saw the smug look on his face. The sun was beginning its descent in the western sky. In its orange rays, Yulen glowed like a smaller version. Somehow, in the back of her mind, she suspected he'd planned for just that impression.

"You're talking in too many riddles today," she accused her husband. "No idea about what?"

"Remember me telling you how beautiful you are?"

"You tell me that almost every day."

"Granted. I guess my telling you so often has numbed its effect on you, but you are. And it's not often we see you in a dress." His eyes raked over her with undisguised heat. "Especially one where your charms are so devastatingly obvious." He chuckled to see her eyes widen before she glanced down at her partially exposed breasts. She pressed a hand to her stomach in surprise as her cheeks turned a deep pink.

"Oh, my!"

Yulen almost choked on his laughter.

They continued to advance en masse toward the newly released compound. Atty kept turning around, keenly tuned to what was going on around her. At one point Yulen raised an eyebrow her way. "What are you sensing?" he asked, not alarmed but curious.

"They know we're coming," she informed him.

"Good."

Now it was her turn to give him a curious look.

Once they reached the break in the trees and could see the outer wall of the compound, Atty paused as Yulen gave the signal to halt.

"This is going to be the tricky part," he told her. She waited for him to explain. "Normally, when we're anticipated, the main gates would be opened for us to enter. That obviously isn't going to be offered to us this evening unless you can get them to open them, Atty."

She brightened. "Not a problem. I'll have to go out alone, first, though."

Yulen nodded. "Okay. I'll take my cues from you." He smiled and waved a hand at her, gesturing outward, inviting her to proceed.

Confidently, Atty rode out into the clearing as the troops watched her advance toward the huge gate. It was only a matter of seconds before the challenge was issued.

"Ho! Stranger! Identify!"

Atty lifted her chin. "Atrilan D'Jacques!" she called out in a loud, forceful voice.

The sentry literally hung over the side of the wall. "Who? Atty? Is that really you?"

She shielded her eyes with one hand against the glare of the sun. "Stephand Reah! What have I told you about carrying your bow like that? Turn that damn thing around and wear it right, or I'm coming up there and beating you over your pointed head with it until you learn better!"

Yulen and the soldiers behind and around him who had been within earshot did their best to cover their laughter. What was more amusing than her threat was the fact that the sentry *did* have a distinctly pointed skull, like an overly narrowed egg.

The sentry disappeared from sight for a moment, then popped back up, this time with nearly a dozen others. "Atty!"

"Open the gates, Stephand! Both of them!"

Almost immediately the massive wood doors began to crank outward, slowly, ponderously. Atty remained rooted where she sat as the walls of the compound began to fill up. People lined the parapets and catwalks, until the narrow ledges could hold no more. Turning around in her saddle, she gave a nod.

"Presentation...forward!"

Yulen called, giving the signal. Behind him Mastin waited to bring up the first row. Slowly, the Battle Lord moved forward with his six guards of honor lined up behind him from left to right. He stopped when he was even with Atty, and the next order was given from behind.

"Secure guard...out!"

Moving as one, the first row of armored soldiers emerged from the forest to flank behind the Battle Lord and Lady. They gleamed in the sun's setting rays as they stately made formation.

"Remote guard...out!"

The second row took their place, creating a box-like, protective wall around the first. Already the small opening was nearly filled with their presence.

"Defensive guard...out!"

The final third of soldiers drew out into the open, taking their places in the exact order they'd practiced. As they paused for the next order, the entire garrison remained perfectly still and in exact, perfect lines. The effect was mesmerizing. Before them, all of Wallis had gathered to watch with eyes wide with fear and wonder. And awe.

Atty felt light-headed. Glancing askance at her husband, she could see the stoic expression on his face. Lifting her chin, she grew determined to present an honorable and equable face.

"Presentation...colors!"

One hundred banners representing Alta Novis simultaneously snapped upward into the air on their poles. In the evening breeze, the pennants began to snap and pop against the wind.

Beside her husband, Mastin took his position on his other side and slightly to the rear, as was his right as Yulen's Second. "Presentation...arms!"

The air sang with the song of steel weapons being unsheathed in one long, smooth pull. Every man lifted his sword above his head and froze in that position.

"Arms...forward!"

The third guard began to move forward while, at the same time, the second guard boxing them in moved aside. The result was a corridor three men deep leading from where the Battle Lord and Lady waited, all the way to the entrance in the gates. Their upraised swords, tilted forward, made for a canopy of steel overhead.

"Guard of Honor...defend!"

The six men behind Yulen, each one a lieutenant, broke rank and positioned themselves beside Yulen and Atty, three on each side. They paused, waiting for their leader to take command.

"This is it, my love," Yulen whispered under his breath, drawing up his reins.

"I'm ready," Atty promised, kneeing her horse.

Together they moved toward the gates of Wallis.

## Chapter Fourteen Welcome Back

Atty forced herself to keep her eyes forward and her face calm, although she felt anything but. All of Wallis was either watching from overhead or lining the main corridor from the entrance to the courtyard.

She knew all of these people personally. She'd grown up with them, and they had helped raise her from birth. Which was why she couldn't help herself from drinking in the sight of everyone she passed.

Hot, prickly heat filled her face. Her nose stung from unshed tears as she realized how homesick she'd been. Everywhere she looked brought back memories of her past. Each visage in the crowd was a voice in her head. But today these faces bore the ravaged signs of a nearly month-long starvation watch that finally was over. Unable to stop herself, Atty glanced over at Yulen, who saw her anguish and smiled encouragingly.

They continued to advance slowly, stately, toward the end of the corridor where they could see all the members of the Council of Elders standing in wait for them. Once she and her husband passed through the gates, the order to lower their weapons was given. There was a sudden explosive sound as two hundred swords were slapped against metal armor in unison. The silence that followed was deafening.

Not a word was spoken by either the soldiers or by the Mutah community. The forces from Alta Novis were filling the smaller compound, as intimidating as they'd been five months ago, but no longer frightening. They were not there to torture or kill. They were there on a mission of mercy. Atty felt pride in their precision and dedication. They were her new family. Her new family meeting her old, where she hoped they would subsequently forge a stronger relationship with the new treaty Yulen planned to propose to the Council.

At the end of the corridor Yulen held up his arm, signaling for a complete halt. "Arms...rest!" Mastin barked.

Two hundred swords sang a softer song as they were sheathed in one smooth move.

Standing at the head of the Council, Piron George never dropped his gaze from the Battle Lord's. Atty saw the unreadable expression on the man's face, and she glanced over at her husband. His own eyes were expressionless, but she knew too well the play around his lips. There was a silent war being waged for authority. Atty had no doubt who would be the victor.

Almost casually he dismounted. Walking around the front of the horses, he came over to Atty and held up his arms to help her down. She gave him a warm smile that reflected in her face as she held out her hands and felt him clasp her around her waist. He literally lifted her from the saddle and lowered her to the ground. For a split second his hands remained around her as something unspoken passed between them. Atty was transfixed by his gaze, by the intense emotions behind his eyes, leaving her unaware of him lifting her left hand until he placed a kiss directly on the small platinum band she wore on her third finger.

Keeping her hand firmly in his, Yulen turned and proceeded toward the front where the Council was watching them, ready to formally present her. They stopped directly in front of George.

George's eyes swept from the Battle Lord to Atty and back. Atty saw his hesitancy.

"Good sirs, I would like to present to you my wife, Atrilan D'Jacques, of the compound Alta Novis, late of the compound Wallis."

Atty fought her nervousness by giving the old man a cool, almost daring stare. There was a moment of tenseness, until a small smile bent the corners of his mouth. Giving a deep sigh of finality, the Council leader dropped his stern visage. "We've missed you, Atty," he honestly admitted.

A second later she had thrown herself into his arms and was giving him a smothering hug. "I've missed you all!" she exclaimed, fighting back tears. Then she stepped back slightly and gave him a hard, angry shove as she glared at them with a dark, hurtful look. "How *dare* you and the Council! *Damn* each one of you!"

The men look disoriented and confused. "What are you talking about?" George demanded, completely lost. Glancing over at the Battle Lord, he was even more confused by the smirk on the man's face. His attention went back to the stranger standing before him. A stranger he'd known since her first breath of life.

"Damn you for never telling me Yulen had come back here looking for me! Damn you for making me think he never cared enough! And damn every member of the Council for thinking I wasn't of any use to you anymore. That I'd lost all my skills and ability to hunt for you and provide for this community, and that's why you relented to let me go back to Alta Novis!"

Without warning, she snatched George's staff he used to call their meetings to order and broke it over her knee, tossing the pieces behind her like so much kindling. The crowd reacted as if she'd done an unthinkable act.

"You owe me and Yulen an apology, Piron George," she ordered them, shaking a finger in their direction. "And it damn well better be a good one, and an *honest* one, or, by God, I'll take those wagons full of supplies and send them straight back to where they came from!"

A movement behind the cluster of men caught her eye. Before anyone could see what was happening, Atty whirled around and snatched her husband's dagger from his hip. Her body completed the circle, and she threw the blade underhand, over their heads. There was a small grunt and a solid sound as the knife embedded itself through the shirtsleeve and into the trunk of the tree twenty feet away. The man standing beside it could only stare in shock where his arm was securely pinned, preventing him from raising the bow, much less aiming and firing it.

"You better had been planning on putting that thing away, Killen Sudderlee," she threatened angrily, "instead of what I *thought* you were about to do with it!"

There was shocked silence as realization and understanding began to flow through the Mutah community. The flaps on George's cheeks noisily blew open and closed, revealing his irritation and agitation. He opened his mouth to comment on her actions when two men emerged from where they had been standing amid the armored soldiers.

Stepping up to the low platform, Fortune and Bertrand faced the Council. "You owe them an apology," Fortune restated. "We were wrong. We were *all* wrong."

Turning around to face the crowd, he caught sight of his wife's face. His next words were meant more for her, as well as for the rest of them. "We place our greatest faith on love, and marriage, and family. Yet, we tried to deny those very principles to someone we claimed to love. I admit I am just as guilty when I tell the Council now, we had no reason to take Atty away from the man *she chose* for her husband. And then we denied her going back to him, when she had every right! Our guilt multiplied when we denied D'Jacques the right to see her, or to even let him know she was alive! Her husband! Therefore I beseech the Council."

Fortune turned back to face the small group of elders. "Why can't we offer an apology to them both? Why did we have to punish Atty, when all she was guilty of was falling in love with a Normal? I mean, we're talking about Atty here! Remember her? The little girl who never did anything unless it was done in the best interest of everyone? The young woman who brought in a wolfen because she desperately wanted to be accepted by others? The young woman who made a hundred friends but never once allowed anyone into her heart? The woman who...who took an oath of chastity in order to protect what she believed was her most precious gift? Her hunting skill?"

Fortune's voice dropped. "Haven't you even once wondered what kind of man Yulen D'Jacques is, when night after night she cried to be with him? This is the man she was willing to give up everything for, including her oath. Well, *I* can tell you, after four days on the road with him, after seeing them together..." He paused and shook his head.

"Despite what we put them through, it wasn't Atty who agreed to help us in this time of need, despite what everyone probably thinks. It was D'Jacques. The man you threatened. The man you turned away. The man you deprived of a wife." Licking his lips, he squared his shoulders. "Frankly I never thought I'd be here today with an armed guard and wagons filled with supplies to tide us over until we can bring in fresh meat. I don't know about the rest of you, but thank you seems to be a pretty paltry payment."

The sun disappeared below the treetops but no one moved to light the lanterns. It grew extremely quiet in the courtyard as everyone waited for the Council to make their move. This time, though, it was Twoson Pike who stepped forward past George as if by silent agreement the rest of the Council had chosen to no longer let the man speak for them. Looking at both Atty and the Battle Lord, he said, "There has been enough bloodshed and heartache on both sides. D'Jacques, you've honored your part of the treaty, and then some. Perhaps your coming here can be the start of something better for both our peoples."

Yulen nodded. "I had the same hope." He glanced at Atty, then back at Twoson, making his next expectation very clear with the lift of an eyebrow.

Clearing his throat, Twoson looked down at the changed woman still standing flustered and ruffled before him. "I'm sorry, Atty. We're all sorry. Forgive us, but we thought we were doing the right thing. We though we were protecting you, but we were wrong. Can you forgive a bunch of old fools?"

Slowly the flush of anger drained from her face. Atty bowed her head, hands on hips as she deliberated. The toe of one slippered foot scratched a pattern in the dirt. Yulen saw her eyes glance his way, and he noticed she was trying to hide the smile that wouldn't stop forming on her lips.

"Feel better, my love?" he grinned as he folded his arms across his chest.

She sighed loudly and lifted her face, but kept her eyes averted from the Council. "Yeah," she admitted in a small voice.

"You want to go get my dagger, then?"

Almost meekly, she walked over to the tree and jerked the blade out of the trunk, but not before giving the pinned man an angry glare. Returning to where her husband was standing, she spun the knife in the palm of her hand before flipping the weapon back into its sheath.

"Thank you," Yulen said. "By the way, why didn't you use your own?"

"Couldn't get to it in time," she answered with an apologetic grin.

"Why not?"

Her eyes traveled down to the front of her dress. "Because it's strapped to my leg underneath this dress, and I didn't think it would be appropriate to hike my skirt up in front of everybody to get it."

Yulen nearly choked on his laughter as the others around him tried to keep a straight face. "Atty, do I even dare ask you where you put your longbow?"

Atty groaned and rolled her eyes. "Oh, good heavens, I married a comedian! For your information, it's still tied to my saddle, beneath that cape on my horse!" she exclaimed. However, the last part of her explanation was lost in the sound of her husband's laughter, and she turned to see Mastin and MaGrath standing directly behind her, vainly trying to keep from joining him. On the other side of the platform, Fortune and Bertrand began to snicker. Even the Council was having a difficult time holding back. Before long, the entire crowd was beset with fits of laughter.

Too late. Atty threw up her hands, admitting defeat, as a slow blush covered her from neckline to cheeks. "All right! One more time make the blue-haired girl the brunt of the joke!" She whirled around to make at least some sort of dignified exit on her mare, when a pair of armor-clad arms snagged her and pulled her against him. Yulen gave her an apologetic kiss that warmed her down to her toes. When he lifted his lips from hers, she opened her eyes to give him a smoky look. For a moment she let her guard down, and he could see her desire, desperate and aching, in her blue-gray depths. A second later her defenses were back up, making him wonder for the hundredth time what was keeping her away from him. But he had promised himself to give her time. She had sworn to him it wouldn't be much longer, and she had never lied to him before.

Releasing the long sigh he hadn't been aware of holding, Yulen gave a nod to Mastin, who came over to begin helping him to remove the ornamental armor.

"What do you want us to do?" Twoson asked, realizing the man was preparing to take charge.

"First things first, my men will begin unloading the wagons. You'll need to see that the foodstuffs are distributed equally. Second, let's get some chairs and a table out here. If we're going to discuss fortifying this compound against future attacks, we'll need room to spread out."

"Where should we tell the men to make camp?" Mastin asked, unbuckling the shoulder plates and lifting them over the Battle Lord's head. Yulen looked to the Council for answers.

"Anywhere throughout the compound will be fine," Twoson told them. "We have no barracks or guest quarters that will accommodate everyone."

"Yulen?"

He glanced over at where Atty stood watching and listening. "Time for me to get to work, my love," he told her. "Aren't you chomping at the bit to go out and get re-acquainted with your friends?"

"You don't mind?"

"It's going to be a—"

"Long night," she finished in unison with him, adding a wistful smile. "I know. It's not like I haven't heard that old excuse before." She snickered. "Okay. I'll be back in a little while to see how things are going."

Fortune stepped forward to get her attention. "I slipped Tory a nutria. She'll have dinner ready in another hour or so. We would be honored to have you for supper."

Atty slapped him on the shoulder in mock anger. "I would have been devastated if you hadn't asked. Yulen?"

"At least let me get things somewhat situated here first," he laughed as Mastin removed the final piece of armor and handed him his weapons belt before carrying the armor away to pack for the return trip home. "Come back later and get me."

Atty walked over and stretched up on her tiptoes to give him a quick kiss, then hopped off the platform and into the waiting arms of the crowd, who gathered around her to bombard her with questions. Yulen watched her departure until Paxton nudged his elbow.

"Where should I have the men erect the tent?"

It wasn't difficult giving him an answer. "Put it under Atty's tree," he told him.

"Sir?" The lieutenant appeared baffled.

"Come," a Council member Yulen had yet to be introduced to gestured to the young man. "I'll show you where it is."

When the rest of the Council had cleared the platform, Yulen found himself facing Piron George alone. The Council leader had not moved or said a word during the entire series of events since Twoson had accepted responsibility. Strangely, even though he stood on foreign soil, on the older man's home territory, Yulen felt an odd sense of home. It was almost as if he knew this compound and its people were destined to become a permanent part of his life. "I'm here to give your people a future," he quietly said, buckling on his weapons belt.

George nodded. "I know that."

"Then why won't you accept me? Why won't you accept me being with Atrilan?"

"Give me time, D'Jacques," George told him with the ghost of sadness in his weary voice. "I have a few more years of hatred to overcome than she did."

Slowly, the Mutah stepped off the platform and disappeared into the gathering gloom as some of the Wallis inhabitants began to go from pole to pole, lighting the streetlights. Behind him, Yulen could hear the sounds of people preparing their suppers, the majority of them eating decently for the first time in many days. There was laughter and the occasional cackle of joy. If he closed his eyes he could easily believe he was in Alta Novis.

"Sir?"

Turning around, Yulen saw where the table and chairs from the Council lodge had been brought out and set on the platform. Straightening his tunic and belt around his waist, Yulen opened the box set before him and pulled out the sheaf of notes he'd written several days ago. He wondered where Atty had gone, and what she might be doing at that moment, but he didn't have long to dwell on it. The Council members would soon be returning to take their seats and find out what the Battle Lord had planned for them. He had to be ready to defend every suggestion he needed to make. Not to mention swallowing a lot of humble pie.

Sighing, Yulen rubbed a hand over his face. It had been a very long day, and it would be a very long night, indeed.

# Chapter Fifteen Old Friends

"Well, Fortune was right," Irmalee announced loudly. "It was pretty shitty how the Council treated you. We didn't know ourselves that you were back until Fortune went before Piron and requested a council meeting!"

"I have no recollection of being brought back, either," Atty admitted. "One moment I was marrying Yulen, and the next thing I remember is waking up in Fortune's spare bedroom feeling like someone had run over me with a team of wild horses."

She was sitting on a stump near the schoolyard, surrounded by at least two dozen friends and others eager to hear her story.

"Imagine you, married to a Normal. And you were going to give up everything for him." Jessit shivered. "Oh, he just does something to you when he looks at you, doesn't he?"

Portia reached over to rub the material of the velvet gown between her fingers. "You are sooo lucky. And he is sooo handsome!" Several others agreed with her, bringing a rush of blood to Atty's cheeks. "Sooo, what kind of lover is he?"

Several of the young women leaned closer, hoping not to miss a single word. Atty raised an eyebrow at them. "Like I would tell," she said, flustered. All the questions they had thrown at her earlier hadn't been too difficult to answer or dodge. This was a different story altogether. The flush that crept up to her face was beginning to spread throughout her entire body. Already she could feel herself subconsciously responding to their probing questions. For every intimate detail they wanted to know about, a dozen memories reminded her body of his.

"He's strong, isn't he?" Irmalee smiled, adding a little giggle.

"Did you see his buns?" piped up the petite girl sitting next to the stump, right beside their guest of honor.

"Corianne, you notice everybody's buns!" Jessit retorted as everyone hooted and laughed.

"Well, he has cute buns," Corianne defended with a pout. Sliding her eyes upward at Atty, she tried to get confirmation. "I bet he's got a magnificent body underneath those leather britches."

Atty slapped her arm and gave her a stern but playful warning look. "What would your mother say if she heard you talking like that?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Mohmee would probably ask you the same question, Atty!"

"Hey, everybody! Have you see what they're doing over by Atty's tree?" Mendenall asked, running up breathlessly. When he had everyone's attention, he told them. "They're putting up this big blue tent! And one of the solders said it was the Battle Lady's tent!"

All eyes turned her way. "Is that what they call you? The Battle Lady?" Portia asked in awe.

Atty sighed. "Yeah."

"What does he call you?" Corianne asked.

A tender smile came over Atty's face. It was not lost on the rest of the group. "He calls me Atty," she admitted with some hesitancy.

Jenna Beth barked with laughter. "I'll bet that's not all he calls her!"

"I heard him call her 'my love' just like that. Clear as day!" Portia added.

"He did? In *public?*" Jessit asked in astonishment.

"Right out there in the courtyard. Don't tell me you didn't hear him."

Jessit pouted. "Aww, geez. I was too far in the back."

"Did you at least see him kiss her? Ahhhh!" Corianne fell onto her back in a mock faint. The group laughed at her antics, including Atty.

From behind her, Sarasue reached over to finger the circlet on Atty's forehead. "That's a real stone, isn't it?"

"Sapphire," Atty admitted.

"Does he make you happy?"

"Yes." She nodded slightly. "Very. I have no regrets. None."

"What kind of tent are they putting up?" Mendenall inquired. "Is it for council meetings?"

"No, it's mine. It's where we sleep when Yulen and I are away from Alta Novis. He gave it to me as a wedding present."

"You mean he *sleeps* in there with you?" Corianne's eyes widened.

"No, silly," Jenna Beth teased the girl. "He gets to sleep outside with the men. Of *course* he sleeps in there with Atty!"

"I'll bet they do more than *sleep* in there," Portia dryly hinted.

"Yuuu-len." A couple of girls, Fiona and Gia, breathed the name together. It set off several others in a fit of giggles.

A small tug on her skirt redirected Atty's attention to the young girl who had somehow managed to scoot up closer through the crowd. "Did you want to ask me something, Keedra?" Seeing the little twelve-year-old who had been one of Keelor's dearest friends, Atty felt the sting of tears.

"Are you going to have a baby soon?" the child inquired. The question was totally unexpected, but the rest of the crowd immediately became interested in the answer.

"I would have to get pregnant first," Atty told her with a nervous laugh.

"But it's sort of your duty, isn't it?" Jenna Beth asked. "I mean, since he's the Battle Lord. Don't you have to give him an heir or something like that?"

"I...I would guess so. We haven't discussed it, to be honest."

"Oh, gee, Atty, you almost sound like you don't want to have a baby," Corianne accused.

Again, Atty tried to hide her sudden shyness from their probing questions. "Look, we've only been married a few months. We're still getting to know each other. Learning each other's habits and all."

"Tell us!"

"Tell you what?"

"About his habits. What does he do that drives you nuts?" Fiona asked.

"Oh, that's not a hard one to answer. He won't admit when he's wrong, even if the evident slaps him in the face," Atty giggled. "At those times I could almost poke him with one of my barbed points."

"Okay. So what does he do to make you just *melt*," Corianne whispered loudly.

Atty bit her lower lip as she thought. Looking down in her lap, she noticed she had been absentmindedly twisting her wedding ring around her finger. "That's easy. His kisses. Doesn't matter if I'm mad or sad or what. He makes my hands go numb. I can't resist him, I can't stay angry, I can't *think* when he starts to kiss me."

There was another round of romantic sighs all around, followed by a chorus of gentle laughter. They were interrupted by Memnon striding toward them with a purposeful set to his demeanor. "Atty! Mom's got dinner ready. She told me to come tell you so you could go get your husband."

Nodding, Atty rose to her feet and straightened her skirt. Privately she loved the feel of the material against her skin, but she would be glad when she could get back into her familiar pants and tunic. "Thanks, Memnon. Tell Tory we'll be there shortly."

"Tell us more later?" Jenna Beth asked as they also stood, ready to scatter to their own homes. It was well into dark, and before long everyone would be taking to their own beds for the night. Atty gave her a regretful grin.

"Sorry. I'm dragging. You have to remember we were on the road four days before we arrived."

"How about tomorrow?" insisted Corianne.

"Tomorrow morning I'm heading out with the caste to get some fresh meat."

"Wow. That's right! You're still a hunter!" Memnon commented in astonishment.

"Damn right. And I intend to prove it to the rest of the Council." Giving them a final goodnight, Atty hurried to the center courtyard to fetch her husband for supper.

As expected, he was surrounded by half a dozen men, two from the Council, and the other four she recognized as being important members of the compound. They were hunched over some charts and papers that she saw bore Yulen's handwriting. Deliberately she stepped onto the platform and made her way over to his side where she placed one hand, palm down and fingers spread, on top of the document they were busily discussing.

"King's X!"

"Atty, what are you doing?" Yulen asked her, but not without a little relief. She could see how his exhaustion was beginning to catch up to him.

"Calling a time out so you can get something to eat," she told him. Looking up, she gave the men a little smile as she addressed them directly. "Excuse us, please, but we've had a long journey, not counting a near-miss with a horde of Bloods, and frankly I'm hungry enough to eat a moose, antlers and all. And since it's supper time, I'd like to be able to look at my husband over my plate. He'll be back, I promise. But, in the meantime, I'd appreciate it if you could just spare him for an hour or so."

The men bade them a good evening and dispersed, leaving Atty to grab her husband's hand and almost haul him out of his chair. Chuckling, Yulen allowed her to guide him through what to him was a maze of walkways to a small apartment-like home. As they traveled down the side streets, he couldn't help but notice the faces peering at them from behind curtained windows. "Looks like we're objects of curiosity," he murmured to her with a smile.

Atty cut him a smug look. "It's not me who's the object," she teased. "Hope you're hungry. Tory cooks for twice as many people as she sets."

"Anything I need to be aware of before we get there? Any kind of protocol I need to follow?"

"Oh, good heavens, Yulen. We're just common folk. As long as you don't lick your plate clean, you'll do okay."

He laughed at her visual imagery and gave her hand a squeeze.

As they approached the Kalich family's front door, it opened, and a tall, strikingly beautiful woman stood in the doorway waiting for them. Seeing the couple, she held out her arms in greeting.

"Atty! Oh, God, you make a mother's heart proud!" She hugged her adopted daughter with warmth before looking up at the man who accompanied her. Hoping to avoid any awkwardness, Yulen took the woman's hand and bent over it, placing a kiss on the workroughened knuckles. To all outward appearances Tory Kalich could pass for a Normal.

"Thank you for inviting us," he told her sincerely.

Tory blushed. Unable to take her eyes away from Yulen's golden-red appearance, she stepped back and gestured for them to enter her home, shutting the door behind them.

Fortune emerged from a back room. "Glad you could make it, D'Jacques. Take a seat. It'll just be the four of us tonight. The rest of the household has run over to a friend's house for an all-night celebration." He grunted. "This is one history-making visit you're making. You know that, right?"

"I can imagine," Yulen admitted.

Tory interrupted to have them take their seats at the table as she began to serve them from the pots sitting on the hearth by the fire. Waving off Atty's offer of help, she quickly set full trenchers before them. "Hope you like nutria..." She hesitated, unsure as to what to call the Battle Lord.

"I believe at this point you should call me by my given name," he grinned.

Tory smiled back. "Have you had nutria before, Yulen?"

"I believe so. Although I'll be honest and admit that after eating Atty's cooking these past few months, I've found there's very little that isn't edible if it's fixed properly."

Tory nodded, taking her seat next to her husband. "Then you've probably had it. Can I offer my thanks for coming back to Wallis?" She gave Fortune a quick but scathing glance. "Sometimes our Council can be over-zealous in their decisions."

"Understandable." Looking to his wife, Yulen let Atty know where her tent had been erected. "I may be a couple more hours before I can retire."

"Just don't be alarmed when you see me gone when you get up."

"Going out?" he asked her.

"Yeah. The entire caste is heading out to see what can be rustled up for tomorrow night." Yulen paused. "Tomorrow night? What's happening then?"

"We're throwing a big party for you and your men," Fortune told him. "Dancing, games of chance, not to mention a feast."

"Not to also mention a couple barrels of lemon verbossa," Atty added with a snicker.

Chuckling, Yulen carved himself another piece of meat. "Okay. I'll bite. What's lemon verbossa." In his mind's eye he could see the tiny grove of lemon trees that had come to symbolize Wallis and its inhabitants to him.

"Have you seen or remember a strand of lemon trees on the far side of the compound, near the gate where you entered several months ago?" Fortune pointed out. The Battle Lord nodded. "Those were planted there by Diad Murphy's father when Diad was born. Every year Ford would make a barrel of this juice from the lemons he cultivated. Potent stuff. It would put hairs on your chest."

"You're talking about an alcoholic liquor?"

"Yeah," Fortune said. "When Ford died a couple of years ago, Diad started making the stuff. You could say he improved upon it. Now it'll put hairs on your chest before giving you a good swift kick in the butt."

Yulen grinned. "What does this lemon verbossa taste like?"

"What you'd probably guessed. Tart. But sweet, too, at the same time. God knows what the man puts in it. I'll be very curious to see how well you take to it, D'Jacques."

"Is that a challenge?" He glanced at Atty. "Have you ever had any of it, my love?"

"Once. Long ago. Pawpee said I could have just a couple of sips of it..." Her voice trailed off and a cloud seemed to pass over her face. Quickly she waved a hand at him to let him know she would be all right in a minute or two. Taking a deep breath, Atty managed a weak smile. "I'm sorry."

Leaning over the table, Tory grabbed one of her hands. "It's okay, Atty. We all understand."

For the strangest reason, Yulen felt a sense of déjà vu come over him. Whether from the circumstances, the memories, or what had been said, he couldn't remember. Either way, he managed to shake it off. "Atty? While we're here in Wallis, sometime I'd like for you to show me around. Show me where you grew up. Think you can find the time to do that?"

"Any place or thing in particular? You already know about my tree," she asked warmly.

He shrugged. "I'll leave it up to you. I just know there's just so much paperwork I can handle before I go stark raving. I'm going to need you to break me away from it every so often so I can clear my head. How long do you think you'll be on the hunt tomorrow?"

"There's no telling," she admitted.

"With the Bloods holding us prisoners in our own compound as long as they did, we have no idea how badly they may have depleted the local resources," Fortune added. "We abide by a strict code when it comes to what we can kill and how often. That way we can insure there'll be enough game to sustain us for generations."

"It won't be long, hopefully. I heard the Bloods came from the west and tended to stay in that area of the forest. So we're going to concentrate on the north and east." She held up a slice of peach they were having for dessert and offered it to him. Yulen smiled and allowed her to pop it into his mouth. His lips closed seductively over her fingers, and for a split second Atty felt a tingle run through her entire body as his tongue teased her fingertips. She was riveted by the playful look on his face when an urgent knock came at the door. Fortune rose to answer it. It was MaGrath.

"Thank heavens you people know how to give good directions. Sorry to interrupt, Yulen, but we're about to lose Sands."

Yulen got up to follow him. "I'll see you later," he promised Atty before giving her a quick kiss goodbye. Bowing to Tory, he complimented her on supper and followed the physician out the door. Fortune accompanied them.

As the door closed behind the men, Tory gave a little sound of exasperation. "What was that all about?" She turned to Atty for an explanation.

"We had an encounter on the trip up here with a small group of Bloods a couple of days ago. We lost one man, and two others were seriously injured. Sands was one of the men injured."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Tory apologized.

"Here, let me help you clean up." Atty got to her feet but the older woman stopped her from going any further.

"Let me. You'll get that pretty dress ruined, and I'll never forgive myself if you do." She took the plates and started for the sink at the back of the room.

Atty watched her go back and forth from the table to the sink. The scenario brought back memories of her own mother, and of countless times she'd make Atty perform the same chore as the sisters argued over who would wash and who would dry. She was unaware of her tears until Tory walked up to give her a comforting hug.

"There, there, Atty. Whatever it is, it's going to be okay. Trust me."

"I just..." Her breath hitched, making it hard to take a decent breath. "Mohmee and Keelor." Tory felt good in her arms. The woman had been her mother's best friend. In some ways, being held by her was almost like coming home.

They stood that way for several minutes as Atty pressed her face in the woman's shoulder and let the grief she'd never allowed herself to completely give in to finally flow out of her like water from a jug. Tory more than understood.

"I know I can't take Eenoi's place, but if there's any way I can help you... I remember when Fortune and I first got married. I had so many questions and worries, I don't know what I would've done if my mother hadn't been there to answer them for me." She pushed Atty back until she could look into the woman's eyes. "I'm here for you if you ever need me. You know that, don't you?"

Atty nodded, lifting a trembling hand to her face to wipe away the tears. "Tory...oh, God, I don't know where to begin."

"Here." Leading her back to the table, Tory sat her down in front of her, then took her two hands in her own, giving them a good rub. "Okay. One thing at a time. What's wrong? Are you happy? Is he treating you well?"

Atty nodded. "I don't think I've ever been happier in my life. He's...he's become my whole life. I never thought it would be possible to love someone so much that it could hurt when he's away." She tried to take a breath, but it caught in her throat. Atty bowed her head and covered her face with her hands as silent sobs overtook her. Her shoulders shook almost violently.

Tory kissed her hair and tried to comfort her as best she could. "Then what's troubling you?" she asked gently.

"I...I've been denying Yulen these past few nights."

"Denying?"

Atty shook her head. "In my bed," she managed to whisper.

"Why? Has he done something—"

"No," Atty quickly assured her. "He's never hurt me. He's never been anything but patient and gentle and loving with me."

"Then why?"

"Tory, do you have any tunsul leaves?"

The older woman appeared taken aback by the question. "Why would you...Atty, have you been taking the leaves?" At the woman's nod, she gave her a confused look. "Why?"

"Because I'm terrified," Atty confided. "I'm so scared our child, if we have one, will be Mutah."

"And why is that a bad thing?"

"Because you have no idea what I've had to go through just so I could love him!" Atty exclaimed angrily. She got to her feet and began to pace back and forth in front of the fireplace. "His people didn't accept me in the beginning, any more than you would have accepted him if our roles had been reversed." She waved a hand to indicate outside the room. "Look at Piron. He still has his hatred and his prejudices to work out. Yes, Yulen and his men slaughtered many of our people. But I killed sixteen of his men, and I had to face those families when he took me back to Alta Novis."

"Didn't he try to protect you from their anger?"

"Yes! Yes, he did. But I still suffered. There isn't a day that goes by, even now, when newcomers don't come to the compound and make a derogatory comment about me when they see me."

"What does Yulen say when they do?"

Atty have a humorless laugh. "He doesn't have to do anything. His men usually take care of it for him."

"His men?" Her eyebrows went up questioningly. "The soldiers take up for you?"

Atty nodded. "Funny thing. They accepted me a whole lot quicker and a whole lot easier than the hunters caste did."

"So what does this have to do with having a baby?"

Tossing a lock of deep indigo-colored hair over her shoulder, Atty explained. "I don't know if I'm ready to have a baby. I mean, I don't know how to be a mother. I've never been around babies, except for Keelor. I wouldn't know the first thing about taking care of one." She sniffed and wiped the tears from her face. "What if our child is Mutah, and Yulen can't stand the sight of it?"

"Do you honestly believe that? Atty, I sat right here and watched the two of you together. That man adores you."

Atty walked over and sat back down beside the woman who was willing to be her surrogate mother. "I-I just need more time. I couldn't find my bag of leaves before we left Alta Novis."

"So you've been holding back on making love with him while you were coming here? Atty, I'm sorry, but I don't have any leaves to give you. If I did I would spare you enough to get you back to your home, but we had a difficult time finding what we could this past year. I'm totally out, but Fortune and I figured there was little if any chance I could bear fruit." She tilted her head and asked, "Haven't you spoken to Yulen about this?"

"No."

"Well, you should. You need to, before things get completely out of control. If he loves you as much as I think he does, you'll work this out. As for being around babies, did you know Teal had a little girl?"

Atty's face brightened. "Really? A little girl?"

Tory smiled. "Posso named her Valla. She's absolutely the prettiest thing you've ever seen."

"What's her mark?"

"She has extra skin running from her arms to her waist. She looks like she has wings. I'll take you over there to see her. Teal will be thrilled to see you."

"How many does that make this year so far? Three?"

"Two," Tory corrected her. "Miriam died last week. Some sort of cough that just consumed her tiny body."

The news seemed to deeply affect Atty. "That's another thing, Tory. What if I can never have children? What if I get pregnant, but can't come to term? What if I give birth, and I lose the baby anyway? What if—"

"Hush! Hush right now, Atrilan Ferran!" At Atty's glance, Tory laughed. "Atrilan Ferran D'Jacques," she quickly amended. "So, what do you plan to do now? Now that there's no tunsul leaves you can have? Oh! What about the Battle Lord's doctor? What's his name?"

"Liam MaGrath."

"Maybe he has something you can take."

Atty shook her head. "I confided in him, but he says it's my duty to give Yulen an heir, to keep the D'Jacques Dynasty going."

"He's right," Tory said. "It's nature's gift to you for being a woman, to bring new life into this world. So if that doctor won't give you anything, what are you going to do? Are you still going to deny Yulen into your bed until you return to Alta Novis?"

Slowly Atty shook her head. "I can't. I'm so hungry for him now, I'm just one giant ache. And I know he feels the same way. We had...we had a major misunderstanding the other night. I had to convince him I still loved him. Oh, Tory, I don't know what to do. I want so bad to make love to my husband, but..."

Tory shushed her again and drew her back into her embrace. "You've survived and grown stronger because of your love for each other. Trust and put all your faith in that love because it's what'll get you through this together. If you get pregnant, maybe you won't have the difficulty we have because the baby will be half-normal. I don't know. I can't promise anything, but I do know this. Tell Yulen. And then love him. Life is too short to waste another day or night not to spend it in his arms."

It was some time later when Atty finally pulled away from her comforting hug and went into the kitchen to splash cold water on her face. Giving the woman a kiss on the cheek, she bid her goodnight and left the house. Tory watched her go until the young woman turned the corner at the end of the street and was lost to view.

Maybe tomorrow would bring an end to the young woman's dilemma. Tory hoped so. For the sake of Eenoi's and Dayman's souls, she fervently hoped so.

### Chapter Sixteen Morning Hunt

A gentle movement at her back awoke her. For a moment Atty lay still, waiting for the movement to repeat itself. When it didn't, she carefully rolled over and sat up. She had no idea when Yulen finally made it to bed last night, but somehow she'd been aware of him, of his presence, his warmth, and his scent. He was lying at the moment on his stomach, face turned toward her and his hands tucked beneath the small pillow. He'd kicked off all the coverings, and in the pre-dawn hour his naked body was a long, beautiful treasure. The bundled blanket separated them like an unspoken barrier.

Atty felt a tightness between her legs and a twinge deep below her belly. Without being aware of it, she started to reach out toward him. Biting her lips, she stopped herself. If she touched him, he would be alert instantly, and he would see the overpowering hunger on her face. She wanted to make love him so badly, it was painful. Her need was greater than anything she could remember. It was no longer a gnawing ache. It had grown into an almost debilitating agony that was beginning to consume her thoughts.

Even in sleep she couldn't escape the dreams and memories that made her whimper and toss about. This was something she'd never imagined could happen to her, but she understood why it had grown so much more powerful than it had been at the beginning when she was still a virgin. When they'd had to make do with any release they could find without intercourse.

Her body knew his now. She knew the feel of him filling her, sliding heavy and hard, sending her senses reeling, and creating within her an ecstasy that defied description. An ecstasy he could and often brought to her night after night. Sometimes more than once a night. The loss of that feeling, that joy, that soaring passion, had left her empty, dry, and weak.

Quickly she dressed, debating whether to kiss him goodbye. She opted instead to leave an arrow on her pillow. It was a sign she'd left him in the past, back at Alta Novis. This time, though, she made sure the barb was pointed directly at his chest, at his heart. He'd grasp its meaning.

Ducking out of the tent, she waved at the sentry a few feet away. It was Dubois, and he gave her a little salute in greeting. This early in the morning he would not call out the usual announcement to let the compound know she was on the grounds. The soldiers knew by this time that whenever she was up and about before daybreak, it meant she was on the hunt.

Quickly, Atty hurried over to the hunters lodge where all the caste members were meeting. As she approached the group waiting to get started, she was greeted with warm hugs and welcome smiles. Fortune, especially, gave her an extra fatherly hug, leaving her to suspect Tory may have spoken with him.

"Stay to the east and north," Sisson ordered. "Don't try to find the biggest game you can. We have almost five hundred to feed, so plenty of smaller game for variety will suffice. Any questions? Atty, Fortune and Bertrand tell us you're a force to reckon with."

"I just want to prove to the Council that marriage hasn't been my downfall," she half-teased, fingering her bow she wore slung across her shoulders. Her answer got a smattering of chuckles from her peers.

"Very well. This should prove interesting. Good luck, hunters. Have a safe and profitable hunt!"

They all dispersed, going their separate ways. Before she left the compound, Atty glanced one last time at the blue tent in the distance, envisioning how he looked when she left, and knowing he would be waiting for her when she returned. Sighing, she slipped through the small side door in the wall and disappeared into the underbrush before the entrance closed behind her.

\* \* \* \*

"You're going to give everyone the impression you're a lay-about. Do you know what time it is?"

Yulen groaned loudly. Opening one eye, he stared at the figure seated a few feet away. "Who gave you permission to come in here?"

"Don't need permission," MaGrath grinned. "When breakfast is served and I don't see your shining face at one of the tables, my first thought is to your general health, which is my job as your doctor, in case you've forgotten. Long night last night?"

"Long night doing my job," Yulen grumbled, rubbing his face with one hand. "What time is it?"

"Nearly nine. Everyone's already eaten, but they're saving some for you. Can you believe these people have never had real coffee before?" He got to his feet and gestured at the pillow beside the Battle Lord. "Is there any significance to the arrow?"

"It means Atty's gone on the hunt. She leaves one on the bed to let me know where she is when I wake up and find her missing."

"I meant, is there any significance to it being pointed at you that way?" MaGrath emphasized.

Yulen glanced down to see the point aimed directly at his left breast. Unable to help himself, he grinned.

The physician let out a snort. "Never mind. I think I can guess. I'll wait outside for you to get dressed."

"Haven't you eaten?" He reached for the pants Atty had set beside him.

"Yeah, but I haven't gotten to talk to you much this trip. I've missed your company," MaGrath admitted a bit reluctantly.

"I'm touched, Liam."

"Yeah, well, don't get used to it," he quipped as he ducked out of the tent. It wasn't long before Yulen joined him, and together they walked over to the area that had been set up to feed the soldiers.

"How's Kiefer?" the Battle Lord inquired of the other injured man.

MaGrath nodded. "He'll pull through, but he won't have adequate use of that leg anymore."

"That's a shame. He was a good kid. A promising soldier. How are the men adapting to being in the compound?"

The physician waited until Yulen had gotten his coffee and a slice of the sweet bread that had been freshly baked, and they had taken a seat at a nearby table.

"Amazingly, the men are getting along well. One or two minor skirmishes, nothing to get alarmed about," he insisted when Yulen gave him an insistent stare. "You can't undo generations of hate and distrust in just a few months, but I gotta admit, you've accomplished miracles."

"And Atty."

"You're right. You and Atty. By the way, how's it going with the new treaty?"

Yulen drained his mug. "Better than I expected. Twoson has taken over as head of the Council, and he's convinced the others about the practicality of most of my suggestions."

"How much longer do you think we'll be staying, then? Any idea?"

"No. None. I don't want to rush anything with these people. There's too much at stake. Anyway, there's the other Mutah compounds I want to learn about. With everyone's help here in Wallis, they'll be able to pave the way for me to extend the treaty to the others."

"Battle Lady about!"

The call rang out, surprising everyone with the announcement. Moreso the inhabitants of the compound, who had never heard the cry before.

MaGrath looked at his friend. "It's only past nine. She's back already?"

The same question seemed to be going around the compound. Atty normally took most of the day to return with her kill. Yulen jumped to his feet and began to run to the far end of the compound where she would be heading. His first thought was that something had gone wrong. Either something had gone wrong, or someone had gotten hurt. There was no other possible reason for her to return after just a few hours into the hunt. Not unless...

Stepping outside the compound wall, Yulen paused in the doorway, straining his eyes to see where she would emerge from the undergrowth. He glanced up at the sentry, who pointed in the direction she was coming from. Around him others were gathering to check out what was going on. From the whispers he could overhear, Yulen could tell that, to them, her early return was not normal.

There was a movement in the bushes, and Atty emerged alone and empty-handed. A quick scan let him know she was uninjured, and he let out the breath he'd been holding.

Looking up at the sentry, she stopped just short of the clearing. "I need two horses, at least thirty feet of good, heavy rope, and four strong men," she called out loudly to everyone watching.

"What's wrong? Are you in need of help? Are you hurt?" the sentry questioned.

At his elbow, Yulen caught Paxton's eyes. The lieutenant nodded and immediately vanished to fetch the required materials.

"Yes and no," she replied. "Hurry!"

It was Paxton and three of his subordinates who came running around the corner of the compound and followed Atty back into the forest. Once they vanished from sight, Yulen went back inside the compound to wait for her return.

"What was that all about?" MaGrath wondered aloud.

"No telling, but it's going to take two horses and four men to solve whatever problem she's encountered." Another cup of coffee nestled in his hands. "Atty promised to show me around the compound later and point out places of interest. Care to come with us?"

"Thanks. I would enjoy that. In the meantime, I'm heading over to their little apothecary to speak with the man who's their doctor. I'm dying to see what medicines he uses. Trade a few secrets, if not a few ingredients."

Yulen chuckled. "Have fun, Liam. I'll send for you when we're ready. I'll be back at my desk as soon as I get another cup of this stuff inside me."

"Watch the caffeine, Yulen. Too much, and you'll have one helluva headache."

Waving him on, the Battle Lord went back for his second refill before heading for work.

It was less than an two hours later when a shout arose, followed by a roar from the crowd

that had remained at the compound walls. Yulen broke his attention away from his paperwork when the call went out again.

"Battle Lady about!"

This time most of Wallis had migrated to the east wall to see why Atty had returned so soon. They didn't have long to wait.

"Oh, good heavens! What is that?"

Yulen glanced over at Mastin standing beside him. "It looks like an elk."

"An elk? The damn thing looks to weigh half a ton!"

Grinning, the Battle Lord nodded. "Yep. Which is why she needed two horses and four strong men."

He stepped through the doorway and began to make his way toward the knot of men emerging from the forest. The enormous bull elk had been lashed to a travois between the horses, but it was evident it had been slow going through the underbrush. All four soldiers accompanying it were doing their best to keep the beast centered on the makeshift carrier. Atty trailed along behind. Yulen noticed it had taken six arrows to bring it down—two to the left eye, one to the right, one inside the mouth, and two in the neck. He could only guess what it must have taken for her to pull off the shots, or what she had been put through that forced her to use so many arrows.

"Everyone's wondering why you're back so soon," he told her. She was flushed with the conquest, and he found himself wishing he could pull her into his arms and smother her with kisses before carrying her back to their tent and having lusty sex with her. Instead, he gripped his sword at his side and forced an amused smile on his face.

"Yeah, well, tell them I got lucky. It practically ran me over before I managed to get off the first shot." She was breathing heavily, and Yulen realized she was still pumped full of adrenalin. Without warning, he could envision her beneath him, soaked in sweat and breathing just as heavily as he slid his heavy length into her tight, wet channel. As they pounded each other, striving for that perfect plateau. And later when their bodies melted back into the quilts after the sexual shock and strain of their releases. His dick immediately became rock hard. Willing himself to calm down didn't help. Yulen shook his head.

"Are you okay?" she asked him, suddenly concerned. Their eyes locked, and they were rocked by the bolt of burning lust that passed between them. Atty had started to reach out to him, but the raw hunger she saw on his face seared her, and she drew back instinctively. The ache she'd managed to temper during the hunt blossomed, quickly growing in intensity. She began to burn internally, until the rest of her strength crumbled from the heat. Her knees grew weak.

Simultaneously, Yulen stumbled as he saw the undisguised desire in her gaze. She'd unconsciously let down her defenses, and there was no longer any way she could hide her need from him. Catching himself before he could fall, he put out a hand to steady himself, only to encounter her hand. Their fingers clasped tightly, almost hurtfully, and the connection seared them.

"Yul..."

She started to walk into his embrace, unmindful of the hundreds of eyes intently watching them. Yulen found he couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel his body respond to hers as he realized she was letting him know she giving up her self-imposed exile and finally relinquishing herself to him.

Their wait was over. He was free once more to cherish her body, and slake their sexual thirst. Her invitation, though unspoken, was a white flag fluttering in the breeze.

He reached out with his free hand to draw her against him, when a dozen Mutah citizens came running toward them to congratulate Atty on her kill, and to aid the soldiers in bringing the elk the rest of the way into the compound. They swept her off her feet and hoisted her on their shoulders as they marched her back into the compound. Atty glanced over her shoulder at him in silent desperation.

Yulen stood back to watch, his body quivering with anticipation. *Soon*, an inner voice whispered. *Soon. Tonight*.

The rejoicing began almost immediately as the women in the compound descended upon the still-warm animal and began preparing it, detaching the head before skinning the rest of the carcass. Several soldiers joined the Mutah men in digging a pit big enough to roast the elk.

When measured, the rack was over eight feet wide and bore more than twenty points. It was presented with a flourish to Atty, which she declined. "It goes in the caste lodge," she instructed. Her eyes searched the courtyard, but Yulen had vanished. Her body tingled as she realized the enormity of what she had done. No more doubts, no more fears. No more long, aching nights.

She had made her decision, and, without realizing it until now, she had made her choice very clear to her husband. She would give herself to him tonight. For the entire night. A night to be filled with exquisite rapture and happiness. And then, for every night thereafter.

Closing her eyes, she groaned with anticipation. It was not yet noon. Somehow they had to make it through the rest of the day.

But it was going to be damn hard.

#### Chapter Seventeen Hunters Caste

Atty waited a good hour for Yulen to return. She knew he had work to do, and understood how much he had to accomplish on this trip, but she wanted him nearby to bask in her accomplishment. Yes, it was a selfish request. One she knew she had no right to ask. Yet... Getting to her feet, she went in search of him, already knowing where he would be and what he would be doing.

As expected, he was surrounded by a group of men engaged in a spirited discussion. She stood on the perimeter of their huddle, listening. This was one area of expertise she readily acquiesced to her husband. He was good at his job. There were evenings when she could sit at the table in the main lodge and just listen for hours to him conversing with the men. The sound of his well-modulated voice would soothe her, eventually lulling her into sleep and forcing him to carry her upstairs to their bedroom to put her to bed.

But enough was enough. He had asked her to save him at varying times throughout their visit and show him around the compound. At that moment she needed to be with him. She needed to see him, touch him, glance into his eyes. She wanted his hands about her. She had to feel his warmth and brush her cheek against his chest.

Barging through the crowd, she slapped both hands down on the papers spread out before them, careful not to smudge the fresh ink.

"All work and no play makes Yulen a dull boy," she announced firmly, giving her husband a knowing stare. "I'm declaring the next hour or so as time off to give you a breath of fresh air and a chance to clear your head so you can come back to this table with a new perspective and renewed vigor. So, how about it, husband of mine? Want to take a walk around the compound and let me play tour guide?"

Yulen gave the Council a rueful grimace. "You men have known Atty longer than I have. What do you think my chances are of refusing her?"

Twoson snorted, grinning. "One hour?" he asked Atty, to double-check.

"Two."

"All right. Two hours. We'll be waiting. Oh, and, by the way, good kill, Atty."

Atty watched as they left. She heard a soft chuckle beside her. Looking behind her, she saw her reflection in his blue-gray eyes.

"Your timing, as always, is perfect, my Atrilan," he murmured.

She shuddered involuntarily. He never used her full name except in their most private moments. She received a second shock when he picked up her hand and turned it over, placing it against his cheek.

"Tell me I wasn't dreaming out in the field," he whispered huskily. "I haven't been able to concentrate on what I'm suppose to be doing ever since that moment." He pressed her palm against his mouth and began doing things to the sensitive skin with his lips and tongue.

"I was..." She tried to swallow but found she had no spit. Her legs threatened to give way as a slow tendril of desire curled itself into a little ball in the middle of her abdomen. "I was going to show you the hunters lodge," she finally managed to say, unable to break away from his gaze.

"Tell me what I want to hear," he demanded again, more softly than before. "Tell me what I see in your eyes. Tell me, my love. Confession time." A small smile tilted the corners of his mouth when he felt her growing warmer. Like a small furnace, she was beginning to glow.

The sound of someone clearing his throat came from behind them. Yulen dropped his head and swore silently. Looking over his shoulder, as he expected, Mastin was waiting to speak. "Cole, you're beginning to make this a bad habit," the Battle Lord half-accused, half-threatened him.

"Yes, sir," Mastin automatically replied, undeterred by Yulen's comment. "There's a small altercation over on the south side of the compound. The parties involved won't budge unless you act as their intermediary."

"Can't you handle it under my authority?"

Mastin shook his head. "They won't listen to me, sir. Only you."

"The hunters lodge is in that area," Atty told her husband.

"I promised MaGrath he could come with us when you took me on the tour. Why don't you go get him and meet me there?"

"Where is he?"

"At your clinic or doctor's office, or whatever you call it."

Atty smiled. "Infirmary."

Yulen released her hand as he stood. "Hopefully this won't take too long. All right, Cole, show me what you risked life and limb to tell me."

Atty hurried off to fetch the physician, glad for the unusually cool weather they were having. It was another second before she realized she'd never given Yulen an answer. Which meant he would try again to coax her confession out of her. Fanning her face, she was smiling when she reached the small infirmary and went inside to find the doctor.

It was not much later when they reached the area where they found Yulen giving instructions to a very cowed soldier, under the watchful glare of Paxton and Mastin. They waited until the Battle Lord curtly dismissed them, when Atty crooked a finger at the Second.

"Cole, you might be interested in this," she invited him.

The young soldier gave her a questioning stare, then quickly looked to his leader for confirmation. At Yulen's nod, he joined them, and Atty led them to a small building sitting adjacent to the compound wall. Not twenty feet away a small door in the wall gave the hunters access to the forest beyond. Atty walked up to the lodge and put her hand on the door latch.

"If anyone gripes because I brought you here, just tell them it's my prerogative. I'm allowed to bring visitors as long as they remain supervised." She grinned and pushed open the door, gesturing for them to enter first.

Yulen walked in ahead of the others to find the interior dark and a bit stuffy. He was surprised to discover there were no windows in the walls to allow in any outside light. Once they were all inside, Atty went around the room to light three lanterns strategically hanging from the ceiling. MaGrath let out a long, slow, appreciative whistle.

"Good heavens, this is one fine trophy den!"

"Makes Foster City look rather pathetic, doesn't it?" Yulen smiled. "How many of these are your kills, my love?"

Atty let her eyes roam around the lodge, taking in the mounted trophies filling nearly every inch of space on the walls. Hanging just out of reach overhead were several stuffed birds, including a couple of large crows, made to look like they in mid-flight. "Oh, I didn't give them

any of my little stuff to keep," she grinned enigmatically. Striding over to the far wall, she reached for the rope pull that would open the closed curtain shutting off the rest of the room. "I gave them something they would always remember me by."

Keeping her eyes on the three men, she drew down the rope hard and fast. The look of sheer fright and astonishment on their faces gave her a perverse thrill.

Yulen saw the devilish grin on her face. "How big was this thing?" he asked her. Although he knew it was dead, he couldn't help but approach the stuffed fully grown wolfen with caution. Whoever had mounted it had done an excellent job, posing it so that it looked almost ready to pounce and rend its victim to shreds at the first unguarded moment. Standing next to it, the head nearly reached his chest.

"They figured it was nearly twelve hundred pounds, give or take."

Mastin reached out and touched the grizzled fur. "My God, Atty. You brought this down all by yourself?"

"With only a bow," added Yulen with pride.

"How old were you?" MaGrath asked her.

"I did this last year," she told them.

Yulen's went head went up as he remembered what she'd told him before they'd left Alta Novis. "Atty, I thought you said you only brought back the head."

"I did," she nodded, then pointed over their shoulders. "That one."

They whirled around and spotted the smaller wolfen skull mounted on the wall right above the door. They had missed seeing it when they'd entered the lodge. Yulen glanced back at her for an explanation.

"It was a wolfen, just as they demanded, and it got me accepted into the caste. But it was a baby. So a couple of months later I went back to get one of the pack males." She gave Yulen a coy look. "Took me two days to hunt him down, and two more days to bring him back." She suddenly gave herself a little shake. She averted her gaze momentarily as she briefly relived the memory, and the Battle Lord couldn't mistake the ghost of pain that flashed across her face.

"What, Atty? What happened out there?" he lowered his voice to ask her. He moved closer so only he could hear her answer.

"You know that scar on the inside of my thigh?" she whispered, giving him a cautious look.

Yes, he knew it. Intimately. It was a long, ragged river in her silken skin, less than an inch from her pubic area. The first time he'd seen it, the sight of it had been enough to make his skin crawl. He could only imagine how she'd gotten it, and until today he'd never really known the truth as to how it got there. Yulen felt his skin turn cold. She saw the understanding in his eyes, and she nodded.

"I nearly bled to death, but I got my trophy. I swear to you, Yulen, I never pulled that kind of stunt again. And I never will. I learned my lesson."

He opened his mouth to ask her how it had happened, but stopped himself. Maybe one day she would confess the whole incident. When she did, he knew without a doubt it would be one fascinating yet horrifying tale.

"Atty, is this what I think it is?" MaGrath was pointing to a creature mounted to a tree limb and suspended overhead.

"That's a chipmunk. Sisson brought it over from—" She caught herself and clammed up. Giving her husband a quick glance, she relented and relaxed somewhat. "Sisson brought it from

North Crestin." Despite the puzzled looks from Mastin and MaGrath, she was more surprised to see an easy smile on Yulen's face. "You know about North Crestin?" she asked him out of curiosity.

"I also know about West Crestin, and I know about your trip to San Remus, although you'll have to tell me why you were there."

"San Remus? There's a compound named San Remus?" Mastin echoed. He appeared transfixed by the enormous stuffed wolfen, and remained beside it, lightly stroking the preserved coat.

MaGrath chuckled. "This gets better every minute. First I find out Wallis has better pharmaceuticals than I ever had, and now we discover there's a whole network of Mutah compounds we never knew existed. Do they stretch north to south like ours?"

"Somewhat," she admitted, albeit reluctantly. "There's quite a few of them to the west. None to the east, as far as we know. If there are, we've never had contact with anyone from that direction."

There was a knock on the door, to which Mastin wryly commented, "Not me this time, sir." An unfamiliar face popped around the corner.

"Ah! They said you'd be here. Two more hunters have re-entered the compound with their spoils. Looks like it's going to be a celebratory kill, Atty!" he grinned happily at her. "You brought us luck!"

Atty smiled in return. "Thanks, Fullus. We'll be right out."

Sighing, Yulen admitted it was time he got back to work. Their two hour break was probably already up. Mastin left the room first as Atty went around the lodge, extinguishing the lanterns. MaGrath exited the room behind Mastin, leaving Yulen alone to wait for her. But before she came around to the door, he closed it behind the two men and reached for her in the darkness.

Her mouth was ready for him when he carefully dipped his head and brought his arms around her. She shivered in his embrace as she lifted herself up on tiptoe to feel his body mold to hers. They kissed with an urgency dictated by where they were, panting heavily as their hands roamed over each other, touching and caressing with a hunger that only increased in urgency. In the darkness they were unusually aware of the feel of their skin beneath their clothes...of the perspiration...the heat...the delicious softness.

Atty whimpered briefly before her fingers reached beneath his tunic to find his chest. The hairs were warm. Tantalizing. She pressed her mouth over one male nipple, teasing it into a hard bud, and she smiled when he trembled against her, a low growl vibrating inside his chest.

Yulen bowed his head to taste the sweet curve of her neck. She was such a hot, sweaty essence, keeping his blood just below boiling level. A hand reached up to release the tieback in her hair until it fell like a silken curtain against his face. For a moment he wished he could pull her down to the floor and take her there. She was straining, pressing herself as tightly as she could along his pulsing length, whispering his name over and over.

The door opened just a crack and MaGrath's voice washed over them. "I hate to interrupt you two lovebirds, but I think some of the Council members are waiting for you over in the courtyard, Yulen." He casually shut the door, plunging them back into darkness.

Yulen cursed softly, not wanting to remove his hands from where they were nestled. Chuckling, Atty drew away from him. "Later, my beloved husband."

"Do I have your word?" he whispered almost breathlessly. He felt her lift his hand and place it over one perfect breast. He gave it a gentle squeeze, rolling his thumb over the tight nipple, and heard her gasp with pleasure. She shivered slightly, raising his need, his fever, and his erection a few degrees higher.

"You have more than my word," she murmured, and gave him a final kiss that told him everything he needed to know.

Before he could comment further, she slipped out the door, leaving him alone to calm down enough so he could attend to business without embarrassing himself.

## Chapter Eighteen In Preparation

With the exception of a brief noon break, time passed quickly despite Yulen's dire prediction. Of course, taking a walk around the compound to point out and note problem areas in the wall and other defenses helped to eat up the hours, thanks in large part to the Wallis women who had shooed them away from the tables so they could begin to set up for the celebration.

Twice Yulen spotted MaGrath, accompanied by a tall, thin, almost impossibly gangly man a good two feet taller than the six foot physician. They were always in deep discussion, or argument, depending on one's point of view. Laughing softly, the Battle Lord had a good idea what their debates might be about, having been on the losing end of many similar verbal battles himself with the man.

He had not seen Atty again, however. Not since their visit to the hunters lodge. Yulen shook his head. Maybe it was just as well. Having her near, either visually or physically, would have put a definite kink in his ability to concentrate. Still, he couldn't help but wonder what she'd been up to during the day.

Little by little, sometimes alone and sometimes in pairs, the rest of the hunters had returned to find they'd been trumped by the very woman they'd believed no longer had what it took to be effective. Atty may have given more credit to the animal for its woeful sense of direction than to her skill, yet Yulen had little doubt she relished in her accomplishment. He made a note to stroke her pride a bit. She deserved it.

And then, after he stroked her pride, he would stroke other, more intimate areas. "D'Jacques?"

"Sebastien?" The Battle Lord glanced up at the man with the bull-like facial features and waited for him to continue. Despite the Mutah's appearance, the carpenter had a sharp and inquisitive mind.

"Explain to me again how raising the compound walls another three feet would make them more effective when they're already fifteen feet high."

He started to answer when a young woman dressed in a blue gingham dress ran up to their small group and grabbed Sebastien by the hand.

"Pawpee! They're needing you over by the pit! Hurry, hurry!"

Twoson noticed the concerned look that came over Yulen's face, and chuckled. "It's nothing to worry about," he commented as they watched the man being led away by his daughter. "Sebastien's the unofficial keeper of the flame. He determines how hot the coals are, and if there's a need for more wood, less wood. You understand."

A young man brandishing a small lit torch hurried by them to begin lighting the lanterns along the inner wall. Yulen was surprised to see how late it had gotten. "Guess it's time to call it quits for the day," he observed. "Twoson, what all happens at one of these feast festivals, if I may ask?"

The huge man shrugged. "Pretty much what you'd expect. Lots of eating. Plenty to drink. There's a bonfire lit in the courtyard for people to dance around. We have some pretty decent musicians in Wallis, if I say so myself." He grinned. "How good a dancer are you?"

Yulen held up his hands in surrender. "Sorry, but that's one area I never look lessons in."

"Shame. Although, I have to let you know, Atty might have been pretty good at it herself if she'd attended her classes like she was supposed to. I don't know how many time Eenoi reamed her out for skipping."

"Let me guess. She'd rather be out in the woods instead of in a classroom," Yulen chuckled.

"For a man who's only been married to her for less than six months, you got her pegged. Hey, Fussun! How's it going?"

They rounded a corner of the narrow street that housed various shops and markets. It was like penetrating an invisible wall when the scent of the roasting elk washed over them. The smell reminded Yulen he'd had very little to eat that day, and dark memories of the past rose unbidden to haunt him. Gritting his teeth, he squelched them and concentrated on the present.

The tables used to feed the troops were draped now with colorful fabrics. More such fabrics had been braided over lengths of rope that stretched from tree to tree like a canopy of rainbow colors. There were bowls of the fruit Atty had ordered packed on the wagons, and the women were placing loaves of freshly baked bread on side serving tables nearby.

Just beyond where the elk was roasting in the pit in the ground, a bonfire had been built with old tree branches and deadwood. Someone was carefully dousing it with something to make it burn hot and quick.

The air was festive with celebration. The Bloods were gone. Game had returned to the area. And a new alliance was being formed between Mutah and Normals. There was much to rejoice about.

"Why do I get the feeling this shindig is going to make whatever Alta Novis puts on look like a child's slumber party?" a voice commented as it approached him.

"First the trophies, and now this. Kind of makes you realize how much we're alike, and yet how very different," Yulen said solemnly.

MaGrath nodded. "Earlier I overhead one of our men commenting to another. Something along the lines of, 'You know, after a while, you no longer see their mark.' I have to admit, he's right. You no longer see what they're like on the outside. And, get this, Yulen, sometimes their mark is to their benefit."

He agreed with the physician. "How many times have you wished you had an extra hand, or a super strong grip, or better hearing? These people have that. And more."

"So, tell me again why we were taught to slaughter them?"

Yulen gave his friend a regretful look before turning back to watch the activities. "Have you seen Atty?" he asked after a while, hoping it would sound less anxious than he felt.

Unfortunately, MaGrath knew him better than that. "Last time I saw her, she was heading toward the tent." He sighed and stretched his arms over his head. "Rumors say there's going to be some potent brew being served tonight, and I personally am going to make sure I thoroughly investigate its veracity."

Unable to hold back his laughter, Yulen clapped a hand to the man's shoulder. "Good heavens, I can't remember when was the last time I saw you in your cups! This should prove to be an interesting night!"

He never saw MaGrath's knowing smile in response. "Oh, I quite agree. It's going to be a *very* interesting night!"

Yulen excused himself to head over to the tent. For once he was at a loss as to what he needed to do, if anything. The festivities were out of his hands, something he'd hadn't planned or

made allowances for. At first he'd been confused and a bit leery when he'd heard the news. It soon became apparent that such an informal get-together between his men and the citizens of Wallis was the perfect solution to help defray the tensions still lingering between them. Good food and good drink, combined with music and merriment, would do much to strengthen the ties between them.

Belatedly, the Battle Lord realized the last time Alta Novis had done anything similar in celebration was after MaGrath's and Madigan's wedding, and that had been four months ago. Well, the holidays would be here before they knew it, and Yulen promised himself there would be enough celebrating then to make up for it.

He had almost reached the tent when Atty stepped through the door flap, into the open. Seeing her, he skidded to a stop in surprise.

She was wearing a simple gown in a soft gray color. It was long-sleeved, to protect her against the chilly evening wind, and it cut in around her waist and hips to flatter her curves. The front dipped low to where he could see her cleavage, but not as deeply as the presentation gown she'd worn yesterday. She'd left her hair loose, and in the evening lantern light the circlet of silver around her forehead glittered. He caught the faint scent of soap, letting him know she had already bathed.

She smiled at him, equally surprised. "Hi! Calling it a day already?"

"Have to when the people you're working with just get up and leave. You look radiant, Atty." He started to go inside the tent, pausing when he realized she wasn't following him. He gave her a questioning, almost hurt look.

"I promised Tory to help her with the meal," Atty answered apologetically. She reached out to take his hand and give it a squeeze. "I'll join you when it's time to eat. Promise. Save me a seat."

He remained by the doorway, staring at her. In the distance they could hear the laughing and shouting of people, and the tentative strains of musical instruments warming up for the night's festivities. It was almost dark. Overhead the broken moon peeked above the treetops.

"I'll promise you a seat, as long as you remember *your* promise," he whispered, his throat suddenly becoming tight with expectation. To emphasize his words, he held onto her fingers. Slowly, he raised her hand to his lips, turning over the palm, and seductively kissed the sensitive skin in the center, trailing his mouth up to her wrist, all the while never taking his eyes from her face. Even in the low light of the coming evening he could see the color rise to her cheeks.

Atty trembled before taking the two steps toward him that closed the gap. Readily she lifted her face for his kiss, knowing the power he had over her but no longer caring. Tonight would be their foreplay. They had the entire evening to enjoy themselves, enjoy the celebration with its merriment and surprises, and later, to enjoy rediscovering each other's bodies in what they knew would be hours of exhaustive lovemaking.

Yulen reached up with his free hand and cupped her cheek, holding her face hostage as he delved into the moistness of her mouth. Their tongues tangled before gently stroking each other, tips teasing, sexually taunting. She was soft clay, ready to be molded and shaped with his hands and his body. He felt her arms start to reach around his neck when a throat cleared itself a few yards away. This time it was Atty who threw her head back and cried out softly in exasperation.

"Cole!"

"Yes, Madam?" came the stoic reply.

"Perhaps my husband has failed to fully explain to you the duties of a Second."

Mastin paused. "No, Madam," he said.

Yulen chuckled, trying to keep from laughing out loud. "What is it this time?" he asked the young man. "Are you here at MaGrath's command?" he added.

"No, sir. Councilman Pike has asked if you and the Battle Lady would join him and his family tonight for the feast."

"Tell him we would be honored. Oh, and make sure we're saved four seats."

"Four, Sir?"

Yulen grinned. "For myself, Atty, Liam, and yourself, unless you plan to join the men at their tables, which you have my permission to do."

Mastin beamed. "Thank you, sir. I would be honored to be part of your company."

"Yulen, I need to be going," Atty reminded her husband. She gave him a perfunctory kiss before tossing a "See you later, Cole!" to the soldier as she hurried away.

When he was certain she was out of earshot, the Battle Lord turned back to his Second. Doing his best to sound stern, yet still manage to hide his amusement, he told the young man, "Cole, at some point this evening Atty and I might wander off for some time alone. When we do, unless there's a major or cataclysmic event occurring, I had better not *see* you, or *hear* you within a hundred yards of us. Because if I do, and your excuse doesn't fit my criteria, I will personally bust you down to kitchen help the moment we arrive back at Alta Novis. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly, sir," the paled young man responded.

"Good. Now, you're officially dismissed from duty for the rest of the evening. Enjoy yourself, Cole. That's an order."

"Thank you, sir," the Second replied rather stiffly, leaving Yulen to himself as he quickly strode away to find Pike and relay the Battle Lord's answer.

Mastin was still green around the edges, Yulen realized, but the man's dedication and courage was unmatched. Given time, the Second would become a superb commander. In the meantime, he needed guidance and a few lessons in discretion.

Secretly, Yulen knew the man was probably a little in love with his wife. It was a fact he suspected in about half of the men who soldiered under his command. Maybe more in the number who had volunteered to come with them to Wallis. Oddly, it didn't bother him. He had no doubts about Atty's fidelity, even when she unconsciously flirted with the men. And while she sometimes showed a preference for Mastin and Paxton, and one or two others, he knew there would always be just one man in her life who could both heat her blood and cool it at the same time.

Smiling to himself, Yulen ducked into the tent for a quick bath and a change of clothes. When he emerged a short while later, it had grown pitch black. The surrounding forest was quick to envelope the smaller compound in secrecy and darkness. He had learned that was part of the success and longevity of the Mutah compounds—remaining far off the usual pathways, keeping the compounds small as to escape easy detection, and letting the woods help provide camouflage.

Unfortunately, those very points, which aided the compounds in avoiding the yearly sweeps in the past by Normals, had proven to be detrimental against invasions by the Bloods. Or by the Cleaners, when finally discovered. Yulen hoped that with his suggestions those points would no longer be detrimental, and help to turn the compound's weaknesses into strengths. Thankfully the Council of Elders had recognized their liabilities and agreed with the Battle Lord, in most part, with many of his suggestions for improvements. There still remained one or two

sore spots he needed to broach lightly, or maybe not bring up again until future visits to the compound, but those were issues he didn't need to dwell on tonight.

No, tonight was destined for discovery. Excitement. Merriment.

And love.

# Chapter Nineteen Taking Wallis

The music had already started when Yulen reached the center of the courtyard where the women were beginning to serve the people taking their seats at the tables. To his trained eye he could already tell his soldiers were sticking close together, although here and there some were mingling with the citizenry.

Most of the Wallis inhabitants were taking their places in family groups. Hearing his name being hailed, he quickly found Twoson Pike and his wife already being served, along with MaGrath and Mastin. However, Atty had yet to join them.

As if reading his mind, MaGrath commented, "She said she'd be right back. She's bringing your dishes herself."

"Have some bread, D'Jacques. My wife, Vallina, made it herself. Honey, have you met the Battle Lord?" Twoson conducted the brief introductions, and Yulen took a seat across from the Mutah family, next to Mastin, who had also begun eating.

"All right, I hate to have to bring up business, but this is the first chance we've had to be alone for me to ask you," Yulen inquired of the Councilman. "How well do you think the rest of the Elders are taking my suggestions?"

Twoson nodded as he dove into his overloaded trencher. "With the exception of the duty rosters and the locations of some of the outlying buildings, pretty damn good. But that's just my opinion."

"And George? I have a feeling he may try to sway some of the leaders once I leave."

"That's a possibility, but I seriously doubt he'll have much luck. We are a peaceful people, but we're not fighters. That's the job of our caste. But you've probably already learned that Atty's a better hunter than a warrior. She's extraordinary with a weapon in her hands, but when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, she's nowhere as accomplished as you and your men are. Same goes for our own men. I think deep down we've prayed for a truce between our peoples. We just never believed we'd have one within our lifetime, or so quickly after—" Twoson stopped in mid-sentence to stare at the Battle Lord.

So quickly after your men came and attacked Wallis, was the unspoken phrase the man had begun to say. So quickly after your men killed our people, then you kidnapped Atty.

As flustered as the Councilman was over his near mistake, Yulen could feel the heat of his own emotions rising into his face. He was about to comment when MaGrath looked over his shoulder and pointed with his knife.

"Speak of the devil."

Turning around in his seat, Yulen watched as Atty arrived at their table, bearing two plates. She was flushed from the heat of the coals over which the elk was roasting.

"You know, I've brought in I don't know how many kills, and all that time I've never claimed my portion. Well, by golly, I did this time!" she beamed.

"Claimed your portion?" her husband questioned curiously.

"The choicest piece. The one who brings in the kill has the right to claim the best cut of the meat for himself," explained Twoson. He gestured toward the two trenchers she'd set down. "Got the back strap, did you, Atty?"

"You bet your chubby cheeks, Twoson," she smiled, taking her seat between her husband and Mastin, who had to shift over a bit on the bench and move his sword out her way. "Boy, you cleaned up nicely, my love," she complimented him brightly.

Yulen was quick to realize this was the first time since they'd arrived in Wallis that they were finally having a meal together, including the entire compound with both Normals and Mutahs, gathered together like a regular community. He ate in silence as Atty kept up a continual stream of chatter with the Councilman and his wife, along with Mastin's occasional comments and questions, and the odd grunt from MaGrath. There was an exciting warmth along his thigh where her leg pressed against his, and every so often when she would punctuate something she said with a gesture, her arm or shoulder would gently bump his.

She was close enough for him to smell her uniquely feminine scent. Despite the overwhelming odor of food, especially the roasted meat permeating the courtyard, he was excruciatingly aware of her. At one point, unable to resist the temptation any longer, Yulen dove a hand into her warm hair behind her neck. His fingers began to massage her neck and shoulder muscles, and she paused to close her eyes as she relished his touch. Not an eye in the compound missed their interaction.

Behind them the music stopped as the musicians broke for a quick supper. No longer having to compete with the noise, conversation at the tables resumed more normal levels.

"Hey, D'Jacques. If we agree to these improvements, how long do you think they'll take to complete?" Twoson brought up.

"Depends mostly on the weather. With winter coming, it's going to take longer than I'd like. The outer walls alone will eat up a good six months."

"What if we divide up the men? Put half on the wall and half on the other projects we discussed. It would take longer, but we'd get it all finished at about the same time."

"No." Yulen shook his head, putting down his mug of beer. "I want all of the men to concentrate on one project at a time. The wall has top priority." He looked at Atty as she got to her feet to remove their plates from the table. She paused, seeing his unspoken signal, and waited for him to finally make the announcement only she had been privy to know before this moment.

"I'm taking Wallis under my banner," he told the Council leader.

Around them all movement ceased as the importance of his declaration sunk in. It was Collier Vogel, seated at the next table over, who spoke first.

"You're *taking* Wallis?" he reiterated in a louder voice. This time the entire courtyard quieted as every eye focused on the head table.

"Yes. He's taking Wallis," Atty said in a low, firm voice. Her gaze raked over everyone seated and standing. To show her support, she moved behind her husband and laid her hands on his shoulders. "By flying the banner of Alta Novis, all who come here will know this compound is under our protection. By flying our banner, you are guaranteed never to be in want of food or supplies or help. By flying our banner, all of you will be afforded every advantage allowed, including trade."

"What if we refuse you?" Twoson asked. His demeanor was calm but clearly cautious. Despite the Battle Lord's coming to their defense, despite the fact that he had married one of their

own, and despite the unquestionably sincere desire the man had to help them, the Mutah knew relations between them remained perilous.

"If you refuse me," Yulen answered, "then our work here is done. Tomorrow morning we will leave to return to Alta Novis, and you will never have to worry about dealing with us again. If you come to Alta Novis, you'll be treated as a guest, but nothing more. And do not ever ask for our help again. Do not request anything of us. I answered your plea this time for Atty's sake. It was not her decision or her choice. It was mine. So what is your answer, Twoson Pike? Or do you wish more time to meet with your fellow Councilmen and discuss this?"

Twoson turned his attention to the woman standing behind the Battle Lord. "Have you turned your back on us, Atty? Your own kind?"

"My own kind was prepared to deny me my life, my happiness, my very existence," she bitterly replied. "Yulen may have forgiven you, but he's only had to deal with the nightmares. I'm the one who fights waking up and thinking I'm still lying in a bed in Fortune's back room, dying from Borash poisoning, and believing that these past few months have been nothing more than fevered dreams."

Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as she tried to contain her pain. Yulen reached up and took her hands in his. "You have until noon tomorrow to decide. Until then, we will continue to guard you and provide for you," he said.

"Let me get this straight." Vogel stood to address the Battle Lord directly. "If we say no, you'll just pack up and leave? No force? No coercion? No threats?"

"None of that. We'll simply leave. The old treaty will remain in effect, such as it is."

"You would abandon us?" Twoson asked Atty, looking her in the eyes.

Slowly she nodded. "There is nothing here for me anymore," she told him, holding tightly onto her husband for support. "My real family is gone. The home I had here is no longer mine. Yulen is my family now. He is my home."

To everyone's surprise, Tory Kalich got to her feet and loudly called for their attention, pounding the table adamantly with her fist.

"Enough of this! Enough, Twoson! Enough, Collier! I for one am sick and tired of the Council, with their insufferable male pride, making life or death decisions for us when we have no say in them! Time and again D'Jacques has come to us with hand outstretched, and every time you've slapped it away. You throw the fact that Atty is Mutah in her face, then you take away all her rights and freedom to be one. Together they promise us a future. A future with hope. A future not just for ourselves, but for our children as well. A future without fear or hunger...and you're actually considering turning it down?"

She waved an arm in Atty's direction. "We've known Atty all her life. To your knowledge, has she ever lied to us? Has she ever not followed through with a promise?"

Total silence answered her. Slowly, she raised her hand overhead. "All of you who are willing to live under the banner of Alta Novis...all of you who are willing...D'Jacques, if after some time has passed and we decide we no longer wish to honor your pledge, can you remove the banner, even if it means also losing your support?"

Although the request was not something he had expected, Yulen nodded. The compromise was very feasible. "If, after six months, you find our arrangement inadequate or unwanted, I will release Wallis from its obligation. However, if after six months there are no further arguments, the banner will remain permanently. Permanently, with no chance to appeal.

That's my offer. My only offer. And this will be the only time I will present it to you, to all of the compound."

Tony smiled. "Fair enough. All of you who are willing to agree to D'Jacques's conditions, raise your hand."

Steadily, almost as one, nearly every hand went up to show their support and willingness. Beside Twoson, Vallina glared at her husband and also raised her hand. Shrugging his immense shoulders, the Councilman lifted his hand overhead and grinned at the Battle Lord.

Yulen looked at his wife, who leaned down and gave him a hug around the neck.

Tory beamed with relief. "Okay. Now that we got that out of the way, don't you think we *really* have something to celebrate?"

A chorus of cheers went up. Yulen looked over to see MaGrath with a huge smile on his face. The physician winked to show his approval. Atty also saw the wink and tugged on her husband's shoulders.

"Come! Let's go to the bonfire! Come on, Yulen! Hurry!"

Laughing, the Battle Lord got to his feet and followed his Lady to where the musicians were scrambling back to their instruments. Now there was a bigger, better reason to celebrate.

The night was just beginning, but for the compound of Wallis, it would become the first night in their nearly three-hundred-year history where they would never again have to worry about what tomorrow would bring.

# Chapter Twenty Night Dance

The music was quick and upbeat. Around the roaring bonfire people were dancing joyously. Here and there people peeled off in small groups to talk or dare each other in games of chance. A few of the tables already had card games going. A little further on some of the soldiers had set up a game of horseshoes.

Not too far away Diad Murphy had set up a small stand with a barrel of his deadly, if not toxic, lemon verbossa. Yulen chuckled to see MaGrath already over there with mug in hand.

"What's so funny?" Atty whispered. They were leaning against one of the huge pecan trees ringing the courtyard. Yulen had his back to the large trunk, with Atty comfortably in his arms. From their vantage point they could see most of what was going on, while remaining somewhat discreetly out of sight.

He motioned toward the physician with his head. Atty glanced over at the knot of men gathered around the keg. Her groan turned into a giggle. "Liam has no idea what he's getting himself into."

"To be honest, my love, I'm rather curious to know what kind of kick it has."

She smiled at him. "Why not go over and get some, then? I'm curious to see what you're like when you're tipsy."

Yulen shook his head. "Liam says I get quiet and deadly, like a feral stalking prey."

"You clam up? Or you become a mean drunk?"

"To be honest, I don't remember for sure. But Liam swore to me that one time I actually had the men fall out for a complete surprise dress inspection at four in the morning."

"Ooooh," she snickered. "You're a mean and crafty drunk!"

"Am not!" he laughed softly, giving her waist a squeeze where his arms encircled her. Atty lifted her face, pressing her head back against his shoulder, waiting for his lips. She didn't have to wait long.

As his hands slid up her waist to cup her breasts, Atty turned around to lay at an angle along his body, unaware that their mutual breathing was becoming quicker, shallower. Their kisses slowly becoming more intense. Demanding.

Beside the keg, MaGrath's eye caught the couple hidden in the shadows under the tree. In the dark all he could see were their outlines dimly silhouetted by the bonfire's light, but he didn't have to guess what they were doing.

"But we wouldn't have had to agree to the new treaty if the Bloods hadn't shown up," one of the men enjoying the brew nearby argued.

"It wasn't just the Bloods, and you know that," another man with a second set of thumbs on his hands challenged him. "We've been fighting a losing battle for generations now. It was just a matter of time before we were totally overrun or defeated."

"Yeah," mumbled Diad, lifting his mug in salute. "The Council should feel damn lucky D'Jacques took us under his wing. At least now we have a chance at a future, a *real* future. Right, MaGrath?"

The physician smiled wistfully. "I've known Yulen since he was born. If his father instilled anything in him, it was integrity. The man does nothing unless it's with a singleness of

purpose. He honestly thinks he can make a difference in the alliances between Normals and Mutah, but he has no fantasy that it will be accomplished in his lifetime. He just wants to make certain that he gets the wheels initially spinning, and when his time on this earth is over, he hopes what he's started will continue."

He lifted his mug in the direction of the tree-shaded lovers. "But if you want to know the real reason why we're here, or why Yulen chose to ally himself with your people, there's your answer right there. Gaze upon it, gentlemen, but don't interrupt it. And don't ever do anything to try and come between them. Because if it weren't for their love, this day would not have happened. Plain and simple." Giving them a smart salute, the physician left to find a seat nearer the musicians. He was fond of a good song, and it had been a while since he'd enjoyed a concert.

The men around the barrel glanced in the direction the man had indicated, and noticed the shadows beneath the huge tree. Although they couldn't see any distinct shapes, there was no doubt what the couple was doing.

"The doctor said not to interrupt them," one of the men commented.

"But Fortune said the Battle Lord was wanting a taste of my verbossa," Diad noted.

"Ahhh, the man's getting a good enough taste of what he wants," another said what they all were thinking. The remark got him a few snickers of agreement.

Regardless, Diad drew a mug of his brew and proceeded toward the pecan tree, despite his friends' urgent requests to reconsider.

\* \* \* \*

Yulen peered down into Atty's eyes, now slitted with desire. She had managed to undo the top three buttons of his tunic, and with her tongue had placed little wet trails of fire from his throat down to his chest. Her body along his rubbed tantalizingly, and his body had responded until he felt he was being consumed. He exhaled with a low groan. She felt so good. So warm. And soon, he would feel her raging heat again when he buried himself deep inside her.

"Atrilan."

His hand was at the back of her head, his fingers twisted in her thick, glossy, indigocolored hair. Slowly he began to pull her head back until he could reach her neck. Where he could lift her higher into his arms and bury his face in the fragrant valley between her breasts. Her hands were around his waist, her fingertips sliding inside the waistband of his pants. Teasing him. Tempting him. She jerked at the waistband as if she was struggling with the buttons. Her nails skidded across the line of velvety hairs trailing downward past his navel and disappearing from view, and he felt a bolt of heat jerk his erection to attention.

A movement from the corner of his eye put every nerve instantly on alert. Without thinking, he clasped Atty tightly to his chest and bowed his head over hers to protect them from prying eyes.

In a small voice, trembling from her pent-up frustration, she whispered almost too softly for him to hear, "Who? Cole?"

"Surprisingly, not this time. Some man. Coming over. Little bird-like feathers for skin." He felt Atty giggle against him. Her breath on his bare throat sent shivers through him. "That's Diad. Does he have a mug with him?"

"Yes."

Reluctantly she pulled away from him. The coolness of the evening washed over them, tempering their passion, and giving them a chance to collect themselves before the Mutah got

close enough to see them clearly. Despite the slight distance now separating them, Yulen refused to release his wife from his embrace.

"D'Jacques?" the man inquired as soon as he was near enough to be heard.

"You must be Diad. The man with the verbossa. I've been warned about you," Yulen greeted the man with a grin. They shook hands before Diad handed over the mug he'd drawn.

"Can't let your doctor have all the fun. Drink up, D'Jacques, but don't say you weren't warned. I'm told you can be quite testy when you've had more than your share," he grinned in return.

"Oooh, mean, crafty, and testy," Atty giggled, glancing up at her husband.

"Oh, hush," he groused good-naturedly at her. "Thank you, Diad."

"There's plenty, in case you want more. It can be addicting. Atty, how about a mug for yourself?"

"No, thanks. I'll get a sip or two from Yulen's. Careful, my love. I'm warning you. It'll sneak up behind you when you're not looking," she snickered.

Diad left them alone, returning to guard his keg. Atty watched as Yulen took his first tentative sip. As she'd expected, he winced at the tartness.

"Leave it on your tongue for a moment before you swallow it," she suggested. "It makes the heat easier to take."

Despite her suggestion, Yulen was forced to release her as he coughed against the potency, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. Atty wasn't surprised to see tears in his eyes.

"Good God, what else does he put in this stuff?" he finally managed to say in a strangled voice. He tentatively sniffed the liquid.

"Fortune did say it'll put hair on your chest, although I think I like your chest as it already is," she teased him with a playful smile.

Yulen tried a another swallow. Again, it burned all the way down, but by the third swallow he believed he was getting the hang of it. Either that, or he'd lost all sensation from his throat to his stomach since the brew probably had seared away most of the flesh anyway.

Atty took the mug for a swallow. She was unable to keep from wrinkling her nose when the strong liquid scorched her throat. Shaking her head to help clear it, she fanned a hand in front of her face. "Wow. It's worse than I remember," she laughed lightly as she handed the cup back to him. A smile teased his lips.

"I don't recall you telling me how you react to alcohol, my love. Dare I even ask?" "No, but you'll find out eventually."

Looking up at him, she watched as he took a partial sip, then bent down to kiss her. As she parted her lips beneath his, she tasted the verbossa as he let it slip onto her tongue. Warmed by his mouth, the brew tingled. Her lips softened and grew more sensitive. And when his rough tongue found hers, she could feel the sensations it gave her down to her toes. Leaning back, she was unaware of her fingers tightly gripping the front of his dark green tunic. "That...was nice," she whispered.

"What was?"

"Whatever it was you just did," she purred, and rubbed her face against his strong chest, keeping her eyes closed. The alcohol was reaching her stomach and would soon spread to other parts of her body. It was not an unwelcome feeling.

"Atrilan?"

"Mmm?" Dimly she could feel his hand on her hip. Not unexpectedly, it slid over the fabric of her dress, branding her bare skin underneath with the heat of his palm, to her buttocks for a quick squeeze, and proceeded to press her against him, and his stiff erection. She fought for every breath with quick, little gasps as the painful need to feel herself being impaled over his thickness spread through her, pulsing sharp and strong. Her hands turned sweaty as his mouth caressed her hair, against her ear, until a sigh whispered a single word.

"Come."

He moved slightly, sliding against her body, which was partially draped over his, and then he had her hand, pulling her along. Atty opened her eyes to see him leading her, guiding her, toward the tent. As realization washed over her, he turned to look at her, and she was unable to stop the trembling coming over her.

"Yul?"

He smiled at her. It was a smile of love. Of anticipation, and full of promise. Although she felt terrified, Atty knew they couldn't wait any longer.

"Hey! You can't leave the party so soon!" a voice called out to them.

Atty turned around in surprise just as three woman descended upon them and surrounded her in squeals of delight. Corianne skipped around the couple, reaching out every now and then to tug on Atty's sleeve.

"They're going to do the waylay! Come on, Atty! Come join us in the waylay!"

"I... I..." Unable to catch her voice, Atty could only look over to where Yulen stood a few feet away, arms crossed over his chest, an unreadable expression on his face. But the heat of his desire continued to burn in his eyes.

"Come on, Atty! You have to do it with us," Jessit commented matter-of-factly. "Just this once."

She was unable to resist their indomitable force as they started to drag her toward the bonfire. "I haven't danced it in years." Atty vainly tried to wriggle out of their grasps.

"All women have to dance the waylay," Portia said, as if repeating an oft-quoted remark. "You might have been able to talk your way out of practice, but we got you cornered this time, and you're not going to sneak out of doing it tonight!"

"Ladies, if I may ask," Yulen interrupted in a deep, moody voice. "What is a waylay?"

Corianne covered her mouth as she burst into a fit of giggles. Jessit shot her a look that clearly told her to behave herself, and answered the Battle Lord. "It's a dance we're taught to do growing up. Whenever there's a celebration and bonfire, all the women have to dance it. It guarantees them a happy and fruitful marriage."

One eyebrow raised above hooded eyes. "All women? Unmarried and married alike?"

Portia nodded. "Maidens dance it, hoping to find a husband. Wives dance it, hoping to bear many healthy children." She turned to Atty, who was still attempting to escape their grasps. Iron chains could not have held her tighter. "You haven't danced it in ages, Atrilan! Don't think you're going to talk your way out of it this time, either."

"I don't remember the steps. Not all of them," Atty argued.

"Then you should have come to lessons when you were supposed to, instead of sneaking out of the compound," laughed Corianne, who gave Yulen a conspiratorial wink.

Despite Atty's struggles, the trio hustled her over to the bonfire where the women were gathering, preparing for the dance. Unlike his wife, Yulen knew when to admit defeat, and went over to top off his mug from Diad's limitless keg before joining the men on the outskirts of the bare patch of ground where the women would be dancing.

A small cheer went up when the girls delivered their reluctant prisoner. From his vantage point, Yulen could see how uncomfortable Atty felt becoming the unavoidable center of attention. It was clear that if she was being lauded for an exceptional kill, she would have no qualms about taking her bows. But this was a different situation altogether. This required a skill from her she either lacked, or had little practice in, and standing among people who knew that and still expected her to perform was making her extremely nervous.

She looked up and scanned the crowd, searching for him. When her eyes found him, he gave her a wink and a smile to let know he was there for her no matter how badly she flubbed up. She made a face in reply. It was a typical irritated Atty face, and he laughed in spite of himself.

The women circled the bonfire, facing the crowd of men. From what Yulen could tell, only the matured women danced. Children and young girls who had yet to reach puberty remained with their fathers.

The women took their places, standing straight with arms out until their hands touched, heads bowed. The music began, slowly, softly, and gently crescendeed.

Yulen kept his eyes locked on Atty, fascinated by this side of her he knew nothing about. Atty dancing? It was almost as alien as Atty in a dress.

For the first few steps old memories came back to her, and she moved with the rest in unison. There were a couple of missteps, when she lifted the wrong hand or led with the wrong foot, but the women on either side of her quickly whispered corrections to help guide her through the motions.

The music continued to weave a melody. A simple line, uplifting, almost happy in tone. Until it grew more sensuous, and an underlying theme began to play. The movements of the dance changed, from light and joyous, to darker and deeper.

Yulen watched in surprise as Atty began to sway her hips with the dance, lacing her arms overhead, eyes closed, head slightly tilted back. She turned, and stepped, and dipped, and twirled until her loose hair cascaded over her arms. Her arms swooped outward like wings covered in midnight blue feathers, before she swung around, matching the steady beat that seemed to grow stronger, pounding like a thundering heartbeat.

The women moved as one entity, and the music grew more insistent, more intense. Around him, Yulen could hear the men calling encouragement to their wives and loved ones. Many called out to Atty. With the light of the huge bonfire behind her, he could see every curve of Atty's beautiful body highlighted through the thin material of her gown as she undulated provocatively, seductively with the rhythm. The lines of her thighs, her flat stomach, and the curves her small but perfectly-formed breasts were unmistakable. If he noticed, he knew others did as well. When she bent backwards, her breasts strained against the fabric, and he was aware of how her nipples had grown taut, either from the dance, the cool weather, or from an inner emotion rising within her.

Belatedly, Yulen understood the effect of the dance on both the dancer and the watcher. Giver and recipient. Female and male. No wonder she had skipped out on her lessons, he acknowledged to himself. The dance was meant for lovers, for husbands and wives. It was a

dance laden with sexual overtones, filled with promises of the body as only two people in love could share. Back then, Atty had been right to avoid practice, having sworn an oath of celibacy. No wonder she panicked tonight.

But now, her life had changed. Atty had changed. The dance, though, had not. A small bead of perspiration rolled down the side of his face, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. The dance wasn't the only thing getting to him, he realized. Yulen cursed the drink's hold on him, even as he took another long draught of it.

These people remembered the old Atty as a thin slip of a girl, dressed in hunters togs, and more often than not covered in grime or blood, or both. When he had presented her in the low-cut velvet gown, her body molded by their lovemaking, their shock had been genuine. This was not Atty the innocent, virgin hunter any longer. She had become Atrilan, the woman. The little girl had grown up, and the sprout had blossomed into an incredibly beautiful woman whom they almost didn't recognize.

The music faded away, ending the dance, and the women stilled in the same position in which they'd begun. The crowd burst into hearty applause and whistles to show their approval.

Yulen watched Atty approaching with an almost apprehensive look on her face. Handing her his cup, he noticed the fine sheen of perspiration on her skin as she took a long drink, then followed it with a shudder.

"How many more hidden talents are you keeping from me?" he grinned.

"My dancing is not one of my talents," she wryly commented.

"Oh, I think you did quite well, in spite of your lack of experience."

"Do you dance, Yulen?"

He chuckled. "A little, but not like that. Hey, careful of the verbossa." He grabbed the mug away from her, even as she took another mouthful of it. At some point during the dance a steady buzzing had begun inside his head. And although the ground remained level, there was a slight halo effect now surrounding everything. Yulen knew he wasn't drunk just yet, but he was well on the way.

Atty leaned her forehead against his arm. The sapphire stone inset into the circlet dug into his skin, but he didn't care. Gently he brushed away a tendril of sweat-soaked hair clinging to her cheek. "Are you ready?" he whispered.

"Ever since this morning," she answered, lifting her face. Her confession sent a shot of adrenalin throughout his body. Every nerve went taut with expectation. For the umpteenth time, Yulen was glad of the patches of darkness that could help disguise his body's intent.

Drawing his arm around her, Yulen began to lead her once more toward their tent. "No one's going to come and snatch you away from me for another dance, are they?" he teased, but not without a serious undertone.

"No. Promise. No more dancing."

"In public," he added with a grin.

"In pu—". She stopped to stare at him. The expression on his face spoke volumes. "Definitely not in public," she finished, smiling.

They passed a large group of soldiers and Mutah gathered around a smaller campfire near the courtyard. The men were involved in some form or another on various games of chance, where bets were being placed and wagers given. Yulen's expert eye told him that most of his men appeared to be the definite underdogs.

The group hailed them as the men spotted the couple walking by. Yulen acknowledged them with a nod of his head, intending to keep going, when Del Ray, one of his lieutenants, loudly commented, "Looks like the hunt and the party have worn out the Battle Lady."

"Looks that way," Yulen laughed. "Of course, a few swallows of Diad's liquid fire may have helped."

A man with long, beard-like skin growths on his chin spoke out. "Oh, so you've tasted the verbossa? What did you think of it, D'Jacques?"

"Potent!" he called back.

He and Atty were near the outskirts of the gathering, almost past them, when another Mutah remarked, "Remember the first time Atty got snockered and nearly put an arrow up that beemer's ass?"

From the tenseness that suddenly came over her, Yulen knew Atty had heard.

"Oh, yeah!" the one with the beard of skin hooted in delight. "She was so intoxicated, she couldn't nock the damn arrow in time!"

The Mutah men roared with laughter as Yulen's men looked on. A few cast furtive glances at the couple, until Atty stopped dead in her tracks and turned around. "I have never been so drunk that I missed any target I set my eye on," she told them in a deathly quiet voice.

Mr. Skin Beard tossed her a back-handed gesture. "You wouldn't admit a near-miss if your life depended on it, Atty."

"I've had plenty of near misses," she snapped hotly, immediately reminding Yulen of the ragged scar on her inner thigh. "But none of them were after I'd had a few too many."

"Care to put your money where your mouth is?" Mr. Skin Beard grinned.

"You damn right!" Stepping closer, Atty removed the circlet from her brow and placed it in Paxton's hands. The lieutenant literally jumped in shock when she gave it to him. "There. That ought to pay for a few more sheaves of that wanna grass you love so much that you get over in West Crestin and don't think any of us know about. So what are you willing to ante up, Phillipe?"

Yulen kept silent, one hand over his mouth to prevent himself from saying something to anger or upset his wife. While he was apprehensive about her putting the circlet on the table as her wager, he knew he had to trust her. Trust that she knew her limitations, and knew when to back away once those limits were reached. When Paxton threw a worried look his way, he merely nodded to let the man know all would be okay.

He hoped.

Phillipe got to his feet, making it clear he was fully in touch with all his faculties. "If you can pass my test, you can name your price," he challenged.

Atty's eyes narrowed. "You have that nice little saber I've always had my eye on. That's what I want."

Phillipe blanched. "That saber's been in my family for generations."

"Going back on your bet?" someone called from the crowd.

"Renege on the wager now, and you'll lose all credibility in the future," Paxton dared the Mutah.

"Yeah!" someone else said. It was a Mutah man with a neck almost as wide as his shoulders. "Better think about it, Phillipe! When word gets around you hedged your bet with Atty before you even named the challenge, your reputation will be ruined."

"All right! All right!" He glared at Atty. "The saber, if you pass the test." He reached behind him where his weapons were laying within reach, and pulled an arrow from his quiver. Walking over to where a pile of firewood sat nearby, he found a piece he liked and brought it back to the center of their group. Laying it on the ground, he turned the short, thick piece onend and jammed the barbed tip of the arrow down into the soft center core. "There," he gestured toward it. "There's your challenge. Using only a knife, I dare you to split the arrow between the fletchings."

Immediately everyone stared at the slender shaft perched vertically in the chunk of firewood. Word began to spread, and before Yulen was aware of it, people began to drift over to watch.

"Between the fletchings?" Atty repeated, staring at the shaft.

"You heard me. Between the fletchings. With only a knife." Reaching in his belt, Phillipe extracted his dagger and handed it to her. Atty stared at the weapon for a second before handing it back to him.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to use my own."

A few gasps of surprise went up among the men as she lifted her gown above her knees, revealing a pair of shapely, long legs, then reached up further inside her thigh where she had strapped her Ballock. The large dagger gleamed in the firelight.

"Atty."

She looked over her shoulder to see her husband gesturing to her. She walked over to have him bend his face closer to hers. "Atty, you don't have to do this."

"I have to," she insisted. She seemed a bit unsteady on her feet, making Yulen wonder if the alcohol had worked more quickly on her because of her weariness, despite the fact that she hadn't had that much to drink.

"As much as I would hate to lose the circlet, "he began. Atty reached up to lay a finger on his lips.

"Shhh. Let me try this. If I win, I win. If I lose, I lose. Either way, I've preserved my dignity by going through with it. And I can face myself in the morning." Her eyes were clear enough to satisfy him. Sighing, Yulen nodded, and Atty returned to the center of the circle.

She bent over to stare at the arrow as her hand played with the Ballock's grip. She lifted the blade to her face, judging the width of the steel to the width of the shaft. It soon became clear to everyone the feat was impossible. Although the tip of the dagger was small enough to penetrate the wooden shaft, the weight of the weapon was greater than the arrow's. In order for the blade to split the wood, she would have to throw it with enough force to do so. But it would also knock the arrow off the piece of wood, either deflecting the blade, or missing its target completely. In short, there was no way Atty could throw the dagger at the arrow and have it split the shaft between the feathered tips.

Yulen noticed the furtive hand signals and the passing of coins between his men and the Mutah. He wondered what the odds were, and if they favored Atty.

Sighing loudly, Atty glanced upward at the broken moon now directly overhead. "Between the fletchings," she repeated again.

Phillipe shuffled his feet. "Quit stalling, Atty. Admit you can't make it and we'll call it a night."

She narrowed her eyes at him as she straightened up. "Think I no longer have what it takes, Mr. Barnstall?"

"All I know is that the old Atty wouldn't have deliberated this long. She would also have known an impossible shot when she saw it, and admitted defeat. Go ahead if you think you're still good enough."

Several in the crowd reacted to his dare. "If I think I'm still good enough?" Atty whispered darkly. Her eyes darted back at the arrow, then she lifted her face to gaze at the sky.

Yulen looked upward, his curiosity piqued. Why was she staring at the moon? As sure as he knew his wife, he knew she was planning something. Something no one suspected. A smile slowly lifted his lips.

Hefting the blade into the palm of her hand, she drew her arm back as if to throw the dagger directly at the arrow. Then, without warning, she stared upward once more and threw the Ballock underhand, straight up into the night sky.

Absolute silence reigned as every pair of eyes watched the heavy dagger fly upward until it reached its zenith, hesitated for the span of a heartbeat, and began its descent downward. Down toward the end of the arrow. Gathering momentum, speed, and thrust until the sharp tip bit through the notched end of the shaft, buried itself in the wood, and slid down through the grain, past the fletchings, until it came to rest almost midway down the arrow. Neatly splitting it nearly in half.

Several seconds passed before anyone could fully grasp what she had done. Atty took the opportunity to walk over and stand before her challenger. Bowing low before him, she again repeated the challenge. "Between the fletchings." As she straightened to turn, she added, "I'll want the saber and my Ballock returned by morning. Warren? May I have my circlet back now, please?"

Paxton gladly handed it to her, watching as she handed it to her husband, who placed it back on her brow with a loving smile.

Without a backwards glance, the Battle Lord and Lady soon disappeared into the darkness, heading for their tent, and leaving behind a group of stunned believers.

## Chapter Twenty-One Never Again

"Atrilan?"

They had just reached their tent, a bit out of breath from their rush to get there without another person stopping or interrupting them. Atty leaned down to duck inside the door flap when she felt Yulen pulling back at the same time he called to her. She stopped and turned to feel herself being drawn into his arms. In the moonlight his red-gold hair glowed like an aura about his head.

She looked into the shadows shielding his face, trying to find the reason why he wasn't following her inside the tent. Instead she heard his quick, nervous breathing as he touched her face with one warm hand.

"Atrilan, are you certain?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but for the first time words remained in a jumbled heap in her head. She winced and tried to make her thoughts form into sentences, but the verbossa was starting to take control of her faculties. The prickly heat of tears stung her eyes. If she waited too long, he would take her hesitancy for a negative answer, and that was the last thing she wanted tonight.

"Certain?" she managed to whisper. Suddenly she felt cold and hot simultaneously. It had been so long. Too long. She'd made her decision, and there would be no going back. She could never again refuse him, refuse his love, or refuse his body. It hurt too much to deny him, more than it hurt to deny herself. "Come inside and see how certain I am," she finally managed, trembling, and ducked into the tent.

She was three steps inside when Yulen grabbed her, turning her around roughly, and clamped his mouth over hers. Together they fell onto the pillows as his kiss branded her lips, devouring her with a passion that left her dizzy and starving for more.

So long...too long.

His hands shoved the hem of her dress up to her ribcage as she clasped her arms around his neck. She was drowning in his kisses, drowning in his overpowering authority over her body and her mind and her senses. His tongue plowed into her mouth, forcing itself inside her wetness with the same passion she knew he would use to plunge between her thighs.

Dimly she heard his weapons belt being tossed aside. A moment later she felt him moving restlessly beside her, tugging off his pants before he rolled on top of her. The material of his tunic was rough against her chest when he released her mouth to search for her throat and neck. As his tongue tasted her, she heard him groan, and a second later his hands were under her knees, lifting her legs, spreading her thighs, readying her for his long-awaited entry.

Atty opened her eyes against the dim lantern light to see his face poised directly over her. She tried to inhale, but all she could manage was a shaky breath. "Yul!"

"No more denial, Atrilan? You're ready to take me back as your husband?"

She reached up for him as a tear trailed down the side of her face. "No more denial, my beloved. Never again."

He released her legs to plant his arms on either side of her shoulders. Then, as he descended downward to plunge his tongue into her mouth, his erection plunged deeply, forcibly, into her body.

The indescribable surge of fire that passed between them caused them both to shudder from its intensity. It had taken them many nights of lovemaking for her body to learn how to take and accept as much as it could of his whole incredible length. Regardless, her flesh remained tight and restrictive, making his initial thrusts as soul-splitting as they had been those first few weeks after they had first become lovers.

As he began to move inside her, Atty cried for the sheer joy of having him fill her once again. She found herself alternating between lying passively beneath him as he pounded into her in his urgency to assuage his need for her, before joining him to demand he move harder, faster, and deeper inside her. He rocked her against the pillows, pressing her repeatedly into them as flesh slapped against flesh, and bright, needle-sharp pleasure speared into the very center of her womb.

Yulen grunted as he plowed into her. His hair swept across her throat and chest, tickling her breasts until it felt like tiny fingers of fire setting her aflame. She dug her fingers into its reddish-gold thickness, guiding his mouth back to her neck, to the overly-sensitive areas he was more than willing to attack with his teeth and tongue.

They were both panting, yet unable to stop the craving that had overtaken them. Sweat glistened on their bodies as they tumbled, rolling across the pillows and blankets, as the focus of their beings concentrated on the fusion of their bodies.

At one point Atty flipped herself to be on top of him, where she could ride him hard and rough. Her hair flew about, surrounding her like a wild mane. Jerking off the circlet, she tossed it to the far side of the tent where there was no chance of them landing on it. Yulen's hands poured over her skin, lifting the dress higher above her waist, over her breasts, until she raised her arms over her head so he could pull it completely off of her and toss it to one side. Reaching down, Atty grabbed the ends of his tunic and drew it over his head and shoulders, and threw it to join the rest of their clothing.

Now, totally naked, she bent over his chest and circled his body with her arms, pressing her face to his sweaty neck. Yulen responded by clutching her thighs and taking total control of their thrusts.

Exquisite waves of lust washed over her. Unable to stop herself, she whimpered from the sweetness, and little words of love passed her lips. Beneath her she could feel him reacting to her, to her words, and to the breathless perfume of their passion, until he could no longer suffice with her on top of him.

Growling throatily, he rolled her over onto one of the larger pillows, to where she lay arched beneath him over the soft cover. Reaching under and behind her, he held her firmly by the shoulders as he began his final assault on her body, shoving himself so far inside her rich, hot depths he could swear he touched her soul. Atty cried out as he rammed himself repeatedly into her, caught up in his invasion of her senses, lost in the feelings of sizzling sweet pain and pleasure that slowly rose to envelope them, devour them, and ultimately consume them in one shattering climax. Her body lifted off the pillow as every nerve went into rigor, and Yulen felt his bones and muscles turn into water. Together they fell back onto the pillow and slowly slid off onto the floor in a semi-comatose heap.

How long they lay there, gasping for breath, bodies vibrating uncontrollably in the aftermath, they could not fathom. At some point they both fell asleep, with Yulen still deeply buried within her, but neither of them willing to draw apart. A loving blanket of bliss swaddled them in contentment while outside the celebration continued into the early hours of the morning.

It was much later when Atty awoke to feel fingers tenderly stroking her hair around her forehead and temples. Bit by bit her mind took inventory of her body. She was lightly covered by Yulen's body, his warmth keeping them both protected against the night's chill. He was still inside her. She could feel him like a second heartbeat, her legs wrapped about his waist. They were lying at an angle with large pillows supporting their backs.

Before she opened her eyes, she smiled tenderly. A fingertip traced her lips.

"I am so in love with you," he whispered.

She caught his finger with her mouth and kissed it. "Not any more than I am with you."

"Then why, my only love? Why?"

This time she opened her eyes to see him studying her face a few inches away. She looked down to see where his hand had left her face and was twirling a lock of dark blue hair between his fingers. Twisting it until there was a little tuft left at the end, a tuft he used to reach over and tickle one pale pink nipple. Watching him playing with her allowed her to make her confession without having to see the pain she knew would come into his face.

"Do you remember that little green bag of herbs I was searching for before we left Alta Novis?"

"Yeah." Silently she could hear his next, unvoiced question. So?

"They weren't herbs. They were...they were tunsul leaves. They're a...contraceptive. I was taking them to keep from getting pregnant," she confessed softly, as if the gentleness in her voice could somehow make the words less hurtful.

The fingers stopped twirling her hair. His hand disappeared from view.

"I know what a contraceptive is," he responded quietly. There was no emotion in his voice, although she strained to find one. "Why didn't you tell me about this earlier?"

Unbidden, Liam's words came back to haunt her.

Yulen wants children. If you're going to deny him that dream, at least love him enough to let him know.

She lifted a hand over her eyes. "I'm frightened, Yul. I...there are so many reasons why. So many excuses. I don't know how to be a mother. I don't know if I *can* be a mother. I've seen so many women die in childbirth, and that alone terrifies me. And then there's the chance the baby would be Mutah, and that scares me even more. And I...and I..." She tried to explain further, but the air wouldn't leave her lungs. She couldn't catch her breath, and all at once she felt as if she was strangling.

She pushed him away and out of her, and sat up, gasping between breaths as hot tears rolled down her cheeks. Yulen sat up next to her, yet he kept his hands away from her, not touching her, but waiting to see what she would do next. Waiting to hear what she would say next, as if there was anything else she could tell him that wouldn't make it hurt any worse than it already did.

"Please...please don't hate me," she begged, trying to keep her face averted from his.

"I can never hate you, Atrilan, but I can't believe you wouldn't discuss this with me first to see if we couldn't come to some sort of solution together." There was a slight pause, then he asked, "How long have you been taking this stuff?"

"Ever since we escaped Bearinger, back when I killed Collaunt. I found some in the woods. I took my first leaf the night we made love for the first time."

She dropped her face and let her hair slide over her shoulders, until she was hidden beneath its thick, blue waves. She needed to feel his arms around her, needed his love if not his reassurance.

"I'm so sorry. You're right. I should have discussed this with you first. But everything was so new between us. I...I knew nothing about physical love. All I knew was what Mohmee had told me."

"Your mother told you about these leaves?"

"Yes." She sniffed, taking a corner of one blanket to wipe her nose.

"She told you about sex and about how babies are made?"

She felt him draw up his knees to clasp his arms over them. "Some of it," she admitted. "When I went into the caste and took my oath of celibacy, we spoke no more about it. I mean, why would I need to know more?"

Silence fell between them. Outside the tent a cold wind flapped the pennants on the roof and pushed against the cloth walls. It was Yulen who resumed the discussion.

"Talk to me, Atrilan. Why does having a Mutah baby frighten you? Do you think I would hate our child if it was Mutah?"

He was still calling her by her love name. Her intimacy name. The realization gave her hope. Tucking some of her hair back behind her ear, she sat up slowly, yet still kept her eyes cast downward.

"No." She shook her head. "I know you couldn't hate our child. Our own flesh. But that doesn't mean others wouldn't."

"Others? You mean other Mutah and Normals."

Atty nodded. "There have been half-breeds born before. I've seen them. I've seen what they've had to endure. Belonging to both people, but accept by neither. I...I couldn't bear to have our baby go through that." She pressed a hand to her face. "Oh, God, Yul. I've suffered so much physical and emotional agony just so I could be with you. I will never allow that to happen to our baby, even if it means never giving birth to our child. I couldn't bear to see..." Her throat closed up, blocking off all air. Gasping for air, it finally came out in one choking sob. "I can't bear the thought of our child having to suffer that kind of pain, simply because I gave birth to him!"

This time his arms did encircle her, and Yulen drew her to his chest where she trembled against him. He pulled a blanket up to cover her bare back and shoulders, then held her until she managed to stop shivering.

"Let me guess. You couldn't find your leaves, so that's why you wouldn't make love with me. You feared getting pregnant. Were you waiting until we got to Wallis so you could get more of these leaves? And that's why you've finally allowed me back into your body?"

"Yes...and no."

His warm hands pulled her away from his comforting chest, and fingers lifted her chin until she was forced to look at him. "What are you trying to tell me?" he asked patiently.

Biting her lips, she confessed. "There are no more tunsul leaves. At least, not until next spring." As she expected, his expression grew quizzical.

"But if there are no more leaves, then how...why..."

"Because I love you," she repeated. "Because I couldn't go another day, another night, not having you inside me, or sleeping beside me. Or touching me and loving me. There are no mornings without your good morning kiss. I can't sleep without your warmth surrounding me. I couldn't go any longer having you believe I didn't desire you any more, or thinking I didn't love you any more. When in fact there isn't a day that goes by that I don't love you harder and stronger than I did the day before."

She reached out with tentative fingers and stroked the soft golden-red hairs running down the center of his chest. They were like strands of warm silk along her fingertips. "I had to come to a decision, so I made the only one my heart would let me make. I'm putting myself completely in your hands. And I pray that if I have a child, you'll help me to protect it. And love it. And teach me to be the kind of mother I need to be. Because Liam was right when he told me—"

"You spoke to Liam about this?" His demeanor instantly hardened. "When?"

Atty nodded. "That night when we almost... You remember, on our way up here. When you rolled off of me and left the tent, and sent him in here to talk to me."

Running a hand through his shoulder-length hair, Yulen sighed loudly. "I never sent Liam in here," he told her. "Yes, I was upset and afraid and frustrated. I went outside and vented to Liam, but I never asked him to come talk to you. What did he say? What did he tell you?"

She glanced down to see where he was holding her hand. It was almost an unconscious gesture, them holding hands. They did it all the time whenever they were together. Even when they were outside their bedroom, in the lodge, or outside the lodge, out among the public who had noticed. It was as if having just that minor contact was enough to keep them grounded. As though the surety of their being with each other, and knowing they were both safe and whole and happy and at peace, could be centered in the touch of their fingers.

"I asked Liam for another contraceptive, but he turned me down." She watched his fingers squeeze hers gently before they laced between hers.

"Why did he turn you down?"

"He said...he said I needed to talk to you. He said I had to explain what was going on. And then, if we both agreed, to let him know. He wouldn't give it to me until we both agreed. That's what he told me."

Yulen suddenly released her hand and got to his feet, searching the blankets until he found his pants. Atty watched as he pulled them on and started to button them up.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm going to find Liam and order him to give you the contraceptive."

"What?" The flat angry tone of his voice could not be ignored. Atty stared at him wideeyed. "Yul, it has to be after two in the morning!"

"Mmm, probably closer to three." He grabbed his tunic and turned it right-side out before slipping it on.

"Then answer *me* why," she whispered as she clutched the blanket to her breasts. "I told you I was willing to take that chance now."

He paused just inside the doorway, weapons belt in his hand. "Maybe now, Atrilan," he answered her. "Maybe tonight you're willing. But what about tomorrow night? Or the night

after that?" He shook his head. "We've only been married a few short months. We'll talk more about it later. Maybe after a few more months or so you'll be able to find it in your heart to accept a child. Until that time, I will wait for you. Just like this time, when I trusted you and waited for you to allow me back into your body."

He gave her another long look, then ducked through the door flap, leaving Atty alone to shiver in the cold, damp, early morning air. Covering her face with her hands, she waited to see what would happen next. In the meantime, she could feel the delicious, telltale soreness between her thighs and in her lower belly, along with the stickiness.

A child. A product of her and Yulen's love. A child that was part her and part him. A boy or a girl. What would that child look like? Despite the fact that the baby could have some mutant mark, would the child look more like her? Or like Yulen?

She lifted a lock of dark blue hair curled over her breast. Both of her parents had been dark-haired. Her mother had brown, her father black. Sometimes she had wondered what color her hair would have been if it hadn't been blue.

If there was a baby in their future, could the child have blue hair like hers? Atty immediately shook her head at the thought. Mutah marks were as individual as fingerprints. It was a well known fact that no two Mutah bore identical or similar marks. In fact, it was a belief passed along through many generations that once the marks began to repeat, that moment would signal the beginning of the end of the Mutah races. And that, eventually, all marks would eventually disappear, withdrawing back into the gene pool until there was no longer anything to differentiate Mutah from Normals.

Of course, there was also the belief that repeating marks would most likely occur in the offspring between Mutah and Normals. Was it possible the repeating marks could happen within their lifetime?

Atty sniffed loudly and swiped at the drying tears on her cheeks with the back of her hand. *A baby.* A child who would take the world the way she and Yulen left it and carry it forward into the future. Madigan referred to it as the D'Jacques Dynasty.

A baby. Atty took another deep, shaky breath. How would a baby growing in her stomach feel? How would she feel?

The only thing she was certain of was how Yulen would react if she got pregnant. She had no doubt he would rush right out into the courtyard and ring the announcement bell the moment he was told the news. More than that, she knew her husband and Liam would take every precaution necessary to protect her and the baby, and see that she had a safe and uncomplicated delivery.

She bit her lip as she suddenly realized how her thoughts had shifted. How her feelings had changed. Was it possible to love someone so much that she was willing to risk everything for his happiness?

For some strange reason, the possibility no longer frightened her.

### Chapter Twenty-Two Under Protest

"Liam. Wake up."

MaGrath groaned softly but made no movement. Again Yulen shook the man who was bundled up inside his bedroll. "Liam, wake up."

This time the physician managed to crack one bleary eye. "Yulen?" He tried to sit up, but from his actions it was clear he was suffering from an overdose of lemon verbossa. One hand pressed a palm to his forehead. "Shit," he muttered under his breath, then lifted his face to find the Battle Lord standing over him, an equally grim expression on the man's face. "What's wrong? What time is it?"

"It's about three in the morning."

"Three? What's happened? What's wrong?" He managed to get shakily to his feet as Yulen offered a hand to help steady him.

"There's no emergency, but I want you to give Atty the contraceptive like she asked." MaGrath stared at him in disbelief. "What? Now?"

"Yes, now. And Liam, next time Atty asks you for anything, anything, you will give it to her without a lecture or condemnation. Do you understand me?"

Jerking his arm away from Yulen's supportive hand, the physician turned an angry face toward the young man. "So she's convinced you she's too scared to have children? And you believed her?" he asked hotly, but softly, so as not to arouse any of the sleeping soldiers nearby.

"Yes, I believe her. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because you're in denial, that's why. Because you're letting your love for her color your thinking. Yes, she's afraid. But deep down she doesn't want children. Ever. Haven't you figured that out by now?"

Yulen shook his head. "That's not true."

"Yes, it is! She doesn't want to be burdened with the responsibility. Hell, her life right now is exactly the way she wants it. She has total freedom. She can go out and hunt to her heart's content, then come home to you. Why burden herself with having to take care of a baby? Because she knows that once she does, all that freedom will go out the window, and she'll be tied down with having to feed it and care for it and raise it. No more carefree days running around in the forest and making love with you beneath the trees. Oh, don't look so surprised, Yulen. Did you really think we didn't know what you two were doing out in the woods when you disappeared for hours at a time?"

MaGrath snorted and reached for his boots to begin pulling them on. "I want it on the record that I'm giving this stuff to her only because you ordered me to. I still don't think she should be taking it. Dammit, Yulen, she's your wife. She owes you an heir."

"She owes me nothing," Yulen responded quietly. There was an undercurrent of hostility in his voice, but he kept his temper in check. "And you're wrong about her never wanting to have children. Liam, we've only been married a few months. I'm willing to give her time. Frankly, I don't care what you think. She's not ready yet. She's not ready to be a mother, and I will not force her to do anything that will upset her or in any way jeopardize her love for me."

"Oh, yeah? And what will her excuse be in another two or three years? That she's still not ready?" He harrumphed as he snatched his medical bag from where it sat on the ground next to his bedroll. "I'll be looking forward to hearing how you defend her then." He strode away, albeit a bit wobbly, heading for the tent, and leaving the Battle Lord behind to bite back his angry reply.

The moment MaGrath entered the tent, it was more than obvious what had been going on. Near the center of the pile of disarrayed pillows and blankets Atty sat as if waiting for him. She lifted a face filled with defiance, her eyes flashing and daring him to make a hurtful comment when she heard him enter. At the sight of her love-tousled hair and slightly swollen lips, MaGrath couldn't remember if she had ever looked more beautiful. Her long, shapely legs were bared to her thighs. Only a thin blanket covered her breasts and abdomen. The scent of sex clung to the night air.

"I'm here under protest," he announced flatly.

Instead of responding, Atty brushed back her hair. Her gesture caused part of the blanket to slip, revealing one lovely pink-tipped breast.

"Besides, isn't it a bit late to be asking for it now?" he continued to antagonize her.

"Liam, you're still drunk."

Shaking his head, he flipped back the cover of the bag and reached inside for the small glass vial he'd placed in an inside pocket. Somehow a little voice had told him it was only a matter of time before he'd have to give it to her. Tossing her the little bottle, he instructed her, "One drop in a glass of water every day. This should last you about two weeks. When you start to run low, bring me the bottle and I'll refill it for you." Pulling the bag's strap back onto his shoulder, he gave her one final glare. "I may be feeling the effects of that damn lemon verbossa, but it hasn't changed the way I feel about your decision."

"Mine and Yul's decision," she softly corrected him.

"No, *your* decision. He made his out of love. But you had a completely different reason for the choice you made."

"Oh? And what do you think my reason is?"

"Selfishness," MaGrath snapped. Without waiting to see what her reaction would be, he ducked out of the tent and went in search of the Battle Lord. He found the man talking with the sentry posted at that section of the compound wall.

Spotting the physician, Yulen watched for him to signal he'd done as requested. When the signal came, the Battle Lord bid the young soldier a good night and returned to the tent where Atty was waiting for him.

For a long moment he stood inside the door flap, staring at her. Finally, it was she who broke the silence. "It's cold, Yul. Come warm me?"

He didn't need to be asked twice.

## Chapter Twenty-Three Slim Chance

As she always did, Atty first took notice of her surroundings before she opened her eyes. Rising from the depths of sleep, as her body awoke her of its own accord, she heard faint sounds of movement and voices outside the tent. Although it was still dark inside the structure, her internal clock told her it was just past sunrise. The compound was waking up. Any plans she'd made last night to go out hunting before daylight had been neatly nipped in the bud.

She was warm. Comfortable. Tired. Sore. Oh, God, she was sore, but the knowledge brought a satisfied smile to her face.

There was a feathery breath against her back. A warmth stretched down, past her buttocks, behind her calves, all the way to her toes. *Yul.* Memories of the night before came back to her. When he had returned after searching for Liam, they had begun to make love again. Only it had turned into another tumultuous, lust-driven bout that had left them both quivering like boneless puddles in its wake. She had no recollection of when they'd finally fallen asleep.

Stretching just enough to get the cramp out of one leg, she wondered what the women would be serving for breakfast. Sharing a nice, intimate meal together would be nice. Could she manage to creep outside long enough to get some of it, plus two mugs of coffee, to bring back before he woke up?

Well, there's only one way to find out, she told herself, sliding out from under the blankets. She started to crawl over the tumbled bedding when a warm hand firmly grabbed her by the ankle. "Where do you think you're going?" a sleepy voice demanded to know.

She glanced back at him, aware of her bare bottom sticking up in the air. Yulen was also very aware of the temptation the creamy buttocks provided. "I'm starved. I was going out to get some breakfast and bring it back for us to eat here."

"Worked up an appetite?" he grinned. A second later he winced. The hand that had grabbed her ankle released her and pressed against his forehead as he gave a deep groan of protest.

"Headache?" she asked him, whispering.

"From the verbossa?" he countered.

"Coffee will help. I'll be back in a jiffy."

She pulled a fresh change of clothes from the travel bag kept inside the tent. No more dresses, she swore to herself. For the next few days she could go back to her beloved leather pants and loose top.

Reaching the door flap, she stopped to stare at Yulen's sword and scabbard buried several inches in the dirt just outside the entrance, the hilt close enough to almost bar the entrance. Curious, she stepped outside and waited for her eyes to adjust to the bright morning sunshine before heading for the center courtyard.

Epiphany greeted her with a shout of good morning and a hug. "Oh, my goodness, Atty, everyone is just abuzz about what you did last night." The woman shook her head in amazement. "Word is you may be even better now than you were before you got married! Can I help you with something, hon?"

Atty raised an eyebrow at her. "What I did last night?"

The Mutah woman snorted. "Had a little of Diad's lemon juice, did you? I'm talking about how you split that arrow with your dagger. By the way, how's that hunky-looking husband of yours this morning? Diad said he had at least two mugs of that stuff. And considering how he's never had any before last night, it's probably kicking him in the teeth this morning."

Atty grinned. "I'm hoping some coffee will help. Can I take a tray back to the tent, please?"

"Sure! I'll get it ready for you." The woman ambled off, leaving Atty time to glance around the compound.

Over at the farthest end, at the last table, she spotted MaGrath hunched over a cup of coffee, looking like the last day of a two-week journey. Without a doubt he'd had more than two mugs of the verbossa, and her heart went out to him.

There was a branch of small purple leaves sitting in a bowl on a nearby table. Atty wondered if the physician was aware of montrosse, but just in case he didn't, she snapped one off a stem and took it over to him.

The man didn't seem aware of her approaching. He remained still, unmoving over his cooling mug of coffee, his eyes tightly shut against the daylight. Carefully, Atty leaned over and pressed her lips to his cheek. His skin felt hot. Tucking the leaf into the palm of his hand, she whispered, "Chew this and swallow it down with some coffee. I love you. Talk to you later."

Leaving him alone, she went back to get another leaf just as Epiphany returned with a full tray. Atty thanked her and took it back to the tent where her Ballock and her newly acquired saber were lying right at the doorway. Slipping them into her belt, she eased the tray around the sword as she ducked through the door flap.

While she'd been gone, Yulen had managed to slip on a clean pair of pants and wash his face. She handed him the leaf and a cup of coffee, and gave him the same instructions as she'd given the physician. "Chew this and swallow it down with some coffee."

"Let me guess. A male contraceptive?"

Atty gave him a wary look, until she noticed the twinkle in his bloodshot eyes. "Very funny. How do you feel?"

"Obviously worse than you do. Are you suffering any side effects this morning?"

"I didn't have as much as you. Besides, it's not the verbossa I'm suffering side effects from." Before he could find a decent comeback, she held up the saber to show it to him. Yulen gave it an appreciative look.

"It's a beautiful piece. Are you planning on keeping it?"

"No. I just want him to squirm a bit for making that crack he made last night. Before we go home, I'll give it back to him." She tossed it to one side before handing him the large slice of bread she'd spread with butter and jam. Yulen took it from her and stopped to stare at it. "Trust me, my love. The montrosse leaf will settle your stomach enough to allow you to eat. So eat. You'll need your strength."

Yulen obliged by biting into the bread. "Need my strength for what?"

"For what I have planned for you." Atty gave him a wink over the rim of her cup.

Seeing her invitation, Yulen proceeded to crawl over the short distance separating them, when Atty suddenly held up her hand in the signal for silence. He froze, straining his ears to hear what had alerted her. Several seconds passed before she lowered her hand.

"What?" he asked her.

"I thought someone was coming to the tent."

"Don't worry. They won't enter."

"You're sure?" she asked him. She moved over to where they could sit side-by-side with the tray in front of them.

Yulen nodded. "They won't come in as long as the door's locked."

A giggle escaped her. "The what?"

Her husband smiled at her over his coffee. "Didn't you notice the lock on the door when you left?"

"Oh, you mean your sword in the ground?"

Chuckling, Yulen explained, "It's something my father used to do. As long as the sword is there, no one is allowed entrance into the tent. No one. It also meant that, when I was a kid, I wasn't allowed to leave the tent until he removed it."

"Let me guess. You left anyway."

"Oh, yeah," he smiled. "Got my butt whipped for it, too."

Atty laughed. "Gee, now that sounds like something I would do!"

Yulen reached over to brush a lock of her hair over her shoulder. Lovingly he stared at his wife, then leaned over to give her the good morning kiss she'd mentioned the night before. She fit perfectly against him as she reached up lay a hand on the thin scar running down the side of his face. Pulling back, he caressed her cheek with his knuckles.

"Sometimes I wish I could have found you earlier. Maybe grown up with you. Seen what your life had been like when you were a child. I wish I could have met your parents, and known how remarkable they were to create someone like you."

"No you don't. I was obnoxious growing up. Always a pain. Always giving my parents fits because I wouldn't fit the traditional mold," she smiled.

"You still don't," Yulen told her. "That's probably the reason why I was drawn to you in the first place." He refilled his mug from the small pottle on the tray. Pausing for a moment, he tilted his head in that way she knew he did whenever he was thinking. Or listening.

"Your men must think something's wrong since you haven't left the tent yet. I know some of the Council men are probably chomping at the bit, waiting for you to come out."

"No rest for the weary?" He snorted softly and drained his mug. "Guess I'll have to get up, then, and get to work."

Atty reached out to move the tray out of his way so it wouldn't get knocked over, when she suddenly found herself being lifted and pushed back into the pillows behind them. Gasping from his strength and the gentleness of his hands holding her around her waist, she stared up into eyes that were heavily-lidded with desire. His kiss tasted of coffee and honey, and she found herself tonguing his sweetness with eagerness.

"I thought you said you had to get up and go to work," she finally managed to say when he let her up for air. A slow grin creased his face as he began to unbutton her pants with slow, deliberate movements.

"I lied."

It was nearly an hour later when Yulen exited the tent, leaving Atty behind to debate whether she wanted to take a quick mid-morning nap, or go ahead and face the rest of the day. As he'd suspected, several of the Council members were waiting in the courtyard for him. Nearing the table, he saw Fortune Kalich shake his head.

"I told you to watch out for that verbossa. It has a mean kick."

"You neglected to tell me it also likes to nail you to the floor," Yulen laughed.

"Did Atty give you some montrosse to counteract it?" Twoson inquired.

"You mean a little purple leaf? Yeah, she gave me one. Which reminds me." He glanced around to see if he could spot MaGrath anywhere nearby. "You haven't seen my physician this morning, have you?"

"I saw him and Gilter leave a few minutes ago," Vogel admitted. "They went out the main gates. My guess is they're out collecting plants."

Nodding, Yulen pulled out the large diagram of the compound from beneath the pile of other drawings and placed it on top. "All right, gentlemen. Now that the celebration is over, and I've made my intentions clear as to the future of Wallis, let's get down to business and discuss the rest of these changes I propose. I want the men to get started immediately on buttressing the walls. The rest can wait until that's finished."

The Councilmen gathered closer around the table. They had six months to either accept or reject what the Battle Lord had planned for the compound. Six months before they had to decide whether to become a permanent holding under the absolute command of this man, or to go back to their old way of life. Very few of them had any doubts as to what the final outcome would be.

As they discussed each separate issue he brought up, and compromises were met, Yulen kept one eye open for Atty. Last night and that morning had done little to assuage his hunger for her. On the contrary, making love with her had increased his need. He deliberately had left the scent of her on his skin and hair, although he knew it was risky. Some of these Mutah could probably tell how intimate they had been, but at the moment Yulen didn't care. All he had to do was close his eyes and he could relive her like gentle strokes across his nerves. There were times when the mere sight of her was enough to turn him into a pool of lust.

He remembered the men laughing, telling him the fire would go out after a few months. By year's end he wouldn't find her sassiness as endearing, they'd promised. A tiny smile curled both corners of his mouth. They were wrong. So damn wrong. A look or a touch, or the feel of her hair sliding against his cheek—the only time he felt complete was when he held her in his arms. The only time he felt worthy was when she craved him as much as he did her. The only time he could forget his responsibilities as a Battle Lord was when they were literally glued to each other, inside each other, and Atty was panting his name over and over in time with his thrusts.

A shudder ran through him. *Careful*, he warned himself. A little more concentration on the matter at hand, and you can reward yourself later. If he didn't pull his attention back to what he needed to do, the consequences could be devastating.

So it was with great relief when Andolph nonchalantly remarked that they needed to release the table to the womenfolk in order for them to finish getting things ready for lunch. Yulen caught the flare of the man's nostrils as he walked past him and gave him a hooded glance. The man with the head full of dimples knew. Good. Maybe these people needed more than their eyes to realize that what he and Atty had was greater than anything they were used to seeing.

Straightening his shoulders, Yulen began rolling up the papers as the Council members went off to their individual households when a low voice behind him asked, "Yulen, do you have a few minutes?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "A few. How do you feel this morning, Liam?"

The physician walked up and leaned against the edge of the table. "I feel exceptional, considering how sick I was this morning. Since then I've learned about the miraculous healing properties of a little purple leaf from a plant called the montrosse, thanks to Atty."

Yulen peered at him over the bundle he was tying. "She was the one who gave it to you?" "Yeah." MaGrath bowed his head, searching for a good way to phrase his next statement. Yulen saw the indecision on the man's face and remained silent, waiting.

"Are you going to be much longer? I have to get a few things off my chest with you."

"I'm done here for now. Sure you don't want to go somewhere more private?"

"No. I'd like to stretch my legs a bit more, if you don't mind," the older man said.

Yulen covered the rolled-up papers with a length of hide someone had offered to help keep the rain and morning moisture off the work. Having reassured himself things would be okay until he returned, he followed his old friend toward the rear section of the compound, behind where the apartment homes lined narrow streets.

They walked for some time, giving Yulen a chance to quietly observe the scenery. As he always did, he let MaGrath begin the conversation.

"Have you noticed how many children there are in Wallis?"

Raising an eyebrow, his first question to himself was to wonder where the physician was going with this. "Not really."

"There are seven young adults from the age of nineteen to thirteen. Seven teenagers, including Atty. I'm including her as she's the only twenty-year-old on their census. There are five children from twelve to six. There were six, but you know about Atty's sister, Keelor. And, to avoid any more guilt, there were the four our men slaughtered when we invaded five months ago." He cleared his throat, giving himself a chance to collect himself. "And from ages five to one there are three children. Know how many infants there are under the age of one? Just two. There were three, but there was a death just a couple of weeks ago. That's seventeen children left total in a compound of over two hundred and fifty adults. Twenty-three children born in the last twenty years. That's barely one per year."

Nodding, Yulen asked, "What are you trying to tell me, Liam?"

"This compound's dying. The number of births isn't keeping up with the number of deaths. Give or take three or four generations, if Wallis remains heading in the same direction it has been these past years, the town will become nonexistent." MaGrath scratched his head. "Gilter has been an enormous help bringing me up to speed on Mutah physiology. To be frank, Yulen, the man believes the Mutah population is slowly dying out, and I'm inclined to agree with him. Their newborn mortality rate is almost eighty percent. Greater than three of out every four births ends in death before the age of one."

Yulen stopped to stare at the man. MaGrath noticed the man's inaction, and paused to turn and look back.

"What you're saying is that, even without the contraceptive you gave her last night, the chances of Atty getting pregnant are very slim. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"No. I'm saying the chances of Atty bearing a living child are very slim. She has the family history of multiple miscarriages. In fact, there's not one female of child bearing age, of the ones married or trying to conceive, who haven't had at least one loss." MaGrath lifted his chin. "After the way I blew up last night, I wanted to tell you I was sorry. I had no business ragging on

you and Atty the way I did, but I wasn't thinking straight at the time. Damn verbossa. I should have explained myself further. Well, I'm explaining now. If you take Atty off the contraceptive, Yulen, she may conceive, but it'll be a miracle if she ever gives you a child who'll live beyond his first birthday. And it won't be her fault."

Yulen nodded slowly as the man's words sunk in. "She mentioned last night about seeing women dying in childbirth."

"That's not uncommon, either," admitted the physician. "They've lost three in the past two years. Add the destruction we brought as Cleaners, and you can see how great their anger and frustration runs."

He watched as the Battle Lord rubbed his forehead in consternation. It was clear the man was upset by the news. "It makes a lot more sense to me now," MaGrath added.

"What does?"

"Why Atty is terrified. It also explains why she says she doesn't know the first thing about being a mother. It's because she's never been around that many. She's never seen what real motherhood entails, not in the same way we're used to seeing it. For all we know, the idea of becoming pregnant and having a baby is like a game of chance. Put the right card on the table, and you live, but you lose the baby. Put another card on the table, and you just might give birth, but the child dies soon after. Another card, and the baby lives. But have the wrong card dealt to you..."

"And you die," Yulen said quietly. "Oh, God, Liam. Now I feel like..." He glanced up to see his reactions and feelings mirrored on the physician's face.

"Now I can see why she wants to put off trying to have a baby," MaGrath said softly. "She wants to have as much time with you as she can before she tries. Because if she should happen to not make it..." His words faded away, leaving behind the stark and hopeless possibility of a future without her.

A coldness came over Yulen, one where he could actually feel the blood draining out of his face. His skin seemed to tighten over his bones, shrinking inward until his insides felt mummified. "I want to spend the rest of my life with her," he managed to whisper.

"I know."

"I...I can't lose her. Not now. Not after all we've been through."

"I know."

"I won't put her through that. I won't chance it. I can't. Even if it means the end of my line."

MaGrath grimaced, but he understood. "I know."

"Have you said anything to Atty since last night?"

MaGrath shook his head. "I saw her for only a moment this morning when she brought me the montrosse leaf. I haven't been able to catch her since then. I was hoping I could at least talk with you. And hope you'd give her my apologies." He smiled. "And a thank you for the hangover leaf."

He started to walk away when Yulen called to him. "Where are you going?"

"I was summoned a few minutes ago to go check out one of the men who tried to fillet his hand with a wood awl. Would you also give Atty my love when you see her?"

"I will."

Yulen watched the man hurry off as Atty's confession from the night before still rang in his ears.

I had to come to a decision, so I made the only one my heart would let me make. I'm putting myself completely in your hands. And I pray that if I have a child, you'll help me to protect it. And love it. And teach me to be the kind of mother I need to be.

Groaning softly, he turned and returned to the courtyard to find his wife and relay MaGrath's messages to her. And to apologize. All this time, when he had been selfishly demanding she give herself to him and start a family, she had been facing the possibility of committing the ultimate sacrifice. Once again he had stopped thinking of Atty as a Mutah, and it had almost cost him his most precious possession.

## Chapter Twenty-Four Old Home

Atty glanced up from where she stood serving the soldiers from behind the long table, to see her husband striding purposefully toward her. At first she thought there was something wrong until she got a better look at his face. She'd seen that expression only one other time in her life—the day she had returned to Alta Novis. On MaGrath's and Madigan's wedding day. On the day Karv had tried to claim the compound for his own, and she had killed the man without a second thought. Then she had fallen to her knees before her husband and tried to convince him she was still alive. That she still loved him. That she had come back to him, and nothing would ever tear them apart again. His eyes had stared at her then with that same dead, terrified, lost expression.

He swept over to the table and literally grabbed her by the wrist, jerking her away from the serving line, away from the stares of everyone eating or waiting to be served. Atty half-ran, half-stumbled to keep up with him as he drew her away from the crowd, finally stopping near the old, enormous tree she'd carved her name into years ago.

Twirling her around to face him, he bent over at the waist, hands on his thighs, as he tried to catch his breath while she waited. Before long he raised his face to look at her. "Forgive me."

"For what?" She started to wrack her brain, trying to think of what he might have done that would bring about such an apology.

"For not understanding."

She gave him a puzzled look. "Understanding about what? Yulen, are you okay?"

"Liam explained to me about the birth rate among your people."

"So?"

It then dawned on him why she had such a casual attitude. She really didn't understand herself. "Atty, the birth rate in Wallis has been steadily declining over the last few decades."

"I know that."

"Atty," He shook his head. "That's not normal. For the number of women here who are capable of bearing children, there should be at least five to ten babies born a year. For the past twenty years, there's been about one birth a year in Wallis."

"What do you mean, that's not normal?" She gave a little laugh, as if he were joking with her. "How many babies were born this year in Alta Novis?"

"Twenty-six so far," he told her.

Atty's mouth opened in astonishment. "Twenty..."

"Six. Although Liam expects the number to climb to thirty by the end of the year."

"Oh, but there's nearly three times the number of people living there."

"Atty, there are just over four hundred plus citizens living there. There's another four hundred soldiers. Do the percentages."

"What are you trying to tell me, Yulen?"

"Do your people know they're a dying race?"

"Yes," she nodded slowly. "We've known for years. It's probably why the caste finally allowed me to join. Every bow is needed in times of danger or famine."

She watched as his anger briefly boiled. "When will you get it through that thick skull of yours that the reason they let you join was because you're a hundred times better than they would ever be?" he hissed hotly. "Woman or not, they couldn't turn away the greatest hunter they'd ever seen."

They continued to look into each other's eyes, until Atty walked up to him and laid her head against his chest. She could hear the steady beat of his heart against her ear. "What does this have to do with us?" she asked him carefully.

"Maybe nothing. Maybe everything." He reached up to stroke her hair, knowing how the gesture could soothe her as it also calmed him.

*Maybe everything*. She leaned back to look up at him. "You're talking about having a baby," she stated frankly.

"Yes."

"I thought we were finished talking about it. At least, for now."

"For now," he echoed, placing a kiss to her forehead. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No. I was serving the men while I waited for you."

"I need to run to the tent for a moment. Want to go ahead and get us a couple of plates?" She nodded. "Don't be long."

They parted, unaware of the whispers and stares from those who had witnessed their conversation. Little did the couple know that in the short time they had been at Wallis, both Normals and Mutah had exchanged every tidbit of gossip and information they had about the giant blond warrior with the scarred face, and the courtship and marriage he shared with the blue-haired huntress.

Yulen's men now knew as much as they could about her early days in Alta Novis. And the citizens of Wallis were aware of the instance when she shot out the three simultaneous targets. About her kidnapping and rescue from the brutal Battle Lord of Bearinger, whom she killed during her escape. About her being poisoned on their way home, and how D'Jacques wedded her just prior to the Mutah army's attack on the compound. And about how she was brought back to Wallis, where she recovered as she begged to be returned to her husband.

It was as juicy and as exciting as any tale they had every read or heard, except this was real, and it was now. Plus they happened to be right in the middle of it, right where they could analyze every move, every look, and every overheard word.

Now the rumors were flying thick and fast that the Battle Lady either didn't want children, or wasn't able to have children. No matter which problem lay at the root, it was causing friction between her and the Battle Lord. Such friction did not bode well for either compound. But they had no choice but to watch, and wait, and hope things would work out for the better.

\* \* \* \*

Mastin glanced up in shock as two plates landed on the table in front of him, and both the Battle Lord and Lady took their places on the bench across from where he was sitting.

"Give me a report, Cole," Yulen ordered with a grin as he began to dig into his potatoes. "Report?"

"You have us thoroughly spooked," Atty giggled. "We can't do anything now without wondering when and where you're going to pop up to interrupt us."

"So we thought we'd save you the time and trouble, and just show up. What's new, Cole? Anything I need to be aware of?"

Mastin blushed, at a loss for something to say. "There's really nothing new, Sir. We went on a sweep yesterday as you ordered, but found no sign that the Bloods may still be around, or might be returning. There's fresh spoor in the wood, however, meaning game is returning to the area. The only thing I can think of at the moment that's been relayed recently to me is that the men are wondering how much longer we'll be staying in Wallis."

"Are the men uncomfortable here?" Yulen asked guardedly.

"Not as far as I can tell. They just would like to get home before the weather makes it too difficult to travel."

"He's got a point," Atty mentioned. "This far into the forest, once the snows begin, we'll be pretty much socked in."

"Then I need to get as much as I can arranged so that the Council can handle the reconstruction on their own after we leave. But I'm also planning on leaving behind a small force for their protection. Cole, how many unattached men do we have in this battalion?"

His Second did a quick mental tabulation. "Probably about half, give or take."

"A hundred men. That should suffice. Perfect. Cole, get word around about the reassignment coming up. In the meantime, if any of those scheduled to remain behind give you any doubts as to whether or not they'll be able to handle staying for the duration of the winter, let me know who they are. They may have to return with us, but I don't want that to be the norm."

"They'll be staying through the winter?" Atty asked her husband.

"Yeah. They'll have to. In the meantime, besides providing extra defense, they can help with the hunting and the rebuilding. Cole, let them know it'll be a six month stay, or until the spring thaw. When it comes, I'll be bringing another squad back here. At that time the Council will let me know if my banner will become a permanent part of this compound, or if they're going to go their own way."

"Got it," Mastin acknowledged. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. Don't forget what the sword in the doorway means," Yulen said quietly, never taking his eyes off his plate.

Mastin, however, turned a bright red and hastily excused himself. Atty watched him go as a thought dawned on her. *He'd tilted his head in that way she knew he had whenever he was thinking. Or listening.* Her eyes widened. "Cole came to the door flap this morning! That's what you heard! How did you know it was him and not someone else?"

"I didn't. Not for sure, anyway, until now."

Atty covered her mouth as she began to giggle. Yulen glanced sideways at her and grinned. Whatever Cole had heard, it served the young man right. Chances were he would be especially cautious in the future about interrupting or disturbing them when they were alone.

They got up together to take their empty plates back to where the women were cleaning up. Wandering over to the Council table, Atty suddenly grabbed her husband by the arm and gave it a tug. "Uh-uh. Not yet. Let's go on another sightseeing tour."

"Want me to get Liam?"

"No. Just you and me this time, okay?" She smiled up at him, letting him know she wanted just his company for the next half-hour or so.

"Sounds like a good excuse to walk off lunch. Where to, my lady?"

"Home."

Giving him another tug, she started to lead in the direction of the apartment houses. Yulen laced his fingers with hers and followed. Before long, he was totally confused by the winding streets, and he commented as such.

"The compound was intended to be a maze when it was originally designed and built, in case of invasion," she told him. "Having the enemy wandering through the streets gives our hunters the chance to get to the roofs of the buildings."

"So you can effectively ambush them and bring them down," Yulen finished. "Ingenious. And back when my men invaded the compound, they walked right into your hands." He looked at his wife, who had stopped and was staring at him. "If there had been any more of your people up on the roof that night, you would have been able to kill us all, if not keep us at bay. If that had been the case, I would have eventually brought in more soldiers and totally annihilated your people. And you."

They continued to stare at each other as the realization of how close they had come to never finding each other became clearer. Atty walked into her husband's arms, and together they held each other tightly, almost desperately. Although fate had intervened, and their life together had turned out the way it had, still the fact that so few factors could have forever changed things was too frightening to think about.

Yulen buried his face in her hair, pressing her closer. "I want to make love to you, my beautiful Atrilan. Right now. I want you to help me get rid of this sickening feeling in my stomach that, had things been different..." He kissed her forehead, holding his lips there as he murmured, "Tonight, when we're alone in the tent, don't let me for one second ever think back on this again. Promise me you'll erase it from my mind and fill it instead with only thoughts of you. Of how much you love me as we confirm that love with our bodies."

Despite the fact that their lives had intersected, and fate had allowed them to become husband and wife, the future remained as blank as a sheet of paper, with happiness and despair yet to fill it. At that moment Yulen needed to be close to her, as one with her, to make the foreboding and fear he suddenly felt go away.

Atty gazed up into his eyes. Her face reflected his trepidation as well as his growing hunger. "First let me show you this, Yul."

She pulled on both his hands, and continued down one more serpentine street before stopping in front of a doorway. Yulen glanced at the nondescript wooden door and single-paned window set low in the wall beside it. There was a small flower box sitting on the outer ledge. He started to question her why they had stopped there when his eyes locked back on the flower box. On the small rosebush planted in it. A rosebush bearing a single brown rose.

Eenoi especially loved brown roses. Grew them in big pots by the front door of their home.

"Up until the day before you first arrived here, this was my home. I lived here all my life, until you took me away to Alta Novis," she told him in a hushed voice.

This was the place where she'd been born. Where she had been raised. Where, as a toddler, she had taken her first steps. Where she had reached puberty yet remained chaste. Her home and her sanctuary.

"Who lives here now?" he asked. He couldn't take his eyes away from the door. There was a small, faded, but still visible, bloody handprint on the outer door jab. Yulen reached out and touched it with a finger. Beside him he heard Atty snort softly.

"Mohmee was always chewing me out for not washing my hands properly before I came home from a hunt. I was always leaving messy handprints everywhere. The door, the kitchen, my bedroom."

She saw Yulen's questioning glance again. "Sergei and Emma Peters live here now with their two sons. I told Sergei I was bringing you here to see it. Come. Let's go in."

Atty opened the unlocked door and stepped into the tiny living room. In doing so, she felt as though no amount of time had passed since she last saw her mother and little sister. The remains of an old fire was dying in the narrow fireplace. The three-legged stool she'd spent so much time on was parked by the hearth. Turning around, she could see Yulen taking all of it in, as if memorizing every detail.

"It's exactly as it was when I lived here," she told him. "When one's family is killed or dissolved, another family takes over. We don't move furniture or pots and pans. Just personal possessions."

"It's...small."

Atty shrugged. "This whole apartment could fit in just our bedroom, but to me, when I was growing up, it was enormous."

He walked into the tiny kitchen area and placed his hands on the counters. "This is where you learned to cook?"

"Actually, we did most of our cooking over the fire. But I've washed and dried my share of dishes in that kitchen. Not to mention how many kills I cleaned in there."

"What's back there? The bedrooms?" He pointed to the only other door besides the front door.

"Yeah."

Down the short hall she showed him what had been her parents' bedroom off to the right, and then the second, smaller one on the left. Yulen pushed aside the curtain that served as a door and looked inside. There were two small cots separated by an oval rag rug. The walls had typical boyhood drawings tacked to it. He glanced over his shoulder at her. "You shared this room with your sister?"

"Yeah." She nodded, feeling the tears sticking in her throat. "She had to have the bed next to the door. Keelor was sick a lot and...and Mohmee often had to come in during the night to check on her." She lifted her chin even though it trembled. "This was my home, Yul. This is where my memories lie. It may not be as grand as where you grew up, but my mother and father loved me and gave me the chance to become what I am now. I'm not ashamed of being Mutah, or of anything else."

"Why should you?" he challenged her gently. Bowing his head, he shook it gently. "I only have one true regret in my life, and that is that I never had the chance to meet your parents. Or your sister. At least Madigan has gotten to know you. There are times when I think about my father and wonder how he would have taken to you. What he would have thought of you."

Yulen closed the curtain and turned around to face her. His eyes were devoid of emotion. "You keep talking about how my people are learning, or have learned to accept you. Well, I'm asking you the same question. Atrilan, would your mother and father have accepted me? Or would they never have gotten past the fact that I'm a Normal, and a Battle Lord, and the man who ruthlessly killed your people without a second thought?"

Atty walked over to draw her arms around his neck as tears glittered briefly in her lashes before falling to her cheeks. "If they had objected, it wouldn't have mattered. Just like you defended me against Madigan when she first denounced me, I would have defended you."

"And now? There are people out there who still hate me. And they hate my men. But they hate me even more. I took you away from them, and to all intents and purposes, they feel as though you've betrayed them. Yet you'll still defend me?"

"I will," she whispered heatedly as his hands went up to clasp hers behind his neck. "I will. You know I will. Deep inside your heart, you know I will. Just as I know inside my heart you will be beside me. Always."

His eyes were no longer empty and lifeless. As she gazed into them, they filled with warmth and love, and they loomed larger and closer, until they blocked out everything in sight, and she was forced to close her own eyes so she could savor the sweet tenderness of his kiss.

In the tiny hallway, outside the bedroom where she had dreamed young girl dreams of a man who would hold her and love her, and bring her indescribable happiness—dreams she had later given up as impossible because she believed no such love or happiness could ever exist for her—she now held that very man in her arms with a fierceness that surprised her. Sobbing softly into his shoulder, she let the warmth of his arms protect her until the last of the tears dried up. Afterwards, she dried her face on his shirt as he smiled at her, and together they left the small apartment home without ever looking back.

# Chapter Twenty-Five Small Blessings

"Yulen, may I abduct your wife for a while?" Tory Kalich graced the Battle Lord with a wide smile soon after he and Atty had appeared back in the courtyard.

Smiling, he handed his wife over. "Would only seem fair," he replied lightly, "seeing as how I abducted her first."

Both Mutah women gave him a strange look, knowing the man had just made an off-hand remark regarding his very first contact with their people. As her husband walked off to get back to work, Atty looked at Tory in wonder.

"Yeah. It surprised me, too," the older woman admitted.

They were headed toward the rows of shops. Life in the compound had resumed normalcy, despite its doubled population. It was a Friday, and that meant La Vernia and Bastion were getting their baking done for the coming market day on Saturday. Atty sniffed the air and smiled. "Boy, does that bring back memories."

"Smells great, doesn't it?" Tory commented as they passed by the shop. People waved at the pair, calling out a greeting.

"Yeah. Brings back memories. Tory? Tell me truthfully?"

"What, sweetie?"

"Do they resent me marrying Yulen?"

Tory glanced over to see the young woman searching her face for the answer. "At first we believed you'd been blackmailed into it. Truthfully, we thought that maybe he had forced himself on you. But when you were brought back, and you begged to go back to him, we didn't know what to think. It was something we totally never expected, you wanting to stay with him." She sighed deeply and pursed her lips. "Then when he showed up and asked for you..."

Atty stopped and clasped the woman's upper arm. "Tell me more. What happened?"

Tory's face grew solemn. "You could see the man was dying inside. He never raised his voice, never made demands. He only wanted to see you. I honestly think he believed you were dead, and only wanted a chance to make his peace by seeing your body. Oh, Atty, he was completely weaponless when he walked into the compound, completely willing to place himself into our hands. Completely willing to let the Council pass their judgment on him."

"No!" Atty's eyes widened. "But they passed no judgment, didn't they?"

"In a way, they did. They sent him away without letting him see you, or even letting him know you were still alive. It was then I knew how much I resented what our Council had become. And after talking with a lot of other people, I found I wasn't alone in my thoughts."

She watched her husband help the depleted woman into the house. Whatever had occurred had wrung out what little strength Atty had managed to gather before heading off to the Council meeting.

Quickly she rushed over before Atty melted to the floor and pulled her into her embrace. "Come on. Let's get you back in bed."

A weak shake of dull blue hair was her answer. "Take me h-home."

Tory scorched Fortune with her gaze. "What happened with the Council? What did they say?"

"Atty asked them to let her go back to Alta Novis," Fortune replied softly. "She wants to go back to the Battle Lord."

"And what did they say?" Tory hissed between her teeth. Atty lay pressed against her, trembling as she listened to their conversation.

"They...they told her if they took her back that she couldn't return as one of us. She would be considered one of the enemy."

"What? They said what?" Her own fury at the Council's injustice raged deep in her breast. Before she was aware of it, Tory let out an expletive that made Fortune pale. This side of her was so rarely seen, he knew how dark her anger burned.

He opened his mouth to tell her more when she turned her back on him and half-carried, half-dragged the young woman into the guest room, easing her gently down on the bed and covering her with a fresh quilt.

The entire time he had carried Atty back to the house she hadn't spoken a word. Her plea to the Council had taken everything out of her, but it hadn't ceased her determination to return to Alta Novis. Fortune knew that if she had to, Atty would attempt the journey on foot by herself, regardless of the dangers.

"The Council is letting her return," he told his wife who had remained sitting on the edge of the bed and was pressing a cool, wet cloth to Atty's face.

"The Council is letting her return?" Tory caustically echoed.

Fortune winced at the sound. "They ordered a wagon and four guards to see her to the front gates, but that's all. I volunteered to be one of those accompanying her."

"How gentlemanly of you," Tory said bitterly.

Another minute passed in uncomfortable silence. Fortune shuffled his feet where he stood in the doorway. Neither woman moved. "I'm going over to the stables to get a horse."

Tory glanced back at him. "You're leaving now?"

"Before first light, but we're packing tonight." He nodded in Atty's direction where the woman appeared unconscious. "Piron said to send everything she owns with her. We...we're to break all ties. She's being branded a deserter."

"Insufferable bastards." Tory's voice shook. There was no way she could hide the sound of tears in her oath, and that gave Fortune a sense of relief. He much preferred his wife upset rather than infuriated. He could deal with her tears, but not with her wrath.

Quietly he left, making sure he closed the front door with a noticeable sound. He had learned early on in their marriage that his hunter's ability to stalk almost invisibly was unnerving for his new bride. It forced him to consciously remember to make noises wherever he went with her, so as not to shock or surprise her by his reappearance.

With her husband gone, Tory gave her full attention to the young woman lying too passively in bed. "I'm sorry, Atty. Please forgive those fools. They think they're doing the right thing."

"*Tory?*"

"Yes?"

Atty opened her eyes, allowing Tory to see the torment that continued to flood their blue-gray depths. "Do you think Yulen will want me back?"

The question stunned her into silence before another wave of white-hot anger washed over her. "Will he...Atty, they didn't tell you?"

The moment she asked the question, she knew the answer. Of course not. Those insufferable sons of bitches hadn't told her anything. Damn them!

Giving Atty's hand a squeeze, Tory leaned over to place a soft kiss on her forehead. "Yes, Yulen will want you back," she started to explain, when Atty rolled her head away and weakly commented.

"Does he even care if I'm still alive?"

"Oh, God, Atty." Tory's voice hitched in her chest, held back by the thick press of tears. "He risked everything when he came here for you."

She could see the woman tense at the remark. Atty turned eyes filled with hope as she stared at Tory. "He was here a week ago. Alone. They made him drop his weapons belt outside the compound and enter unarmed."

"What did he want?" The weak voice trembled, drinking in her words as if they were a life-giving force.

"Үои."

Atty gave a sob, clutching Tory's hand with shaking fingers. "What did they tell him?" It was already obvious that Yulen had left without her, which meant the Council had forbid him.

"Nothing." Tory shook her head. "They told him nothing. Not even that you were still alive and recuperating in our home."

A low moan of pain came out of Atty's throat. Pain not from the remnants of poison that refused to give up its possession of her body, but pain from her heart. The fact that the Council had forced her husband to desert her. The moan turned into a single word. "Yul!"

Bursting into the tears that had been threatening to fall, Tory pulled Atty into her arms, and together they both wept for the injustice of it all.

Grabbing Atty's cold hands and giving them a squeeze, Tory flashed her a warm smile. "Hey, let's not go back there. It's an old, unwanted memory we don't have to relive if we no longer want to. Come, I want to show you something I'd promised to show you a couple of nights ago."

They reached the end of the walkway where it opened up into a spacious area where several merchants would set up their vendor's carts. Tomorrow the traders from two other Mutah compounds would arrive for their monthly visit. It would prove to be a very festive day.

"Teal! Where's that little angel? I wanted to show her off to Atty!"

"Atty?" The young woman turned around as a delighted smile brightened her face. "Atty!"

The two childhood friends exchanged warm hugs before Teal bent down to pick up her new daughter from the basket at her feet. "We named her Valla," she said proudly as she handed the tiny bundle into Atty's arms.

"Oh, my gosh, Teal, she's so tiny!" Atty giggled, accepting the sleeping infant. She held the baby close to her breast, supporting its head in the crook of her elbow as she gazed down into the wrinkled face. "Would you look at all that hair." Lifting a hand from where she was cradling the child's bottom, she ran her fingertips through the thick tuft of dark hair. She gave Teal a warm smile. "You are so blessed. She looks wonderful!"

Teal sighed loudly as she returned the smile. "Babies are our small blessings. I was in labor for almost two days, but she was more than worth it. I wouldn't hesitate to do it again."

Tory glanced around and noticed the cobbler wasn't at his stall. "Where's Posso?"

"He'll be here soon. He went back to the house to pick up a pair of boots he'd repaired for that merchant from Delphine. You remember him, the guy with the hand-carved children's toys?"

"Oh, yeah! I remember him." Atty adjusted her hold on the infant to where she could lower her head and bury her nose against the child's fragrant skin. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift in the warmth pressed against her. When she finally opened her eyes, she noticed Tory was intently watching her, a shadow of a smile on her lips.

"Do you remember when you used to help Eenoi after Keelor was born?"

"That was so long ago," Atty admitted ruefully. "Keelor was sick most of the time. And it took Mohmee a long time to get well after having her."

Nodding, Tory wrapped an arm around Atty's waist and leaned in against her shoulder to coo down at the baby. "Know what I'm thinking right now?" the woman asked. At Atty's inquisitive look, she pressed her cheek along the young woman's arm. "I'm seeing someone with a natural instinct for motherhood."

Atty stared at her.

"Oh, yes," Tory nodded slowly, smiling warmly. "Believe me or not, Atrilan. You hold this child, and respond to it, just like it was a precious package that had been unwrapped so it could be oohed and ahhed over."

Little Valla moved slightly in Atty's arms. One miniature hand escaped the swaddling blanket. Without thinking, Atty touched the pearl-like fingers with her thumb; the infant grasped it instinctively. A deep shudder came over her. This time, when she glanced over her shoulder at the woman standing beside her, she saw a wise, understanding expression on Tory's face.

Leaning closer so as not to be overheard, Tory whispered in her ear, "Now...imagine she's yours and Yulen's."

Atty closed her eyes and nuzzled the fresh, new-baby scent of the infant's skin. A hundred emotions were running through her—conflicting, fighting, tenuous feelings that argued and shouted at each other deep inside her heart. "You fight dirty," she murmured to the woman.

"I've known you all your life, Atty. No amount of arguing would make you see how naturally you fit into motherhood unless I did something like this to prove it to you."

Teal walked over to kiss her newborn daughter on the forehead. "Go ahead. If you want to take her for a walk, I won't mind. But when she wakes up, I'll need her back so I can feed her."

"Can I watch?" Atty asked.

"Sure. I don't mind."

"Great. Thanks, Teal. I promise I'll take extra special care of her. Come on, little one. Let's let your mother have a moment's peace, and I'll tell you a story that'll curl this mop of hair on your head." Smiling, Atty turned and slowly started walking back down the walkway with Tory remaining by her side.

They slowly made their way down the street, stopping on occasion to let others get a glimpse or to stroke the baby. As they rounded the corner which opened up to the courtyard, Tory glanced up to see the Battle Lord at the far end, standing over by the Council table,

surrounded by the majority of the Council members. As Piron George had formally excused himself from all proceedings the day before, his exit left Twoson Pike to conduct all business as Council Leader by unanimous decision. And the two men, Battle Lord and Council Leader, were almost constantly together during the day.

It was less than a minute when Yulen's gaze raked over the courtyard, as she knew he would, instinctively checking the compound for anything that might need his immediate attention.

Or for Atty.

A rush of warmth came over her as the man's eyes caught sight of his wife cradling the tiny bit of new life in her arms. With Atty keeping her head bent over to prevent the September sun from shining on the baby's face, she missed the look of incredulity that came over her husband's face, or the way he raised his head up to stare at her. Tory saw him glance her way, as if seeking some kind of reason or answer. She was unable to give him any sort of sign, however, as several others hurried over to get a look-see at Teal's new daughter. Smiling, she stayed by Atty's side and allowed her to show off the child.

It was only until little Valla began to whimper and cry did Atty finally return her to her mother. As Teal sat beneath the shade of a large poplar to breastfeed the baby, Atty sat with her to talk about the birth, and to ask questions about pregnancy in general. Her friend answered her truthfully, emphasizing the good but not hedging on the bad aspects. At one point Teal glanced over at where Tory sat nearby. Atty saw the looks exchanged between the two women, and she chuckled.

"Both of you fight dirty," she announced, making Teal laugh.

"As I told you the other night," Tory reminded her, "Eenoi would have wanted me to take care of you. You've become a woman, Atty. You need to know what to expect, should you ever decide you're ready to have a child."

Atty tore blades of dead grass from the ground. Already her arms felt strangely empty after relinquishing little Valla back to her mother. "If I decide I'm ready...when I decide...oh, damn, Tory, how do I know what kind of questions to ask when I know nothing about what I'm talking about?" she exclaimed irritably, throwing the grass back onto the ground.

Laughing softly, Tory got to her feet and extended a hand toward her, helping her up. "We need to go and let Teal finish getting things ready for tomorrow. So say thank you to Teal for letting you share Valla."

Grinning, Atty obliged. "Thank you, Teal, for letting me share Valla."

"You're welcome," Teal laughed.

"Now you and I are going to have that mother-daughter talk I never got to give because I had a son. And one which I know for a fact Eenoi never got to finish because you took that idiotic oath."

Atty lifted an eyebrow as the woman began to hustle her away from the market area and toward the apartment houses. "This ought to prove interesting!"

"Oh? How so, smarty pants?"

"You don't think I'm going to make some comparisons?"

Laughing loudly, Tory swatted her on the arm. "Just you wait. I might be able to give you some pointers, if not some eye-opening facts."

"Go ahead, Tory. I double dare you. I may have been a virgin before I married Yulen, but he's been an excellent teacher."

"I take you up on that dare, Atrilan D'Jacques. But first I'm going to fix us a pot of chamomile tea, just in case things get interesting, and the subject takes longer than I expect."

"All right. But if Yulen comes looking for you later on to ask what in the hell's gotten into me—"

Tory shrieked with laughter and gave Atty a hard shove. Atty turned around and threw an arm around the older woman's waist, giving her a hug as she giggled.

Together the two women hurried along the street, already engaged in whispered conversation long before they reached Tory's front door. It would prove to be a very educational discussion, indeed.

#### Chapter Twenty-Six Ulterior Motive

It was a slight rustling in the trees, right at the edge of his peripheral vision. The sentry froze, still as stone, and waited to see if the movement repeated. Most predatory wild animals that roamed the wood often hunted at night. They moved predictably, taking their cues from ground level and not caring if they could be seen from above. Believing the foliage would cover their movements below.

A minute passed. Then another. There was a flash of something reflective, like a mirror. Or silver. Or polished steel. So quick, it was almost too easy to believe it had been a trick of the eyes.

Casually, the sentry resumed his walk along the battlement, catching the attention of the secondary sentry guarding the narrow door in the compound wall fifty feet away. He waved three fingers behind his back, and in less than a minute Paxton was shaking Mastin awake from a sound sleep.

"Code three, sir."

The Second was awake almost instantly. "Where?" he whispered.

"East wall. Near the hunters door."

"Could it be one of theirs?"

"They don't go out after dark," Paxton reiterated what he'd heard Atty remark many times in the past.

Getting to his feet, Mastin quickly buckled on his weapons belt. "Rouse the men. Have the other lieutenants over by the tent in less than five, do you hear me?"

Like the Second's, Paxton's eyes slid to the edge of the courtyard where the majority of soldiers were encamped, to the tent where the Battle Lord and Lady had retired for the night a few hours ago. By his guess, it had to be nearly two in the morning. Mastin caught his glance and nodded. This was one time he knew his summons fit the man's criteria.

He paused only for a second as he stared at the scabbard embedded in the soft dirt in front of the door flap. Drawing his own sword, he pulled out the Battle Lord's weapon and gently slapped his blade against the buried one. The resulting sound was clear, soft, and bell-like. Dipping his head against the thin flap, he said in a low voice, "Yulen, code three."

Without waiting for an answer, or to listen for any sound of movement, Mastin backed away a few yards as Paxton and Sorcher came jogging up to join him. Behind them, Del Ray and Fleismann were hurrying to obey. As they reached the small group, Yulen exited from the tent, snatching the weapon from the ground as he strode toward them.

Mastin's trained eye for detail caught the fact that the man was carrying his shirt and weapons belt in his other hand. There were thin, bloody scratches from his shoulders to his collarbones, and sweat glistened on the Battle Lord's upper body, which was unusual for the chilly night. There was still no sign of Atty.

"Cole?" he asked as he reached them.

"O'Casey called a code three over by the east wall near the hunters door," Mastin reported as he watched Yulen pull his shirt on over his head before buckling on his sword and dagger.

"No chance of it being a Mutah?"

"They don't go out after dark, not unless there's a party of them," Mastin replied.

"Any idea how many?" Yulen's eyes darted back to the tent. At that moment Atty came through the flap, her longbow in hand. She'd hastily tied her hair back, but little tendrils still clung to her sweaty face and neck.

Without a doubt Mastin knew the couple had not been asleep when he'd summoned them. "At the moment, no," he answered.

Atty approached the small knot of men as they waited for orders. Her eyes were wide, and she'd already nocked an arrow. Stopping a few feet away, she halted, legs slightly apart. Her gaze locked onto Yulen. "Bloods."

Her husband nodded in affirmation, knowing she would have sensed them by now. "By the hunters door." Turning to his men, Yulen instructed them to have the soldiers take defensive positions. "Let's see what they have planned. I need to know if this is going to be a full-scale invasion, or if they're testing us to see what we've got."

Nodding, Mastin turned to give instructions to his subordinates as the Battle Lord quickly scanned the compound. The inhabitants of Wallis were safely abed, leaving the protection of their homes in Yulen's capable hands. With the exception of Atty, none of the other hunters were awake. Nor did they serve guard duty. All of that would have to change, however, once the Battle Lord's troops left to return to Alta Novis.

He felt rather than heard Atty leave his side as she began to advance stealthily toward the compound wall. He followed her, keeping his eyes and ears open. The cool evening air sent shivers down his back and chest as it chilled the sweat coating his skin. It was invigorating, and helped to clear away the shreds of sleep that had started to overtake them after their long session of lovemaking. He resisted sniffing his hands, knowing they still carried her musk.

Yulen watched her leading the way, searching, testing, almost sensing the air. His mind inescapably shifted back to what had occurred between them in the tent.

Something had happened today. Something that had to do with what Atty had experienced. Something he didn't understand, but knew had affected her profoundly. All he could be certain about was that it had started when she'd taken him to see her old home, and had come to some sort of culmination when Tory had brought her into the courtyard carrying the baby.

At supper Atty had told him about her visit to a childhood friend to see their new baby, and about the long afternoon she'd spent with Tory talking about "women things", as she'd called it. He'd watched her face in amazement and noticed the softness around her eyes when she'd spoken about the child. And he remembered the smug grin on Tory's face when she had seen him watching Atty cuddle the infant. The older woman had planned for him to notice. She had planned for Atty to be exposed to the newborn. MaGrath's words floated back to him.

She doesn't know the first thing about being a mother. It's because she's never been around that many.

Tory knew that as well. So whatever it was that the woman had said, or done, or planned, it had made an impact on his wife. One that had also brought an extra surprise to their bed that evening.

Atty lifted her head and froze. Behind her, Yulen gripped his sword and waited to take his cue from her. Above them, lined along the parapet, his soldiers watched the forest and waited to see where the attack would center, and from which direction.

Back when they had been on the road heading for Wallis, Fortune had explained to him that Bloods were reliably disorganized. Their attacks could come from any direction, at any time, with or without warning, and wholly without making any sense of purpose. Five may come at you all at once, or they may attack one at a time altogether, or hours apart. Any man who tried to use conventional methods to repel or even predict such attacks was a fool. Therefore the best line of defense was often a watch and wait attitude. And have the ability to think fast on your feet.

He caught the look in her eye when she glanced back over her shoulder. Motioning with her head, she indicated the tree. Atty's tree. In the time it took for him to wonder what she was implying, his wife dropped her bow over her head and made a run for the trunk. A leap, and she grabbed one of the lower branches before swinging her body upward. Within seconds she was scrambling up the tree, all sounds of her ascent masked by a strong wind rustling in the leaves. There was a storm brewing, blotting out the stars with swollen clouds. Already a few fat drops of rain had fallen onto the hard-packed earth.

Yulen ran for the wall and pressed himself against one of the support posts. Adrenalin was surging through him like fresh water pouring into a dehydrated man. His grip tightened on his sword.

There was the barest vibration against the wall. Eyes narrowed, Yulen raised his hand, ready to signal the attack. Above him the sentry remained crouched, trying to peer into the Stygian blackness.

An odor drifted to him. A stench that quickly grew stronger, until it was overpowering and sickening. Like a body left to rot in the heat until it liquefied. Yulen took a step back, trying to place its location, when a whining sound zipped past his shoulder. The thin, furred Blood shrieked wetly as the arrow slit a vertical mouth through its lips and nose. The creature jerked wildly as it tried to reach where Yulen had been standing.

Knowing it was already dead, the Battle Lord raised the cry. "They're in the compound!" At the same time he whirled around, catching the next creature that had managed to scale the compound wall, and neatly slicing its head and one arm from the rest of its body with a downward stroke of his sword.

More Bloods climbed over, but not before they were dealt with quick efficiency. Overhead, Atty managed to down half a dozen of their numbers as they managed to evade the soldiers but not her unerring accuracy.

The skirmish was over too soon. The bodies of the dead Bloods were dragged into a pile in a clear area of barren earth where they could be cremated. As Yulen stood upwind, away from the smoke and any possible contagion, Mastin tugged on his arm. "No injuries, sir, but we have a survivor."

"Where?" Yulen followed his Second to a spot a few yards away where Atty had one booted foot firmly planted against the leathery neck of the Blood she'd pinned after she'd descended from the tree. She held the large Ballock dagger less than an inch from the creature's eye, and Yulen was taken back to the memory of himself holding his own dagger to Atty's eye in the same manner, back when they had first met and she was his captive.

Leaning down to the spluttering Blood, Atty hissed, "Why did you attack us?"

"Die, Abnormal," the thing growled through clenched teeth.

Atty pressed down on its throat until its face began to darken. Its arms were at its side, not a wise move on Atty's part, Yulen realized. At any time the Blood could reach up in an attempt to either dislodge her or take away the dagger. Planting his own boot on one wrist, Yulen watched the creature shift its attention away from his wife. "Are there more of you out there?" he demanded.

"Die, Normal!"

"Well, at least he's consistent," Mastin dryly remarked.

"But still unaccommodating," Yulen said. He bent down slightly, keeping one eye on the other free hand lying next to Atty's other boot. "Who is leading you? Who decides when to attack, and where?"

The Blood squirmed until Atty applied the toe of her boot to the underside of its jaw. With a flip of the dagger, she pressed the steel point into the creature's jugular until a thin trickle of white, pus-like ooze slipped down it skin. "Who is your leader? Tell us!"

Instead the creature glanced back at the scarred man standing on his arm. "You will die, D'Jacques. You will die!"

Everyone froze in shock at the realization that the creature knew the Battle Lord's name. Up until that moment it had been assumed the Bloods attacked randomly and without any purpose other than to acquire food or wreak havoc.

Knowing Yulen's name could only mean one thing. The attack had not been random. The Bloods were capable of knowledge and foresight, and that also meant they could have an ulterior motive.

A huge gust of wind took them all by surprise. Rocked slightly off-balance, Atty teetered a little before she could regain her balance. The Blood felt the pressure ease off his neck at that moment. With a tremendously strong heave, he managed to slip out from underneath their boots and began frantically scrabbling his way toward the compound wall.

Pushed away, Atty fell onto her side just as Yulen regained his footing, hefted his sword, and aimed it like a javelin, launching it toward the Blood. Another force of wind whipped over them, this time bringing with it a surge of rain that pelted them unmercifully with cold, icy drops. The sword managed to nick the creature in the side before the Blood leaped upward, grabbed the top of the compound wall, and somehow miraculously found enough strength to slip over to the other side.

One of the lieutenants yelled, "It's getting away!"

Yulen already knew that. He also knew that if it got back to wherever it had come from, it would relay everything it knew. Grabbing Atty's hand, Yulen jerked her to her feet and began running for the nearest ladder leading up to the parapets.

The rain was like a curtain of wetness, blurring everything so that even the trees beyond were nothing more than indistinct shapes. Amid the noise and cries from below, he strained to see beyond the water pouring over them. Atty pointed to a nearly invisible shape moving a few yards away. She pressed her mouth to his ear. "It's getting on a horse!"

"You've got to stop it!" he yelled back at her. "Can you do it?"

Before he could ask her, she'd pulled back on an arrow and let fly it toward the escaping Blood. There was a strangled cry, but the creature managed to keep going.

"Shit! I missed!" Atty fumed. Before he could say anything, she was descending the ladder. Yulen kept his eyes on the slowly moving shape. He knew her frustration. Although she'd managed to hit the Blood, she hadn't succeeded in stopping it. Therefore, to Atty, she'd missed.

Before he had a chance to wonder why she'd left his side, she was coming back up. Another arrow was nocked on her longbow, but this one was spluttering with fat and flames. Yulen's eyes sought out the pile of burning bodies, knowing it was where she'd gotten her fire. He didn't dare wonder what she was using as fuel.

More of his men had reached the catwalk and were looking over the wall, peering through the downpour, hoping to catch a glimpse of the escapee. One pointed into the distance and yelled. Both Yulen and Atty raced over to where the man stood, showing them where he'd last seen the creature.

Atty nodded. "I see him!", and she looked down the arrow. A moment's hesitation, and she lowered her arm. "I can't get him from here!" she cried out to her husband. "The trees are blocking my shot!"

"He can't get away, Atty!" Yulen started toward the ladder when she grabbed him by the sleeve of his tunic and refused to let go. Both of them were thoroughly drenched and shivering, with water sluicing over their faces. It was only because of the shielded lanterns still lit throughout the compound that they were able to see each other at all.

"Where are you going?" she tried to shout above the pounding rain.

"Getting a horse and going after him!"

"No! They may be out there waiting!"

Her eyes beseeched him to reconsider. Yulen was faced with a monumental decision. "If I don't go, it could mean the end of Wallis!"

"Then *I'll* get the bastard!" she screamed, and returned to where the sentry had kept sight of the target.

The first arrow she'd launched at the Blood had done enough damage to slow the creature down considerably. But now, after leaving the protection of the first growth of trees, the Blood's horse was taking off at a gallop into the open field beyond. The creature was barely managing to keep his perch on top of the animal. Atty saw this as her only other opportunity to stop it.

Aerial flight was tricky. In the blinding rainstorm, it was impossible. Yet, neither would deter her. Behind her she could hear Yulen's affirmation of his belief in her, and it made her all the more determined.

Raising the longbow to where it faced the low-hanging clouds, Atty pulled as far back on the string as the weapon would allow. Her muscles ached from the strain, and for the first time in her life her arms were shaking from the pressure. She aimed as true as her vision could guide her, then let her instincts take over with their unerring accuracy. Beside her she could feel Yulen's warm presence like a calm, guiding force giving her the strength she desperately needed at that moment.

She released the arrow, and every man watched as the burning shaft arched overhead, over the trees, before it curved downward, picking up speed like a miniature fireball.

The arrow plowed its tip into the Blood's back. Within the span of a dozen heartbeats, the creature's upper body was totally engulfed in flames. Seconds later, the conflagration had spread to the horse's back and was crawling over the rest of its torso as the animal screamed in

pain, but it continued running for the cover of the next line of trees, the still-burning body of its dead rider slumped over its neck.

Every man watched in fascinated horror at the sight of the flaming horse before the increasing storm and the cover of the forest finally swallowed it from view.

Yulen tightly held Atty as she trembled in his arms. He'd witnessed something he realized no man would believe unless they had been there to see it for themselves. This time he knew there had to have been more than just skill and ability behind Atty's shot. There had to have been a miracle. Holding her tighter, he whispered in her ear, "Let's get out of this storm and get warm."

Nodding, Atty went down the ladder first and waited for him to join her so they could return to their tent together.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven Order Given

"Hold it. This can't wait." Grabbing Atty's arm, Yulen first retrieved his weapon then directed her back toward the tree where his Seconds and their lieutenants were gathering to await their next set of orders. As they approached the soldiers, thunder rumbled overhead, sending a fresh deluge down upon them.

"We'll meet at first light at the Council hall if it's still like this," Yulen yelled over the din. "Mastin, make sure the compound is secured."

"Already working on it, sir!"

"The rest of you, let the men know we're heading back home at dawn."

Even the lieutenants stared in surprise. Del Ray wiped his face with his hand, to no avail. "May we ask why, sir?"

"I'll explain when we meet," Yulen told them, and dismissed them with a nod of his head. As they began to disperse, he snagged Mastin by the sleeve and motioned for him to follow them. Bedraggled but obedient, the Second bowed his head against the heavy rain as he followed the couple back to the tent.

Ducking inside, he gazed in wonder as Yulen reached behind him to plant the sword back into the doorway. Gratefully he dropped beside the brazier where Atty was stirring the coals, replenishing the fire so she could add more bits of wood and build up the heat.

They all were dripping water from the storm that continued to rage outside the tent walls. A large soft towel was dropped in his lap, and Mastin nodded his thanks. Presently Yulen sat across from him. He'd doffed his tunic and was briskly drying off his head and upper body. Unwittingly, Mastin's eyes roamed over to the rear of the tent where he could see Atty silhouetted against the sheer blue curtain separating them. She was also toweling off after stripping down to the buff. A flush of heat rose to his face at the sight of her revealing outline, the full breasts with their hard little nipples easily evident in the lamplight, and the Second quickly averted his eyes.

There was a wide indentation in the pillows and blankets a few feet away, he also noticed. They had been lying there when he'd summoned them. The realization made him blush even redder.

"I wanted to go over a few things before tomorrow morning," Yulen began as he combed back his damp hair with his fingers.

"Speak louder! I can't hear you over this rain!" Atty called from the back.

Chuckling, her husband answered, "Then we'll wait for you!"

Mastin took his cue from the Battle Lord and divested himself of his tunic before wiping himself down. Before he was finished, Atty joined them, having slipped on a cream-colored gown. "Not fair," Yulen told her.

Atty replied with a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders as she began to unbraid her hair so it would begin to dry. "If you want to go ahead and peel off your pants, feel free. Won't bother me none."

"Not with company here," he argued with a laugh.

"Suit yourself," she smiled sweetly, teasingly.

"It's all right, Madam," Mastin began until he saw her warning look. "I mean Atty," he quickly amended. "Thank you for letting me share the fire. The men should have the temporary shelters up by the time I leave here. And while I'm thinking about it, let me compliment you on that incredible shot. I'm still in a state of disbelief, and I witnessed it!"

Atty graced him with a warm smile. "Thank you, but to be honest, I had a lot of luck with me."

"And that's precisely why I asked you here," Yulen slipped in. "We were damn lucky tonight. I can already tell where we were the weakest. If that Blood had managed to return to his ilk, we might have seen a return visit."

"Do you think we managed to get all of them this time?" Mastin inquired.

"As far as I could tell, yes," Atty answered. "Of course, with the rain and all, it's hard to be certain. Let's just pray that the one that almost got away was the sole survivor."

Mastin looked at the Battle Lord. "That thing knew your name."

"Yes, and that alone spoke volumes to me," Yulen admitted in a low voice. He threw the towel around his neck and crossed his legs. He opened his mouth to say more when Atty interrupted.

"Someone's coming."

That someone turned out to be MaGrath. "What the hell happened, Yulen? As if this weather isn't enough to cause a commotion, there are all kinds of rumors running rampant out there! Half the compound is awake!"

Atty tossed him her towel as he crossed over to where they sat and found an empty space to park. "We were attacked by Bloods," she began.

"Bloods who knew me by name," Yulen finished for her.

MaGrath gave him a wary eye. "They knew your name? Crap! Then that means they know this isn't your home compound!"

"Exactly."

"And they know Alta Novis is presently without its Battle Lord."

"Correct again," Yulen replied tightly. "Which also means they know that at some point we're going to be leaving here to return to Alta Novis, which puts both Wallis and our troops in grave danger while we're on the road."

"Not to mention Alta Novis," Mastin added.

"We've been fools, thinking they were nothing more than deranged renegades and nomads." Yulen gave his wife a long stare. "Once again we've been mislead by others into thinking of our enemies as non-intelligent beings incapable of rational thought."

Atty reached over to touch his stubbled cheek. "It nearly cost us," she softly said.

Mastin spoke out. "But Atty managed to stop the escapee from alerting the others."

"Escapee? What escapee?" MaGrath laid the towel over his lap. "And what's this I hear about a miraculous shot?"

Yulen quickly explained, adding, "Which is why we need to start heading for home as soon as possible. It won't take them long to realize their surprise attack failed. What I can't figure out was why so few of them stormed the compound. Surely they saw the number of men along the battlements. There were less than a couple dozen of them. The odds were stacked."

Mastin snorted. "Sounds to me like a typical diversionary tactic." He saw an eyebrow raise on the Battle Lord's face. So did Atty and MaGrath.

"Wallis isn't their primary target," Yulen gave voice to his thought process. "That force we passed on our way here. They were amassing their numbers. There could well be a minimum of a thousand Bloods out there by now, if not more. Winter's coming, and they're becoming desperate to find enough provisions to supply them through the snows."

"Where did they find enough supplies in the past?" MaGrath asked aloud. "Where do these Bloods come from, anyway?"

"From the east," Atty told him. "At least, that's as much as we've been able to ascertain from the signs we've come across in past years. Where they've stayed during the coldest months is anyone's guess, but it seems they're migrating westward. Maybe even north to south. Who knows?"

"Exactly. They're coming across the compounds and finding them to either be easy pickings, or too difficult a nut to crack. Mutah compounds aren't as fortified as ours, so they're going to get hit more often." Yulen wiped away a drop of water that managed to trickle down the side of his face. "By the way, my love, next time you pin a potential prisoner, be sure their hands are not within reach of you."

Atty's response was a rueful grin.

"But compounds maintained by Battle Lords are often bigger, and contain more materials and goods and supplies and food," Mastin pointed out. "Wouldn't the risk be worth it to swarm one of them?"

"Definitely. And that's exactly the reason why we have to get back to Alta Novis as soon as possible."

MaGrath lifted his head as the Battle Lord's unspoken words sunk in. "Oh, my God," he whispered. "All this time they've been deluding us into thinking one thing, when all the time we've been playing right into their hands."

"What do you mean?" Mastin looked over to see Atty laying a trembling hand on her husband's shoulder as she sought out his gaze. Yulen lifted his eyes to find her blue-gray ones filled with fear.

"They deliberately drew us here to protect Wallis, leaving Alta Novis without me, or Mastin, or my next two best men to protect them if they should attack. Because we were so sure they wouldn't go after the more fortified compound. I've been a fool, and I fell for their trickery." Taking a deep breath, Yulen said, "Their original target has always been one of the major compounds. In our area, there's only three; Alta Novis, Bearinger, and Foster City. Zane has Foster City well guarded, which only leaves the other two. Verris has Bearinger up to my specifications. What other compound is left?" Touching his wife's cheek, the Battle Lord continued. "They know you're with me. They knew you were from here. That's why they laid siege to Wallis. That's why they've continued to plague us with measly little hit-and-run attacks. To keep us off-guard. To keep us focused here. They knew we'd come to defend Wallis. They knew and planned to draw me away from Alta Novis so they could attack at its weakest moment. Atty, that Blood wasn't escaping to let the others know of our plans. He escaped to let them know he'd made a mistake. He'd committed a critical error when he called me by name, because he knew we'd be able to figure out their plan, and he needed to let them know we would put the pieces of the puzzle together and finally guess what they would do."

Mastin let out his breath in one slow four-letter-expletive sigh. "We *have* to get back to Alta Novis before they do!"

"Yulen, can the compound withstand an all-out assault if we don't make it in time?" MaGrath asked. His fear for Madigan had intensified. To have finally won her after all these years, after all these decades, to possibly lose her in a Blood ambush...

"I don't know, and I don't want to think about it. We have the advantage right now, and we're going to have to push to keep it. The Bloods are traveling through the forest to reach Alta Novis. Or, if their main forces are already there, waiting for word that it's time to strike. By staying on the road, we'll be able to move faster than them. I would even hazard to guess they've made at least one or two preemptive attempts to see where our weaknesses lie." He rubbed his face with his hands, exhaustion written in every muscle of his body. "Oh, God, how could I have been such an idiot?"

"You are not the idiot, my beloved," Atty whispered. "We've all been duped. It took your wisdom to see through their deceit." She sat up and looked to Mastin. "We leave at first light?"

"It's going to take some time to get everything rounded up and packed," Yulen reminded her. "In this thunderstorm, that's going to take longer than normal."

She got to her feet. "Then we need to get started now, don't you agree?" Smiling, she held out her hand to help him to his feet. Yulen grinned and accepted her offer. Mastin quickly stood as well.

"Guess it's back into the rain, right, sir?" the Second managed a small smile.

Yulen groaned softly, thinking about the chilling effect of the weather this time of year.

"Well, I for one know I'll just be in everyone's way," MaGrath announced, holding his hands over the brazier, seeking the warmth of its fire. "So if anyone needs me, I'll be right here."

"Liam, remind me to demote you when we get home," Yulen half-jokingly threw at him as he pulled on a heavier, dry tunic.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," the physician grumbled as the Battle Lord followed Atty out into the night. But deep inside he had a lot bigger reason for wanting to remain inside the snug, warm tent. For some reason he felt safer being here. And at peace. Next to Maddy, Yulen and Atty were his family. This tent was their home, their refuge, their love nest, and their sanctuary. After hearing Yulen's plans, an icy hand had found its way inside him and closed its fingers around his heart, and for the first time in many, many, many years, MaGrath was terrified as to what might happen in the next few days. Remaining in the tent helped to calm the shaking of his hands. It also allowed him the chance to catch a mental breath and assess what he needed to do.

Before he knew it, the physician was sound asleep on one of the rugs, oblivious to the commotion taking place outside.

#### Chapter Twenty-Eight Return Trip

The rain continued to fall, but without the gusts of wind that could knock one over. If the weather had been any cooler, it might have been snow falling out of the sky instead of the hard, nearly sleet-like pellets. Instead, the cold and heavy dreariness of the clouds overhead only seemed to make their need to return to Alta Novis all the more urgent.

Atty said her hasty goodbyes to Tory and Fortune as Yulen finished giving last-minute instructions to Twoson and the Council. The Battle Lord was leaving behind seventy-five soldiers to help protect Wallis until he could determine his next plan of action. That wouldn't come about, however, until everyone knew what the Bloods intended.

Yulen ordered everyone into armor for the duration of the trip. Even Atty was given a chain mail shirt to wear over her tunic. She instantly hated it, hated its smell and weight, despite its ability to protect her. However, she grudgingly admitted it provided an extra barrier against the cold. Yulen would take no chances of a surprise attack decimating their already thinned ranks, and he made sure Atty realized she needed to ride within the core of their line for her own protection. And to remain there for the sake of his sanity.

"Don't begin to think you can wander off anytime you please, Atty. No hunting. No tracking. Not this time. It's going to be a long and dangerous ride back. For God's sake, don't make me have to worry about you, on top of everything else. Promise me, my love. Give me your word," he begged.

She had promised, even though she detested not being able to talk to him or ride next to him during their first day on the road. Sometimes MaGrath would ride with her to keep her company, looking ostentatious in his own chain mail, and sometimes Mastin would break away to spend a few minutes alongside. Otherwise she was surrounded and completely protected within a phalanx of six heavily armed, armor-clad guardians.

When they broke for lunch, simply because the horses needed the chance to rest, Yulen was finally able to spend a few minutes to grab a quick bite with her.

"I miss you," she whispered when she managed to sit next to him. Like the rest of the men he wore his helmet at all times now, yet it couldn't hide the deep lines of worry creasing his face in its shadows.

"It's a small price to pay, Atrilan," he murmured back, giving her hand a gentle squeeze despite his metal glove. "Better to miss you now, than to lose you and miss you forever."

They couldn't kiss. The helmet prevented it. Atty cursed softly at the inconvenience, and her irritation brought a small smile to the Battle Lord's face. Chuckling, Yulen had them back on the road exactly one hour later.

Once they had left Wallis and reemerged back onto the main road, the rain started to let up. By the time they were ready to make camp for the night, the stars had managed to reappear in the sky, but the air had turned colder.

Atty shivered and watched as her breath slipped from her mouth as little white puffs. Yulen forbade the erection of the tent, which meant she'd have to spend the night in a bedroll by the fire. Not that she hadn't already spent many nights in the past curled in a tight little ball,

trying to keep from freezing. What she wanted more was the long warmth of her husband keeping away the creeping cold.

It wasn't until much later, after Yulen had posted double guards at each duty post, that she felt an extra thick blanket being draped over her. Moments later he slid behind her into the overly large bedroll, and snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her back against him.

"Your hands are like ice," she giggled, rolling over and snuggling into his wide, muscular chest.

"Then warm them up for me," he breathed lightly into her ear. Reaching under the quilted bedroll and blanket, his palm crept under her tunic to cup one firm breast. As he expected, Atty pressed herself closer to him. With the fire at her back, he could see only the shadows of her face as she buried her cold nose against his shoulder.

They were surrounded by over a hundred bedded down soldiers and twenty-four alert guards. MaGrath was lightly snoring less than ten feet away, and the others were politely trying to give them what privacy they could. Yulen smiled to himself. Despite the potential danger of a surprise attack, and despite the fact that they would be sleeping fully-clothed and out in the open every night until they reached Alta Novis, just having Atty in his arms was more than enough to ease him into sleep. With her warm breath against his chest and tickling the hollow of his throat, Yulen kissed her forehead and tried to rest.

\* \* \* \*

Atty opened her eyes and tried to make sense of where she was. She was warm, snug, and dry. There was a pebble digging into her hip, but otherwise she was comfortable. Yulen was holding her as he slept, one arm and hand along her back. Her eyes glanced up at his face, at the peaceful strength in his features even with the long scar that arched from the outer edge of his right eyebrow down to the corner of his mouth. For a second she wanted to kiss the lips mere inches away from hers, but she decided against it. He needed the restorative power of sleep more than she did.

Behind her the fire crackled and hissed as a log split and fell into the coals. She shifted lazily and looked one last time up at her husband's face—

It was the tiniest of movements up in the trees. A shadow on a shadow, not a trick of firelight. Nor was it any kind of movement made by a limb or the rustling of the yellowing leaves.

There. About twenty or so yards away, where she could make it out just above where a lock of his golden-red hair had fallen over his ear.

Atty lowered her lashes, feigning sleep, and waited. Just to make certain, she began to count Yulen's slow heartbeats. On the thirty-third beat, she saw the movement again. Without realizing it, her whole body tensed, and she caught her breath.

The heartbeats sped up. "What?" he whispered so softly she could barely hear it. Atty dropped her eyes to find his staring directly at her. "What?" he repeated, his body tensing. She replied by rolling her eyes to the spot behind him. "Bloods?"

He pulled her closer, until their lips nearly touched. "Where's your sword?" she murmured.

"At my back. With my dagger."

"Dagger's no good. I need to get to my bow. But if it sees me, it'll know."

"The men?"

"Unaware. It came through the treetops."

"Just one?"

Atty could feel his other hand flex its fingers where it lay between their bodies. Both of hers had been curled at chest-level. "Follow my lead," she whispered, her mouth teasing his.

Before he could reply, she started to roll over, like a sleeping form adjusting to a more comfortable position. With her buttocks against his groin, Yulen stifled a moan at the contact and tried to ignore the fantasies that reared up with the feel of her shifting hips.

Her weapon was between them and the fire. Using the blanket to cover her movements, Atty slowly, very slowly, reached over until she grasped the longbow and a single arrow, drawing it an inch at a time from the quiver so she wouldn't alert the Blood. Right now Yulen's body was shielding most of what she was doing from the creature.

A few feet away, a guard noticed she was awake and flashed her a smile—and froze when he understood what she was doing. His face paled, but otherwise he made no sound or sudden gesture. A glance at the Battle Lord found the man's eyes drilling into his before cutting back to watch his wife.

Once she had the arrow nocked, Atty arched her back, whispering, "On three, jerk back the blanket, and lie on your back as flat as you can." His hand against her stomach withdrew to clutch the thick quilt.

"One."

The creature hadn't moved. Her ears strained to listen for any further movement, but there was none.

"Two."

She prayed for a clear shot. Well, there was just one way she knew she would get one, and that would be to draw its attention.

"Three!" she yelled.

Yulen threw back the quilt as he simultaneously rolled onto his back and flattened himself against the ground. The longbow and arrow arched up and over as Atty rolled with it, until she was facing the opposite direction, leaning over his chest, and aiming the weapon horizontally.

"Hey, you! Monkey face!"

A split second later the arrow went buzzing through the air. The Blood screeched as the barb found the tender flesh of its lower abdomen, and the creature dropped from the tree to land less than five feet away from a stunned guard.

The furred monstrosity continued to writhe and scream in pain from the gut shot as Atty and Yulen ran over to join the small group already gathered around it. Bright blue blood pulsed from the wound until the creature's movements grew weaker.

"Check up in the trees for more of them!" Yulen barked to those on duty. The soldiers jumped to obey.

"I think this one was alone," Atty repeated. A hand on her hip drew her against him.

"I want to know how it got past our defenses," Yulen growled. His eyes glittered as he stared at his soldiers.

Mastin jogged up and joined them, fighting the last pull of deep sleep. "What happened? What was that screaming?" Getting a better look, he gasped. "Oh, sweet heavens, where did that come from?"

"It was up in the tree," Yulen explained. "It came through the treetops." He prodded the still form with the tip of his sword. The creature didn't respond, but that didn't mean it was dead.

"Who saw it first?" Sorcher asked.

The Battle Lord motioned toward Atty. "I wasn't sure at first," she told them. "It was too well hidden."

"Sir!" a voice called from the other side of the encampment. The group started to go over to join the soldier waving at them, when a slight motion on the ground alerted Yulen. The creature reached out to snag Atty's pants leg, unseen by anyone, as it made one last attempt in its death throes. Its mouth opened wide, revealing a mouth full of yellowed, pointed canines, and it lunged to bite the person responsible for its agony.

Atty stumbled, her leg caught in its grasp. As she whirled around to try and shake it loose, Yulen lifted his sword with both hands and brought it down in one powerful stroke. The blade sliced through the thing's skull and through its mouth, until the finely-honed edge lay embedded in the mossy ground between the jaws. Atty fell backwards, landing heavily on her right hip, her pants firmly clutched in the Blood's death grip.

It was so quick, no one was aware of what had happened until they heard the wet *shunk* of the sword.

Yulen stared down at the thing at the end of his weapon as Atty managed to free herself and get back on her feet. He was breathing hard from the burst of adrenalin that had exploded inside him. Taking a deep, shaky breath, he put his boot on the dead Blood and levered the sword out of its skull. Once it was free, he cleaned the blade on the moss.

"Mastin, rouse the rest of the men, if any are still asleep. Let's get back on the road." "Yes, sir."

Sorcher trotted back over to let them know what the sentry had spotted. It was the creature's horse, tied to a tree not far from the edge of the camp.

"That means it was sent to keep an eye on us. To watch and learn what we knew," Yulen muttered. "If the horse was close by, then that thing only meant to stay a little while and be gone before we awoke."

"It also means that when it doesn't report back to the main group, they're going to know something's happened," Atty said.

Her husband nodded. "That's why we have to leave now. Every mile we get closer to Alta Novis, the less of a chance they'll have of accomplishing whatever plan they're hatching." He looked down at her. "How did you know it was there? Did it make a sound? Did it do anything unusual?"

She shook her head, biting her lower lip. "I don't know. I can't tell you anything definite. I just woke up and was thinking about kissing you while you were asleep because you haven't been able to kiss me all damn day, and that's when I saw it in the trees behind you."

The soldiers standing nearby smiled, some snorting softly at her admission. Even Yulen had to grin. To think that they had been saved because she'd wanted a kiss.

"Well, in that case, I think you've definitely earned one," he chuckled softly as he reached for her.

# Chapter Twenty-Nine Foster City

The next three days and nights they met no other sign of resistance, saw no other Bloods, and Atty felt no presence with her innate ability. However, that didn't mean they didn't see evidence that the creatures were ahead of them and moving straight toward Alta Novis.

In spite of her husband's warning not to wander off to go hunting, Atty managed to snare a fair amount of game from her perch on top of her mare. It was mostly small animals who made the mistake of pausing in their forage for food to stare at the glittering, armor-clad line passing by, only to end up as supper. The men assigned to protect her enjoyed watching her pick off the strays. It also helped to pass the time.

The weather remained cold. MaGrath predicted it would be an early and possibly harsh winter. Yulen agreed. If they thought as much, maybe the Bloods did as well.

When they were encamped, Yulen spent most of the evening discussing strategies with Mastin and his two lieutenants. They needed to have a plan of action ready to implement the moment they entered the compound, in case the Bloods had already tried attacking the city. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that there would be a full-scale assault once they returned. With the Battle Lord back in his domain, the Bloods would know their chance of overtaking the compound would be gone. Yet, without question, they definitely would try one last desperate time to succeed.

And, more often than not, desperation led to success. Unless Yulen and his men had everything set and ready, the odds would be in favor of the larger, if not somewhat disorganized, force.

Atty sat on the ground next to her husband and listened to the men discuss and plan and argue and draw little diagrams on the sheaves of paper Yulen carried with him in his saddlebags. Sometimes she'd fall asleep, cuddled against his strong, warm back, and find herself waking up in his arms inside their bedroll. On another night she managed to stay awake until they'd dismissed for the evening, and hand-in-hand they had retired together.

On that night they'd tried to talk about Yulen's plans to expand the outer walls of Alta Novis, to accommodate the population growth the compound had seen in the past few months. In the middle of their conversation, her husband suddenly ceased what he was saying in mid-sentence and gave her a funny, delighted look.

"Monkey face?"

As if finally getting the punch line of a joke, Yulen burst out laughing. It became infectious, and before she knew it, she was giggling, then laughing along with him. It was the release they'd been needing to rid themselves of the stress of the past few days. Exhausted, and with his stomach hurting from laughing so much, he pulled her into his arms and promised to smother her with all the kisses she wanted as soon as they arrived at Foster City.

\* \* \* \*

It had started to drizzle again when they came in sight of the compound. Normally Yulen would have bypassed the fortress in order to make a few more hours on the road before dark. However, with the threat of Bloods in the area, he knew it was imperative he get his men inside a more secured shelter, and give them some respite from the strain of the last few days. Besides, he

knew Batuset would welcome the additional troops, and the man also needed to be caught up on the latest information.

"Ho! D'Jacques!" The big bear figure of the Battle Lord of Foster City greeted their entrance personally as the troops slowly began to file their way through the main gates. Dark brown eyes didn't miss the small knot of men guarding the lone figure amid their protective circle as they rode past the first line of sentries. "Isn't it amazing how much can change in the short span of a few months?" the man challenged him with a grin.

Yulen got down from his mount and removed his helmet before accepting Batuset's warm handshake. "Thanks for taking us in, Zane."

"Thank you for stopping. There's been a helluva lot going on these past few days, and I'm eager to hear your part in it."

Yulen paused, eyes widening. "Have they struck here as well?"

Grabbing the younger man by the arm, Batuset started to lead him toward the main lodge when Yulen stopped and turned around. Atty dropped from her horse and hurried to catch up, taking his extended hand.

"Ah, yes. Forgive me. But like I said, a lot has happened in a few months," Batuset apologized.

They hurried into the warm main room where two servants helped to remove the armor and chain mail shirts from their guests. Shivering, Atty walked over to the huge fireplace to dry. Both men eyed her as they took a seat at a nearby table. Once Batuset ordered trays brought out to feed the men, he turned his attention to Yulen. "I remember your last visit to us like it was yesterday."

Yulen smiled wistfully. "It's been quite a ride, let me tell you."

Again, Batuset let his gaze linger on the woman standing before the roaring fire with her back to them. "It's a story I've been dying to hear. But before you do, we first need to get straight on what's happening right now. Do you have any idea why this sudden surge of piddly-ass strikes against my compound?"

Beginning with the day Atty's people arrived at Alta Novis asking for protection against the siege laid down by the Bloods, Yulen recounted each instance of their attacks, including the moment when he realized what their real target was. As he related the news, his soldiers filed into the main hall to be fed before seeking out their first safe night of sleep in a long while. Atty joined them just as the food arrived and began to eat, sitting quietly beside her husband to listen. Presently they were joined by Mastin, Del Ray, and MaGrath, who also dug into the sizeable portions on the trays. When Yulen finally paused to drain his cup, Batuset whistled softly. "What can I do to help?" he offered.

"Just keep on the alert. If they find Alta Novis unaccommodating, they may come here. If we see them turning in your direction, I'll bring additional help."

"I'm a small compound," Batuset reminded him. "I only employ just over a hundred and sixty troops, with a little less than a hundred in the general population."

"I know that. My problem, however, is growth. We've grown by over two hundred people in just the past six months, some of them immigrants from other compounds."

"Why do you reckon they've come to you?" Batuset asked. "What other compounds?"

Yulen shrugged. "We had our largest influx last June. We always get quite a few nomadic tribes seeking shelter at that time of year, but this time they wanted to stay. I wasn't

going to turn them away, especially if they had someone among them who was experienced with a weapon."

Again Batuset's eyes drifted over to where Atty now sat with her head pillowed on her arms on the table. In the firelight her deep blue hair shone with bright gold highlights. It was late; the sun had set hours ago. While Mastin had stayed, in case Yulen had any last-minute orders to give him, the other two soldiers had politely taken their leave and gone to bed.

"I'd be willing to bet she may be one of the reasons people are seeking you out. You know, I've heard a lot of stories coming out of Alta Novis about you two," Batuset commented softly.

Yulen smiled at him over the rim of his cup. "Yeah? And how much of it are you willing to believe?" he asked, half-teasingly.

The big man blinked. "All of it." Pointing a finger upward, Batuset told him, "You remember that pennant you had her shoot down? I had it put back up there, hole and all, just so I could tell people who stop by and ask me about her that she took it down with just a bow and arrow." He glanced over at Mastin, who had wisely kept quiet during their conversation. "I bet you have some interesting tidbits to share."

"Sometime in the future, ask Yulen about the flaming horse." Mastin grinned. "I noticed he left that part out."

"Flaming horse?"

Groaning softly, Yulen got to his feet and stretched. A yawn caught him unawares, and he shook his head to clear it. "Would love to sit and chit-chat some more, Zane, but we need to be up and out by daylight. Cole, you're dismissed."

Mastin bid them goodnight and left as Batuset also stood. Silently the Battle Lord of Foster City watched Yulen lift his sleeping wife into his arms and prepare to ascend the staircase to their room. "You owe me, Yulen. Big time," the big man casually remarked.

"You're right. I do. But it'll have to wait," Yulen promised.

He turned back to the stairs to carry Atty to bed, realizing at that moment that the last time they had been in that same bedroom, they had come to the finalization that they were in love. It had been on a drizzly, overcast night exactly like tonight, and everything between them had been new, exciting, and very frightening. Looking at his wife, he noticed how she instinctively snuggled against him. Life with her had not changed. Their marriage was still new and exciting. The only frightening aspect with her now was how much he worried whenever she went out to hunt, or when she was gone longer than she promised.

He wished it was earlier in the evening so they could enjoy a bath together. In those intimate moments their conversations always tended to meander into very private and sometimes previously unexplored topics. It was like opening up to each other, revealing their souls as well their bodies. Of all the moments they shared, Yulen looked forward to bath time the most. Tonight, however, it was out of the question. They would have to wait until they reached Alta Novis.

Inside the bedroom, the small corner fireplace was radiating enough heat to fill the entire room. Laying her on the bed, Yulen removed her boots and clothes, then slid her under the sheets and blankets. He quickly did the same, pulling her into his arms before falling almost instantly to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"Yul?"

Sleep would not let him go. Yet, for some reason, Yulen didn't sense the urgency to come wide awake. Not like he did last night. His body felt detached, almost floating, except for a silken warmth lying against him. He was aware of small hands reaching around his hips, and before he was fully aware, they began to stoke him into hardness. Her fingers grasped his scrotum and lightly teased it with her fingernails until he shivered in expectation.

He took a deep breath and rolled against her, pressing himself firmly into her belly as her fingers coaxed and teased his growing erection. "Are you needing me for anything, Atrilan?"

"Yeah. And there aren't any damn soldiers nearby to watch," she whispered, a smile clearly evident in her low, husky voice.

A pair of lips started to play with his male nipples, tonguing them roughly, and Yulen felt his body begin to respond despite his exhaustion. She continued to stroke him, using nearly expert movements as her fingers wrapped more tightly around his pulsing dick. Groaning, he reached out and found her back and waist, and her cloak of warm hair. He let her play with him as he grew and thickened in her grasp, and brought to life the eagerness to envelope himself inside her moist heat.

"What's come over you, Atrilan?" he moaned, pressing his lips to her forehead.

"I want you."

"I know that. But you've never been like this before. Has this come about because of what you and Tory may have talked about?"

"Perhaps," she laughed lightly.

"Or because you no longer have to worry about becoming pregnant?" he ventured, broaching a subject they hadn't spoken of since MaGrath had given her the contraceptive.

To answer him, Atty pushed him onto his back and climbed on top, easing herself over him before she began rocking up and down in a long, slow, sliding motion. She was as tight as she had been when he'd first taken her virginity, but unlike then, she could almost take the whole of him. Her body could encase him in pure ecstasy. Yulen grabbed her hands where they rested along his ribcage, and pulled them up to his shoulders until her breasts rubbed against his. The friction was like setting fire to tinder.

He groaned loudly, shifting his weight. He threw her back onto the mattress and rolled on top in order to assault her senses with his mouth and hands as little sounds of pleasure came from deep within her. Sounds that were music to his ears, and shifted every nerve ending into overdrive.

She lifted her knees even higher, giving him the ability to sheath more of his length. Raising her feet above his head, Yulen rested her heels on his shoulders, and Atty shuddered at this totally new and unexpected sensation. He was a delicious thickness that made her wish she could crawl between his thighs and never leave. She wanted to be his saddle he rode on during the day, and his blanket that covered him at night.

He was beyond her reach now. She could only grasp the bedcovers, twisting them in her hands as every cell was flooded with wave upon wave of erotic delight as he continued to pound into her, moving faster as he brought them both nearer to the edge of their world and prepared to hurl themselves toward the broken moon that was flooding the bed with light. Panting heavily, Yulen opened his eyes to look down and saw her face twisted into an expression of pure lust. In the dying firelight, her face was framed within a sea of midnight-colored hair. At that moment

Atty's eyes opened, and they gazed at each other as they molded flesh into flesh, over and over, until the overwhelming climax seized them, churning and overflowing, leaving them breathless and quivering as they writhed on the sweat-coated sheets.

Kissing her lightly on her swollen lips, Yulen gathered her tightly against him as he settled onto his side and let oblivion take him without a struggle. It wasn't until much, much later that he realized she'd never answered his question. But by then, it no longer mattered.

#### Chapter Thirty Narrow Escape

"What's the first thing you're gonna do when we get back, Jake?"

"Get rip-roaring drunk, then have a three-night sleep. How 'bout you?"

"You know I've been seeing Shellee, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm thinking about maybe making an honest woman of her. Would only be right, seeing as how we've been together going on nearly a year now."

The soldier to her left crowed with delight. "I think you've got that a bit backwards, Dugglas. She's going to make an honest *man* of *you!* No more late nights playing double deuce with the boys!"

The soldier ahead and to the right snorted. "That's what you think, Jake, my boy!"

The other soldiers around her continued to jibe each other with questions, trying to pass the time as they'd done the past few days. They were only a few miles from Alta Novis and making excellent time. Unless something barred their way, they would make the compound before nightfall, even though the days were noticeably shorter.

Atty sighed and stretched her arms over her head. The soldier to her right saw her fidgeting and grinned. "Not much longer, Atty."

"I know, Russell. So what's the first thing you're gonna do when we get home?"

The soldier named Jake gave her a short salute and made way for his replacement as the men took turns on their three-hour shifts.

"I've been worried about my dad," Russell admitted. "He hasn't been doing too well, and Mom's been having to double-up work just to take up his slack."

"Oh?" Atty gave him a concerned look. "What does your dad do?"

"He helps take care of the compound livestock," Russell said proudly. "My mother's the one who makes certain fresh milk is delivered to the main lodge every morning. But with Dad under the weather, things have been a bit short-handed. I pitch in and help with the milking and all when I can, but with me being gone these past few weeks, I've been worried about how they've been getting on."

His replacement trotted up to take over. Russell gave her a little salute goodbye. "See you at the compound, Atty!"

One at a time, the soldiers changed places, until she was surrounded by six new men. One of them, a man by the name of Kort, greeted her jovially. "Almost home, Atty girl!"

She flashed him a weary smile in answer.

"Won't be soon enough," the soldier behind her and to her left grumbled. "We'll make it just in time to catch the latest massacre."

Kort guffawed. "That's the right attitude, Freshon! Always could see a bright ray of sunshine coming from your ruddy face!"

"I don't know why you guys are so gung-ho about finally being home," Freshon continued. "We're being inundated with Bloods. You guys are acting like it's Market Day."

"You can't dwell on it," the soldier ahead and to her left shot at him over his shoulder. "If they come, we'll deal with 'em. Hell, we have Atty on our side. How could we lose?"

"Still, I'd feel a helluva lot better if we knew what they were planning. How many are there? What kind of weapons do they use? Can you tell me *that?*"

Atty gave him a small smile. "They use whatever they can carry in their hands. Sometimes they may have a crude knife or ax or sword, but they'll also use rocks and big tree limbs. And when they don't have those, they'll use their hands and teeth. Just be careful not to get bitten, or let any of their blood get in an open wound if you can help it. We've found that some of their blood can hurt you, like a poison. I've even heard of a few who had blood that was like acid. Just ate through the skin as quick as you please."

Silence reigned for a few minutes as the men digested this bit of information. The caravan continued at a quick pace. The Battle Lord had ordered no stopping for lunch since they were so close to their destination, forcing everyone to take their meal in their saddles.

Like the day before, and the day before that, Atty hadn't seen her husband except for brief glimpses. He stayed busy with reports from the scouts, and from discussions with Mastin and the lieutenants. It was only at night, after camp had been erected, that she could be with him, and even then there was practically no privacy to be shared. Which was why she'd been especially glad when they had stopped at Foster City. A tiny smile creased the corners of her mouth. If Yulen was surprised by her enthusiasm last night, just wait until this evening, she promised herself.

"So, Atty, what are you looking forward to doing when we get back?" Kort interrupted her thoughts.

For a second she wondered if he'd been reading her mind. A slow blush began to creep up her face. She tried to hide it with a toss of her thick braid. "I want a nice hot soak in the tub," she told them. "That, and I want to sleep as late as I want for the next week."

"What? No going out hunting before the crack of dawn?" the soldier on her left inquired. Atty peered through his helmet and recognized the face behind the armor. She smiled.

"Just because I'm a hunter doesn't mean I enjoy rising before everyone else does and traipsing about in the near-dark. I love the hunt, and I love the feeling of accomplishment when I can bring back fresh meat to the compound. But, to be honest, if I could stay in bed until noon, and *then* go out, I'd be happier. Of course, we all know that'll never happen." She blew an errant lock of hair out of her eyes. "What about you, Johed?"

"I'm going to beg Berta for the biggest haunch of roasted meat she's got cooking in the kitchen, and I'm going to die a stuffed but happy man!"

The men laughed at the admission. Johed turned slightly in his seat, a big grin evident on his face despite the masking effect of the helmet. "How about you, sir? What are you looking forward to when we get home?"

A deep, rich voice directly behind her answered, "I'm looking forward to a little more quality time with my wife."

Startled, Atty gasped and whipped around in her saddle to see his blue-gray eyes twinkling within the shadows of his helmet. "How long have you been back there?" she demanded.

"Long enough," he laughed with a chuckle that came from his chest. "So...you'd like a loong soak in a hot tub, and then stay in bed for...at least...a week?" Yulen drawled slowly.

There was no way she could escape the insinuating tone in his question, and the slow blush she'd managed to hide earlier returned with a vengeance to burn her cheeks a bright pink. The men around her also caught the double-edged meaning as he turned her words around and gave them back to her. They roared in laughter to see her speechless.

"Wellll...I'll see what I can do...to accommodate you," he commented, much to her chagrin. The soldiers continued to snicker.

Glaring at him, Atty watched as her husband tossed her the customary little salute as he pulled away from the entourage, allowing another soldier to take his place. He hurried ahead, leaving her to cope with their good-natured teasing. Seeing him go, she couldn't help but smile. At least she knew he'd been thinking of her, and missed her enough to insinuate himself into the guard in order to surprise her. She pressed a cool hand to an overly warm forehead, and sighed.

"How much further before we get there?" she asked, off-handedly. For some strange reason, that elicited another round of laughter from her guards. Atty rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on, guys!"

She searched ahead again to see if she could spot her husband. They were coming into territory that looked slightly familiar to her, which meant they probably were within one or two miles of the compound. Alta Novis, her home. Her real home now.

Despite the inclement weather, Atty loved this time of year. Her father often referred to the winter as "cuddling" weather, and for the first time in her life she was looking forward to sharing some quality cuddling time with Yulen. It would be their first winter together. Glancing down at her hands, she thought back on some of the things Tory had suggested to her, and a playful grin came over her. Oh, yeah. Things were definitely going to be a lot more fun.

The men around her continued to talk, leaving her alone for the moment as it was obvious she was lost in her own thoughts, which was fine with Atty. She'd been a solitary person for so long, she had no problem blending into the background when others were around. It gave her the chance to sharpen her observation skills. Like now.

Atty glanced at the cloudless sky overhead. It was a good sign. No clouds meant no approaching bad weather. But it also meant a clear night, and clear nights were always very cold nights. She shivered unconsciously at the thought, then smiled. Cold nights would mean a warm Yulen beside her as well.

She blew away that same irritating bit of hair that tended to want to stay right in front of her left eye. Was it her imagination, or did all the birds sort of disappear within the past few minutes? Her eyes darted from one side of the road to the other. When did the insects stop chirping? Why did the air suddenly seem thick?

A cold finger drew an imaginary line up her spine, lifting the hairs on her head. Before she was aware of her own actions, little Atty withdrew into herself, and the huntress-warrior Atty stepped into her skin just as all of her inner bells began to ring. Without thinking, Atty reigned in hard on her mare. Not expecting her sudden stop, the two guards behind her plowed into the little bay, then passed her up a few feet before they managed to stop along with the others of her guard.

Behind them, the rest of the caravan, traveling in squads of four, as per the Battle Lord's orders, saw the disruption in the line ahead of them, and immediately halted.

Unaware of them, Atty jumped from her saddle, landing in a crouch beside her horse. Every nerve tingled, every sense attuned. The one thing she hated most in the world was when the tables were turned, and she the hunter became the hunted. It was an eerie, almost sickening feeling that sat inside her chest like a heavy congestion, making it difficult to concentrate and almost impossible to breathe.

Instinctively, Atty pulled her bow off her shoulders and nocked an arrow as she remained close to the ground, listening...watching...waiting...

Behind her a huge gray horse drew close and stopped. Up and down the caravan everyone had come to a sudden standstill. Silence became so absolute, even the horses remained unmoving.

The stench intensified. Suffocating. So many. Hundreds. The sun dimmed and started pulsating like a heart torn from a chest. Terror turned the air black with danger. Atty's eyes widened as all the blood drained from her face. Her tongue shriveled in her mouth.

"Atty!" It was a whisper. Anxious, worried, demanding.

She turned her stricken face to her husband. "Run!" she somehow managed to croak, despite the fear clogging her throat. "Run!"

She was in her saddle before the scream had left her lips. Yulen wheeled his stallion around as his arm came down in the signal to attack at full gallop. Except this time the headlong rush toward Alta Novis was not to attack, but to escape.

Conditioned by their training, the soldiers automatically closed ranks as their horses thundered down the road. A hundred yards. Two hundred yards. They rounded the last hill that overlooked the small valley where the compound was nestled. Seeing the open expanse of ground between them and the main gate, the caravan tightened even further, until the sound of hooves pounded in Atty's skull like a runaway stampede as they raced for their lives.

She'd lost sight of Yulen, but something told her he was behind them, making certain every last man, animal, and wagon made it safely into the compound. Jerking the mare's head to the side, the animal protested but left the protection of the pack. They swept past her in a blur as she wheeled her horse around and stood in her stirrups to look back.

The Bloods were advancing toward them, flowing over the ground like a massive, screeching blanket of inhumanity as they tried on foot to catch up with the rapidly escaping mounted soldiers. It quickly became apparent their surprise ambush had been foiled, and they would not be able to reach the enemy before the troops disappeared behind the heavily fortified walls.

Yulen saw his wife picking off those in the front, the few on horseback who were closest to reaching them, as the rest of his men slipped through the rapidly closing gates. He literally shoved her mare ahead of him with his horse, slapping its rump with the flat of his sword, mere seconds before the wooden doors closed with an echoing thud.

Already the archers and guards on the parapet and boardwalks along the walls were firing at the retreating mass. Yulen hurried up the nearest ladder to direct the retaliatory attack, knowing without question that Atty had his back. But by the time he reached the top of the wall, he could see the Bloods had turned and were returning to the safety of the trees on the other side of the road. Beside him, Atty stood down and lowered her weapon. They both were breathing heavily.

"I've stopped trying to figure out how you're able to know," he gasped, not taking his eyes from the sight of the mutated mass as it seemed to seep back into the ground at the edge of

the wood. There had to be hundreds of them. It would have been a slaughter if they had succeeded.

He reached out to find her hand. Atty slipped her fingers into his glove, and he squeezed them gently. "I love you," she told him, as if it could explain everything.

This time he turned to look at her. Her face was still pale and strained. He wondered if his looked the same. "No more than I love you, my Atrilan."

Squeezing her hand again, he led her over to the ladder for her to began their ascent down.

#### Chapter Thirty-One Duty Defined

People descended on them like a swarm of bees, all talking at once. They were frightened and concerned and relieved to have their Battle Lord back among them. Yulen tried to calm them and make sense of what they were trying to tell him in one loud muddle of sound as Paxton helped relieve him of the heavy armor.

Atty felt a tug on her shoulders. A quick glance told her it was Mastin, undoing the straps that held her chain mail in place. She gave him a watery smile and allowed him to remove the heavy shirt.

Her body was singing from the nearness of their escape. This was the feeling the soldiers thrived on, this intense high brought about when facing the enemy. But for her, it was a feeling she didn't care for. It left her with a throbbing headache. And once the adrenalin was gone, incredibly drained. All she wanted to do was curl up in a little ball in some dark, warm corner, and sleep.

Several of the soldiers from the caravan clapped her on the back and shoulders to thank her for her alertness. They knew they'd narrowly escaped probable extermination because of her. Atty accepted their thanks before Yulen grabbed her hand and took off for the main lodge.

Once inside, the Battle Lord was able to sort out the tangled threads of conversation, and started barking out orders, beginning with food for his men who'd just returned with him. Sitting beside him at their usual table closest to the fireplace, Atty cast wistful eyes toward the upstairs rooms where she knew their bed awaited. Sighing, she rubbed her forehead.

Faintly she listened to what Ampour and his sub-lieutenants had to tell her husband. There had been four other attacks on Alta Novis since their departure. So far there had been no deaths, but two sentries had sustained non-lethal injuries.

Progress had been slowed on the extended compound wall. Yulen immediately called a halt to the construction until the trouble with the Bloods was resolved. In the meantime, he approved doubling the number of sentries on the wall, and cancelled all up-coming activities.

More of his guards approached him with concerns and questions. Atty watched her husband perch his bottom on the edge of the table in front of her as he listened and answered them one at a time. At one point Berta hustled over to place a tray in between them. From the expression on her face it was evident she was more than happy to have them back at the compound.

Atty thanked her and reached for the mug of milk, when her thoughts went back to Russell's comments about his father. She made a mental note to ask Yulen if there wasn't something they could do to help. After all, she was the Battle Lady. She had the same authority as her husband, although it had taken her some time to realize that fact.

Madigan had been in charge of the compound while Yulen was away. Now it was her turn to accept the responsibilities placed on her when she'd married him. He needed to keep his mind on the protection and upkeep of the compound. She would start to handle the day-to-day dealings of the people.

If they would let her.

Atty rubbed her eyes. For some odd reason, she felt that would no longer be a problem.

She are quietly as she watched and listened to Yulen deal with the more urgent issues. He nibbled off the tray, to her relief. He had to be as hungry as she was.

She was just about to excuse herself to go upstairs when MaGrath made his way over to them. Atty thought he was seeking out Yulen when he surprised her by stopping next to her. She blinked wearily up at him. Behind the physician, she could tell Yulen was trying to listen in on what he wanted.

"You should be getting low on the bottle I gave you," he told her quietly. "My hands are already full with the injured in my clinic, and it looks like things are only going to get busier. So while I'm thinking of it, I need to refill it now while I have the time."

Atty glanced down at his extended hand and wondered why he thought she'd be carrying it on her at that moment. "It's in my saddlebags. Can I give it to you at breakfast tomorrow morning?"

"Breakfast will be fine," he agreed. He slapped a hand on Yulen's back and wished him goodnight. Yulen reciprocated, turning around to give his wife a puzzled look. "You're bushed. Why don't you go ahead and go to bed?" he suggested.

"Will you be much longer?"

He shrugged. "There's no telling. The Bloods may attack again tonight, or they may not. Either way, we have to be ready."

"You're as dead on your feet as the rest of the men," she argued gently, "yet you let them go to their barracks."

"I have men to replace them until they're fully rested."

"But what about you? You say you're needed, but what happens when *you* collapse in exhaustion? *Then* who's gonna lead the men?"

"She has a good point, sir," one of the men nearby told him.

Yulen scratched at the several days' growth on his cheek. In the soft lantern light his beard and moustache, as well as the hair on his head, appeared orangish again, reminding Atty of the first time she'd seen its color. It had been by lantern light, as well, inside of a tiny shop in Wallis. In the sunlight she knew it would gleam like polished brass.

"Atty, go to bed. I'll be there when I can."

"All right," she acquiesced, getting to her feet. "But if I'm too tired when you finally decide to join me..." She left the sentence open and the suggestion clear. The men surrounding Yulen grinned and chuckled. Smiling, Yulen gave her a quick goodnight kiss, then swatted her backside with the report he'd been handed earlier.

In the time since their narrow escape into Alta Novis, night had fallen. It was still early, but the day had been a long one on the road, as had the past few days, and not counting the Bloods' misbegotten ambush. Berta had already filled the tub with warm water, and Atty slipped into its depths with a gratified smile. She let herself soak a while before washing her hair. At one point there was a knock on the door, and the housekeeper let herself in to dump their saddlebags on the small writing table. "Will you be needing anything else?" the older woman asked, peering around the doorway of the bathroom at her.

"Is he still surrounded downstairs?"

"Yes, Madam. Would you care for another mug of milk?"

Atty brushed a fan of deep blue hair out of her face. "Berta, do you know Russell's parents? The ones who help take care of the compound's livestock?"

The housekeeper smiled as she nodded. "The Prichards. Real nice folks. Adem's been sickly lately, though."

"I know. Russell told me." Atty swirled the washrag around in the water as she thought. "Berta, tell me something? Honestly?"

The woman leaned against the door. "I'll try, Madam."

Atty snorted, smiling. "Do I have the same power to have something done as my husband does?"

"You mean, do you have the same rights to rule as D'Jacques? Of course, since you're the Battle Lord's Lady."

"Then I'm going to start asserting those rights, beginning tonight." She grinned at the housekeeper's wary expression. "First off, don't call me madam anymore. Keep that for Madigan. My name is Atty, and that's what I expect to hear. I may be Yulen's Lady, but I'm still me. The tomboy who still climbs trees and challenges the boys to games of skill and daring. Second, I'm going to see if something can be done to help Russell's family. Can you look into that and give me some suggestions?"

"I'll need to check with the Battle Lord first."

"No, you won't," Atty argued. "No. Not anymore. He's going to run the compound's defenses. I'm going to take over the duties of managing the interior. It's...it's what I'm supposed to do...isn't it?"

A smile slowly drifted over the housekeeper's face. "I'll see what I can find out," she promised. "Will that be all?"

"Yeah," Atty replied in a smaller voice. "This is all strange and new to me, but I'm going to try and be the kind of wife Yulen needs me to be. If I stumble, just be there to help pick me up and brush me off. Can you do that? Please?"

"Aren't you being a little hard on yourself, Atty? Maybe the Battle Lord wants you to stay the way you are. After all, isn't that what made him fall in love with you in the first place?"

"I have his back in battle. I need to prove to him I have his back in every aspect." She picked up the washrag and wrung it out. "He told me he wanted to spoil and pamper me. Well, damn it, I'm a superb hunter and warrior. He can pamper me all he wants, but I want everyone else to know I have a backbone and a fine dagger, and I'm not afraid to use both!"

Berta chuckled. "I'll have a talk with Ellinor and see what can be done. I'll let you know what I find out tomorrow. Will there be anything else, Atty?"

"Yeah. Go tell my husband to get his delectable butt up here before I go downstairs and hog tie him, and drag him up here myself."

Laughing, the housekeeper left the bathroom. Atty heard the bedroom door close, blocking out the sound of her laughter. She remained in the tub, enjoying the way the water soothed her muscles after spending the last few days in a saddle, and the nights on the hard ground, despite the bedroll. It wasn't long before she recognized the stamp of boots coming up the stairs. She watched the doorway until Yulen peered around the corner at her.

"Let me see if I can quote her. 'The Battle Lady says to get your delectable butt upstairs, or she'll be coming down here to hog tie you and drag you up there herself." He grinned. "Atty, such declarations do not make me look good in the eyes of my men." He paused, then added, "But it definitely got the point across. They dismissed themselves so I could obey."

"Do they think you're henpecked?" she asked, suddenly blanching. "I'm sorry, Yul. I didn't want to give them that impression."

Yulen chuckled as he removed his boots and prepared to join her. "Henpecked? Not in the least. In love? Oh, most definitely. Is the water still warm?"

Atty smiled, watching as he shed the rest of his clothes and stepped into the big brass tub. He eased down opposite of her, and kept going down until he was completely immersed underwater. Atty watched him slowly moving around and waited to see what he would do next. Suddenly she shrieked with laughter as he grabbed her legs and pulled her under with him.

Berta would definitely have a mess to clean up tomorrow, but at the moment they didn't care.

### Chapter Thirty-Two The Bottle

"If I'm ever stricken with incontinence in my later years, you'll know why," MaGrath dryly remarked as he took a seat across from the Battle Lord the following morning. An instant later a plate of breakfast waffles was set before him, along with a cup of cold cider. "I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life than I was yesterday." He glanced up over his plate. "Please tell me you were just as scared."

"Hell, yes, I was scared," Yulen admitted. "I don't think it sunk in, though, until I watched the horde heading back into the forest, and saw how many of them there were. It was a close call. Too damn close." He took another bite of his waffle. "They found Palmyer's body, or what was left of it," he told the physician. The soldier had been the lookout sentry and would have challenged them when they'd gotten closer to the compound, but the Bloods had found him first.

MaGrath nodded. It was then he glanced around. "Where's Atty? Has she already eaten?"

"She'll be joining us soon. She said she had something to do first."

The men continued to eat in companionable silence, until Yulen brought up the subject. "Atty and I haven't spoken any more on the topic since the other night," he mentioned quietly. "But last night she also told me she wanted to take on more responsibilities with regards to running the compound."

"More responsibilities? Like what?"

"Like overseeing the day-to-day activities. Taking care the people have what they need. Resolving minor conflicts. All those things that take me away from managing the soldiers. In a way, I'll be glad to let her have the job. I need to concentrate on protecting the compound."

"That's quite a jump for our little blue-haired wood sprite," MaGrath observed. "She's growing up."

"We'll see," Yulen said. "She's going to make a few mistakes, but she's wise, and her heart is in it. I'll be excited to see how she manages." He gave the older man a small smile. "The only thing I really worry about is how Madigan is going to take the news that she's going to have to relinquish control."

MaGrath waved a hand at him. "Don't worry about Maddy. She's been wanting to hand over the job for quite a while. After all, she's been slowly but surely turning it all over to you these past couple of years." He shook his head and chuckled. "Imagine it. Atty running the compound. Don't that just make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up?"

"Speak of the devil." Yulen looked up and smiled as Atty descended the staircase and began to approach them. MaGrath turned around to watch her approach, and both men immediately saw the determined look on her face. Part anger, part feistiness, it was all Atty, and it meant she would not accept argument or compromise, whatever the problem was.

"Atty, what is it?" Yulen asked her as she neared them.

Nearing the table, she didn't stop until she'd reached them, and then she planted her feet firmly on the floor, her back ramrod straight, and looked first at her husband before turning her glittering gaze on the physician.

"Last night you asked me for the bottle," she commented. "I promised you'd get it this morning. Well, here it is. And there'll be no further word about it." She almost slammed the tiny glass vial on the table between them, pivoted on her heel, and strode purposefully out the front doors.

Stunned, MaGrath picked up the bottle, barely glancing at it as they watched her departure. Until a second look made him swear softly under his breath. Yulen tore his eyes away from her to see what had upset his friend.

Opening his hand, the physician showed the bottle to the Battle Lord. The tiny vial of contraceptive he'd given her was full. The wax seal around the cork had never been broken.

MaGrath looked full into Yulen's face to see if the man understood the impact of its meaning. Atty was not taking any precautions to keep from getting pregnant. And she hadn't since they'd left for Alta Novis almost three weeks ago.

Yulen gave the man an understanding glance, then got to his feet and strode out of the main lodge.

### Chapter Thirty-Three No Reason

"Atty, we need more barbs!"

Giving a loud sigh, Atty walked over to the table where her archers were busy working on making their new arrows according to her personal specifications. "Where's the gross I ordered before I left?"

One of the soldiers looked up from where he was sitting, tying on fletching. "They never got here."

"Then go *get* them!" she snapped with a smile.

Obediently, the man jumped to his feet and took off.

"Hey, Atty, are you sure you want us to use these feathers?" another called across the way. She hurried over to check the quills laid across the board. Running an expert hand over them, she picked a couple out of the lineup and tossed them onto the ground.

"These are good. Whoever gathered them did a good job."

"Atty?"

She glanced over to where Mackenzie was stripping the bark off saplings. The man motioned with his head toward the back of the tent where they were working. Turning around, Atty was surprised to see Madigan standing in the door flap, calmly taking in the scene. Spotting her daughter-in-law, the older woman walked into the narrow space in Atty's direction.

"What is it, Madigan?" Atty began. "I'm a bit busy at the moment."

To her complete shock, the woman never said a word as she stopped in front of her. Atty searched the woman's face for some clue as to why she had come to this part of the compound, obviously seeking her out, but all she could see were the unshed tears shining in clear brown eyes.

Without warning, the woman leaned over and gently kissed her, first on one cheek, then on the other. Then she left as quietly as she'd appeared. Atty stared after her in stunned silence. After another moment, she shrugged and went back to helping the men prepare their weapons.

It was nearly noon when the new arrows were finished to her satisfaction. A quick test proved them to be strong and fast, and deadly. It had taken a lot of cajoling to get Yulen and his men to switch to the longbows, but once they'd gotten a taste of what they were capable of, most of the archers had refused to go back to their smaller versions.

Running through the compound, Atty hurried for the main lodge to let her husband know her men were ready. She was also extremely hungry, having denied herself breakfast that morning except for the mug of milk Berta had brought to her in the bedroom while she was dressing. A tiny smile creased the edges of her lips as she recalled the woman tsk-tsking after viewing the water spilled on the bathroom floor.

Coming around the corner where the new lodge was being erected, she heard her name being hailed. She stopped and looked up to see Yulen standing in one of the guard towers. Quickly she climbed the ladder to join him.

"The new arrows are ready," she told him breathlessly as she stepped onto the narrow platform. To her surprise, he pulled her into his arms to give her a kiss that momentarily erased all thought from her mind. When he finally released her, she gave him a wide-eyed look. "What was *that* all about?"

"No reason," he smiled.

"Oh, yeah? Well, that makes twice now this morning that I've been kissed for 'no reason'."

"Oh?" A red-gold eyebrow went up. "And what other lucky gentleman has been kissing my wife this morning?"

"Not a man, Yulen. You know better. I meant your mother."

The news made him rear back a bit. "Madigan?"

"You have another mother besides her?"

"She kissed you this morning? Why?"

"I thought you might be able to tell me," Atty replied. Her eyes narrowed. "You haven't seen her today, have you?"

"No, but I can lay good odds on who might have," he grinned. "Did you eat breakfast this morning?"

"No, and I'm starved. I was just on my way over to the lodge to look for you."

"I figured as much. After you, my love."

Atty turned to retreat down the ladder when she realized they were being watched by at least a hundred pairs of eyes. Not only were the soldiers along the wall eyeing them, but people in the courtyard below were quietly observing. She paused briefly and glanced back at her husband.

"What?" he asked, seeing her hesitation.

"I don't think I'll ever get over being the object of intense scrutiny," she grimaced. Yulen chucked at her discomfort.

"If it's any consolation, I didn't have to worry about it until after my father's death. And then it was like everyone was criticizing me for every decision I made. Watching and waiting to catch me make a mistake. About that same time, Mother moved out of the upstairs bedroom and left it for me. To be honest, I went a bit power-crazy. But thanks to Liam, he helped me keep my head on straight. Being the center of attention takes some getting used to, Atty. Just be patient."

They were slowly climbing down the steep ladder as they conversed. The eyes never left them. "You still haven't answered my question," Atty reminded him.

"You mean, why Madigan kissed you? Think, my love. The answer is obvious."

She glanced up at him and wrinkled her nose. "She's glad we're back in one piece?" She reached the ground, and stood back to wait for him. Yulen jumped down past the last few rungs and put an arm around her shoulders as they started for the lodge.

"I can probably tell you in one word. Vial."

The one word was all she needed to begin blushing a bright crimson. Yulen looked down at her and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"Liam promised he wouldn't tell anyone."

"My love, don't you think Madigan knows what the vial is for? She's a very cunning and intelligent woman. All she would have to see is the unbroken cork to know everything." He stopped and turned her around to face him. "At some point we're going to have to talk about what you did," he said in a low voice.

"There's nothing to talk about, Yul," she whispered.

"Atrilan."

"Nothing," she emphasized. Her eyes lingered on his lips and wished she could lose herself in his kisses. At that moment she want nothing more than his approval. And his love. "Thank you, my beloved," he murmured in a voice so soft she almost didn't hear him. Before she had a chance to respond, he took her hand and continued them on toward the lodge.

## Chapter Thirty-Four Atty Missed

As MaGrath had predicted, the first snow of the winter struck with a vengeance two weeks later. However, on the bright side, the heavy powder seemed to deter the Blood army from any further attacks. When another week went by without any sign of them, Yulen sent a small party out to see if they could find any evidence.

Knowing the men wouldn't see any sign of Bloods if the creatures sat on them, Atty went out on her own in the middle of the day to check things out. Once she returned to face Yulen's wrath, she announced the mass had moved on, and from the looks of things, just recently. Maybe in the last two days.

Still fuming, Yulen had work on the outer wall resumed, but he wasn't going to let his wife forget how thoroughly justified he was to be angry at her for leaving the protection of the compound with nothing more than a bow and dagger, and behind his back, against direct orders, at that.

That night she tried to entice him in bed with one of the tricks she'd learned from Tory, but her husband was unresponsive for the first time in their marriage, turning his back to her. It was as if he was trying to show her how terrified he had been to discover her gone by shutting her out, albeit temporarily.

The following day, while Atty was instructing her archers on the finer points of testing a bow for tensile strength, she heard a sharp whistle. She glanced up to see Yulen standing on the other side of the courtyard, gesturing for her to join him.

Atty sighed as her heart skipped a beat. He hadn't spoken more than a handful of words to her since his self-imposed silence, and his cold shoulder attitude was devastating. He had never treated her this way, but then again she knew that if she had pulled the same stunt back when her parents were still alive she probably would have been spanked within an inch of her life.

She had apologized repeatedly, but he had yet to thaw. Even the whole compound knew how badly she'd screwed up, and they were on Yulen's side when it came to chastising her.

Resigned, Atty released her men, suggesting they go practice, then went over to see what her husband needed of her. The blue-gray eyes were like ice as they watched her approach.

"Come. I need you to see something," he ordered in a clipped voice. Ordered, not asked, she realized. That slight difference stung. He was carrying several rolled sheets of paper which she knew were diagrams of the new structures being built in and around Alta Novis.

To her surprise he led her to the new lodge where they would live once it was completed. It was two-storied, but they would be occupying both levels, rather than the one where they lived now in the main lodge.

Stepping inside, she could see where the interior walls were already up and needed only a few more details before they would be finished. Drawing her arms around herself, Atty was grateful to get out of the cold wind.

Finding a makeshift table, Yulen pulled out one of the diagrams and opened it, setting some rocks on the corners to keep them from rolling up. "I had some last minute ideas I wanted to run by you," he began. "I rather like the idea of a fireplace in the bedroom, like there is in

Foster City. There wasn't one in the original plans, but there should be no problem having a small stone one being added. What do you think?" He turned to look at her for approval.

Atty continued to stare at him as tears unexpectedly rose into her eyes. "F-fine," she managed to say. "I don't care." He stood less than three feet away from her, but from his body language he might as well have been on the other side of the compound.

She wanted his arms around her. Screw that, she wanted him to kiss her. To dominate her like no other man, and make her giddy with desire. She needed him take her and love her, and make the world right again. Why couldn't he see how shriveled her heart had become? How could he not see she was sorry for what she had done? No harm, no foul, but she had promised she would never ever pull that kind of stunt again. He had her word on it, and Yulen knew how proudly she valued her own oath.

She took a step toward, hoping he would allow her to grow closer. Maybe touch him. Just touch him, enough to get a minute amount of warmth from his body if he wouldn't show her any in his eyes or in his expression. Yulen stepped back away from her, and the effect was worse than if he had slapped her. Atty felt her heart crack.

Acting as if he hadn't seen the moistness in her eyes, Yulen pointed to another section of the diagram. "And instead of having this big room here next to the bedroom be a closet, I felt it would be better if we carved a smaller storage closet out of one corner and make the rest of this a small bedroom instead. In case."

She totally missed his hesitation. It had been almost an entire day and night since he'd spoken a civil word to her. Or touched her. Or kissed her. He hadn't even eaten any meals with her. It was as if he was avoiding any contact with her as much as possible if he could help it. Her body felt empty and useless, her soul frostbitten. His desertion was worse than anything he could do to her. She almost wished he would scream and rant at her instead. At least it would be done and over with, not like this unending exile that sapped her as much as the Borash poisoning had.

There was no telling how long he would continue to treat her this way. She had told him she was sorry. She had promised never to go against his direct orders again. How much longer was he planning to punish her? Even the sunlight overhead couldn't penetrate his icy exterior.

Lowering her head, she shrugged. "Okay by me," she whispered, clutching her chest. Two tears dripped onto her coat sleeves. She hastily brushed them into the woolen nap. Her nose was already threatening to run, damn it. She tried not to sniff.

"Also, I need to know if you want me to have the men construct—"

"I don't *care*, Yulen!" she interrupted, then turned and half-ran out of the building, hoping to calm herself before she completely broke down. If he no longer wanted her, then fine. But she couldn't stand there any longer and survive under his unfeeling glare.

Because going up the back stairs beside the kitchen was safer than going through the main front doors of the lodge, and there would be less chance of someone seeing her or stopping her for some reason or another, Atty took the steps two at a time as she headed for the bedroom. Once she was safely inside, she closed the door firmly behind her just as her choking sobs overtook her. She pressed her coat sleeve against her mouth to try and stifle her moans as her shoulders shook.

Walking over to her side of the bed, Atty crouched down on the floor near the headboard, bracing her back against the mattress, and drew her knees up to her chin. Covering her face with her arms, she let her hurt come out in a wash of scalding tears. Lost in her misery, she never

heard the door open and close, nor the sound of footsteps approach her. He already had the ability to walk without making any noise, and with a little practice he would make an excellent hunter.

Two strong hands reached down and picked her up without warning. Atty gasped as he sat her on the side of the bed, then stuck a handkerchief in her face. Obediently she wiped her face and blew her nose.

"Never ever do that again, Atrilan," he admonished her sternly.

She slid her eyes up at him. He'd used her intimate name, and just the sound of his voice caressing her like that gave her hope that she'd finally served out her sentence. She started to reply but her voice hiccupped, bringing fresh tears to her cheeks. Smiling gently, Yulen held out his arms to her, and she melted into them without another word. Keeping his love from her had gotten the point across better than any amount of yelling or threatening could. The lesson had been learned. Now it was time to soothe the emotional bruises.

In the hour that followed, they made gentle love, ignoring the two timid knocks on the bedroom door in the interim. Yulen had locked the door, and there was no key.

Atty buried her face against his neck as she lay beneath him, covered by his warmth and breathing in his scent that was uniquely his as he rested between her thighs. He kissed her again, savoring the saltiness of her lips. "Atrilan?" He released her mouth to nibble on the silky skin under her ears that was hidden by her wealth of fragrant blue hair.

"Mmmm." Words were difficult to vocalize whenever he did that to her.

"If it's any consolation, it tore me apart for me to ignore you like I did," he admitted.

Atty reared back to look into his eyes. She could only hold his gaze for a moment because he dipped his head back down to continue trailing his mouth down her throat. His hands gently kneaded her buttocks. Moaning softly, she let him continue to caress her, when his previous words returned to haunt her. "Yul? What did you mean by, 'in case'?"

She felt him stop her delectable torment and laugh softly. "I wondered if you caught that."

"Well?"

"I'm leaving it at that for now," he teased her.

"Yul!"

He laughed again, then effectively hushed her from any further protest for at least another hour.

The next time they checked a clock, it was well into lunch time. Long before then they had become aware of the rich smell of cooking coming from below. "I'm going to miss knowing what's to eat before it's served," Atty admitted. While their bedroom would move, the kitchen would remain in the main lodge.

"Well, I'm not going to miss having to explain why there's water all over the bathroom floor," Yulen chuckled. Rolling out of bed, he stood and stretched his muscles before reaching for his pants lying in a heap at the end of the bed. "Hurry up and get dressed if you want to eat with me. I've got to meet with Cole this afternoon to discuss reassignments."

Obeying, she dressed quickly, and they went down into the main hall together, hand-in-hand, an instance that was not lost on any of the people already seated and eating. By the end of the day, word would be out that the Battle Lord and Lady had made up, and all was right again with the world.

They are lunch together before Yulen had to leave her to meet up with his Second. Before he left, Atty made sure he knew she would be out on the archery field giving the regiment another lesson. With the Bloods removed from the area, they felt it was safe once more to take practice on the wide expanse of ground outside the compound walls.

Giving his wife a lingering kiss, he threw on his coat and walked out the front doors. Moments later Atty hurried out the back door, humming happily, much to everyone's delight.

Cole was waiting for him when he arrived at the stables. Together they walked over to the main gates so Yulen could inspect the new pins on the hinges before they retired back to the main lodge to talk about reassignments. The main gates took longer than they anticipated as the blacksmith explained how the pins would allow the heavy doors to swing more freely and more quickly, in the event of another hasty retreat.

They remained locked in conversation, totally oblivious of the young man who ran up to the Battle Lord all out of breath until he tugged on Yulen's arm. "Sir! Sir!"

Yulen immediately felt himself grow cold with dread. There could only be one reason why the boy would seek him out with such urgency. "What? What's happened to Atty?"

The boy bent over to grab his knees as he gasped for breath. He had obviously run all the way from the archery field. "She missed, sir! Atty missed!"

As the wave of relief washed over him, Yulen released the breath he'd been holding. "What do you mean, she missed?"

The young archer's apprentice nodded emphatically. "The Battle Lady...she missed hitting the target. And I mean *by a mile*!"

Yulen smiled to himself. Was this another instance of her hitting what she aimed *at*, but missing what she aimed *for*? He remembered similar instances in the past, like the time she had taken down the pennant above the main lodge at Foster City, but then berated herself for not striking the cloth where she had wanted to hit it.

"Very well," he waved for the boy to take the lead, who ran ahead of him and Cole, who tagged along out of curiosity.

There was a nice crowd standing out on the open field, not counting those who had lined the compound wall and witnessed what they thought they'd never see. As Yulen approached the small knot of men who had been practicing, he quickly found his wife sitting over to one side, her back against a tree, knees drawn up to her chin. There was a definitely disgusted look on her face.

"Hey, Sorcher," the Battle Lord greeted the lieutenant standing nearby.

"Sir."

"What's this I'm told?"

The man nodded as he pointed to the target sitting less than fifty feet away. For Atty, it would have been a shot she could make in the dark and standing on her head. "She missed it."

The lone arrow was planted in the white area completely outside the ringed area of the target. Yulen lifted his eyebrows. She most certainly had missed it. He did a quick mental check. And there was no wind or other type of weather to blame.

"Well, everyone has to miss sometime, don't they, Sam?"

"You don't understand," Sorcher whispered, keeping his back to the woman sitting not too far away. "That was her *second* arrow."

Yulen gave him a disbelieving stare. The man nodded slowly. "Her first arrow went right past it. Missed it by a mile."

Letting out a slow breath between pursed lips, Yulen casually strolled over to where Atty was waiting for him. He took his time, getting down on the cold ground next to her, and waited for her to speak first. One minute passed. Then another. Until it became clear she wasn't going to offer any explanation.

"Everyone has an off day every now and then," he murmured, hoping to draw her out.

In response, she rose to her feet and started toward the compound wall. Yulen caught up and kept in stride.

"Maybe you might want Liam to check you over. Make sure you're not trying to come down with a cold or something."

"I'm fine," she muttered.

"Doesn't appear that way, Atty," he told her. "Why not have Liam give you a good onceover anyway?"

"I said I'm fine. I just got a headache."

"Oh? When did this headache come on? Because you weren't complaining earlier," he half-teased her.

"I'll be okay, Yulen. I don't need to see Liam."

Yulen heard the hedging in her voice, and realized it wasn't a matter of *need*, but a matter of *want*. She didn't *want* the physician to check her out. "What if I ordered him to do it anyway?" he challenged her.

Atty came to an abrupt halt and turned to look at him. Her face had an unreadable expression on it. "I'm cold, Yulen, okay? I'm tired, and I've got a headache. I'll be all right tomorrow. You're right. Everyone has an off day every once in a while."

His eyes narrowed. Although they had only been married a short while, there were times he could read her like a book. "When was the last time you actually honest-to-God *missed* a target, Atty? And being two years old doesn't count."

Instead of answering, she turned and continued toward the main lodge. Yulen followed her, but not before signaling for a soldier and giving him orders to fetch MaGrath.

When they reached the main lodge, Atty continued upstairs, disappearing into the bedroom without another word. Yulen remained downstairs to wait for the physician.

"You know you could've brought her over to the clinic," the man groused.

"She's too upset. She doesn't want you to check her out," Yulen told him as they ascended the staircase together.

"She doesn't, huh? Is it true she didn't hit the target?"

"Her first arrow never got close. The second one was outside the rings."

MaGrath whistled, shaking his head, then opened the bedroom door and walked in.

Atty was standing by the window, but it was clear she wasn't watching the activity going on outside. She gave MaGrath a scathing look and crossed her arms over her chest. "I told him I was okay," she repeated. "I just have a headache."

Her reticence didn't faze him. "In that case, let me give you some powder for that," he offered.

"I don't need any powders. I'll be fine. Just... just let me lie down for a little while. I'll be all right."

MaGrath glanced over at the tangled sheets, knowing Berta would have already made up the bed that morning. "Looks to me like you've already been lying down," he commented, tongue-in-cheek, and ignored the look she shot him. Behind him, he could hear Yulen's soft snort of laughter. "You know me, Atrilan. I'm not going to leave until I'm satisfied you're not coming down with anything serious. Not after the near misses we've had with you in the past. So quit digging in your heels and let me examine you. Because until you do, I'm not going anywhere. And if I get an emergency summons, I'll have to get Yulen hold you down so I can do my job. Now...what will it be?"

She gave them both a pained look, then walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge. Nodding, MaGrath extracted a probe and first looked into her mouth. Yulen remained to one side, watching. After a few minutes, and after checking her heart and lungs, the physician gave her a cautious look and ordered her to lie down.

"Yulen, you might want to wait on the balcony until I'm finished."

"I'm staying here."

MaGrath sighed loudly, making his disapproval quite clear. "Very well. But the first time you make a move or say something, I swear, Yulen, I'm throwing you out of this room until I'm finished. Do you understand me?"

Crossing his arms over his chest, the Battle Lord leaned against the far wall and kept mum.

"Okay, Atty. Clothes off," the older man ordered from the door of the bathroom where he was washing his hands.

Yulen watched as she slowly undressed, then slipped underneath the blanket before scooting her bottom down to the edge of the bed and lifting her knees. His eyes widened when he realized what MaGrath intended to examine, but he held his tongue, as difficult as it was to do.

The physician tried to make his examination as quick as possible. Once he was finished, he told her to sit up, and reached over to uncover her breasts. Gently he grasped one, noticing how she flinch at his touch. Taking a deep breath, MaGrath leaned back and stared down at the young woman.

"All right, Atty. 'Fess up."

She responded with a dirty look.

"You want me to tell him? Or will you?"

"Tell me what?" Yulen broke his silence.

MaGrath motioned toward her with a tilt of his head, never taking his eyes off of her. "Go ahead, Atty. You have all the signs, turgid abdomen, tender breasts. When was the last time you had your flow?"

"I...I don't remember," she said.

"Bullshit. You of all people would know. You have to know and keep track of it because that's part of being a hunter. You know how important it is because the smell of blood can draw all kinds of unwanted creatures after you if you're not careful. So, how long has it been? Two weeks? Three?" He watched closely for some kind of response. "Four weeks? Six?"

Atty unconsciously flinched, and MaGrath knew he'd struck a nerve. "Okay. Six weeks. That puts you about two weeks past due. No wonder you missed that target. Your hormones are probably going crazy about now."

"Uhh, Liam, is she sick? Or isn't she?" Yulen insisted.

Giving her one last long look, MaGrath said, "Why don't you tell him, Atty? After all, it should come from you."

Yulen remained where he stood, watching as his wife clutched the blanket across her breasts to cover them against the cold. Her hands were shaking. She took a deep breath. Then another one. Finally she lifted a pale face, yet kept her eyes averted from his.

"I'm...I'm going to have a baby," she barely whispered. Immediately she glanced up at him to see what his reaction would be.

Stunned, Yulen could only stare at her. "Repeat that."

"I'm going to have a baby." It didn't seem to be any easier to say it the second time.

"If she's six weeks late, I would estimate her delivery time around next spring. Late May or early June, but that's speculative." MaGrath gave him a cautious smile. "From this point on we're going to have to be extremely careful, Yulen. We're lucky she hasn't miscarried before now. Her first trimester is the most critical. If you thought we were overprotective before, Atty, you haven't seen nothing yet!"

Yulen walked over and knelt before her, looking up into her eyes as a wide smile creased his face. "A baby?" he whispered. Without realizing it, he did a quick mental calculation in his head. "That means you conceived while we were in Wallis."

Atty continued to stare at him. It was clear she was torn between fear and relief to finally get it off her chest. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Sorry? For what?"

"I..." She shrugged. "I honestly thought I'd never get pregnant," she admitted, "but I knew I had to try."

"You took the chance for us?" he insisted.

"No, Yul. For you. I took the chance so your lineage could continue," she tenderly told him, reaching out to run her fingers through his red-gold hair. "I just hope I don't let you down," she whispered, pressing her forehead to his.

In answer, Yulen pulled her down into his lap, into his embrace, and let his kiss show her how much he loved her. And how delighted he was at the news.

Quietly, MaGrath left the room to let them have their privacy, but his next stop would be to let Madigan know she was finally going to get her dearest wish. The D'Jacques Dynasty would continue. Their future, and the future of Alta Novis, would continue.

Plus, she was going to be a grandmother.