



CHAOS BENEATH
THE MOONBEAMS

SHARON G. CLARK

Chaos Beneath the Moonbeams

by

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Dedication

For Jeremy and Hope, the special people in my heart.

Prologue

THE WIND BIT as fiercely as a predator's teeth, ravaging the men climbing the icy snow-covered mountain. Stumbling and sliding backward, losing steps already difficult to gain, Persimmone readjusted his footing and then his pack. He stared up, toward a dark section within the terrain. "A few more yards men," he said, hollering above the roar of the wind. "And we'll have the Eye of T'Dar. Mine alone to command."

Both men grumbled but followed.

With every inch gained, Persimmone could almost feel the power of the Eye coursing through his blood. His stomach burned with the want to possess, his legs gathering needed strength, as if the Eye sensed his presence and knew they were destined to be together. Rejuvenated, he let his men fall behind and all but raced the remaining yards until he could see into a cavern.

Although snowdrifts piled outside the opening, they stopped at the rim, as if melted by some unseen heat source. Standing before it, the storm howling at his back, Persimmone noted, inside, stalactites hung like fingers from the ceiling and stalagmites stretched from the floor as if reaching for salvation. The formation appeared ordained by the deities of nature, creating a perfect rock maze.

Persimmone hesitated and stepped forward, expecting an invisible barrier to stop him, and breathed a sigh of relief when he met no resistance. He crossed the rim. The interior was devoid of sound. He walked to the maze entrance and withdrew a small leather-bound book from the inner pocket of his fur coat. Soon, ultimate power would be his. His finger traced along the leather cord used to mark the passage he must read aloud before his men caught up to him.

Extending his right hand forward, he read, "Great was T'Dar in mortal histories and great shall he again reign." He closed his eyes and placed the raised hand to his chest. "Behold me, I am Persimmone, come to release you from the confines of darkness. I bring your gift—two foul souls."

The ground beneath Persimmone's feet trembled, then stilled.

From the cavern's entrance came the labored breathing of Rayd and Nurl. He placed the book to his inner pocket and turned toward them. "We travel the maze. What I desire is at its center."

Nurl grunted and drew his sword from its sheath. "This better lead to the reward promised us. Joining your sorry excuse for a band of raiders hasn't yet proven worth the effort to Rayd or me."

"Have faith. You'll get your reward." Persimmone smiled. "If it makes you feel better, I'll release you from duty to me, once I have what I came for."

"Let's not waste time," grumbled Rayd. He rushed to the maze opening and stopped short of entering. "As leader, you should go first."

Persimmone moved in front of Rayd and crossed the threshold. He'd studied the map in the Book of T'Dar and committed every detail to heart. He knew the maze's puzzle and the location of the daggers necessary to complete the invocation for him to command the immortal evil of the

fallen god he sought. With the power he was about to obtain he could rectify his current situation quick enough.

Usurped by a sword-wielding sister, an ungrateful father, and disrespected by people who should have bowed and groveled at his feet these last ten years, he couldn't wait to make those responsible for the ridicule he'd suffered pay, in the extreme.

As he indulged his emotions in silence, the torch flame reflected off a metallic object nestled in a small recess of the rock.

The first dagger.

Careful not to alert the men, paces behind, he brushed his shoulder against the wall and reached inside to retrieve the silver dagger. After two left turns, he viewed the second dagger, this of gold. Two turns remained, one left and a final right, and he should see the Eye itself.

The passage opened to a corridor five yards distance, when he made the last turn. At the far end a platform held the Eye of T'Dar. A gold-brown gem was the middle section of the Eye, a design of braided rope in silver and gold holding it. On the sides, a gold and silver sheath welded to the bottom in a manner to resemble handles.

Behind the Eye, barely discernible from his dying torch, the final chamber lay. This chamber held the god T'Dar. Using his failing torch to light the other two he'd taken from his pack, Persimmone moved to stand in front of the platform and waited for Rayd and Nurl to join him.

"Where's the treasure?" Nurl growled.

Rayd swung his gaze about the cavern, squinting to peer into darkness even the torches couldn't dispel.

"It rests within the pool of water," Persimmone said. "Wait here while I place the torches and it's yours. Don't touch," he snapped when Nurl's finger grazed the contours of the Eye. "Your reward is within the pool."

Rayd, who'd raised his sword at Persimmone's shouted command, lowered it slightly. "Do what you must. We leave after we get what we came for."

Persimmone scowled. "You'll get more than you ever expected." He shoved the dying torch into Nurl's hand, turned and walked to a shallow indentation carved into the rock. A strange liquid, too dark and thick to be water, collected inside. He dropped the first torch into the liquid. The flame sputtered, and the liquid flashed green, then orange. Shifting right, he walked another fifteen paces and found a similar bowl. It reacted in the same manner as he tossed in the second torch.

The strange orange glow of flames lit the entire confines and the pool of water seemed to shimmer in response. Persimmone strode to it and motioned for the two men to join him as he saw the marble statue of the god T'Dar. It showed the god as he appeared to human eyes. T'Dar had shoulder length hair; thin features made the long nose seem beak-like. Even with the statue in a sitting position upon a throne of rock, the god had a warrior's form. Thick muscled arms and shoulders, barrel chest, and long, muscular legs proved T'Dar would even be an imposing human figure if faced as mortal born.

When Nurl and Rayd flanked him, Persimmone pointed to the pool. Beneath the water's surface, heaped in a pile, thousands of silver and gold coins lay. "Your reward," he said. Rayd's inhale was sharp and Nurl licked his lips, but neither moved to retrieve the treasure. Their surprise seemed to have rooted them to the rock upon which they stood.

Nurl moved first, bending close to gaze greedily into the water. Persimmone waited until Rayd took a step and bent forward, before he drew the two daggers he'd located earlier. If the book held an accurate account, as it had thus far, in order for his sacrifice to be accepted, they

would have to be in the water simultaneously. Persimmone applied equal pressure to the middle of their backs, and shoved both men forward. The cavern echoed their startled curses; liquid splashing upon stone drowned it out. Rayd and Nurl fell below the water. Seconds later, both heads broke through, gasping for air.

Persimmone moved into position.

From a spot on the rocks and centered between the two bowls of orange flame, Persimmone could view their angry features through the strange shadows playing across dampened faces.

“My sword will taste your flesh,” Nurl snarled, clawing to reach the pool’s lip. A furious Rayd followed.

Both men had come to within inches of Persimmone and completing their threat, when the pool glowed bright green. Mist began to form above the center where a whirlpool started its menacing spin. All three turned to watch as the mist began to blanket the liquid. Nurl and Rayd’s angry expressions twisted into abject terror.

With their faces turned away from him, Persimmone knew this was the long awaited moment. Inching to the pool’s edge, arching and positioning the daggers, one over either man, he slammed the metal blades into their flesh and held tight to the dagger hilts as they jerked with the first spasms of pain. Screams drowned by a thrumming sound echoing through the underground chamber.

Persimmone pulled the daggers free from the men and rushed back to the platform where the Eye of T’Dar rested. Drops of blood dripped from the blades as he slammed them into the Eye’s sheaths, silver dagger into the gold sheath and gold into silver. The humming became a roar so loud Persimmone was tempted to cover his ears to keep it from deafening him, but he’d read the book, having memorized most passages, and knew he had to take the Eye to the pool’s edge. If he weren’t standing with the Eye held firm in his grasp upon the arrival of T’Dar, he would meet the same fate as Rayd and Nurl—eternal hell.

The mist began to dissipate and the whirlpool slowed to a mere ripple, yet the water funnel remained. From the center came a ghostly form stretching upward until it hovered above the water. It was the exact likeness of the marble statue. The apparition’s mouth didn’t move but the cave filled with its voice. “Your gift has been accepted.”

“Great T’Dar.” Persimmone presented a slight, if unsteady, bow. “This gift is to ensure your freedom from Bahalkar. I stand ready, holding your mighty Eye. I will command your strength, your power. I have fulfilled your ritual of release.” He clutched the Eye tight to his chest as proof.

T’Dar’s laughter rumbled like thunder. “So you have, mortal. Power you shall have, more than you’ve dreamed.” The apparition wavered like a breath through smoke. “Why do you call upon the old powers of gods? Even in Bahalkar, we know your people have forsaken the old ways of sorcery in their civilized new world.”

“They have. The world grows weak and tiresome. I desire power to control, to bring chaos to provide equal balance for the deserving.”

“Do you accept all that comes with my control?”

Persimmone narrowed his eyes in momentary confusion. Other than the command of T’Dar, the book had mentioned no other sacrifices or deeds necessary. It promised the god would be subservient to the one who released him. Granted some of the translation was a bit imprecise... What could T’Dar mean by the question? Rather than allow the god to witness his bafflement, he took a deep breath. “I do, Great One.”

A menacing grin claimed the god's mouth. "Let us complete the ritual." T'Dar stretched his hands upward until they were scant inches from the caves' ceiling.

The Eye glowed in gold colored response as T'Dar recited words in a language Persimmone was barely familiar with, except enough to translate portions of text necessary to release the god. The metal pulsed in his hands. Strange warmth filled Persimmone's body as the apparition of T'Dar shimmered, and then spun in a rapid clockwise motion. The faster the rotation became the warmer Persimmone felt until his body began to burn with fiery pain. He was frightened until his burning mind realized this must be the power he'd come all this way to obtain and command, the joining of power with T'Dar. He could handle a bit of pain, he thought, cleansing the human blood with blood of a supreme being. When he wasn't sure his physical form and mental faculties could withstand much more of the inferno, the pain ceased and the apparition disappeared. Persimmone dropped to his knees, exhausted.

All to remain in the pool of water were the dead bodies of Nurl and Rayd and the whirlpool. The Eye of T'Dar, now filled with the immortals' spirit, glowed as peculiar as the corpses, pulled into the whirlpool's funnel, was joined by agonized screams of the eternally tortured souls in Bahalkar filled the cavern. When the bodies were out of sight, the whirlpool ceased and the liquid stilled until it resembled mirrored glass.

Once again, Persimmone felt more alive than he ever had, renewed, his skin tingling with charged energy. Laughter bubbled inside him until he could no longer contain it. "Power is mine," he announced to the empty cavern. "No man—or sister—shall stand in my way again!"

SINCE BEFORE THE Great Harmony War, Zheirger Keep was empty. The years of disuse weren't evident in obvious disrepair, but a collection of dirt lay thick on the floors and furnishings left behind. Ysannie, Goddess of Warriors, missed the activity and life, which used to bustle within these walls.

Another barely perceptible tremor of magic trembled through the stone structure, and Ysannie dropped her head, and placed a hand upon the wall closest to her. "Have patience. There will be life here once again. Soon, if my plan works the way it should."

"Talking to yourself again, cousin?"

Ysannie rolled her eyes before turning around. Her cousin stood in the middle of the room like a golden statue, all blond and tanned. "It's the singular decent conversation I get, Paksha." She moved closer to him as another tremor rippled. Weary, she leaned back against a table's edge, crossed her arms, and asked, "What brings you here? Aren't you afraid to be seen by mortals?"

Paksha grimaced. "I've been asked to collect you for council."

"I see." Ysannie nodded. "Want to predict how you think this will go?"

"You know I don't like to speculate. It's too uncertain, much like gambling and politics," Paksha said with a shudder. "Can't avoid it, Ysannie, and it's best I be the one to bring you. They know your feelings, so you won't have to repeat them, much."

"Not that they'll take my thoughts into consideration."

"Oh, they will, cousin. I don't think they'll be swayed by them." Paksha shook his head. "Might as well get this over with."

Heaving a sigh, Ysannie pushed herself away from the table. “This doubtless isn’t going to go well. T’Dar is sure to be angry. Now he roams free and the humans aren’t the only ones in danger. Wish the Elders could see.”

“I know you want me to care, but I don’t.” Paksha started to turn but appeared to think otherwise. “You and what you may do is what worries me.”

The Betrothal

Chapter One

STEEL CLASHED AND scraped an eerie symphony of pain and death, over-shadowing the labored breathing of the warriors. With a strong upward swing of the blade, Kareina met the downward slice of her opponent's blade, the force sending the weapon spinning into the air. There, weapon and wielder paused. "I can't do this, Ewan."

With scarce a perceptible lift to the corner of his mouth, Ewan reminded, "If you don't, you dishonor us both."

"Please, we'll find another way, but please surrender," Kareina begged.

"Never." Ewan grabbed at the hilt of her weapon, pulling forcibly as he propelled himself forward. Kareina stared in surprised horror as Ewan impaled himself upon her sword.

This was the final blow struck to the leader of Clan Hermitice, Sher Ewan. Eyes clouded as death approached, Ewan fell to his knees and gazed at Kareina in a final glare of disgust. Both she and Ewan knew it was for the benefit of their men. Sher Ewan's lips twitched with a cynical smile. "Glory to you, Sher Karr," Ewan rasped the standard warrior salute as he died.

Kareina returned the salute. "Glory to you, Sher Ewan."

THE GRADYLN HISTORIAN, Zeren, a safe distance from the battlefield (though more from habit than necessity as the Clan's Sher and lead guards fought) had watched with a heavy heart, knowing he would be required to relate this tale. Another battle, Clan Gradyln victorious once again, but Sher Karr appeared drained, not caring. Those men of Gradyln rejoiced in loud cheering as Clan Hermitice dropped their weapons the moment Ewan fell. The historian continued to stare after Sher Karr who walked to his steed, Starsinger, and mounted; the warrior's weariness evident in his slumped shoulders.

Sadness flooded Zeren until he thought he'd weep from the weight of it. Not for the Hermitice men on the battlefield, who would receive proper treatment. The losers of battle compensated with a partial loss of holdings, as the rest would become the property of Clan Gradyln. The winning warriors would be entertained with a celebration feast. This was the civilized way of warfare since the Great Harmony War, more so, as Karr and Ewan, with a small contingent of eight men, fought this particular challenge.

Zeren's melancholy was for Karr. With each battle he had witnessed and written into record, Zeren observed the change in his Sher, his sovereign. He would describe it as the slow draining of Karr's soul. It was as if with each death by his hands, Karr lost part of his own life.

Depressed by the trail of these thoughts, Zeren shook his head, placed his Tablets of Record into the saddlebags, and mounted. No one would learn of this last particular impression, as Zeren would keep his own council. Tales told and retold—with minor exaggeration, of course—of the triumphs witnessed by him. The Hermitice battle would be yet another legacy in the legend of Sher Karr, prince of Clan Gradyln, Warrior Extraordinary of all Kellshae.

From the field, Zeren noted Melrick, Captain of the Guard, and Guard Chief Olaf had joined Karr. Individually, each could strike terror in a person by their presence alone; as a group, they were an imposing trio. Zeren knew Karr, the smallest of the three, to be five-foot-ten, and the other two equal at a height of six-foot-two.

Taking up the reins, Zeren moved his horse a short distance behind the three. When Melrick had begun his approach, Zeren watched as Karr removed his helmet. Now, as he drew nearer, the historian saw the other signs of strain and fatigue on his leader in the sunken cheeks and dark smudges beneath the eyes. The sight made him wonder what the Sher's twin, Kareina, would have looked like, had she still lived.

If not murdered at the hands of Clan Youlren nine years before, at the tender age of eighteen, he imagined her beauty to have improved, unlike the scarred and troubled visage of Karr. The historian blinked, released from his current imagining by the conversation between Karr and Melrick.

"Be assured Sher Ewan receives a proper burial," Karr was saying.

"I've already set Brunell to the task," replied the captain. "I'll make sure one of the warriors brings the Hermitice Chancellor before your father for disposition of the lands, when we return. After the Hermitice men are organized for the march to the castle, I'll rejoin you on the road."

Sher Karr gave a tired nod and replaced the helmet.

"Karr—" Melrick hesitated and Zeren strained to hear what the captain would say, since his voice lowered. For a long moment, Melrick said nothing. At last, he cleared his throat. "Caldier Hassid will be pleased with your victory." From the captain's grimace, Zeren had the impression it wasn't what Melrick intended to say to his sovereign.

The Sher paled. "He's always pleased to acquire more holdings," Karr said, bitterness in the tone.

"I referred to how you fought this day. Ewan was not an easy victory," Melrick stated. "For many obvious reasons—"

Karr scowled. "I am aware of your intent, my friend, but we both know which is more important to my father. Disillusionment may have hobbled Kareina to Hassid's intentions, but I assure you, I am not. Maybe our Lord realizes I won't always be so lucky and wishes to stuff the coffers while he can." Karr yanked the reins to the right and nudged the horse's side with boot heels. Starsinger moved forward, taking the road leading to Gradyln Castle.

Zeren felt mild confusion as to Sher Karr's state of mind, the lack of pleasure in his accomplishment. These were civilized times. Each clan sent small regiments to battle, and always to a designated place of combat. No longer did clans fight wars on lands with women, children, the infirm, or elderly slaughtered. If a clan wished to test its prowess at battle and increase holdings by means other than marriage, it issued a challenge, the only stipulation being the land of challenged and challenger had to join, in some way. The clan's noble representatives

would meet and fight until one lord's surrender or death; thus, the victor claimed control of the holdings of the defeated.

At the rate Sher Karr won these challenges, Clan Gradyln would own all the land of the East Continent and bring unity under one house. The ruler of Clan Gradyln, Caldier Hassid, a strong, if not overbearing, monarch had great reason to approve of his son and of his accomplishments. Which made Karr's response to Melrick seem unnecessary and bitter.

Zeren shrugged away his confusion. After all, he thought, Sher Karr looked to be over-tired. Battle could do that to mortal men. He'd seen and cataloged enough to witness myriad effects even civilized battle had on men. What Karr needed, Zeren concluded, was a change in his lifestyle. If Karr would take a wife, have a reason to return home, the Sher would feel better after a victory. It did wonders for him, returning to the gentle ministering of Wilra who would massage his temples with her soft, fleshy fingers, an ample bosom on which to rest his weary head. She listened with excitement as Zeren retold the battles as he had witnessed them.

Change, indeed, needed. It seemed so long ago his clan returned from battle at full gallop, yet less than a year had passed, Zeren realized, joining the procession of fighters. These days the pace more resembled a funeral march.

KAREINA LOOKED FORWARD to returning home. Once again, she had complied with the challenge set forth by Kellshae rules. At least as far as anyone knew—most believing her to be the male heir to Clan Gradyln. Alongside Kareina rode her best friend, Captain of the Guard, and her confidant, Melrick. Melrick's wise words and even his knowing how difficult this was for her couldn't break the depression consuming her. It didn't stop Melrick from making a few feeble attempts anyway. She and Melrick had moved far enough ahead of the procession they had more privacy and could speak freely.

"I realize it doesn't make what transpired any better," Melrick said, "but even the healers confirmed what Ewan told you."

"Yet, a friend still died by my hand," Kareina whispered. She had spoken with Ewan's physician, not wanting to accept her friend's request, no matter the challenge or laws of Kellshae. It pained her, though it didn't surprise her, when her father had accepted a challenge from Clan Hermitice.

"And you allowed him to die with honor, my friend," Melrick reminded. "Ewan deserved as much, didn't he?"

Kareina glared at him. "You know he did."

Melrick nodded. "Agonizing as this is, Ewan was dying. You provided him a way to die which his people will find righteous, at the hand of someone he loved, though we alone know of this. He had no living heir, or I'm certain he would not have asked this of you. Ewan knows Clan Gradyln will treat his people with respect, a promise no other clan could or would have made him."

"You're right, of course." Kareina gave a slow shake of her head. "But I can't keep going as we are, Melrick. I am too tired."

"I feel a change coming." Melrick glanced behind him, as if to assure they were out of earshot. "Pray to the goddess, my friend, because I can't tell if it's a bad or good change."

AN ANGUISHED SCREAM filled the confines of the tiny hut nestled deep in the forest of Langlear. Nearby, wildlife scattered at the startling sound. Narilla clutched gnarled hands to her chest in an attempt to stop shaking; awakened from a deep sleep, of how many moon-cycles, she didn't know.

The time had come.

Dread weighed heavily upon her spirit, cumbersome enough to crush her already brittle bones. Trembling fingers rubbed at sightless eyes, and pushed back the tangled strands of thinning and long neglected hair.

Narilla had prayed long and hard before her sleep of vigilance this day would not come, hoping her aged body would expire during her magically induced slumber. Prayed the mighty powers, long gone from the world, would never see their return to mortal men.

Her hopes and prayers were ignored. Evil's power loosed and now she would have to unleash another power to combat it, a power that could return the evil to the darkness in which it dwelt.

The dream, which had awakened her, told everything and nothing. The face of evil resurrected was the old god T'Dar. This told her much. Many would die. Most would suffer horrible deaths.

Another image had appeared. Two similar faces, transposed, separated to show two male features, alike yet different. One visage scarred and darkened by many hours of sun, one without blemish and pale as a wraith. The images were clouded, hazy. Narilla sensed these men were not as they appeared. One image was untrue. Which one she couldn't be certain.

Standing on shaky, aged legs, weakened more by years of disuse, Narilla counted the steps it would take to reach the far wall; the stone fireplace in particular. She felt for the mantle, touched twisted fingers to the cold stones, counted left, then down, and removed the loose stone. Digging her hand into the opening, she pulled a leather pouch free, wrinkling her nose at the assaulting smell from dust and mildew encasing the dampened leather.

Turning and counting four steps to the right, she reached out and felt for the table and the chair placed there. Trusting time hadn't allowed the items to deteriorate beyond usefulness she sat and dumped the contents of the pouch onto the dust-covered tabletop. As she felt for the talisman, her hand brushed against cobwebs, its lone occupant scurried across the back of her hand and she shook it off. It was wrapped in oiled cloth with an inscription written in blood. She didn't need to see it, knowing it by heart.

When beneath a mystical moonlit pool, the veiled portal
Digests two of blood that boils and flows identical,
Though one flows with compassion, one boils only to maim,
Will the darkness then spew forth upon the land to devour and reign.

The talisman, awakened by human touch, warmed against her palm. Narilla held it tight and closed her sightless eyes in meditation. The heat spread through her entire body as she mouthed the words to awaken the sleeping powers, praying for the images to guide her next move.

The features of the scarred one flashed in her mind. Narilla trembled at the overwhelming force of mental and physical pain she felt attached to the image. She shuddered yet allowed the pictures to come to her, emotions and all. The Pool of Promises, nestled deep within the Valley

of Mist, appeared next, bombarding her with the impressions of fear and pain, as the two resembling visages fought a fierce battle. Last were flashes of the village of Bredwine and with this the feeling was emptiness and loneliness.

Sorting these answers in proper order, Narilla knew what course she must take, thankful she was but a messenger for the old powers. The scarred one would fight the evil, fight himself even, and as the old gods deemed it, vanquish T'Dar back to the hells of Bahalkar that spawned him, and the evil he unleashed—if the gods of light deemed it so.

She had very little time to get the talisman to Bredwine, where she would give it to the scarred one. After the task's completion, she could live out the miniscule remainder of her days knowing she'd completed her duty.

Narilla shook her head in sadness and horrified wonder. What kind of man would unleash the old powers? What could he hope to gain by freeing only evil? She didn't know the answers. Nor did she want to guess at reasons men would tamper with powers they could never control.

What if the scarred one didn't accept his destiny? What if heroes passed into oblivion after Harmony's war, the war banishing magic and drove the gods away? Narilla shrugged, wincing at the responding pain from old and tired bones.

If she had any luck left, she'd perish from age long before chaos reigned again in Kellshae.

CALDIER HASSID, RULER of Clan Gradyln was in a sour mood, slouched upon his throne. The messenger from Clan Bredwine had put him so. Hassid knew his wife was also anxious for his answer. Her apprehension did little to improve his spirit.

He frowned. Honor was at stake. Hassid couldn't shirk a responsibility. Honor maintained by his family since before the Great Harmony War. Even as he gave thought to his decision, and its repercussions, Karr honored the challenge upon the battlefield. Sher Karr would be meeting the invitation and prove victorious, of this Hassid was certain. What he wasn't confident of was how Karr would handle this latest turn of events.

Hassid rubbed his tired eyes, before he fixed his gaze upon the messenger before him. "And you say these raiders have killed many of the people and destroyed your caravans for months now?"

"Yes, Caldier, they've slaughtered too many people. Women and children included," the messenger replied with sadness. "These raiders are quite barbaric, as if from the old ways."

"And in return for my son's warrior skills against these raiders, Caldier Oriun will give his daughter in betrothal?"

The messenger squared his shoulders. "As I have said, my ruler believes there is great honor in joining our clans, without the customary warring. With the beauty of Mayliandra and the strength of Sher Karr, greatness would be born to them," he said with pride in his voice for their people.

The implied compliment was another attempt to win his favor, and Hassid wouldn't let himself be led astray. "Without the customary practices, I lose control of the holdings for my clan."

"But you gain in profits of Clan Bredwine," sputtered the messenger. "Arranged marriages have been productive in past generations."

Hassid rose and stepped away from his throne to stand before the messenger. "I will speak to my son upon his return from the battlefield and give my answer."

The messenger paled. “My apologies, Caldier Hassid, Caldie Parrin,” he said, with a nod in the monarch’s direction. “I’m instructed to receive a reply straight away. If you cannot give one, I have instructions to approach Caldier Armin, another possible suitor. The time required for further travel does not allow for delay,” he said with an audible gulp. “No matter the unexpected necessity.”

“What is the urgency you cannot wait but a day or two?” Hassid asked, conscious of the smaller man’s trembling. He knew his height of six-foot-four, as well as girth (a modest 380 pounds) tended to be imposing and often terrifying to others. It gave Hassid a small measure of satisfaction to witness the messenger’s discomfort.

“The ultimate fate of my clan,” the man said.

“Tell Caldier Oriun, Karr will solve his raider problem. I cannot answer for him as to the betrothal. My son can make his own choice as to a wife.”

“Sadly, it cannot be so. There is clan honor to consider. I’m to get agreement to both, or to none.”

Caldier Hassid felt heat fuse his cheeks at how difficult the simple situation was becoming. Joining lands would be a great coup for both clans, and he would acquire lands not joining his own, thus building a new land base north to spread out of, through the lands of Bredwine. If he refused, Clan Gradyln would lose the opportunity to gain additional means of profit and all without a battle. Hassid hated having to make the decision without a chance to consider all the alternatives and repercussions. If Hassid wanted pressure, he’d still be on the battlefields. Maybe Karr would find a way to deal with the little problems in time. After all, battles were Karr’s specialty.

He sighed and became aware of Parrin’s burning gaze. Hassid hoped she’d hold her tongue until the little man left. The injustice served by his agreement—for Mayliandra’s fate, as well as Karr’s—became minor when compared to the results consent would reap. Hassid directed his attention toward the messenger, intent on ignoring his wife and whatever protest she might wish to make. “Tell your Caldier, Sher Karr will accept the betrothal. I’ll send him posthaste to Clan Bredwine upon his return.”

The messenger beamed a toothy grin and bowed ceremoniously. “Thank you, my lord. I shall dispatch myself at once to tell my Caldier the news, and prepare for proper tribute in greeting Sher Karr’s arrival.”

Hassid stared after the man hustling from the room at an almost run. He laughed at the ridiculous sight. “Thinks I’ll change my mind if he doesn’t hurry, most like,” he said, adding a throaty bark of laughter. Unable to escape the inevitable, Hassid turned to Parrin, caging his laughter. The instant he met her gaze, Hassid felt the full force of her anger.

“As well you should have done.” She walked to him with deliberate slowness and his insides clutched in dread. Though standing less than five-feet tall, Parrin could mark her presence with any emotion. It was Parrin’s quiet anger, the one he recognized in her casual approach toward him, which alarmed him most. Hassid knew she’d make him pay for this decision for quite some time. “How could you do this?” Parrin asked. Rage singed the words, as did her glare.

“I had little choice in the matter, my dearest.”

“You could have said no.”

He stood defiant and puffed out his chest. The expected effect lost when it resulted in the quivering of his massive stomach. Still Hassid forged on, determined to make her understand his purpose. A voice in his head whispered a warning—as if Parrin might hear—but he ignored it. “Those lands will prove useful to us and to our people, not to mention the trade,” he explained.

“There are greater strategies at work, my love, and too many considerations for you to comprehend, wife.”

Parrin’s eyes widened and she snorted her disbelief. “You’ve lived too long in your fantasy, *husband*.” She shook her head. “This betrothal cannot take place.”

“It will not. Karr can deal with it and find an adequate and honorable way to extricate himself,” he justified.

“Listen to your own words,” Parrin demanded, tears forming in her eyes. “Everything has been done to please you, to defend your blessed honor. *Sher* Karr has such a reputation as a warrior you cannot remember she is your daughter and not her brother.” Angry, she swiped at the tears of frustration running down her cheeks. “Karr is gone.”

Hassid paced, now recognizing his verbal mistake. He sputtered, “I’ve not forgotten which child we speak of, woman.”

“Then tell me why, here in an empty room save us,” she asked, hands waving at the room around them, “you refer to Kareina as him?”

“A minor slip of tongue,” he admitted.

Parrin shook her head. “It was no slip. You’ll never admit your son has abandoned you, runaway years before, and his twin sister taken his place. She has done so to please you.” She placed a hand upon his sleeve. “My love, not even Kareina can solve what you’ve done. How long before you drive her away, too? Have you seen the results of your pride, your honor, in her eyes? She’s dying inside. How long before she allows a blade to slip through her defenses and finish the task?”

“What would you have me do?” he asked. Not giving a reply, she left the room with her back stiff and unyielding. Hassid knew she spoke the truth, but it didn’t squelch his own anger, or the shame. Whether it was with her or him, for realizing too late the implications, he didn’t want to consider.

For eleven years, Kareina was Karr, and it had suited father and daughter. Hadn’t it? Though he’d never asked, Hassid believed it to be a truism. His daughter had never held back voicing any other disagreement she’d felt in matters concerning them both, for their people.

He remembered how, until eighteen, she’d been so attractive, handsome even. She wasn’t anymore, not after her capture by Clan Youlren. Kareina preferred the way things had turned out, didn’t she?

Her reputation in the guise of Karr had given her position, notoriety, and a place of honor in life she would never have achieved as a mere woman. Hassid visualized her beauty of so long ago. He mentally imposed the image of Kareina today, and felt a cold shiver run through him. Placement she could never achieve through normal means with her scarred visage.

Hassid realized Kareina could not wed Mayliandra, well aware of expected marital boundaries. Though these things happened in the darkened recesses of the land, no child of his would consider crossing that line. No matter how he—she—felt in her heart, Hassid would hold propriety fast, even if he were the one guilty of putting her in the offending position.

The question remained. How could Kareina extricate herself from the deal he’d made? Except by death of Mayliandra or Karr, neither clan could break the bargain. Doing so would dishonor both houses, and assure a war. If Parrin were correct, Kareina would welcome her own demise.

“What have I turned you into, child?” he whispered. Hassid walked to his throne, dropped his girth into the seat, and cried.

Chapter Two

THE GREAT HALL was empty of the revelers come to Castle Gradyln for the celebration. The room's occupants were defenseless against the sounds of merriment, music and smells of roasting meat drifting into the keep. Melrick sat at the massive stone table, centered within the room, along with Kareina and Olaf. They occupied the far end, before the hearth, where a fire blazed to take the chill off cold stone and autumn's cool evening winds. The fire brought little warmth to Melrick's soul.

They were on their second tankard of ale, yet this did not bring solace. Kareina seemed to have drifted into private thoughts, unable, or unwilling, to discuss the battle or any other topic. Melrick had no intention of breaking into these, but he would aid in any way he could, if asked. Besides, how do you console a long-time friend who had been honor-bound to kill her childhood playmate? He wondered if his Caldier even remembered Kareina and Ewan had played in these very halls since both were six years old, their shenanigans and laughter entralling the entire staff. It mattered not at all Ewan was already dying a slow death from disease.

From the stone staircase against the room's far wall, came the scurried tapping of footsteps. Melrick rose as Caldie Parrin rushed ever regal down the steps, her tunic swishing dangerously around legs moving at too fast a pace. She was petite, a full foot shorter than her daughter, and slender; but Melrick knew her to have a heart the size of a giant. A long black braid hung down to her waist, blue eyes a matching color of a clear sky, and a beaming smile. "My lady," Melrick greeted, not the least bit slighted when she failed to respond with more than a cursory smile in his direction.

In an excited voice, she addressed Kareina, who had risen to meet her. "My child, you've returned safe." They embraced, Kareina doubled over bending toward Parrin's small frame.

"Did you doubt, Mother?" Kareina asked with a thread of amusement.

Parrin, tears streaming from her eyes, took a deep breath before answering. "Regrettably, there's always an inkling of doubt. I can rejoice when my faith and *you* prove stronger."

"I'm happy to demonstrate your faith as correct," Kareina said, placing a gentle kiss to the Caldier's brow, before tracing a finger across the line of tears. "My apologies, Mother, I've soiled your face." Parrin dismissed the deed as inconsequential with a wave of her hands. "Regardless, I should remove the traces of battle. So, dearest of all mothers, can I get you to order my bath?"

"Not yet," bellowed a voice from the hall entryway.

Melrick turned at his Caldier's voice and noted a strange look on his features, as if Hassid were wary of approaching Kareina. Expected from most opponents since Kareina was an incredible force to reckon with, the expression was unexpected from his ruler.

"We have a matter to discuss first," Hassid said.

Kareina stiffened. "Whatever it is, it can wait."

"It's best if it doesn't." The Caldier seemed apprehensive. This repeat impression surprised Melrick. Usually, Caldie Parrin alone had this effect on their ruler. Of course, Melrick realized, Hassid may be wary of Parrin's reactions, as well.

The hair on the back of Melrick's neck straightened; a sure sign of lurking danger, or, in this case, imminent confrontation between father and daughter. Olaf must have felt it, too, as he left the room. Olaf, was too afraid to face his uncle, even for Kareina. It was an unnerving impression among family and friends, an added reason to remain steadfast and ready for the unexpected. Melrick would not let Kareina face unknown danger, even if from her own father, alone.

"Too bad, I'm afraid," Kareina said with unveiled sarcasm. "I've won your battle and increased your holdings, your people celebrate, rather noisily if you hadn't noticed, and I'm weary. We'll talk in the morning." Kareina moved toward the stairs.

"Son." Hassid bellowed.

Kareina froze with one foot on the bottom step.

Melrick held little respect for his ruler, but with one word, the minutest fraction still existing, as well as any residual loyalty, underwent a severe metamorphosis. What remained was a powerful loathing.

Kareina's features, already strained from battle and fatigue, paled as they turned in the Caldier's direction. As a friend, Melrick wanted to rush over and usher Kareina to the safety of her quarters. Yet, no matter the emotional torment, for her sake, and as Captain of the Guard, he remained where he stood, helpless to defend.

Parrin stepped forward, joy replaced with pained frustration, and clutched at Kareina's hand. "Listen, my child," she said, drawing her daughter's attention toward herself. "It is an urgent matter, and best you hear of it from us." She threw Hassid a withering glance. "You shall have your bath and we shall talk. Long into the night, if you wish," she added, placing a kiss to her daughter's hand, before patting it with affection.

Hassid bowed his head. Melrick hoped it in shame for the thoughtless address, but reasoned his ruler had prepared to impart his news. The man had a one-road mind.

"What is so important?" Kareina asked through clenched teeth.

"I've made an agreement, commitment of sorts, concerning you, which you need be aware of." The Caldier looked to his wife with entreaty. Parrin frowned, averting her gaze from Hassid.

Melrick knew they would regret hearing the news if the Caldier turned away, a sign she disapproved and would not assist her husband in the telling.

The room fell silent for some time, tension radiating like the charging after a summer lightning storm. Kareina broke the heavy silence. "Commitment?"

"Your betrothal," Hassid murmured.

Melrick felt the color drain from his face. A pain-filled ache clutched his heart for the woman he loved as a little sister, but he pushed the discomfort aside when Parrin cried out in physical pain. When he swung his gaze in her direction, Melrick noted she stared at the hand clutched by Kareina.

"Are you all right?" Kareina asked, genuine concern with having harmed her mother. "I'm so sorry." Kareina turned her angry gaze on Hassid, and Melrick felt his own blood chill. Hatred and disgust burned in her eyes. "Who is this paragon?"

Hit with the fury of her words, Hassid shuddered, stomped to the table, picked up Kareina's discarded tankard of ale and took a long swallow. "It's Mayliandra of Clan Bredwine."

"That's a she," Melrick stated, aware of the absurdity of the obvious.

"I'm well aware of the fact, Captain," Hassid said.

"Then why make the bargain?" Kareina asked.

“There are other factors, too numerous to name at this time, involved. It was the means to achieve an end.”

“A profitable end, no doubt.”

“Sarcasm won’t help, Kareina,” Parrin, quiet and gentle, scolded.

“But it does help me, Mother.”

Melrick desperately wanted to reach across the table and grasp his ruler by the throat, but closed his fingers into a tight fist at his side instead. “What factors could provoke you into this ludicrous agreement?”

Hassid swung his gaze toward the Guard Captain. Melrick got the impression the Caldier would vent his anger, he being the most reasonable target, but Hassid took a deep breath before explaining. “There are raiders, barbarians, who are slaughtering woman and children, anyone in their path.”

“Okay, I’ll take a party of warriors to track and slay them,” Kareina stated. “No need for this ridiculous—”

“It’s not that simple. I couldn’t very well explain the true reasons for denial, all of Kellshae knowing you aren’t married or betrothed already. Caldier Oriun agreed to your intervention with a betrothal attached to the bargain.” Hassid sighed as he sat in the chair Kareina had vacated.

“Keep everything in the family coffers,” Melrick mumbled.

Kareina moved away from her mother. “I ask again,” she said, when standing at Hassid’s side. “What do you gain?”

“Daughter,” Parrin’s voice harsher than Melrick heard for quite some time, and Kareina shot her an angry glance, which the woman ignored, “what’s done is done.”

“Not until I hear it from his lips,” Kareina said in a quavering voice.

“And what good would it do you?” Parrin asked. “You know the answer.”

Melrick reached over the table and placed his hand on Kareina’s shoulder. “If women and children—”

Kareina wrenched away from his touch. “You agree with this?”

“No,” Melrick said, hurt by her response, knowing she was too angry to realize her rebuff. “But I agree with Caldier Parrin. It’s done. While we handle the raider situation, which we need to learn more about, we devise a way to get you ‘un’ betrothed.”

“I should never have been put in the situation in the first place. There had to be any score of ways to handle this and still keep the blasted Gradyln honor.”

“Agreed,” Melrick stated.

“One of us must die to break a formal clan betrothal,” she reminded him.

“We’ll find a way to do it without such an end. Together.” Melrick emphasized the word to remind she wasn’t alone in this matter.

Kareina met his gaze. The pain in her smoke-blue eyes hit Melrick harder than any physical blow. His “brotherly” instinct was to embrace and comfort her with soothing words, as he had done all through her childhood. He couldn’t do such any longer, so settled for the alternative. “I’ll get men ready for the journey to Bredwine. You have your bath and a much-needed night’s rest. We’ll leave at first light.”

He hadn’t felt this much emotional pain since finding a tortured Kareina in the Castle Youlren dungeons. So many times, he had wanted to find a way to release her from the charade of Karr, but the opportunity never came, at least not any Kareina would agree to. Now they couldn’t do anything until this betrothal—rather this fiasco—was dealt with.

Melrick bowed to each in turn, before leaving with his pain-filled heart. Firm, yet silent, he vowed Kareina would never be subjected to Hassid's whims again.

PERSIMMONE TORE RAVENOUSLY at the leg of mutton. Battle had a way of increasing one's appetite, even if he hadn't, in actuality, done any of the fighting. It was the mere working of it, the strategizing, hiring the proper men, the very initiating of these well-formed plans. A man could waste away if he didn't properly maintain his appetites.

There were many years where he'd had little enough in way of nourishment. Never again would he go hungry.

As he reached for the ale to wash down the succulent meat, he noted the shimmering within the Eye. He groaned. He was tired, hadn't finished his meal, and wanted some peace and time to himself. It wasn't to be. The shimmer formed into a smoky haze, then transformed into a vague shadow.

T'Dar gave a cynical grin. "Do I take this to be a victory feast?"

"Mortal man cannot live on power alone," Persimmon said with irritation.

"Of course not." Completing the transition into solid form, T'Dar sat in the chair across from him. "What has our victory reaped today? Caravan? A village? I'm sure the foul souls in Bahalkar welcome more company. They will be pleased when we take the Priests of Tekelrah. Their annihilation will be quite the tasty coup to those imprisoned below. And when you see what I have in store for them, well, I think you'll be surprised."

A shudder ran through Persimmon at the thought. "Chaos has begun, and I'm getting closer to my ultimate goal. Soon I shall be sole ruler of Kellshae."

T'Dar inspected the nails of his right hand, and corrected, "You mean to say we shall rule Kellshae, do you not?" Though spoken in a casual tone, Persimmon couldn't miss the underlying menace of the warning.

He swallowed the fear threatening to choke him, "Of course, T'Dar. I meant no slight."

"The apology is accepted for your transgression. After all, to be mortal is to err." If not for the victories accomplished since his obtaining the Eye, Persimmon would return T'Dar to the dark depths of his eternal hell. "Where would your pathetic power take you?" the god asked.

Persimmon cringed. With each passing day, the bond between mortal and god grew stronger. Persimmon continued to forget a mental link had manifested as one of the first bonds they shared since the god's release. A handy bonding when T'Dar prompted the delivery of commands and orations of such magnitude his men pillaged and destroyed with intense vigor. Persimmon desired peace within his skull, yet found his thoughts plundered by constant intrusion from the god. At these times, he felt like a witless fool. Try as he may, Persimmon couldn't block out the interference. Nor did the mental link work in the reverse.

A fact T'Dar was more than pleased to remind him as, "A minor thing, mortal."

"It is an invasion," he said.

"Is it not you who came to me for power to reestablish chaos?" Leaning forward, he reached across the table, snatched Persimmon's mug and drained the contents. "You, little man, had a wish to destroy balance. Or do you prefer the word 'harmony' as those wretched historians use in their dusty tomes?" The god shrugged. "How do you intend to rule over the chaos we release, if you can't deal with a little disorder in your own head?"

"Such is the price of power, I know." Persimmon grumbled.

“No,” T’Dar corrected, amused. “Such is the price of knowledge. The foremost skill of any great battle veteran is to understand your enemies. Insight is a mighty tool. You are most certainly a witless fool if you cannot comprehend the intricacies of the power I have given and continue to give you.”

Persimmone hated lectures. He’d had enough as a youth, and this was as useless. What did he care about understanding the enemy? He wanted to rule them with a fear-inducing fist. Alongside the evil god—his slave—he had initiated that very course of action. Let the great T’Dar deliberate on the enemy to his heart’s content, if he had a heart, which Persimmone doubted.

What good was knowledge? Fear made a ruler great; terror in the hearts and minds of those conquered, those killed by his hand, figuratively speaking, of course. The longer Persimmone had possession of the Eye, the more control he could gain over it. The unwanted mind link to the god may be a drawback, but he’d gained the benefits of strength and healing. These particular attributes increased each day.

Soon *he* would be immortal!

The thought lifted his flagging spirits. Persimmone grinned.

A grin wiped from his lips at the menacing sound of laughter echoing off the room’s walls. T’Dar’s solid form shimmered and he returned to the Eye, leaving Persimmone to sit before his cold meal—trembling.

KAREINA REMOVED HER soiled clothes and heaped them upon the bed rail, released her shoulder length black hair from its leather strip, settled into the hot tub prepared for her. No feminine lotions laid out for her use, only a course hairbrush and a change of clothes rested on the chair beside the bath. Kareina removed her single earring, a black skull with ruby eyes, and placed it beside her clothes. The only other furniture placed in the room was an oak clothing cabinet, a sturdy chest used for her armor, and a mirror. This room, originally hers, was the singular place she felt safe. She had maintained use after her alleged-death, the excuse of needing reminders of why Karr had become such a furious warrior in honoring the memory of a sister’s destruction. Few in the castle were privy to her real identity, so she needed to maintain the charade for appearances sake. She loathed every minute of it.

No. You loathe yourself.

Though unbidden, it was a true thought. Kareina had herself to blame for her current predicament. She wanted to heap responsibility upon her father, but couldn’t do it and still be honest with herself.

At sixteen, her twin, the real Karr, pledged to defend the Clan Gradyln honor on the field of battle. Hours before his appearance was due, Karr had run away, never seen again. Rather than allow family honor to become tainted, and since Hassid had a broken leg, Kareina had dressed in his clothing and helmet, and armed herself with her brother’s sword. She’d also worn a talisman—an earring—of minor cloaking magic—worth the hefty price of silver and the penalty of death with using the forbidden alchemy—and made the rendezvous in her brother’s place. Even with her skills, gained by the secret tutelage of her childhood friend Melrick, the battle was difficult; Kareina and her opponent were both surprised by her victory.

It hadn’t occurred to her at the time Hassid, never able to accept his son’s defection, would use the triumph to such an extreme. Every challenge posed was accepted, and Kareina, in the

guise of Karr, sent to meet it. Hassid seemed content to ignore Kellshae law his daughter broke, though he looked upon it daily.

In the beginning, it was exhilarating to defend family honor in a way no woman had done before her, to feel the solid and cool weight of steel in her hand. She took pride in knowing no one had even a hint they fought a woman. Her fame became widespread through all Kellshae. Soon it had all changed. The pride was gone and the glory a bitter taste on her tongue. Balancing a duality became more difficult; which her father never appreciated, or he refused to acknowledge an understanding. Not wanting to lose the prestige the clan had gained, Hassid began making his own challenges. Confrontations Kareina didn't want to meet but did for the good of her people, even at the cost of her soul...the cost of her once owned attractiveness and the last shred of innocence in the dungeons of Clan Youlren.

Kareina felt hot tears gather in her eyes. She cupped a handful of bath water and splashed her face. Looking up, she caught her reflection in the full-length mirror in the room's corner and felt a shiver race through her. The water had cooled, yet was not the source of the physical reaction. It was the image reflected back causing the bone-deep chill.

She stared for a moment, and raised a hand to her face. Her fingertips traced the burn scar on her left cheek, a little below the eye, branded by a white-hot poker. Under her chin, a three-inch knife scar. Kareina extended her arms and stared at her hands. Each finger, once broken or burned by the same poker used on her cheek, showed the disfigurements left upon *Sher Karr* from his honorable battles. Few knew they were reminders of tortures performed on a young woman.

A woman now believed dead.

Her door creaked open and Parrin entered. Kareina hastily wiped at the new tears, dropped her arms and turned away from the mirror. Parrin moved to the chair, pushed at the clothes until a small section was vacant, before she sat on the empty edge. "There is nothing I can say to remove your pain."

"I wasn't wounded in the battle with Sher Ewan." Kareina hoped feigning a misunderstanding of words would alert Parrin to change the subject. It didn't. Her mother let little slide by her.

"Where you not?" Parrin questioned. "Do you think I could forget two children tying poor Nanny Noquai to a tree while she napped? Or the time Ewan used the clan's banner to wrap a newborn foal, and a defiant Kareina who stood, hands on hips, before an angry Caldier and pronounce herself the culprit?"

Tears streamed down Kareina's face at the reminders. "Yet my own father forgot, and sent me to kill a friend for Gradyln profit." She gave a bitter laugh. "My consolation is Ewan never liked the real Karr, since he'd never play with us no matter how we tried to include him—and is what those who know will remember. Ewan was dying, and wanted to go by the hand of a friend. So the treachery is mine alone to bear, my own steel destroyed the last shreds of Kareina, as her friend gasped his last breath."

"I'm all the more sorry for your loss. Tears and time cleanse the soul."

"But not the visage of the creature before you, the monster I have become inside and out." Kareina hadn't meant to sound bitter, the evidence she did written on her mother's wounded expression.

"You will always be beautiful to me, child. It's what resides in your heart creating your true beauty."

“Ah, I fear, there is no hope. My heart is also empty and scarred.” Kareina reached for the drying cloth, stood and wrapped it around herself, before climbing from the tub. “How many more childhood friends will I have to meet on the field of battle? Now I have this newest charade to contend with.”

Parrin sighed. “I won’t try to condone what Hassid has done.”

“It would be useless, Mother.”

“I could send Zeren. Pass the message you’re ill or some such. Postpone—”

“Then what? Go into hiding? Kill Karr and resurrect Kareina, and find a mate who could accept my disfigurement? No, I have choices. Bad choices left to me, but choices nonetheless. Lesser evil wins.” Kareina dried her now cold skin and dressed. As she lifted the tunic above her head, she again glimpsed herself in the mirror. Years of wielding a sword had left her arms and torso muscular and solid. Her breasts were firm, yet small. The skin, milky-white where hidden under layers of clothing to conceal her identity, was laced with the scarring from sword wounds and her painful encounter at the end of a Youlren whip applied without mercy. She was glad for simple consolation she could not see her own back without aid of a hand mirror, knowing the disgusting word etched into her skin as a permanent reminder. No. Any residual attractiveness she may have had long ago destroyed. She shuddered and lowered the tunic, and finished dressing. “Nothing could be worse than the sight before you.”

“Unless to be betrothed?” Parrin asked, with a hint of teasing.

The question brought Kareina to the situation at hand. It was hopeless and she was afraid she couldn’t handle one more responsibility upon her shoulders. She rushed to her mother, sank to the floor, her head resting upon her mother’s lap, she asked, “What am I to do?”

“I wish I could give you all the right answers, but I have none. If people are tortured and lives taken at the hands of these raiders, you must stop them. As only you can do, my child.” Parrin cupped Kareina’s face and lifted her chin until their gazes met. “Pray Melrick is right and you can find a way out of your father’s newest error in his damn honor’s name. I have as great a faith in Melrick as I do in you. Ask yourself this, my heart, will it be so bad? You’ve been in the guise of male so long; and I know your heart has many questions requiring answers in a certain direction.”

Kareina laughed at her mother’s words. She stood, shaking her head in resignation. “A Shei does not find comfort in the arms of a Shei, whether her heart desires such an end or not. Be honest, Mother, what are the chances the one woman in Kellshae betrothed to me would also be as depraved? Melrick is an optimist.”

“Ah, and a better man I’ve yet to meet,” Parrin stated with a smile of motherly adoration. “As to your heart, let it lead where it will. There is always hope for a positive resolution, Ysannie willing.”

“You know the gods no longer listen.”

“And yet you pray to her still,” her mother reminded. “You know I support you—in all things.”

“Is Hassid included in the comparison, or in your support?” With the mention of the Caldier’s name, there was a knock at her door. Before Kareina could give the command, her father entered. She wondered if Hassid had stationed himself outside her door, listening and expecting the conversation to get around to him.

“Could I speak with you?” he asked.

“I was wishing Mother a good night. I’m exhausted and ready to retire early this evening.” In her rudest tone, she added, “After all, I have a future wife to meet.”

He glanced at Parrin and tossed his head to the side.

The Caldie took her cue, much to the chagrin of Kareina. “Good night, Kareina,” she said before placing a kiss on her daughter’s cheek and leaving.

“I wanted to apologize,” Hassid said after the door closed.

“Why? It’s my first betrothal.” She moved to the bed and tossed her soiled clothing to the floor. “I should be grateful.”

Hassid cleared his throat. “For the slip of tongue, as I swear I never meant to call you son. Not the way I did.” He took a hesitant step in her direction and stopped.

Kareina, not wanting to forgive him, glared. Her head pounded and she wondered why she hadn’t asked her mother to send up something strong to drink. “Simple mistake, my lord, I’ve played the part wholly for too many years.”

“Will you accept my apology for the betrothal?”

“Would it change anything?” She could feel her anger return and grow with every breath. Kareina wanted to lash out physically, pound his fleshy mass to the floor, but settled for using her words. “Tomorrow I’ll leave for Bredwine and pay my respects to my future father-in-law and betrothed. From there, I shall trail the raiders and stop their destruction, as this atrocity hasn’t existed since before Harmony. When the task is concluded, I’ll return to Clan Gradyln but once. To say a final good-bye to Mother.”

“Kareina, please—”

“No,” she said. “Time for understanding and apologies are long gone. I take full responsibility, so ease your conscious. This farce never could have gone as far as it has if I hadn’t allowed it. I’m more at fault than you are. Ease your mind.” Kareina turned her back on him and moved to the room’s single window. “Answer one question, Father, and I ask you be honorable enough to reply with sincerity.”

She knew him nervous, his gulp audible. “All right.”

“Did you forget Sher Ewan and I were close childhood friends? Or didn’t you care for anything above profit and blessed honor?” Now, she turned to watch his reaction.

“Ewan?” He frowned. As if realization hit, he said, “If I had, I never—”

“Stop,” she interrupted. Kareina spun and faced the window again. He recognized his grievous error, and that she would ignore his excuses, if he had ever intended to give any. From behind her, she heard the door open, then shut.

For a long time Kareina stood staring at the approaching dusk, trying to understand what she’d done. Why had she told Hassid she’d return once? Where would she go? What would she do? She had no answers. It was one matter to be lonely among friends and family; at least in Castle Gradyln she had her mother’s laughter, her soothing words of encouragement, and her boundless love. It was another matter to be solitary and alone. “Ysannie, dear goddess, what am I to do?”

Her mind couldn’t even begin to fathom a way to negate Caldier Oriun’s deal. Battling an enemy opposite the end of a sword was easy, more so if the enemy was a barbarian like the reported raiders who killed the innocent and defenseless. Living as a fierce and scarred warrior proved simple when skills honed to precision and her visage applied. But to play an interested, enamored betrothed?

Kareina’s bitter laugh rumbled through the room. What would Mayliandra do if she ever learned Shei Kareina was the man promised to wed her? Death, for one of them, the sole result, and most likely hers by the hand of her betrothed.

DARK GREY CLOUDS hung over the keep like a shroud, rain lashing the cold stone with undisguised fury. This was Fleuren's fourth day of confinement to her room, by her own choosing, in Smierc Keep, better known as Deaths Keep. Thankful for the fire in the hearth to warm her, Fleuren sat with her legs curled beneath her, a book open on her lap. This part of life was good. All she had to do was walk twenty feet to the kitchen for meals, usually already on a serving platter awaiting her arrival. Fleuren knew she had Leurette, the head cook, and lone person to treat her as a human being, to thank for this effort. Though the keep housed less than a dozen occupants, Fleuren wasn't here for religious duty. She had no other place to go; and, her uncle would never approve her leaving, if she did.

When a knock sounded at her door, Fleuren was a little surprised. Few sought her services unless left no other choice, either through emotional need or more often for greed, and less would do so in this weather, having to traverse the lake surrounding the keep. "Enter."

Due to well-oiled hinges, there was no sound as the door opened. Bickle's sour smell of dried sweat and unwashed body had announced him before he spoke. "Someone to see you in the library," he said, sneering at her.

Fleuren couldn't imagine who would brave the weather, but assumed a local villager had lost a loved one, and needed to speak with the departed before their spirit moved on. "I shall be right there," she said to Bickle, closing her book and laying it on the table beside her. Bickle snorted and closed the door behind him. Fleuren heaved a sigh. She wished she could make the villagers understand most of their relatives and friends did not stay around in this realm, glad to leave behind earthly toils.

After making certain she was presentable for visitors, Fleuren made her way down the long hallway to the foyer, and headed toward the back hall opposite the wide stairwell, praying the entire walk whoever the guest was, their dear departed had done that—departed.

As she approached the library, Fleuren heard a hearty chuckle from the opened door. Bickle was shuffling from foot to foot in agitation inside the entrance, his demeanor as off-putting as his odor. Clearly, Bickle hadn't been the one to express humor. Fleuren walked inside the room.

Standing in front of the older collection of books was a mature, well-dressed man with shoulder length blond hair. The hair emphasized the broad width of shoulders. The man didn't shy away from hard work, and from the appearance of his clothing, he wasn't a poor farmer. Something about him unsettled and unnerved her something terrible.

"You wished to see me, sir?" she asked, announcing her presence.

The man turned around with a smile slightly softening the sharp edges of his features. "Yes, Fleuren, the very person I need to see." Bickle snorted. Handsome features of a moment ago, turned hard with anger. "You are free to go, Bickle."

Bickle crossed his arms over his chest and gave her a severe look. "That what you want?" The men at the keep, although they didn't appreciate either her or her skills, would provide Fleuren protection as long as she was under their care—as long as her uncle paid board on a regular basis. She didn't believe this stranger would ravish her in the library of Death Keep, so Fleuren nodded.

Once Bickle had rushed away, the man smiled again. He motioned toward the room's furniture. "Please, let's sit." When Fleuren complied, he sat across from her and leaned forward

with elbows on knees. "I've a proposition to take you away from here, making better use of your gift."

Fleuren raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I can't leave the keep."

"But you will."

"No, sir, I will not. Not with someone I'm meeting for the first time, or without a very good reason."

"I offer you greatness, by my side," he said, "not the trivial whining of useless mortals who need learn to deal with the results of death on their own."

"This is my home, now, and the villagers count on me."

His voice took on a harder edge. "And if I told you that you will abide me, as this matter is no longer a polite request."

With confusion, Fleuren asked, "Who are you to make demands of me?"

"I am T'Dar," he stated. "And, I have need of your services, as I'm building a special army."

"You're named after a banished god of evil? Do your parents hate you, sir?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Fleuren knew she had pushed this man's patience beyond his normal limits.

A glint of anger in his eyes, he snarled, "*The* very god."

Foreboding filled Fleuren as the room felt like it contained a crackling charge, and she wanted to return to the safety of her quarters. Maybe she shouldn't have sent Bickle away, as being ravished wasn't what she need fear, she realized. "Much as I have enjoyed the diversion from my room," she said, standing and slowing inching her way closer to the door, "I shall return there. Have a good day."

He let her get a step away from her exit before he said, "I suggest you reconsider, Fleuren, or your friend Leurette shall pay the price for your insolence." As if summoned, Leurette entered the library carrying a tea service. "Ah, thank you my dear," he said as Leurette placed the tray on the table beside Fleuren's vacated chair. "I can see why little Fleuren thinks so well of you."

Fleuren felt panic for the older woman. Though she didn't believe he was who he claimed to be, she didn't doubt the trouble he could cause through the power of coin. "That will be all Leurette."

"No, my dear Leurette, please stay," the man said coldly. He glanced at the door and it slammed closed.

Startled, Leurette looked to Fleuren in question. "What is happening?"

"I'm not certain," Fleuren said, standing in front of the cook. "My lord—"

"Enough. Now you will learn not to contradict my demands." T'Dar glared at Leurette, and Fleuren felt her blood run cold. "Surprise!" Snapping his fingers, T'Dar gave a wicked smile and the room darkened, followed by an orange mist filling the library. From beside her, Fleuren heard Leurette whimper and cry in earnest as the mist swirled faster at their feet, moving up their legs. Fleuren pulled her friend closer, holding her shoulder tight. T'Dar held out a hand, palm up, and a clear orb materialized and hovered. "Your new home, Leurette." As he spoke, the mist swirled faster and ripped Leurette out of Fleuren's grasp. She strained ineffectually to reach for Leurette, the mist holding Fleuren fast, even as the other woman faded away, mist and Leurette pulled into the orb.

"No, please," Fleuren cried. "Your displeasure is with me, not her."

T'Dar scrutinized the orb for a moment, before stating, "Not enough." He pointed the thumb and index finger on his other hand at the orb and brought them together. As he did, the orb shrunk in size until it was less than a half-inch in diameter. Fleuren was unable to help. She

watched as Leurette pounded on the orb and screamed without sound. “Much better,” he said. “Now to finish.” He tossed the miniaturized orb into the air, and a chain appeared, securing itself to the top, winked out of sight, to reappear around T’Dar’s neck.

“Now, my little flower,” T’Dar said, moving closer to her. Fleuren noted the mist holding her in place swirled away at his approach, though now she was too horrified to move. When he was mere inches from her, T’Dar reached out a hand in her direction. She tried to fight the pull, but her body responded against her will, muscles aching painfully from the strain of opposition. Once her hand lay in his, Fleuren felt her body levitate, the room growing smaller while they drifted higher and higher. She noticed a shimmering over Smierc Island, and realized another sphere encased it. Suspended high in the air over Death Keep, he spoke again. “No one will enter or leave the Keep until you have done as I command of you.”

No matter how these men felt, they had looked out for her. “Are they safe?” she asked, powerless as she gazed down upon the one place she called home.

“Yes, for now.”

“What of Leurette?” Fleuren stared at the trinket resting at his throat. She could see Leurette stood frozen within the crystal.

T’Dar smirked. “Leurette will remain in this bauble until you have accomplished what I need of you. Should you fail me, she’ll be destroyed by crushing the crystal beneath my boot.” He shrugged. “Assist me and I will release her unharmed and into your care when I have what I want.”

Fleuren bowed her head to hide the fresh onslaught of tears. Weakly, she asked, “What do you wish from me, my lord?”

He laughed. “Oh, we are to have such fun.”

Chapter Three

WEARINESS FROM THE long journey made Kareina aware of the insistent pounding headache from the loud boasting, the teasing remarks shouted toward the entertainers dancing within the massive room. From the raised platform, which her host had named the *Circle of Equals*, a laughable term to her thinking, since Kareina lounged as per Clan Bredwine custom, upon a cluttered array of goose-down pillows. She couldn't gauge the reasoning for the name either, as four Caldiers sat with her, one being her host, Oriun, in a semi-circle. The warriors, who she would consider equal before any of these nobles, segregated at long wooden tables below the platform by clan.

Kareina regretted not taking Melrick's advice to camp overnight outside Bredwine walls and devise a tentative plan of action for the coming day. In her haste to get the distasteful bargain started, she had discounted his suggestion and found herself in the present situation of submitting to the most tedious, and deafening, of celebrations.

Smoke from the hundreds of candles lighting the room stung her already tired eyes. Stench from sweating bodies mingled with fumes from a spit placed in the corner made her stomach queasy. Kareina's one salvation: the tankard she held never went empty.

Kareina found the men seated with her loathsome and boring, and this particular clan's customs ludicrous. Clan Gradyln took pride in treating their women well, giving them respect if not a say in many dealings—though, to her mind, they still had a long way to grow. The opposite happened to be the case for Clan Bredwine. Near as she could judge from the quiet scurrying and downcast eyes, their women were viewed as nothing more than servants and wenches.

If the Caldiers knew, Kareina thought bitterly, the Sher they lavished so much attention on was a woman, they'd perish from the shock. What would her betrothed would be like; meek and submissive, jumping at her very shadow? Kareina seized at the hope she'd be about the business of tracking down the dishonorable raiders before she had to find out, as the woman had yet to be produced, and for this small favor, Kareina was grateful.

"Answer a question, Caldier Oriun." Kareina had to raise her voice over the cacophony. She waited until Oriun directed his full attention on her. "How long have these raiders been a problem within Bredwine territories?"

The Caldier shook his head, but she saw no true sign of distress or remorse in his eyes. In fact, with disgust, Kareina noted he seemed more annoyed by their mention than sorrowful of their damage. "It's been almost half a season now. Small at first," he said, teeth tearing at a large leg of roasted meat. The fat-juice ran down his chin, yet he ignored it. "Recently, they grew bolder in attacks and their numbers have increased."

Kareina nodded, absorbing the information. "And what of your clans?" she asked, raking her gaze over Jurquette, Armin and Solerac.

"Same, I'm afraid. Too many innocents have suffered. I hope the raiders enter Bahalkar in as horrendous a death," said Jurquette, in a tone of pain-filled sadness. He sounded genuine in his

concern for the victims. The emotion even moistened his eyes. Armin and Solerac nodded, but they added nothing more.

Kareina considered the four men. Jurquette was the only lean one. He had a thin layer of white hair combed in a fashion as to cover his balding head. His features were pinched and tight, from his long nose to his thin lips. Armin and Solerac almost resembled each other with their massive rolls of flesh, heavy beards surrounding thick moist lips and, near as she could discern from their reclined position, short builds. The difference between these two men was Armin had bushy red hair and Solerac had untidy black.

Then there was Oriun, her future father-in-law. He, too, was obese, like her father, in relation to weight seeming more proportionate with his height. Both Oriun and Hassid were tall men. Yet, Kareina doubted this Caldier had ever fought his own battles. His skin, in her opinion, was too soft and white, almost pasty. His light brown hair had the appearance of special grooming. By a woman, no doubt, she thought with disgust.

“Are the attacks random or do they have a design?” Kareina took a swig from her tankard to make it appear this was casual conversation, but watched for reactions from the clan leaders. This being her purpose, after all, as Oriun had dismissed an earlier request to retire to a quiet room to discuss the matter. His interest remained exclusive in obtaining a son-in-law. The delay irritated her more. With the bits of information Kareina had gleaned from snatches of conversation above and below the platform, it became her belief that one of these men knew more than he acknowledged. How else would raiders have lasted as long as they did in this part of Kellshae?

Caldier Jurquette was the first to answer. “It began with attacking trade caravans. Now they’ve escalated to raiding small camps and towns.”

Kareina frowned. “Each has had this done to your respective clan?”

She watched Armin flush bright red. Solerac gave her the reason for the reaction. “Clan Catreve has been left alone, thus far. The rest of us have been hit numerous times and with high casualties in both goods and life.” Kareina noted profit beat fatalities in his statement. Were all Caldiers interested solely in their revenue?

“Do not get the wrong impression, Sher Karr,” Armin said with more heat than was required.

“What impression?” she asked, resting her tankard on her leg and leaning into the pillow behind her. Kareina knew what he referred to, but frowned in feigned confusion.

“Clan Catreve is in alliance with the raiding parties,” he said, a spray of spittle landing on his beard.

“Are you?”

“No.” Armin huffed. “I have better warriors than the others, live in the forests, so my lands are better protected.”

“Or provide the better concealment.” Solerac cleared his throat and spoke louder. “May be true or not, but it seems curious yours is the clan unaffected.”

“What of Karr’s Clan Gradyln?” Jurquette questioned of Solerac.

“Everyone knows the raiders have yet to move that far east. Gradyln’s time will come,” Solerac stated with annoyance. “Besides, if Armin is correct with assuming strength makes a difference, Gradyln stands a better chance of survival with Sher Karr in the battle. We all know what a ferocious and honorable warrior you are purported to be.”

The tension was building quicker among the Caldiers, especially after Solerac’s praise of her. Kareina felt the antagonistic change comforting, bringing relief to her weariness in their

company. Tension, anger and drink would loosen tongues. The lift in spirits turned out to be short lived.

Oriun laughed, loud and out of place. “Men, please. Sher Karr has had a long journey, and tonight’s festivities are in his honor. After all, I’m about to have this great warrior as a son-in-law. There’s time enough in the coming days for discussing this other matter.” The Caldier clapped his meaty hands together and a young woman, head low, rushed to his side. Except for being surprised the woman didn’t stumble on her way up the platform, Kareina didn’t give her a second glance, as she was too incensed with these clan women suffering this type of humiliation. If Kareina had her way—

Kareina stifled the thought; she wasn’t here to instruct these people on basic human civilities. The ludicrous betrothal and her weariness were taking their toll, scrambling her senses, wanting to find a battle in every situation. Oriun had given the woman a command to which Kareina paid almost no attention, concentrating on draining the contents of her tankard. When a shadow fell across her face, Kareina looked up and sucked in a breath of surprise.

Above her, wooden pitcher in hand, was the most beautiful woman Kareina had seen in a long while, and who stood a few inches shorter than her, judging from her own reclining position. She wore a simple tunic of dark brown revealing a slender figure beneath, complete with full round breasts. Her eyes were large and dark brown, her lips full. The most incredible attribute being her hair. Beneath the flickering yellow glow of the candles, the hair seemed highlighted with golden threads.

The woman didn’t speak, yet motioned the pitcher forward, eyes on the tankard in Kareina’s hand. Extending an arm, Kareina raised it, and as the large cup was filling, she caught the woman’s hesitant glance in her direction. Instead of the usual fear and horror her scarred face received, Kareina noted a mixture of curiosity and, odd to Bredwine women, defiance. The latter emotion surprised Kareina after witnessing the otherwise submissiveness of the woman’s mannerisms.

“Here, girl.” Armin, his own tankard raised, bellowed above the din.

Obedient, and with a second’s hesitation, the woman moved to him. Armin had lowered his cup so she needed to kneel in order to pour the liquid. Kareina watched as his hand snaked up the woman’s leg and to her buttocks where he squeezed roughly. The woman jerked away and dropped the pitcher, dumping the contents, along with the scraps of food from the plate resting on the pillow beside him, onto Armin’s lap.

“Bitch,” Armin said back-handing her across the cheek. The force of the blow propelled the woman backward where she landed with a loud thud. Kareina saw the spark in his eyes as he pulled his massive girth from the floor, and she realized he intended to strike the fallen woman again.

Kareina jumped to her feet and rushed between them.

“Out of my way,” Armin said. “She needs to be taught a lesson.”

“No one deserves a beating as a lesson,” Kareina stated, pleased when Armin swallowed hard. “Touch her,” she said with menace, “or any other woman, like that again and I’ll carve your beating heart from its chest.”

“How dare you threaten me?”

Kareina saw sweat bead on his upper lip, and guessed Armin didn’t want this confrontation to turn violent in front of the crowd. “You are but a Sher, a mere youth even, and I your superior.”

She smirked. "Then conduct yourself as such. I caution anyone who would raise a hand to a woman."

"You'd better calm yourself, Armin," Jurquette warned with laughter in his voice. "Sher Karr is a great champion of women, since the death of his twin sister." He directed his gaze toward the ceiling, as if focusing in deep thought. "Kareina, was it not? Raped and tortured, and killed by Clan Youlren, if I remember."

"What is your point, Jurquette?" Having lived the experience, she didn't need a reminder before these fleshy-soft men.

"Simple. It is common knowledge," Jurquette explained with a shrug, "or so I believed, you are a staunch defender of the fairer sex, after your loss." He gave a quick glance at Armin. "The words mere and Sher cannot be used in the same sentence in Karr's case, you oaf."

"Thank you," Kareina said. "But this is little better than what the raiders are doing. You're killing spirit as sure as they do life. You'd rather I condone Armin's behavior, ignore it even?" she questioned, clenching her sword hilt to redirect at least a little of her anger.

"Me, suggest either?" Jurquette raised his hands in supplication. "Perish the thought, Sher Karr. I thought to enlighten those present who may not be aware of your reputation, to explain the reasoning behind a young man's ferocity."

Armin took a step forward. "Step aside," he said. "I care little for your feelings in discipline. The wench has made a mockery of me."

Kareina sneered. "You've done well enough on your own. Now sit down or I will run you through with my blade."

From the corner of her eye, Kareina saw Oriun stand. He seemed concerned about what was taking place, yet she surmised it was worry of possible bloodshed in his precious circle. "Karr, Armin, please, let us have peace and be done with this matter. I shall take care of the woman myself."

Armin hesitated for a moment, before retreating to a reclined position on the pillows. When he did, Kareina released the fierce grip on her sword hilt. Oriun sighed with relief and Jurquette laughed. The sound grated on Kareina's already taut nerves.

"Will you share the jest?" she questioned, perplexed at the outburst.

His laughter subsided. "Forgive me," Jurquette pleaded between chuckles. "Know my amusement is with the situation, not intended to be at your expense."

Kareina's perplexity increased. "What situation would that be to be precise?"

Jurquette pointed behind her, his shoulders shaking with mirth. "The woman, my dear Karr, saved from at least Armin's punishment is your betrothed, Mayliandra."

Until this point, angry with Armin, Kareina was oblivious to a hall of warriors; but the sudden cheering and applause reminded her of their presence. She turned and stared about the room, aware only the men of Clan Gradyln, not appreciating the jest any more than Kareina did, stayed silent. The heat of embarrassment and anger warmed her cheeks. More than anything, she wanted to flee the room, but in guise of Sher Karr, not afforded the emotional luxury.

She looked down upon the woman, who had yet to budge from where she'd fallen, her gaze focused between Oriun and herself. Kareina saw fear in Mayliandra's brown eyes. She wondered on her own behalf if the distress spawned from the careless introductions to her betrothed or Kareina's near attack of a Caldier, or how Oriun would deal with this embarrassment. Whatever put the emotion there wasn't her concern. More emphatically than ever, Kareina knew she had to find a way out of this ridiculous situation, the sooner the better.

Against her private assertion of a moment ago, Kareina observed the trickle of blood from Mayliandra's lips and felt concern for the woman.

"You're hurt," she said, annoyed with the shaky timber in her voice.

Mayliandra shook her head, yet made no move to stand. Kareina's irritation increased. The woman cowered like a frightened animal. "Get up," Kareina said, now surprised at her vehemence. "No future wife of Clan Gradyln grovels at a man's heels." Kareina whipped her hand forward to assist, but Mayliandra jerked away with terror in her eyes, and rose to her feet without the offered aid.

Kareina realized the combination of her scarred appearance and the woman's own timidity made Mayliandra's reaction predictable. The reaction stunned and hurt; her intent was to assist and protect not to frighten. Obviously, the certainty the extended scarred hand would one-day touch her had instigated Mayliandra's exhibition of fear. Kareina dropped the hand.

Armin snickered. "She values your touch as much as my own. You'll have a cold wedding bed until you beat her into acceptance of her place." He gave a lecherous grin as he glared at Kareina. "Give me but half an hour and I'll teach the wench for you. Save you some time."

From the warriors, Kareina heard more jeering before the sounds of drawn swords. She turned to note the latter response came from her own warriors. The room fell silent save the hiss of metal as three other clans also drew weapons.

"Cease this." At Kareina's command, all eyes shifted toward her, and yet they complied. She spun to the right and faced Armin. "You've had your fun in mockery, Caldier. What transpires in my wedding bed is no concern of yours. Nor is how I need handle," she swallowed, "my wife."

Kareina turned and addressed the warriors again. Anger toward the Caldiers and the reaction of her betrothed coursed through her blood. "From this moment forward, Mayliandra is in the care of Clan Gradyln," she announced. To her men she said, "Melrick, see her safely to her quarters."

"Aye, Sher Karr." Melrick rushed forward, clutched Mayliandra's arm and practically dragged her from the room. Olaf followed with a hand resting on his sword.

"If any harm comes to her, I shall personally kill the man responsible." After they were gone, Kareina again faced the table of Gradyln men, her fury building at what she felt forced to do. "Mayliandra is your future Shei. Protect her as such forthwith." How could Kareina have let these horrible men push her into acknowledging her father's decision and giving this defensive reaction?

"Aye," her warriors answered in unison.

"Enjoy the festivities, men, for tomorrow we hunt raiders." As the men of Clan Gradyln cheered, Kareina stepped from the platform without another glance back and exited the hall, half expecting some rebuttal of her interfering actions from Caldier Oriun. None came.

Outside, the air was thick and hot but a welcomed relief. Kareina made her way to the Gradyln assembled tents, thankful she hadn't accepted quarters inside the castle. She had no wish to hear the evening's events retold in drunken whispers throughout the night. Melrick and Olaf were waiting for her, Mayliandra silent between them. Not ready to relive the rejection of her well-meant intentions, Kareina ignored the woman, and didn't care if it appeared as pouting. "Tomorrow I'll talk to the local tradesmen and question them about their caravans. One of you will stay behind and make certain no harm comes to her," Kareina said, pointing to Mayliandra. "For now, see her to her quarters and have ale sent to mine." She watched Melrick frown. Kareina had no desire to hear his opinion of her latter command. She spun away and entered her tent.

THE CURT DISMISSAL annoyed Melrick, but he'd seen the hurt in Kareina's eyes and blamed the woman at his side. She should have allowed Kareina to help her to her feet. He wanted to throttle the wench for the pain she'd caused, even if from naiveté; but it wasn't his habit any more than it was Kareina's. Instead, he tightened his grip on Mayliandra's arm until his fingers bit into her soft flesh. Well, a small smidgeon of discomfort couldn't be too bad, he thought.

"Please," she said, yanking free after the third attempt. "You're hurting me."

"No more than you deserve," he said.

She stood motionless in front of him. "For what travesty do I deserve such treatment? I thought your clan didn't approve of abuse toward females."

"If I abuse you, you'll know it, my lady." He narrowed his eyes. "You had no right to humiliate Karr, after saving you from a beating." Melrick wanted to defend the hurt Kareina suffered, and hated having to defend her under the false pretext Hassid had forced them to maintain.

Her chuckle was laden with bitterness. "The male answer to everything, beat a woman to make her obey, then beat her again so she remembers to continue doing so."

"It isn't our way," Olaf stated, missing the sarcasm.

"We could change tradition for you," Melrick said, glaring at Olaf.

Mayliandra shook her head. "It wasn't my intention to have Sher Karr look foolish before the clans."

Melrick heard the sincerity in her voice, but ignored it. "Don't let it happen again or you'll answer to me."

Olaf grunted. "Not that she'll get the opportunity." He glanced at Melrick with a grin. "Which of us gets watch tomorrow?"

"You do."

"Why me?" Olaf whined.

"Because I out-rank you," Melrick said. He directed a look of distaste at the woman with them. "Besides, when the Shei annoys you into anger, and she will, Karr will still have a Captain of the Guard. We'll find a new Chief easy enough."

"Ah, but Karr can't get another cousin. I'm the sole extended family left," Olaf said.

"You can't leave me behind, tonight or ever," Mayliandra said, alarm in her voice. Melrick sensed genuine fear, saw moisture in eyes brightened by the glow of the moon, but wary of its true nature. It was a female tactic, and he'd seen many strong men defeated by the maneuver. Mayliandra said, in a shaky whisper, "Caldier Armin will exact revenge for the embarrassment suffered tonight. I can't stay in my room, not even in the castle."

"He wouldn't dare," Olaf said, in a tone he generally applied on children. "Nor will he get the chance. One would be a fool to go against Karr."

"Enough." Melrick was losing patience; certain Mayliandra exaggerated the danger. "We have our orders and intend to follow them. Where are your quarters?" Armin seemed a danger to provisions for the kitchen, but little else.

Mayliandra twisted back toward Kareina's tent. "I must talk to Sher Karr, make him understand."

"Do you have a death wish?" Olaf asked in surprise.

Melrick's grab for her arm proved ineffectual, when he realized she intended to see Kareina; but Mayliandra had darted to the left, dodged his grasp and ran. "Hellfire," he said, racing after her. He prayed Kareina was still dressed or this charade would be over quicker than planned—not that they had a plan, yet.

INSIDE THE CONFINES of her tent, Kareina paced, impatient for her ale and wondering about her current emotional state. She'd been too long in the guise of a man. It was the only explanation as to why Mayliandra's fear of her angered her. What did she expect when the woman saw a scarred face looming above her, a damaged hand extended? No comfort for a gentlewoman who had expected her betrothed to be some handsome hero, despite numerous battles, as in the tales mothers cited daughters to keep them compliant with their lots in life, always looking for the impossible.

From behind her, Kareina heard the jostling of the tent flap, relieved her much needed ale had arrived. She wasn't prepared to see Mayliandra enter and rush to her side, Melrick and Olaf scant seconds and steps behind her. "What is the meaning of this?" Kareina asked, stiffening when Mayliandra latched onto her arm with a near death-grip.

Melrick, out of breath after the night's festivities, stepped forward. "My apologies, Sher Karr, but Mayliandra has some fool notion her life is in danger because of our intervention on her behalf."

Olaf remained by the tent entrance, stating, "Doesn't believe I can keep her out of harm's way tomorrow, either."

"You must listen," Mayliandra said. "He'll make it appear an accident, but dead is dead. His pride is more important than any pact with my father."

"Caldier Armin," Olaf clarified.

The woman believed what she said, the evidence in Mayliandra's slumped posture and the trembling of the fingers locked on her arm. Kareina frowned and turned to Melrick for an explanation—and a silent plea for help with her release. He shrugged.

Mayliandra's grip tightened. "I must stay with you. He wouldn't dare go against you. Once I'm alone, he'll have me killed. Or worse."

"She believes Armin intends to murder her for embarrassing him before the clans," Melrick said.

"Please take me with you," Mayliandra begged.

Kareina was unprepared for this situation. She hadn't intended to spend more than a few minutes in the woman's presence, let alone the days to follow in their search for the raiders, or even a return to Gradyln. With her beauty, the distraction would be too great, for Kareina and for her men. "Out of the question, Shei Mayliandra, as where we are going is no place for you."

Dropping her hand, Mayliandra moved away, head bent. "I'm a dead woman. If he can't beat me, he'll ravage and kill me as a lesson to others not to scorn him."

"You show little faith in my men," Kareina said, paling, "or my ability to protect through them."

"Left behind, they'll be dead, too. It won't matter."

"Now she sees the future," Olaf scoffed.

Mayliandra raised her head. "I see these men each time they visit. I know what they are and are not capable of, and the women who have suffered because of certain attentions."

Kareina was unsure what to say that would put Mayliandra's fears to rest. She needed time to think. It was obvious the woman believed in a real danger to her life. "We'll discuss this in the morning," Kareina said, hoping she could think of an alternative proposal to appease everyone. "Let Melrick and Olaf take you to your quarters, now. Collect some things for the night." To Melrick, she added, "Find a tent for the Shei's use, and post guards."

"Thank you, Sher Karr." Mayliandra's mood brightened a degree. As the woman smiled, fresh blood appeared on her lip as the earlier injury reopened.

Before Kareina could stifle the instinctive urge, she reached forward and touched a finger to the wound, wiping the blood free with her finger. Mayliandra flinched at the contact. As Kareina jerked her hand away, she realized the eyes staring into her own were steady and without fear this time, Mayliandra's recoil caused by pain, not fright. The impulsive action to touch the injury had frightened Kareina, more so that she felt a quickening in her pulse when contacting the soft flesh. "Melrick, see to her wound. Use one of the ointments Caldie Parrin supplies you for such cases. Go," Kareina said, turning her back on them.

"Sher Karr?" Mayliandra spoke after a hesitation.

"Yes?" Kareina didn't face her.

"I'm sorry for any misinterpretation of an earlier reaction. I see you are a kind man. I never intended, or wanted, my response or for the Caldier's to humiliate you. Please forgive me."

Kareina swallowed, hoping to staunch the sudden urge to cry. "Done and forgiven. Now, please, go," she said through clenched teeth. Not until she heard them leave, did Kareina allow her shoulders to slump. A kind man. What would Mayliandra think of the supposed kindness when facts became available?

What of this newest predicament Kareina found herself in? The very weight of each compounding problem was getting more difficult to bear. She had to leave Mayliandra behind. Could Mayliandra be correct in her concern Armin would be fool enough to try such a contemptible tactic? Part of Kareina hoped he would try something, as she, too, could set examples. Killing him would wipe the world of his existence. No one goes against her or hers.

The question was whether it would be in defense of Mayliandra or Kareina's own hatred of the man who caused an uncomfortable and humiliating evening all around. Would it make up for all the degradation and pain suffered because of men like him?

Kareina groaned in frustration. "Damn, where are answers when most needed?"

FLEUREN HAD NO tears left for the Priests of Tekelrah. Since the night T'Dar came to the Keep, she had witnessed atrocities leaving her soul virtually empty. She had no power to extricate herself from these current events, needed to endure so she could release Leurette and the others of the Keep. That wouldn't happen any time soon, she knew, and would be at the cost of her own life. Fleuren hoped she'd achieve her goal for Leurette before she died.

One promise she made herself, a vow she renewed watching the pale wraith of a man as he followed behind the last priest dragged from the burning church, was to make certain Persimmone followed her to Bahalkar. A destination she would never avoid, not after being part of the murder of innocent people, whether at T'Dar's command or not. Without the aid of the device controlling the god, Persimmone was a pathetic excuse of a man. Fleuren had learned of his history, the horrors he had brought on his own sister in the name of power, the fact he was a coward at heart. If he owned the organ required. Even now, he had another doing his dirty work.

Once the priest's kneeled in a row before T'Dar, Persimmone moved to the gods' side, glaring at her in distaste as he did. Despite his own monstrousness, Persimmone viewed her ability as revolting. Her ability, as used at the Keep, was her gift, though often unwanted. T'Dar corrupted her gift, using it in a way she would never have considered possible.

"Are you ready, little flower?" T'Dar asked. Fleuren cringed at the god's endearment, and nodded solemnly. She knew what would happen next. T'Dar had explained the process to her in vivid detail the night she'd met him. She had refused, of course, and the god touched the pendant around his neck, a reminder her life was not the only one at stake.

She had balked a few times, and T'Dar punished her for each. Most recent punishment, he beat her body and sent her into a dark void of his making. After three days spent in blackness filled with cries of pain and screaming, some her own, Fleuren realized he could punish her in many horrible ways and keep her alive. She would have to do his bidding until she could escape him.

This trial would be her first attempt to comply with his commands. She hoped it failed. "Let us begin." With a nod to Persimmone's men, one each behind a priest, T'Dar gave the command with a tilt of his head.

Fleuren swallowed the bile racing for release as the slash of a knife slid across the throat of the first priest in line. Raising her hands, palm out, she recited the words to bind the souls to her. "*Adeo mihi, meus mos pareo.*" She pulled the compounds needed to preserve the body, a chemical created from wood, and alkaline, from deep in the earth. As the blood drained, life leaving the physical body, a hazy remnant of vapor rose above the priest and drifted toward Fleuren. A wisp of vapor kept it tethered to its physical form staring straight ahead with vacant eyes. This action repeated until all six of the Tekelrahian were murdered and placed under T'Dar's control, with Fleuren as the puppet master.

"What's going on?" Persimmone asked, unable to see the tethered souls of the priests.

T'Dar gave a glee-filled glance to the priests, still kneeling in a row. He clapped his hands in three quick movements, and the clothing on the priests transformed into deeply hooded robes. "Progress, Persimmone. Behold my new religious order, the Monks of Silence, and our subtle entry into every clan in Kellshae."

Although those around her could no longer observe the vacant eyes of the priests, Fleuren could see their earthbound spirits, could hear their cries at the injustice she'd committed. T'Dar may refer to them as Monks of Silence, but they were far from soundless to her. At her hand, Fleuren had given T'Dar his monks, walking corpses unable to speak with their physical husks of flesh, not able to die again, but forced to conduct any command given them by her or the god, until she released their souls; or, released with her own death.

Inside, Fleuren cried for the atrocity she had committed, prayed she would die before having to realize T'Dar's and Persimmone's vision through. Well, she thought, it would be easy enough to taunt Persimmone into killing me.

Chapter Four

KAREINA WOKE IN a foul mood when Melrick entered her tent. Dawn had yet to pierce the horizon, and she had fallen into an alcohol-induced sleep moments before. “What is it?” she asked, clutching the fur blanket tighter. Kareina scrubbed a hand over her eyes in an attempt to erase the grogginess.

Melrick gave a bitter chuckle. Kareina knew he disapproved of her recently acquired habit of drinking in order to sleep. “There was a fire in the women’s quarters less than an hour ago,” he told her, “almost destroying the whole place. Not that you noticed the commotion, I see.” There had always been a subtlety in his scolding, done with an infliction of voice. It didn’t take away the sting it left behind. Melrick had mentioned his observation of her excessive ale drinking and the repercussions, but she’d ignored him. He couldn’t begin to understand a woman’s reasons. Nor did she intend to share them with him or anyone. How she chose to kill herself was her business. He was correct in this matter, though, she should be more alert as it could be at the cost of her life.

“Mayliandra,” came the sudden realization, “is she all right?” Kareina didn’t wait for an answer. Accustomed to sleeping in her clothes when on maneuvers, there were only boots to pull on to be dressed. She grabbed the leather strap of her scabbard and buckled it around her waist as she rushed from the tent.

Melrick caught up when she paused to survey the chaos in the courtyard, but he didn’t say anything in explanation. Servants were hustling up the outside stairwell of the left tower with buckets of water drawn from the well by two guards. A group of about twenty women and four men huddled against a rock wall, coughing and choking from the excessive smoke they’d inhaled, their faces smudged with soot. Mayliandra wasn’t among them.

Turning to Melrick, Kareina waited for the answer she hadn’t let him give a moment ago. “After I fixed her lip,” he said in hushed tones, “I constructed a place for her to sleep in the tent Olaf and I share.” He shrugged at her glare. “You do remember suggesting a tent and guards. I thought it as easy to guard her from our own, than to waste manpower.”

“I trust you slept well enough through the inconvenience,” she said, surprised with her own sarcasm. Since when had Kareina cared who Melrick slept with? His visage would be more pleasant to gaze upon to a woman. Well, at least to the woman intended to be her wife.

Kareina noticed Melrick grin, before he looked away from her. “She warned this would happen,” he said, clearing his throat.

“You don’t need to remind me, Captain. It could be coincidental. Check, discreetly, though. I don’t want anyone curious about why we’d assume this to be anything other than an accident.”

When Melrick left her side, she turned around and headed for the Captain’s tent, feeling tired from a long night, and annoyed there wouldn’t even be an issue if her father had stayed out of her affairs. Kareina realized her mood had grown worse. She jerked the tent flap to the right and stormed inside. Olaf, sword in hand, jumped to his feet from a cot stationed in front of a barrier of fur blankets slung across a rope attached to the tent poles.

“Karr,” he said, relaxing his defensive stance.

The mention of her name brought Mayliandra from behind the fur barrier. The woman's eyes were swollen and red, her hands twisting together, as she walked to Olaf and stopped close by his side. Kareina battled with wanting to throttle the woman for making the conscious, or even unconscious, choice of her Guard Chief as protector, and with wanting to embrace and assure Mayliandra all would be well. It was aggravating. Not to mention frustrating Mayliandra stirred emotions she wasn't expecting. Kareina hadn't needed to worry about role distinctions, or pay it much attention before this moment, having spent her waking hours as a male. In this guise, Kareina had done minor petting to feel the softness she so craved, but had never followed her heart in that matter. She couldn't understand why she battled with the desires now. Had her mother's words, the night before she left Gradyln, placed these reactions in her head?

Kareina gave her attention to Olaf, who stood rigid in protection mode. They looked good together, she realized grudgingly. Olaf towered over Mayliandra by about half a foot, but they had so many similarities. Their eyes were alike; hers were dark-brown, his honey-brown. Both were blonde; her hair had gold highlights, his red. Olaf still had a handsome, if boyish, face though he was two cycles older than Kareina's twenty-six. Mayliandra was more than beautiful. Olaf was the embodiment of the handsome warrior Mayliandra expected to marry, as daughter of a clan leader.

She felt chilled by the perception. "I sent Melrick to check on the fire," Kareina told them. "As I never had intentions of remaining here long, and with the current situation, I want you to gather the men and prepare to leave Bredwine before dusk. Since we're all awake anyway, there shouldn't be a problem with getting provisions for the journey."

"Aye, Sher Karr." Olaf paused. A sudden look of concern clouded his features. "What about Mayliandra?"

"Shei Mayliandra," Kareina corrected. "You haven't the liberty to address her by anything other than her title. Understood, Guard Chief?"

Olaf winced at the harshness of her tone, looking confused. Kareina felt like a heel, but she had spoken before she thought to soften or halt it.

"My deepest apologies, Shei Mayliandra, Sher Karr," he said in stiff formality, bowed and left the tent.

Kareina wanted to apologize, but stifled the urge. She knew this turn of events could work for the best. If Mayliandra saw her as cold and harsh, the eventual release from the betrothal would be a welcomed relief—to them both. "Hellfire." Kareina dropped onto the cot. Suffering the effects of little sleep, she would give anything for the ground to open and swallow her into the abyss. She'd always maintained the charade of her identity without resorting to titles and ranks before this. Kareina never expected so much strain could accompany a betrothal. Mayliandra, she noted, stood so stiff she'd topple at the slightest breeze.

It seemed time became unending as they waited for the return of Melrick or Olaf, anybody, yet it was minutes when both men reappeared. The tension radiating from all four felt oppressive. "What did you learn?" Kareina asked Melrick, glad for something other than her own tortured thoughts. Mayliandra hadn't uttered a sound since Olaf left, but his arrival brought a grin to her lips. For a heartbeat, Kareina was jealous of her Guard Chief.

Melrick shook his head. "The fire was first spotted by a servant when she went to check on the Shei." He pointed to Mayliandra. "Said she was concerned and wanted to offer her services."

"So an accident after all." From his frown, Kareina knew he didn't believe it. "Is there something you wish to add to dispel the theory?" she asked.

“The servant belongs to Armin’s clan.” Melrick frowned. “She had injuries to her person, not caused by the fire.”

Olaf shrugged. “It’s possible to be an old injury.”

Melrick took a deep breath. “No. Apparently, Armin didn’t want his concern acknowledged. Armin has beaten the woman, from what I could learn. He had sent the servant to ensure the Shei was safe, and the servant failed to do so.”

Mayliandra paled. “Beaten because of me?”

Kareina looked at Melrick. His tight lips told her he believed foul play involved. “There’s something else to convince you?”

He winced. “Soot covered bruises and blood.”

“Why is that important?” Mayliandra asked.

Kareina stood and began to pace. “If the servant was beaten after, the soot wouldn’t cover the damage.” She stopped and stared at Mayliandra. The woman looked like she would cry again, and Kareina heard her mumbling “because of me” repeatedly. “Are the men prepared for traveling?” Kareina asked Olaf.

“Just about,” he told her, “should be another hour, maybe two.”

“Good. Gives us some time,” Kareina said. The morning’s events had given her plenty of opportunity to think, about many things.

“Questioning local merchants?” Melrick asked.

“Yes,” Kareina walked to the tent flap and flung it open, “and for Tac to split supplies and the men into two groups,” she said over her shoulder.

Olaf frowned. “Separate the men, for what?”

“In due time, right now get Mayliandra ready to journey. It’s not safe for her to remain here without an armed guard.” A dark thought occurred to Kareina. “Unless you wish the duty as your own, Olaf?” He shook his head, a question in his expression. “Make sure she gets a reliable and proper horse. I’ll saddle Starsinger and meet you three in the courtyard in half an hour.”

“Sher Karr, wait.” Mayliandra moved toward Kareina with hesitant steps. “While your men take care of your orders, could you take me to the injured servant?” Kareina, about to refuse, saw the guilt swimming in Mayliandra’s eyes and gave pause. “Please, my lord.”

“Very well, but let’s be quick about it.” Kareina turned and held the flap for Mayliandra to exit the tent. Unfamiliar with the layout of this clan’s castle, Kareina said, “Lead the way, my lady.”

Mayliandra smiled at the words, and Kareina’s stomach tightened, amazed at how beautiful she was, how her eyes lightened with the expression of amusement. Kareina shook her head, knowing it was lack of proper sleep having her respond like a besotted fool.

They moved to the side of the castle to the kitchens and servants entrance to see a large amount of people milling about. Kareina felt Mayliandra grasp her hand firmly. Mayliandra tugged her to the right and through large wooden double doors into a storeroom full of numerous crates, barrels, and sacks. She all but shoved Kareina behind a stack of crates. Kareina was about to protest, but Mayliandra placed her hand over Kareina’s mouth and shook her own head. As if that might not be enough to make her point, Mayliandra whispered, “Father and Armin.”

Kareina straightened, ready to confront both men.

Her intention must have been obvious as Mayliandra tightened the pressure to Kareina’s mouth, pressing her body closer, as if a human barricade. “Please, my lord, have a care,” she whispered. It was then Kareina heard their voices, realizing they must have stopped a bit outside

the storeroom. Kareina tried to focus on the conversation; but it proved difficult with the warmth of Mayliandra flush against her.

“It was foolish to take things this far, Armin. Mayliandra is pledged to Clan Gradyln, for Sher Karr.”

“I wanted to apologize for my rudeness earlier,” Armin was saying. “I wouldn’t have harmed your daughter, my friend.”

Oriun gave a snort. “I doubt you would have controlled yourself, friendship or not. Which is why I rejected your initial offer for her hand. Had Karr refused—”

Kareina felt Mayliandra stiffen and tremble. She reached around Mayliandra’s waist and held her in place, trying to provide her some measure of reassurance with the contact. It must have worked because Mayliandra removed her hand from Kareina’s mouth, only to let it drop as far as Kareina’s shoulder. The thought occurred to Kareina that, to an outside observer, their closeness could resemble a romantic embrace. Odd, but the image made her happy. It would take little effort to bend forward and kiss Mayliandra soundly on the lips. Kareina shook herself. Where is this coming from?

“Ah, here come your men.” Oriun said. “I will expect financial compensation for the damage you’ve made, Armin. But for now, I will return to the morning meal you tore me from.” There was the sound of shuffling, followed by solid footsteps. Armin said, bitterness lacing each word, “Get more men and scour the castle and grounds for the little bitch Mayliandra. Truss her up so she doesn’t get away, and take her to my quarters. Make certain no one sees you.” He gave a harsh chuckle. “Need to think of a way to lay blame at the upstart Karr’s feet. Make a fool of me, will he, and assume he can get away with it. I think not. Well, what are you waiting for? Get going.” There was a moment of silence. “I’ll have control of Bredwine, no matter what I have to do.”

Kareina felt herself become rigid in anger. This Caldier couldn’t even manage a frontal attack. The hand on her shoulder squeezed, and Kareina looked down into warm brown eyes gazing back with understanding. She gave Mayliandra a quick smile. “We need to get back to my men,” Kareina said in hushed tones. “Can we check on the servant later?” At Mayliandra’s nod, Kareina added, “I’ll do what I can for her, but right now you’re my main concern.”

A look of shock crossed Mayliandra’s features. “Thank you, my lord,” Mayliandra said, before she pulled away from Kareina.

THE MORNING SUN felt warm on Kareina’s face as she, Melrick, Olaf and Mayliandra rode into the town proper of Bredwine. Merchants already displayed their wares on tables outside their shops, ready to conduct the work day, though there were few left who were still in business. They left their horses with Olaf outside an Inn at the far end of town and walked down the main street. Kareina walked with Mayliandra in tow down one side of the street, while Melrick went to question those merchants on the other.

The merchants they approached were much the way she had expected: none smiled, women hesitated from meeting their gaze, and all dressed hardly better than beggars. Even Mayliandra, daughter of a Caldier, dressed in a simple tunic, as she had earlier, of a light brown color, dressing nothing like her station should have demanded.

“Have the raiders taken so much your Clan is reduced to poverty?” Kareina asked the silent woman beside her.

Mayliandra stopped. Kareina hadn't expected the Shei to bristle at the question. She was thrusting out her chin as she stared into Kareina's eyes. "It's a well-known fact our clans differ, Sher Karr. Here, women have no worthy place other than servants to whatever whim strikes the men. The men, unless a warrior, aren't treated much different. It has always been our way and we accept it. Does it seem barbaric to you?"

It did, but Kareina wasn't going to give the obvious as an answer. Shouldn't the people have revolted by now? She had intended to respond with a lie, until Mayliandra shook her head. The look of defiance, one Kareina had caught a quick glimpse of last evening, once again sparked in the woman's eyes. Kareina chuckled good-naturedly, something she hadn't done for quite some time. "You expect me to voice a denial. Do you hunt for telltale signs in a twitch, a cough, something to give me away?"

Mayliandra blushed. "Partly." Kareina raised a questioning eyebrow. "I wanted to see if you'd deceive your future wife, to observe your opinion of my people, your people once we wed. Also in part, to be aware of how you might regard me. I apologize for my abrupt tone, my lord."

Not knowing how to respond, Kareina was thankful when Melrick joined them, preventing her need to say a word. Instead, she asked Melrick, "Finished?"

"Not much to find out," he said. "I've gone to three merchants. They all say the trade caravans have ceased to come in, and they fear exporting any, no matter how much trade they need. One man even implied dreading the raiders will come into the town, as done in some of the outlying towns, though he doesn't claim to know another town would be safer. In fact, the one thing new to this clan is the arrival of Monks, though they haven't left the warehouse they're converting into a church. Fear breeds religious cults."

"Have the merchants no faith in their clan's warriors? In their Caldier?" Kareina had meant the questions rhetorically, already knowing the answer, and sorry she stated it aloud.

"No." Mayliandra gave a sad smile. "It's why Father sent for you," she said. "My father heard of your reputation. Then again, who in Kellshae hasn't?" She shrugged. "He hoped you'd come, whether you wanted a wife or not. We're farmers, not warriors. Your clan gains trade, we gain protection." Mayliandra dropped her gaze to the ground. "Father appreciated, also, the expedient way to rid himself of a daughter, even if it meant losing his best servant."

Conscious of self-doubt, she recognized Mayliandra's mannerism for what it was. The woman still hadn't raised her head. "What if my—" Kareina stopped and took a deep breath. The timid woman didn't need to hear Hassid had confirmed a betrothal she knew nothing about. "What would your father have done had I not accepted?"

"Chosen another Caldier or Sher. Neither Armin nor Jurquette have wives, Armin's died less than a year ago. Although, now we know Armin had offered and been refused. There has to be another regent's son willing to take me on, for the profit, if not for heirs."

Kareina supposed Caldier Oriun must be desperate, and a fool to think about giving his daughter to either of those men, and she used the word men loosely. Given to Armin, Mayliandra would suffer regular beatings and mauled by the fattest paws in Kellshae. Jurquette wouldn't be much better, though Kareina had noticed no obvious faults, other than his age, to criticize, yet. Did either of these men have sons? If Hassid hadn't accepted the bargain, she would never have cared; but he had, whether Kareina liked the situation or not, and would have to find a resolution to suit them both. She shook her head to clear the frustrating thoughts.

"What's wrong?" Mayliandra asked, putting her hand gently on Kareina's forearm.

"Nothing," she said, her tone too sharp, moving out of the woman's reach and regretting the impulsiveness of the action when Mayliandra's head drooped again.

Melrick must have sensed the reason for Kareina's change in mood. "There's little else to learn here, Sher Karr. May I suggest we get some food from the Inn before we leave? I've missed breaking my fast, and am wasting away," he said, giving Mayliandra a wink.

Kareina acceded the lead to Melrick and Mayliandra. Less than a yard covered, a raspy voice hollered from inside a shop Kareina believed closed a moment prior. "You'll need the Talisman before you go."

Kareina stopped and peered into the open doorway. Inside, a single candle burned, giving off little light. The sun shined bright outside, but the layers of grime on the glass window didn't allow it to penetrate. On a stool in the far corner sat an elderly woman in a worn tunic, her hair not having seen a comb in many days, possibly decades. Curious and cautious as to the woman's meaning, Kareina stepped over the threshold. "Do you speak to us?" she asked.

The old woman gave a snort and shifted on the stool, which squeaked in protest. "Do you see anyone else about?"

Kareina moved closer, a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth at the woman's insolence. The old woman was smiling, too, which revealed stained and rotted teeth. The candle sat on a table strewn with bracelets, earrings, and necklaces of all types and sizes; the flame flickered and Kareina noted the woman's eyes were sightless. "What need have I of a talisman, unnecessary—and illegal—since Harmony?"

Behind her, Kareina noted, Melrick leaned against the door's frame and Mayliandra perused the dust-covered wares.

"The Talisman of D'Kelri is very necessary." The old woman stood and walked to Kareina in small, tired steps, stuffing a wad of worn leather into Kareina's tunic pocket. "It will help you fight the evil magic you're to face."

Absurd, Kareina thought. Age had warped the woman's mind. "There has been no true magic in Kellshae for a hundred years. If there was, we would have been alerted by the Priests of Tekelrah." After all, it was the job of the priests to contain magic from the world, when once their job to teach its use.

Poking a bony finger into Kareina's chest, she snorted. "Evil magic has been returned. The Priests are all dead by its hand. Narilla knows, has seen the signs. That is what you seek, warrior, the evil."

Melrick chuckled from the doorway. "These people really are afraid. Look how it affects, and addles, the mind."

Narilla twisted her sightless gaze toward him. "I have all my wits about me, young man." She poked Kareina again, but didn't turn her sightless gaze from Melrick's direction. "This one will need the talisman if the evil is to be stopped." Poking twice more, she gave her attention to Kareina and frowned, and brought gnarled hands to Kareina's face. Kareina tried to shift out of reach, but the old woman was remarkably strong for her advanced years. Narilla's fingers felt rough and twisted, but there was also warmth in the contact. "Now I better understand the signs. The double image is clear." Kareina felt her cheeks burn. Had the woman guessed, felt in some way, she wasn't the "him" she claimed to be? If so, Kareina didn't want the old woman to blurt it aloud. She turned to Melrick.

"Maybe—"

The woman placed her gnarled hand over Kareina's mouth and shook her head. Narilla turned to where Mayliandra stood enthralled with one of the necklaces from the table. "Good choice, child," Narilla cooed, wobbling as she moved to the Shei's side. "The piece fits the

daughter of a Caldier. More importantly, it fits the task necessary as future wife of this Gradyln warrior.”

Mayliandra’s eyes widened. “How did you know?”

“I don’t need eyes to see everything. Narilla knows a great deal. Nothing to cloud the images I see here,” she said, pointing a finger to her disheveled head. “Do you approve of your betrothed’s choice?” Narilla asked Kareina, crooking a finger to indicate she should join them.

“Oh, no, Sher Karr,” Mayliandra stammered. “I chose nothing.”

Inspecting the piece Mayliandra held, Kareina noted it was made of numerous golden-brown gems climbing up the chain, with a center gem made of a black stone the size of a small child’s fist. The black stone had a mirrored sheen. Kareina sensed Mayliandra was waiting for a reprimand because she was intrigued with the piece. Her hands trembled and her brown eyes grew large with fear. “It suits perfectly,” Kareina said, before she could catch herself.

“No, Sher—”

“Do you deny your betrothed already?” Kareina swallowed hard; surprised she’d made the statement, as Mayliandra must be hearing the question. Both of them flushed in embarrassment. “Turn around, let me place it properly.” With an audible gulp, Mayliandra turned and grasped her long length of golden hair and pulled it away, exposing the white flesh of her neck. Kareina had to take a moment to control her impulse to kiss the bare skin presented to her. Her own hands trembling, Kareina fumbled with the clasp, managed to release it; before she reached up and over Mayliandra’s shoulders. She draped the necklace and reattached the clasp, trying not to make contact with the skin. Heaving an audible sigh when the task accomplished, Kareina gave a light tap to Mayliandra’s covered arm. “Done.”

Mayliandra turned back to her, a glistening in her brown eyes. All of a sudden, she had Kareina in an embrace, arms tight around her waist, breasts firm below Kareina’s own bound ones. “Thank you, my lord.”

The warmth of Mayliandra’s breath as she spoke the words into her ear had Kareina’s pulse racing, the heat of her searing Kareina with a need she’d believed abandoned long ago. Pressed together as they were, Kareina suspected her secret revealed, but Mayliandra released her, a look of awkwardness on her beautiful features.

Narilla cleared her throat. “You and the young man,” she said to Mayliandra, waving a hand toward Melrick, “should wait outside while we complete this transaction.” Melrick and Mayliandra looked to Kareina. She nodded. When they left, Narilla went back to her stool, which creaked as she squirmed into a comfortable position. “You battle more than evil, I see.”

“And what do you see?” Kareina asked, in hopes anger would replace the turmoil coursing through her from her body’s response to Mayliandra.

“The double image which so bewildered me.” Narilla frowned and rubbed a hand across her chin. “The vision showing you must fight yourself before you can conquer the evil.”

“Evil and magic, you said.” Kareina was confused. The raiders were a wicked lot, but not from an evil magic. Great magic had died out long ago; even children’s games no longer spoke of them. These days even simple magic guarded since outlawed by the Priests of Tekelrah.

Narilla shook her head. “My vision saw the Eye of T’Dar. Old magic has risen, and the Priests have fallen. Soon many will feel the vibrations through the earth, through their souls if they have magic linked to their blood. What you seek is in the Valley of Mist. Where the true and telling battle will begin to end for you.”

Kareina tensed; double images, magic and visions from a sightless crone. How much did this old woman truly see, and how much the overwrought workings of a withering mind? It was

impossible for the woman to know her identity. And yet, she had recognized Mayliandra who hadn't said a word. How? The Shei lived here, shopped with these people. Without sight, Narilla must rely on her senses of smell, or something similar. Reasoning made Kareina relax a bit.

"What else have you seen?"

"Be at ease, dear one. No one shall learn of your true self from me. Many secrets of my own I carry. However, I give you this: you are wrong about your betrothed. Her heart is as your own, despite neither recognizing when confronted with it. She will provide salvation when needed most," Narilla said.

Kareina snorted.

Narilla shook her head. "Remember what I've told you. The Valley of Mist is where you must go. There you will die in order to live."

When Narilla closed her eyes and leaned her head back, silent for a long time, Kareina realized the woman had nothing else to offer, or wouldn't offer more. Such was the way with the old witches, give enough to pique and more riddle than answer. She pulled three silver coins from the leather pouch tied at her waist and tossed them on the table before leaving.

Outside, Melrick and Mayliandra waited. Kareina walked ahead of them when it appeared they wanted to question her about the encounter and headed for the Inn, hearing their footsteps follow. Kareina didn't expect she could put much into the old crone's words, but couldn't get the last from swirling around in her head. You will die in order to live. What in the goddess' name was that supposed to mean? Dead was dead. Although, Kareina thought, it would be the simplest way out of this betrothal charade.

Chapter Five

THE INN WAS small, having no sign or banner to claim, no name other than inn, as would those various establishments in her clan territories. Kareina guessed, as the only one in the area, it could get away without one, since it boasted nothing with which to recount tavern tales by campfire. The inn appeared clean, though run-down, and even had an area on the far side where they could sit outdoors under a short, sloped roof. They chose to sit outside in order to avoid the stares of the men in the main room, and whispers from the instant they'd entered the building. The tables were meager in size, thus leaving Mayliandra to sit with Kareina, while Melrick and Olaf shared the next.

Kareina didn't care for the arrangement, not being much for conversation, but didn't want to raise any speculations with the patrons or innkeeper as to why she didn't sit with her betrothed, as she was certain the news had already reached the populace.

The short, skinny innkeeper came to the table rubbing his hands on a worn yet clean apron. "I'm Yurn, Sher. How may I serve?"

"We'll have whatever edibles you've the most of, and ale for my men and myself." Kareina turned to Mayliandra. "Do you drink the ale, or would you prefer something else with your meal?"

Mayliandra blushed. "It isn't evening, Sher Karr."

Stunned by the obviousness, and upset at the evidence of the wifely nagging, Kareina scoffed. "I realize this. What will you drink?"

Yurn coughed into his hand, but didn't say anything. Mayliandra scowled. "Because of the lack of caravans and supplies, the women eat once, in the evening. Men and male children over twelve seasons can have more than evening meals, their strength more deserving of the maintenance."

Kareina, rankled by the absurdity, glared at the Innkeeper. "I don't care for the policy. She is your Shei, and deserves better treatment. You'll serve all four or none at all." Yurn paled, his lips quivering as if he feared a horrific outcome in denying the demand. "Before you finalize whatever response you're about to make," Kareina said, giving her best scowl, "know we're hungry." She stood, towering over him and resting her hand on the hilt of her sword. "I'm not pleasant to deal with when hungry."

Olaf chuckled, but Melrick pulled a leather pouch from inside his shirt. "Would it be easier for you if we paid extra to include the Shei, and have provisions sent you to replenish what it takes to prepare our meals?"

Licking thin lips, his gaze trained on the pouch, Yurn nodded.

"What do you desire for refreshment, Shei Mayliandra?" Melrick asked.

"Ale will be fine," she stammered, wide-eyed.

After the Innkeeper hustled away, Kareina plopped down in the chair in disgust. The customs of Clan Bredwine made her stomach churn. Mayliandra's docile acceptance didn't help. As Shei,

she should expect, receive, and even demand better treatment. “This clan is full of lunatics,” Kareina mumbled.

“As yours may seem to me,” Mayliandra said.

Kareina mumbled an apology, yet held off further comment when Yurn brought out four tankards. She grabbed one and took a long drink. The morning was as difficult to endure as the prior evening, but the ale, she knew from experience, would make her feel better by dulling thought and emotion. For a while anyway, she reminded herself.

At their separate table, Melrick and Olaf talked in whispers. She wished she could join their conversation, unable to think of how to begin one with Mayliandra, who sat toying with the necklace. Deciding it as good a topic as any, Kareina pointed to it. “It’s an attractive piece, more so on you,” she commented. The Shei gave no response, seeming to be at a loss for words herself. Kareina wondered how she was to devote a lifetime to a wife’s moody silence. She felt the heat of embarrassment burn her cheeks. There would be no lifetime wife, Kareina thought while directing her gaze to the street. Besides, silence does solve the conversation problem.

MAYLIANDRA LOOKED TO see what had caught Sher Karr’s attention from the street of merchants. Few were about; the way it was since the raiders started their invasions, in what resembled a lifetime ago. She looked down to the necklace with her image reflecting in the black stone. Realizing she shouldn’t hold the Sher responsible for his curtness, Karr a great warrior after all, Mayliandra tried to imagine how she would ever get accustomed to it. Start small, she decided, also using the necklace as a focus.

“Yes, it is an attractive piece, and thank you,” she said, acknowledging the offhand compliment, glancing up at Karr, who regarded the object in her hand. “It’s probably shameful and foolish to you, my finding it so, but I see it as most beautiful in its simplicity. I don’t even have the proper outfit to wear it with, yet will wear it with pride.”

“You will,” Karr said. He blinked rapidly, as if pulling thoughts from far away, and drained the tankard of ale. “My mother will see to it.”

“Do we return to your clan before going after the raiders?” Mayliandra asked with genuine curiosity. It was her impression they would journey straight away to the battlefields, a frightening, yet exhilarating thought. “Isn’t your home out of the way?”

“We don’t return there, you do.” Karr handed the empty tankard to Yurn, who had returned with four plates of stew swimming in a steaming greasy broth.

“But—” She stifled her protest. Karr stared at her with a raised eyebrow, a characteristic she found both amusing and frustrating about him, and could turn into quite an endearing expression. Mayliandra wished she had the nerve to berate him for treating her as a child, but it would confirm the need to treat her as such.

Mayliandra didn’t know what to make of her betrothed. One moment Karr acted with such strength of will, defending her in a hall of warriors who couldn’t care less how a woman was treated. He hadn’t even been concerned if she was a servant, let alone he, in actuality, defended a Shei. Another moment he showed tenderness such as when her lip bled, and the support when they hid from her father and Armin.

Mayliandra remembered the thrill of their physical contact, though the emotions of pleasure and heat it stirred had startled and scared her. Her feelings of passion had never come from a

male's touch—before Karr. No, she couldn't acknowledge where her true attractions lay. She had a duty as Shei to her clan.

Mayliandra shook her head and resumed her contemplation of her betrothed. Karr was hard and bitter, strong and teasing, as if many personalities inhabited his body, each a catalyst, while keeping a constant war raging within him.

What had Narilla meant by the “double image?” Mayliandra had no wish to see the bloodshed spilled when Karr went after the raiders, but she had hoped she would learn much needed information about the man with whom she'd spend the rest of her lifetime. Maybe she could make herself useful to his eyes during the time. Instead, Karr planned to cart her off to his home where she'd have to learn secondhand. She should be happy to avoid her wifely duties for as long as possible, but Mayliandra's heart expressed an uncharacteristic enthusiasm to be near Karr.

Eating the meal in silence had it settling heavy in her stomach. Mayliandra tried to imagine the kind of Caldier and Caldie who could raise such a perplexing son, unaware her face mirrored the visions flashing to mind, until jolted from them by Olaf's teasing laughter.

“What, Melrick, do you think can cause such a look on a woman? Was it the meal? Possible. Or Karr's lack of conversation producing the distress?” Olaf asked, pushing his empty plate away and leaning his elbows on his table.

Mayliandra looked to see what affect the comment had on Karr, but he gave none, only downed the contents of his second ale. She stared at the empty tankard, and then Karr. Last night he'd surpassed all the Caldiers in their drinking and she'd believed it due to his discomfort in the festivities. Now Mayliandra wondered if it went to a history of excess. How had he lasted so long on the battlefield if the case?

She didn't get an opportunity to answer her own question, realizing Karr stood and faced Olaf. Her mind suggested she stay out of whatever might happen, but her heart suggested this was an opportunity to demonstrate herself to be more than Sher Karr believed her. Mayliandra witnessed the effects of humiliation on Karr last night, and didn't wish to see that particular pain presented again.

Placing herself beside Karr, she said to Olaf, “The silence was my fault. I learned Sher Karr was having me sent to Gradyln.”

Their reactions were not what Mayliandra envisioned.

Olaf appeared stunned. “Ah. It's why Tac is separating the group.”

Melrick leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest. “Wish I could see Caldier Hassid's expression when the Shei turns up at the door.” He laughed, loud and hard.

Karr stared at her through narrowed eyes. “Do you wish to voice your objection now? Do not think you are getting the easy end of the deal.”

A blush burned Mayliandra's cheeks, presented with the chance to show a bit of mettle, knowing Karr tested her. Had Sher Karr's emotional states not been so fluctuating, she would have done so. Her ingrained reaction was to deny the obvious. “I don't understand,” Mayliandra said.

With a bitter chuckle, Karr shook his head. “I thought not. I'd have considered you stay with us, if you'd have shown some backbone.”

“What?” Melrick and Olaf gasped in unison.

“Maybe my mother can ensure the development of yours,” Karr stated.

The blush turned to frustration, her tone bitter, as she said, “How convenient for you, my lord.” All three turned in her direction, gaping. Instinct told Mayliandra to back down and

apologize, but she couldn't. She'd show Karr grit if it killed her. "If I objected, you wouldn't have wanted a female who might speak her mind. Because I didn't, I'm not strong-willed enough. Be honest, at least." Mayliandra sniffed. "Either way I respond, you have no intention of taking me on this journey with you."

When Karr stepped forward, she retreated. Mayliandra regretted doing it when he trembled in restrained temper, eyes blazing the emotion in a dark blue hue. "I won't hit you," he said with teeth clenched. "Stop responding as if I would."

"I have rumors, and the word of Melrick and Olaf, you wouldn't. How can I know for sure?"

"Because from my own lips I have stated this fact to you."

"Your actions suggest otherwise," Mayliandra stated, with a half-hearted shrug.

Karr paled, took a deep breath and two steps back. "Had you proven spirited enough earlier, I would have taken you, no matter how my better sense advised otherwise. Danger goes with us, but is preferable to bearing my father's company. As it is, you shall find my mother, Parrin, a saint among women. She'll care for you and keep my father at bay." Before Karr turned away, Mayliandra saw a flash of sadness cross his features. "She could use a true daughter to care for and look after."

The odd statement puzzled Mayliandra. Parrin had a true daughter, but she was dead. Why had Karr phrased it in that particular way? Karr jumped over the rail and mounted his horse, tethered a few yards away.

Olaf had grasped her elbow before she could protest and nudged her toward the main area of the inn; Melrick remained silent as he walked behind them. If she didn't dread living the rest of her life in Bredwine, Mayliandra would beg her father to recant the betrothal. Oriun would refuse, but also would further humiliate Sher Karr; something she was loathe to do, no matter his mercurial moods.

For reasons she couldn't fathom, Mayliandra had less of a wish for hurting Karr than she probably should have felt. She didn't want to make an enemy of the Sher. Mayliandra wasn't sure she could make a friendship before their marriage, but at least it was better than any future prospect if she remained in Bredwine.

She'd have Olaf and Melrick to talk to until dispatched to Gradyln. Unlike Karr, Olaf and Melrick were attractive, amusing, and didn't seem too bothered by her presence. Mayliandra felt a sharp spasm of shame. Karr, though scarred, wasn't unattractive. Something about Karr continued to speak to her heart.

Maybe all would be well if she considered the situation an adventure.

KAREINA WAS STILL angry with herself when she dismounted in front of her tent, barely registering the tent hadn't been broken down and packed. Her thoughts were elsewhere, failing to understand why she cared what Mayliandra felt about her. After all, if the old crone was correct, Kareina's death was imminent. There was something about Mayliandra making instincts of protection, desires to caress, course through Kareina as if a chance of happiness in that direction existed.

She glanced around, noted her men standing with the wagons and looking troubled. Tac raced over to her. "Sher Karr, a moment, my lord," Tac said, getting her attention before she entered the tent. From behind her, Kareina heard Melrick approach and jump from the saddle. "Captain," Tac said, acknowledging him and looking damned pleased to have someone else

nearby for support. “Caldier Oriun and some of his men are waiting for you, Sher, in your tent. They don’t seem at all happy.”

Olaf and Mayliandra had joined them. Kareina glanced in her direction to gauge her reaction to the news. Mayliandra seemed confused. Kareina entered the tent, Tac holding the flap for the others to follow behind her. At her entrance, Oriun raised his girth from where he sat on her cot. “Ah, Sher Karr,” he said. “Disturbing news has come to my attention.”

Armin pulled himself from the shadows. “I suggest you get straight to the point, Oriun. Before Karr has a chance to run off with your daughter, and sully her reputation further.”

“Karr has done no such thing, Father,” Mayliandra said with more fire than Kareina expected to hear from her.

“Of course not, Daughter, but there have been many disturbing rumors around the castle.”

“Started by Armin, no doubt,” Mayliandra mumbled.

“Hush, Mayliandra. It’s not of consequence.” Oriun directed his attention to Kareina. “It has come to my attention Mayliandra spent the night away from her rooms. Also, your men have made purchase of a horse. Is it your intention to remove my daughter from her home?” He crossed his arms over his massive girth. “Before the marriage vows are taken?”

“Father, you—” Mayliandra placed herself in front of Kareina.

The unexpected reaction brought a small grin to Kareina’s lips. Gently, she moved Mayliandra out of the way. No matter what Kareina said in her own defense, there was only one possible outcome; and, she knew what was coming. In spite of all warning bells going off in Kareina’s head, common sense told her there was no way she could leave Bredwine without the course she dreaded most. Armin had maneuvered Oriun into action, told him Bredwine could lose any clan union, unless Oriun take proper steps. “Yes, Caldier Oriun, Mayliandra was under Gradyln protection last night. I worried for the safety of my betrothed. And in light of the terrible events transpiring, I was correct to extend the protection.”

Armin moved closer to Oriun. “She wasn’t in her rooms before the fire. Where was she?”

Kareina placed a hand on the hilt of her sword, directing a glare at Armin. “And you were in my betrothed’s sleeping quarters for what purpose in order to know this? She’s promised to me, is she not? If you intended to besmirch my honor, or that of my future wife, I demand satisfaction—in battle.” Armin flushed bright red. “Mayliandra is too important to our clans, Oriun, to have this—this cur destroy our alliance.”

Oriun put up a dismissive hand. “Karr, please, excuse Armin his fervent vein. I do not believe honor was intentionally maligned, or needs result in bloodshed.” Oriun clapped his meaty hands together and another man moved out of the shadows from the rear of the tent. “I do need to protect my precious daughter’s honor.”

From the corner of her eye, Kareina noticed Mayliandra trembled at the sight of the man. “Mayliandra?”

Rather than answer right away, Mayliandra shook her head as tears filled her eyes. “Father, no, it isn’t right this way.”

“Will you deny your intended to leave Bredwine with him?” Oriun asked.

Armin took a hasty step forward. “His men have had your room cleared of all your possessions.” Kareina shifted closer to Mayliandra, giving a snarl in Armin’s direction, and almost laughing aloud when he moved to hide behind Oriun.

Mayliandra said, “I thought to learn of my future home while Sher Karr was saving our people, and the many people from all the clans. Karr is honorable, as are his men. I have been treated with the utmost respect.”

Shaking his head, Oriun said, "You should have come to me sooner, either of you."

"Would the outcome be any different than you now intend?" asked Mayliandra in a whisper.

"It's all right." Kareina placed an arm across Mayliandra's shoulder, giving a reassuring squeeze.

"No, Sher Karr, you don't understand."

"Yes, my dear, I do."

Melrick and Olaf stepped closer. "How do you wish to handle this, Sher Karr?" Melrick asked.

Kareina turned her head. Tears dropped full speed down Mayliandra's cheeks, and Kareina resisted the impulse to wipe them away. "I'm sorry, child, as you haven't been given time to adjust to this set of affairs." A knot of anxiety tightened in Kareina's own stomach. Had she been thinking, she would have foreseen this before now. Oddly, her apprehension wasn't for herself, the outcome she was afraid to take made for her.

Baffling her, though, was Kareina felt strangely exhilarated. She feared Mayliandra was dreading the result, especially if the crying were an indication. Well, Mayliandra would never have to worry about her place from this moment forward. Parrin would have a daughter, Mayliandra would be safe from men such as Armin, and for herself a reason to escape and not look back to Kellshae. "Stand straight, gentlemen," Kareina said in Melrick and Olaf's direction. "Shei Mayliandra is about to become my wife."

Chapter Six

WITH HER NERVES on edge, Tiilaen approached the Tent of Council. She knew it an honor to be summoned into that holy place, but with the nightmares she'd been suffering for the last three nights, of people and places she'd never seen, places spoken of in nightmares, the command seemed more like a prophetic bidding of doom. Her mate, Stechyc, with the delivery of the request, indicated arguing the matter was useless when she added one of her patent lopsided grins. Tiilaen wanted to wipe it from her lips with kisses, but also knew she couldn't postpone a demand made by the Matron Mage. Instead, she took her lover into her embrace and planted a kiss to Stechyc's warm lips. Stechyc held her, coaxed the kiss deeper, their bodies melding close. With reluctance, Tiilaen pulled from her lover's embrace and reached a hand to cup Stechyc's chin. "Something you want to tell me?"

Shaking her head, Stechyc replied, "There's change in the air."

"Should I worry?"

"You should be careful." Stechyc clasped Tiilaen's hand in hers. "Go to the Matron Mage. I'll get preparations started." With a final kiss, Stechyc pushed her out the door.

Tiilaen took several deep breaths, cleared her mind and entered the tent of the Matron Mage. The inside felt warm from a fire pit burning in the center. Large pillows circled the pit, and Tiilaen noted one was occupied. The woman, Leenatte, was magnificent, even kneeling on the pillow before the fire, with her long white hair in a thick braid hung below her waist. Her eyes were violet, her cheekbones high, skin tanned from time spent in the sun. She wore the robe of her position, a matching color to her eyes, tied with a rope belt; and from the belt hung numerous pouches carrying the powders of her trade.

"Blessings, Matron Mage."

"Blessings, Tiilaen. Come and sit," Leenatte invited, pointing to a pillow opposite her own. Before the seating, rest a small cup containing a brownish liquid. "Drink," the Matron Mage ordered. "I warn you, it's not pleasant."

Doing as commanded, Tiilaen sat, drank the liquid and gave a shudder at the bitter taste, directing her attention to the other woman. She instantly became uncomfortable with the scrutiny the Matron directed her way. "Why—"

Leenatte raised a hand for silence. "I'll get to the point of your alleged nightmares."

"Did Stechyc bother you with this?" Tiilaen felt a flash of disappointment in her mate.

"There was no need to tell, and no bother. Your eyes speak this by their very bruising. You should have come to me when they started."

Tiilaen gave a short laugh. "They're dreams, Matron. It will pass. My duties have not been neglected."

"No, not to Langear they haven't." Releasing one of the pouches at her waist, Leenatte opened it, took a pinch of the green powder from inside and sprinkled it upon the flame. A burst of smoke resulted. Inside the smoke, which hovered rather than dissipate, images began to coalesce. "But you neglected an ancient one, who bids your assistance."

Tiilaen frowned. “Who would call to me in my dreams?”

“A long distant relative, it would seem.” Leenatte stared intently at the images, as though interpreting them. “Blessed be,” the Matron Mage gasped, “Narilla.”

“Who is Narilla?”

“Shush, child. This is more important than even I first understood.” Leenatte studied the images playing randomly through the smoke. Though Tiilaen didn’t recognize many of the faces, maybe the old woman, yet she understood the importance of not interrupting a mage at work and began to commit the images to memory. After many moments, Leenatte cleared her throat, nodded, and whispered a few words. The images in the smoke began to fade until one, the old crone, remained. “Pay heed, child. Narilla speaks to you.” Leenatte pointed to the smoke. “This time, pay heed.”

Doing as bid, Tiilaen watched as the image shifted until the old woman stared at her—not stared, exactly. Tiilaen realized the eyes were sightless, but they seemed to bore into her very soul. The image’s lips moved, and Tiilaen caught herself leaning forward to hear what she was saying. In an instant, a tired voice filled the room.

“...not without your help. Evil is released...a battle on many levels. Your strength of heart and body will be needed for all to succeed.” The smoke shifted and the image of a battle-scarred man and a golden-haired beauty replaced Narilla’s. The scarred visage’s appearance seemed to shift then waver, becoming at once male and female.

“The talisman of D’Kelri is in her keeping, but she knows not how to use it. You will protect both until the time comes. But beware...” Narilla warned.

Another shift and the image turned pale and wraith-like in form. This visage had hate-filled eyes making Tiilaen shiver. The images separated. “He must be destroyed to release her.” Narilla’s image replaced them all. “Go with the grace of the gods, my great-niece.” The images and the smoke dispersed.

“Blessings be yours in the afterlife, ancient one.” Leenatte gave a small moan, before sighing, “She is gone.”

With a shake of her head, Tiilaen looked to the Matron Mage. “Gone?”

“She is no longer of this realm.” The Matron Mage whispered a prayer before she stood. “You have been given a great honor and a dangerous duty.”

“But I understand neither. Please, Matron, explain what has happened and what it had to do with my nightmares.”

“The nightmares were a vision-quest.” Walking to Tiilaen, she extended her arm. Taking the hand offered, Tiilaen rose to her feet and looked into the violet eyes meeting her own. “When you came to us, child, we knew you were of magic blood, but you never used sorcery, never had an interest. Instead, you chose the warrior path.” The mage smiled with understanding. “Your heart knew what would be needed.”

Tiilaen wished she understood. “Which is what?”

“Magic. You took a mage as mate, honed your body for battle. Together, you will complete the quest.” The Matron Mage took a step back. “We’ll need to convene with the others as there is much preparing to do before you leave the valley. You’re going to Kellshae.”

A knot tightened in Tiilaen’s stomach. She didn’t want to leave the valley. More so, she didn’t want to involve Stechyc in anything dangerous—especially outside the boundaries of mist. Kellshae was a land of barbarians, and the people ignorant of magic. Tiilaen groaned and remembered her mate’s parting words concerning preparations. Stechyc knew!

The Journey

Chapter Seven

MAYLIANDRA NO LONGER thought of the trip as an adventure by the time the two groups of warriors, one to stay with Karr and one her escort to Gradyln, had traveled for three days. She knew Karr had them moving slower to accommodate her comfort, as his arrival to Bredwine was much speedier; and, she wondered if Karr regretted his haste getting him to an immediate marriage. After introducing her to Tac, a burly man with patches of hair growing on the back of his neck, Karr had taken lead of the Gradyln procession and remained there without further word—at least no further words for her.

In the beginning, this brought her much delight. The thought of trying to talk to her husband—the word felt strange on her tongue—made her squirm because it brought a flush of warmth to her core. No doubt he'd find fault with anything I would say, she grouched. More terrible, would be stilted conversations with attempting to gauge every word for possible injury to him, even if he didn't react to them. Mayliandra knew Karr did her a great honor: he positioned guards on all sides for her safety; gave her a fine horse, Spirit, though she wondered at the name being a hidden insult (Skittish a more likely name); and, a Gradyln warrior came at regular intervals to check on her condition and needs. She hadn't the courage to request real companionship in conversation, rather the silence of diligent warriors.

Never having left Bredwine before this, Mayliandra believed they were close to the Tūlamic River. Karr, Melrick and Olaf were out of her sight, and other warriors not assigned to her, almost out of vision's range. It was unbearable. Suspecting she was about to intentionally receive a negative reception from Karr, Mayliandra took incentive to change her current situation. She knew it wouldn't be too long a time to suffer from Karr's anger for leaving her position in formation. If nothing else, one thing Mayliandra had gleaned a positive was Karr's displeasure, even in the form of silence, tended to be short lived.

Clicking the reins against the horse's neck, Mayliandra urged Spirit to a gallop, drawing gasps and curses from her unsuspecting guards. Truer to his name, Spirit sprang forward. The pounding of hooves on the dry dirt road alerted her at least one guard pursued. Mayliandra didn't relish returning to her position in the procession too soon. The warriors riding in the middle of the convoy laughed and teased the pursuing guard, but didn't attempt to slow or stop her to assist him. Leaning closer to Spirit's neck, she caressed it and whispered words she hoped would encourage the horse faster. Spirit's gait lengthened and Mayliandra caught sight of Karr ahead.

Karr had a strange look on his face but Mayliandra was too concerned with keeping her seat and out-distancing her pursuer to put an emotion to the expression. Once close, she pulled back on the reins and slowed Spirit.

“Stretching the horse’s legs, Shei Mayliandra?” Karr asked with no discernable emotion in his husky voice. His gaze shifted to her hair.

She reached up to pull the stray wisps from her vision. “Your men are harder to carry conversation with than are you.”

Karr chuckled, and held up a hand in the direction of the guard as he approached and muttered a stream of apologies. “Is this the type of care you have planned for the Shei’s journey home?” Karr asked.

“No, Sher Karr,” the guard stammered. “I had no indication Shei Mayliandra would run.”

“It’s my fault—”

“His duty is to be prepared,” Karr said, his gaze never leaving the guard, barely sixteen cycles. “Your life depends on his awareness, at the cost of his own life, if necessary.”

“You can’t mean to—” Mayliandra left the question unfinished and turned to the boy, Reene, introduced by Tac earlier. A film of sweat coated his face and she worried it came from fear of a torturous punishment. “What do you plan to do to him?”

“To Reene?” Karr sounded puzzled.

“Don’t be condescending, Karr. Who else are we talking about right now?” Mayliandra stiffened when they all began to laugh, her tense reaction made Spirit toss his head. She tightened her hold on the reins and waited.

KAREINA, LAUGHING, SHOOK her head and stared at Mayliandra. If she’d gained little else since meeting this woman, entertaining diversion topped the list. Kareina hadn’t found much to be cheerful about in recent years, but the Shei provided moments like a poultice to a wound with her innocence and naiveté. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d found such enjoyment, or had expressed amusement around others.

“Reene needs council on his dereliction, but you react as though—” Kareina squelched her laughter. “Hellfire.” She clenched her teeth, now recognizing the look in Mayliandra’s eyes. It resembled the one Parrin gave Hassid when standing her ground. “You believe me capable of, what, killing my own man?”

“I thought—”

“Silence,” Kareina demanded when Mayliandra moved her lips to finish her rebuttal. “No, you didn’t think. Or at the least you consider me a demon.” She rubbed at her eyes, trying to control the surge of fury and the trembling of her voice. As she pulled her hand away, Kareina’s attention focused on the visible scars. “You rely too heavily on appearances, Shei. Let me remove this monster from your site.” Kareina edged Starsinger back and nudged him into a turn and out of the formation, moving away from everyone. Kareina needed a lot of distance to regain her composure.

“It was a simple misunderstanding, Karr,” Olaf explained from behind her.

Melrick maneuvered his horse closer to Kareina’s, but she refused to acknowledge him, glad the first part of the journey was almost over, and rid of Mayliandra and her ridiculous and tiresome fears. Kareina urged Starsinger into a gallop. She had hoped Mayliandra had some spirit with her, heaven knew she’d need it in dealing with Hassid, but Mayliandra’s company was a

constant reminder of all the imperfections in who and what Kareina had become. The amusing diversion was no longer a laughing matter.

“I’m sure the Shei meant no harm,” Melrick said, riding up beside her.

“And I couldn’t care less,” Kareina said, urging Starsinger to a faster pace, which Melrick effortlessly maintained.

“That’s where you’re wrong.” Melrick shook his head. “If you don’t want to talk about it now, I understand of course.”

“I don’t.”

Melrick shrugged. “A one-sided chat never bothered me, either.” He chuckled, but it sounded half-hearted. “I could guess why the woman bothers you so much, but I’d rather hear it from your lips.”

Kareina gave Melrick her I’m-very-annoyed glance. “Give it up, friend. I don’t want to discuss it, now or ever.”

“You have to deal with the problem sooner or later. Sooner is always best.”

“Later works fine for me.” Kareina gave a smirk.

“Kareina,” Melrick shifted in his saddle, “you’re a great warrior and true friend, but even I need to tread light of late. What’s happening to you? Stop,” he ordered, grabbing Starsinger’s reins before the horse bolted under her commanding nudge.

She looked back and saw the others were far enough away. “Don’t you understand?” Kareina heard the tension straining her voice and scowled.

“Not entirely.”

“A ghost of who Kareina was still lingers under this hauberk. I can never be a complete Karr or Kareina.” She stared into his green eyes hoping to find a flicker of comprehension. It was there, clouded with sadness. She ignored it, not needing another problematic emotion to deal with. “This marriage reinforces I can’t have a happily-ever-after life, Melrick. Mayliandra’s presence magnifies and distorts all the meager hopes I’ve inwardly held, albeit by a scant thread, over the years. It foreshadows an existence of being alone.” Tears obscured her vision and she let them fall. “Kareina is dead.”

“She’s more alive than you want to admit. There is more than a physical form you’ve learned to hide behind magic and armor,” Melrick told her. “The sooner you realize it, the sooner we can be rid of Karr. Once and for always,” he said, finishing with a heavy sigh, and turning away.

After a moment, he said, “What the—”

Kareina noticed Melrick’s gaze no longer directed at her. She peered forward to see what had his attention. Squinting, she brought a hand to her forehead to shield from the sunlight and saw a single pillar of smoke rising from the road. The sight didn’t bode well for what lay ahead. “Tell Olaf to stop the others where they are, then come join me.” A sharp jab of her heels to Starsinger’s sides had him galloping forward. For a hundred yards the road inclined, then slanted downward. As she made the decline into the small valley of road, Kareina had a better view of the smoke and saw it came from the wreckage of a small caravan of four wagons; all were either still burning or in the stage of smoldering. She drew her sword and urged Starsinger on.

The stench of charred flesh filled Kareina’s nostrils as she approached, and she fought the impulse to gag. Nothing moved. Kareina surveyed the outer area, saw no signs of ambush, and motioned Starsinger, who had tensed the moment the smells assailed them, toward the wagons. “We can do this, my friend,” she said, needing the reassurance as much as her horse.

Grouped together were the burned corpses of men, women and children in a huge pile amid the shredded and broken remains of the wagons. Scorched earth circled the massive pile of death.

Kareina dismounted and walked to the outside area, the reins clutched in her tight fist. Positioned north, south, east and west were strange scorched two-inch holes in diameter and in depth. There seemed to be no immediate purpose or reason for them, so she moved on, assuming them from an earlier time than the attack.

Kareina studied the ground littered with cluttered prints of half a dozen horses, their riders heavy built men from the indentation of the marks or laden down with more equipment than a fighter carried with him. From the tracks, she guessed the caravan had seen their assailants coming and circled the wagons as a protective barrier. The ploy hadn't changed the outcome.

As Kareina made note of the westerly direction the attackers had fled, she heard the sound of an approaching horse and turned to find Melrick had rejoined her. His face was grim as he surveyed the carnage.

"Raiders?" he asked, dismounting.

"I can assume so, yes." She pointed to the still smoldering fire. "Most would leave the bodies where they fell, as a sign of their indifference."

"Or brutality," he said with a sad shake of his head. "Either way, it works."

"I agree. This is strange, though, like nothing I've expected. Do they send a message, other than the obvious, with this? Why else burn them?"

Melrick rubbed at his nose as if it would take the stench away. "Maybe they don't fear anyone's approach during their attack."

Kareina nodded. "Or as simple as making sure no one lived to pass on information."

"Well, whatever their intended message, we'll stop them."

Kareina nodded. "They've brought themselves too close to our clan territory now, all the more reason to defeat them quickly." Kareina pointed to the road ahead. "The tracks lead west. We'll ride back to the others. Since they didn't head east, it should be safe to send Tac's group on. The rest of us will follow the raiders from here."

As they mounted, Melrick gave her a sidelong glance with a hint of a teasing smile on his lips. "So anxious to depart your wife's side?"

"Don't start."

"It was already started, I thought to finish. It'll wait." Melrick shrugged.

Kareina and Melrick rejoined the rest of the group, which had crowded together rather than stay in formation, their horses pawing at the dusty road. With Mayliandra in the front line, Kareina was loathe to explain in detail the scene she had left, but unavoidable as the sight was below the hill in an open area they were about to ride through. Deciding it better to prepare them all, she recounted in detail what lay over the ridge.

The reactions were as she'd expected. The long time warriors got a determined glint in their eyes as they drew closer to battle, the younger warriors paled at the mention of the atrocities. Except for Mayliandra, her reaction surprising Kareina, as the horror anticipated wasn't there.

Tears in her eyes, she asked, "Is there nothing we can do for them? They need proper burial, surely?"

Kareina nodded. "And we shall." She noticed Melrick had directed a half-dozen men to the task. "I'll need you to tell Caldier Hassid. He'll see men sent to alert the necessary clans and check on nearby farmers. I can't afford to spare the men's time or energy from getting you away and safe." It seemed she would object, but when Mayliandra gave the barest nod, Kareina motioned to Tac, who rode forward. "Be alert. More than ever, you must assure your Shei safely arrives at Gradyln."

Kareina prepared to leave, but Mayliandra reached forward and clasped Starsinger's reins. "Please, be careful Karr."

Stunned by the intensity in Mayliandra's tone, Kareina nodded. Mayliandra may have expected more from their departure, but Kareina could only give a gentle pat to the hand on the reins. The contact sent a jolt through Kareina, and she jerked her hand away, before joining her group.

Once Tac and his men had separated and moved on, Kareina led her group forward, where she'd located the trail left by the raiders and followed. The raiders now had a lead, and she a direction, she didn't want to lose them. Kareina spurred her horse faster, yet not so fast they might overshoot the tracks they trailed.

The open field was flanked by a large forest on the north and west sides. Perfect cover for the raiders, she thought. Having traveled this direction many times, Kareina knew the men heading to Gradyln would reach the north section in half-a-days' time, before it thinned out at the small fishing village sitting on the Tülamic River, where they would ferry further. The trees to the west grew thicker and impeded any chance at haste. This would work for and against them, slowing the raider's progress, yet also slowing her pursuit.

Starsinger voiced his objections with a loud whinny the moment they entered the forest and the lower branches scraped against his flanks. "Would you rather I let Melrick go first?" she asked, bending low to his ear. "I would think this preferable to a stray branch managing to slap you in a rather undignified manner." The horse shook his head in indignation. "That's what I thought." She returned her gaze to the examination of the tracks, which led deeper west, and headed Starsinger in the direction with a gentle nudge.

They'd been riding for over two hours, the direction switched three times already, when Kareina noted the tracks changed course again and moved east. Her irritation and aggravation were getting the best of her. This course changing baffled her for half a moment, before the realization filled Kareina with dread. The raiders had no intention of fleeing the scene, but to slow pursuit while they went after their true destination. Had the raiders known of their presence in the vicinity? Were they after Mayliandra's escort, or intent on the fishing village on the river? Either way, innocent people happened to be in the wrong place at this time.

"Melrick, the fishing village," she yelled over her shoulder, kicking Starsinger hard, ignoring the branches clawing at her face. Kareina turned in a northeasterly direction, hoping to make up some time by cutting through, rather than go east and ride the plains to the north. Her horse was quick, but she knew the others wouldn't be far behind her.

Pushing Starsinger to his near limits, she exited the western forest where it joined the north and could see the well-traveled road ahead. The closer she got to the village, the harder Kareina prayed she was wrong in her assumption. In her haste, she hadn't checked to see if the tracks shifted direction again. Kareina went on instinct at this point, it having kept her alive so far.

The battle cries of fighters and scraping steel assailed her ears before she caught sight of anything. For the first time in her life, Kareina desperately wanted to be wrong. She'd sent Mayliandra and Gradyln men into a battle Kareina herself should have been there to fight. The knowledge gnawed with sharp teeth.

As the trees thinned, Kareina got her first view of the combat taking place in the strangest square she'd ever witnessed. At four corners of the square stood pikestaffs about six foot tall with a red gem at its head and emitting a red haze blanketing the area within. The memory of the unexplained holes she'd found at the caravan massacre flashed in her mind.

Kareina didn't know what the staffs were for, other than to create the strange vapor. She closed the distance to the area, pulled her sword from its sheath and steered Starsinger as close as she dared, yet remained within sword range. Holding the hilt tight, she slashed at the wooden staffs' middle. The result, akin to a lightning bolt hit, a wave of dizziness followed as a scream—her own, she realized—filled Kareina's ears; yet the pikestaff split, fell, and a portion of the red blanketing dissolved.

Six raiders were still fighting, held at bay by Tac and Grellu, though their posture told Kareina only sheer will kept her men on their feet. Strewn about the area were bodies of villagers, most face down in puddles of their own blood. Kareina had the advantage of surprise. None of the raiders seemed to notice her approach, or the destruction of one magical staff. Arching her sword above her shoulder, she brought it down on the neck of one man, swung left and cleaved a second man's waist.

The diversion gave Tac a chance to veer right of an attacker's sword. He thrust it into the third man's chest. Tac yanked the blade free and spun, jabbed forward, killing the man behind him.

Though weary, she knew Tac and Grellu, who dispensed with a fifth man by hacking at his leg and shoving the blade into his exposed throat, could handle the last man. Kareina scanned for Reese and Mayliandra. She saw them trapped beside a wagon pulled against a fishing hut.

One raider fought with Reese, who staggered with each blow, blood dripped from his forehead and poured from a gash across his chest. Reese stood protectively in front of Mayliandra, barring the raider's attempts to dart around him to get to her.

Kareina jumped off Starsinger's back and rushed toward them. She had almost reached them when, from the corner of her eye, she saw another raider approaching from the nearby hut's doorway, less than a yard away. He came at her with a wild yell, sword held in both fists above his head.

Placing feet firmly apart for balance, Kareina brought up her sword to receive his downward slice, bent her knees slightly to accept the impact, and pushed forward with her upper body to hurl him backward. The man stumbled, and charged with his sword held waist-high. She let him come. Powered by his anger, he didn't anticipate Kareina swiveling at the last moment. He overshot his target. Kareina slammed her blade into the small of his back. He dropped to his knees, groaned and fell forward.

She turned to Reese, who was thrown against the side of the wagon and using the wheel to pull himself up, Mayliandra still shielded by his body. Reese gave a helpless cry when his legs gave out, and he fell to the ground. Mayliandra, exposed now, bent over him.

"She's mine now," the raider stated, flashing a wicked grin.

"Over my dead body," Reese spat.

"I hope so." The raider laughed, turning to Mayliandra. "You'll get a real man. Not this boy." He sneered. "I'll train you, if you live through the lessons," he said, taunting her. "Too bad the master wanted you, too."

"Leave her alone, you bastard," Reese ordered, slicing upward with his blade and missing his target completely.

Having dispensed with her own attacker, Kareina ran toward the wagon. The raider closed for what he must have believed to be an easy kill. Mayliandra stared at the man leaning over her, grabbed Reese's sword hand with both of hers and shoved it forward. The raider gazed at Mayliandra in surprise and horror. He collapsed on top of Reese's legs.

Kareina pulled the dead man away and knelt. Mayliandra stared blankly at her hands still clasping Reene's. Kareina removed them. The reddish haze they fought in made the blood seeping from Reene's wounds appear black. "You fought well, Warrior," Kareina told Reene, who had tears flowing down his face.

He gave a shaky laugh. "I had my orders, hers at the cost of my own."

At hearing her earlier words repeated, Kareina's throat tightened, and she clutched her sword tighter. "I never expected—"

"Duty and honor for Gradyln and my Shei, Sher Karr." Reene looked at Kareina, fear in his eyes, and swallowed. "I'm dying?"

Tears formed in her own eyes and Kareina blinked them back. She heard Mayliandra sniffle.

"I know many things about you, Sher Karr, but never that you'd lie to a warrior," he said with a twisted grimace of pain. Reene gave an agonizing moan as his body trembled. "My sister...I'm all she has...had. Will you..."

Kareina allowed the tears to fall. "As if she were our own," she promised. Another shudder took Reene. This time his eyes closed and his breathing stopped. "Glory to you, Reene," Kareina whispered, wiping at the tears. She stood and pulled Mayliandra to her feet and away from Reene.

Kareina was about to join Tac and Grellu when Mayliandra gave a bloodcurdling scream, moved to Kareina's back and shielded her face. Cursing, Kareina stared about for the cause. She was horrified to see the change in the body of the raider beside Reene. His dead body gave the impression of having all the fluids drained; his skin hugged the bone like dried leather.

Kareina ordered Mayliandra to stay put, before she moved to another dead raider in front of her, and rolled him onto his back. His dead body was in an identical condition. Racing to other dead, Kareina saw they suffered likewise.

"What in hellfire is this?" she asked. Gazing around, though unsure how, Kareina concluded the pikestaffs and their peculiar red haze were responsible. Who would use such horrid magic? Who could acquire magic this strong?

"Destroy those pikestaffs," she ordered Tac, who rushed to comply.

As she watched, Kareina glimpsed from the corner of her eyes her warriors approached her position. Melrick rode to her side, but she didn't acknowledge him until all three poles were destroyed.

"Have the other's check out the huts. See who needs attending, but have every man aware of possible raiders in hiding." At his nod, she went back to Mayliandra, whose body trembled and tears flowed unchecked. Kareina wished she had Parrin's talent for saying what was necessary in order to calm, so she could say those words for Mayliandra. Aggravated by her inadequacies, Kareina decided it best not to say anything. She followed her own orders, shifted, and moved to check the hut closest to her.

The door was wide open and Kareina heard muffled crying from within. As she crossed the threshold, sword protectively clutched in her hand, Kareina caught sight of movement in the far corner. Peering into the semi-darkness of shadow, Kareina saw a young female cowered there. Her clothing was torn, the remnants held in a clutched fist. The body of a female family member lay close to the door and she was careful to step over it. Kareina began to approach in as non-threatening a manner as she could, but still the girl, no more than fourteen summers, shrieked.

"It's all right," Kareina whispered, already aware of the nature of the child's victimization. Memory of her own similar suffering surfaced in her mind and she moaned. She wasn't surprised when the girl gave another shriek, but Kareina noticed something else. The frightened child's

eyes kept darting to the opposite corner. Kareina looked upon a threadbare curtain hung in a doorway leading to the hut's sleeping quarters.

With cautious steps, Kareina approached the back of the room. Sword kept at the ready, she yanked the material away, and not caring it tore, left the remnants dangling from the nails.

It was darker in this room. A meager light came through a single square window, too small for even an infant to crawl through. If the girl's gesture had indicated someone, as Kareina believed, he wouldn't have gotten out using that way. Kareina examined the room. She saw two cots against the far wall and a wardrobe to her right. Kareina made a move for the larger piece of furniture. She doubted even a cowardly raider would hide beneath a bed, not easy to get mobile from the position. Moving closer, she reached for the wooden knob. Before she pulled on it, the door swung open and a raider jumped out. Thrown off balance, Kareina stumbled backward. The man managed to shove his blade into the fleshy section above her hip.

Grunting at the searing pain, Kareina rushed him. He stood his ground with a throaty growl, deftly countered her swings and returned his own. With wide shoulders and his weight, he would outmatch her in physical strength. Kareina knew she could outmaneuver him, let his size work against him.

Kareina glanced at the cot, certain it wouldn't hold for too long, before she pounced on top. She needed to gain some height. With a wicked chuckle, the man swung his blade at her middle. She jerked out of reach and hopped to the other cot. It didn't take the sudden impact of weight, crunching to splinters beneath her. She made a hasty roll, barely avoiding his downward stroke, and shoved her blade into his leg. He howled in pain, cursed, and awkwardly charged her.

Kareina managed to stand and her wound spurted blood, the pain so sharp she almost doubled over. She darted for the nearest wall. Kareina kept out of reach, sprinting from wall to wall and using it to propel her. She was tiring them both, trying to anticipate an opening with which to defeat him. He managed to slice into her left arm before she was able to avoid his thrust.

His breathing more labored, his steps slower, Kareina stopped and leaned against a wall and faced him with a taunting smile. He roared in rage, raised his sword above his head. "Not smart," she said. He stomped in her direction, one step, two. The instant he lowered the blade toward her head, Kareina dropped to her knees and thrust upward with her own blade. It caught him in the chest. Deftly, Kareina twisted to the side to avoid the fall of his raised blade. His blood dripped onto her cheek, falling warm and sticky down her neck. Yanking the blade free as she rolled away, Kareina saw him tumble headlong into the wall, and slide to the floor, dead.

Tired, she plopped on the undamaged cot, inhaling deeply to get her breathing slowed. Her head ached, as did her entire body.

From the outer room, Kareina heard movement, before Mayliandra's call. "Sher Karr, are you all right?" she cried out, before appearing in the doorway. "Oh my... Let me see to—"

"No!" Realizing Mayliandra's intentions, Kareina regretted her harsh tone of voice. Is it any wonder she thinks I'm a monster? There was no way Kareina could maintain her secret if Mayliandra tended her injuries. "The child, see to her first, please."

"But... Yes, of course, Karr," Mayliandra said, leaving with a slight bow of her head.

Kareina stood and moved to the wardrobe, pulled out a tunic and tore it into strips. She raised a corner of her leather armor, her shirt, and tucked the wadded material over the wound to her hip, binding it around her waist with another strip. When finished, she stiffly left the room.

Mayliandra sat on the floor, cooing words of comfort to the girl cradled in her arms. Kareina tried to crouch beside them, but the pain wouldn't let her. She put a hand on Mayliandra's shoulder to catch her attention.

"Let's get her outside. We'll see if there's someone to look after her," Kareina said, offering each a hand.

Mayliandra accepted the assistance. Whimpering, the girl huddled tighter into the corner. Kareina took a step back. Too late, she recognized the frightened response, reactions all too clear in her own memory; yet, in a moment of genuine concern, Kareina had forgotten everyone saw a man. "I should've remembered this fear," she whispered, looking at the child.

"How could you?" Mayliandra asked. Her face reddened before she turned away. "I'm sorry. I'd forgotten about your sister."

Kareina bit back the harsh laughter building in her throat. She couldn't explain to Mayliandra understanding on a more personal level, stopping the charade in an instant. Instead, Kareina sighed to gain control of her frustration lest she frighten the child further. "Help her outside," she managed to say.

All Kareina's men had finished their inspections and gathered the few remaining villagers together. As Mayliandra and the girl joined them, an older woman rushed to their side and took the child to where the others waited in a circle away from the worst of the carnage.

Melrick, followed by Olaf, came to her with grim faces. Melrick said, "There are eight left. Spallan found another raider in one of the huts." He sighed. "Do we escort Shei Mayliandra to Gradyln?"

Kareina frowned. She didn't want to go back there. "Did you deliberately ride the Shei into this?" she asked of Spallan.

"No, Sher Karr." Spallan swallowed hard. "We were waiting to ferry the river when all hellfire broke loose. Four came riding in at breakneck speed, slammed those pikestaffs into the ground, and the others followed them in."

Which meant Kareina didn't get answers as to whom or what the original intent was: the destruction of the village, or getting Mayliandra and her escort. Evidence proved it was the village, but Kareina couldn't get the raider's taunt out of her mind. Too bad the master wanted you. Was she targeted? Maybe because she was a Shei? Not most would know it about Mayliandra from appearances, as people of Bredwine dressed like paupers. Though it could have been careless wording, she doubted that the case. Where was this master, and who was he? Evidence and information obtained from merchants and the Caldiers proved raiders never took hostages. No one would have guessed or recognized if hostages were taken with the charred remains left behind, Kareina thought. Would explain the burning of the bodies, to hide the numbers.

So, if Mayliandra was the intent, why the sudden interest in her? The raider's taunts suggested he knew, or at least knew of, who she was, upon sight. Kareina explained her thoughts on this to Melrick. "We were expected. I think it best Mayliandra stay with us, until we see this matter a bit further, at least. I'm responsible for her safety, as the Shei's husband."

Melrick didn't reply to her last remark, but his shocked expression spoke volumes. She wanted to kick herself for having said it. Kareina realized Mayliandra's presence would be harder on them all, but believed the decision more practical as a tactic.

"We'll send Tac and Grellu home with Reene's body. Ask Caldie Parrin to attend to Reene's sister," she said. "This attack seems too easy a victory. Their own men were expendable, to test our abilities, or to prove any loss to them is unimportant. Make sure our men have a care on the

remainder of the way home, travel as safety allows. Give orders for them to warn my father how close the raiders came; and to have men dispatched to alert of the carnage we found on the road earlier. He'll take care of Gradyln, and our people."

Melrick nodded. "I suggest we camp outside the village," he said. "Patch the villagers, and ourselves, as best we can before moving on."

"Olaf, let the others know our intent. Assist these people in performing the rituals for their dead. Bring me one of those staves before you tend to it." When she finished the order, he rushed to do as bid.

Kareina scowled. "You've seen the corpses?"

"A foul magic," Melrick grumbled.

"Yes, but magic from where and, who would be so stupid as to release it in the first place?"

FLEUREN DIDN'T KNOW how much more to expect from the unnecessary deaths of so many, but would see how far she could push Persimmone by asking a boon from T'Dar. It had come to her when she witnessed the death of the young boy defending the woman in his care. No one had suspected she and the god were so close, standing near the river to witness the destruction of the village. No one, not even Fleuren, could comprehend the need of the god to be present for the horror of these needless killings. Her guess was the negativity somehow brought pleasure, if not an infusion of strength to T'Dar with the drying of the souls before sending to Bahalkar and the conversion of certain people into the walking dead which became his Monks.

As the new arrivals came and destroyed the pikestaffs, defeating Persimmone's men from taking the village and the Shei, Fleuren gave an inward cheer. She was glad, even with her obligation to do the god's bidding, she and T'Dar did not have the same link the Eye forced on Persimmone.

Unnoticed by those around her, Fleuren had bound the soul of the young man as soon as death had claimed him. His soul, looking confused and distressed, stood by the horse that now carried his corpse.

She didn't know why this particular death disturbed her, but it did. Maybe it was because, even near death, his concern was for his sister and not himself.

"My lord," she directed to T'Dar, watching the warriors of Gradyln break away to make camp. "May I speak freely?"

"Of course, little flower."

"As you know, I have witnessed and been inspired by your power, and would never doubt your capacity to protect me while I do your bidding speaking with your Monks. I know and appreciate your goal."

T'Dar gave a sly smile. "Do I hear an entreaty coming?"

"Sadly, yes." Fleuren bowed her head. "I don't feel the same can be said of Persimmone. I have the impression he is jealous and fearful of our relationship. He has made the inference he could bring me harm and you couldn't do anything to prevent it."

An incensed gleam lit T'Dar's gaze. "Couldn't or wouldn't?" the god demanded.

"I couldn't presume to know, my lord." She summoned her strength to look the god in the eye while giving her best impression of fear. "I fear a physical attack on my person, so he can prove his control over you with the Eye. Persimmone does not seem impressed with your supremacy."

“I shall give him a lesson,” T’Dar snarled.

Fleuren shook her head. “Actually, my lord, there is a simple way to achieve the lesson, and maintain a closer eye on his actions.”

“What do you propose?”

She pointed to the distressed soul of Reene. “Make him and one other my personal guard. A continual reminder of a still possible fate should he incur your wrath. It would be a small token of comfort that I’m protected from harm at his hands.”

T’Dar gazed hard at her, as if he would glean her true intent. Fleuren believed Persimmone intended to harm her. Both despised the other. So when the god looked for clues of her deceit, he would find none—at least not as far as this matter was concerned. “We will make it so,” T’Dar announced.

“Thank you, my lord,” Fleuren said. She hoped to test a few theories over a space of time, and could only do it with Monks of her own. “This means more than you know.”

YSANNIE GLARED AT her cousin. “I comprehend we swore not to get involved, Paksha. We can’t turn a blind eye either.”

“I see no other way. The Elders have spoken, yadda-yadda. The mortals abandoned us first.”

“They’re as children.” Ysannie rolled her shoulders trying to dislodge the tension there.

“And, I must admit I’ve enjoyed the quiet. Not having to appear to those devout yet undeserving supplicants, demanding favors they don’t merit. The ghastly rituals we attended at the temples, which went on for days. No, I don’t miss that part.”

Paksha stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles. “You’re just mad we have to ignore your favorites with the other little kiddies.”

Though she wouldn’t admit it to him, Paksha had a point. “I’m simply stating, if we do nothing at all, we are next in line for T’Dar to toy with. Somehow, I can’t believe he’s going to shrug our part away for putting him in Bahalkar.” Ysannie shook her head. “And if T’Dar accomplishes his mission in the Valley of Mist, he won’t be alone when he seeks revenge.”

“Well, you may very well be correct. I plan to keep out of the whole mess until given no other choice. Like the elders command we do.” He stared at her and stabbed a finger in her direction. “Best you do the same. Should you be right about T’Dar, is it smart to provide the fuel he’ll use to roast you on a spit?”

“Maybe not,” Ysannie said. She grinned. “And you may have the right of it, Paksha. Maybe all I need do is watch—and get seen doing it.”

Paksha sat up stiffly. “What are you planning, Ysannie? Do I need to warn the others you’re involving us in this fiasco?”

With a wry grin, Ysannie said, “They need not know, Paksha. I’ll do as you suggest. Nothing other than watch,” she shrugged, “and wait. What harm can there be?”

Chapter Eight

KAREINA STARED INTO the brown eyes trained on her own. She and Mayliandra sat near the fire, though it brought no comfort and little warmth. Her plate of food remained untouched on her lap since Kareina was unable to eat. Not with Mayliandra treating me as a pouting child, Kareina silently complained.

“The others aren’t acting this poorly,” Mayliandra said with a soft huff. Since allowing Mayliandra to stay, she’d been acting...different, almost possessive.

“Tend to them,” Kareina said.

“I did assist a few.” Mayliandra’s voice rose in her frustration. “Quit being obstinate and let me tend to your arm.”

Kareina looked to Melrick for assistance, he shrugged; and to Olaf, who wasn’t about to assist either. “I’d let her tend to me, but more is the pity,” Olaf said, “I wasn’t wounded.”

Mayliandra blushed at Olaf’s remark, Melrick laughed, and Kareina knew she’d get little help from either of them. Mayliandra, her lips pursed, asked, “How do you think this looks, my lord?” Kareina felt her heartbeat skip when she visualized kissing the pout away. Kareina forced herself to concentrate on the words leaving those kissable lips. “How can I gain the trust of the men, Karr, if my husband, their leader, refuses to let me help him? If you can’t trust my ministrations, why should they?”

It was Kareina’s turn to redden. Melrick always tended to her wounds. What she couldn’t guess was why he avoided doing it now. The worst part was Mayliandra had a valid point. As a select few knew the truth of the situation, it seemed as if Karr didn’t trust his bride. “Hellfire,” Kareina said, ripping the shirt’s sleeve completely off and tossing it onto Mayliandra’s lap. “When you’re done stitching me, you can re-stitch the sleeve in place.”

Olaf laughed harder. “What if she’s a lousy seamstress? Your shirt will be ruined.”

“Relax,” Melrick said with a good-natured nudge to Olaf’s arm, a broad grin on his face. “The Shei has had practice on the others, now she’ll have more on Karr’s arm. The shirt should be easy after all this experience.”

Kareina wanted to slap the smile off Melrick’s face. She noted a similar smile on Mayliandra’s lips; but rather than slap it off her, Kareina once again felt the impulse to kiss her. The image flashed all too fast in her mind, reminding Kareina she hadn’t kissed anyone since she was seventeen summers. She corrected herself. In actuality, Kareina hadn’t entertained those thoughts since the incident at Clan Youlren and with Sher Guldrac. The reminder made her shudder.

“Did I hurt you too much?” Mayliandra stammered, her eyes widening.

Realizing her reaction was misinterpreted, Kareina looked down to see the first few stitches already completed. She’d been so preoccupied she hadn’t noticed the work had begun. Kareina shook her head. “I’ve felt worse.”

Mayliandra’s gaze locked on Kareina’s face and throat, before she cast her gaze toward the fire. “Would you tell me about them sometime? How you received them?” Mayliandra asked.

Kareina cleared her throat. The last thing she wanted to do was talk about her scars, to anyone. Certainly not with Mayliandra, even if she believed the discussion a right due a spouse. Was this Mayliandra's way of attempting to be friends? Or to learn more about the ugly beast she'd been forced to marry? The thought was bitter, but Kareina doubted them far from truth. Either way, it made her uncomfortable. "I don't think so, no."

As if slapped, with a stunned look and tears in her eyes, Mayliandra flinched. "I didn't mean to pry and upset you," she said wiping stray tears with the torn shirtsleeve. "May I finish?"

Feeling guilty for directing her anger onto Mayliandra, Kareina only nodded. Kareina expected Mayliandra to move away when she finished, but she didn't. "Thank you," Kareina said, assuming Mayliandra waited for gratitude, knowing the woman needed comforting Kareina couldn't give her. She realized comfort wasn't the Shei's intent at all. "Now your waist," Mayliandra said, pointing.

Kareina felt true panic. "The cloth has been damaged. The blood isn't mine," she said, glancing to Melrick for assistance.

Mayliandra frowned. "But it looks—"

"They bleed well enough, these raiders, when they're not shriveling up," Melrick said, dropping his food, and chuckling, "happens all the time. Hard to tell whose blood is doing the staining."

Mayliandra crinkled her eyes, as if unconvinced.

"We should check on things, before we turn in." Melrick directed to Kareina, "Maybe change clothes before you worry the Shei any further. Feel strong enough to check the horses, Karr?"

With relief, Kareina got to her feet. "Yes." She turned to Olaf. "Is the Shei's tent prepared?" At his nod, Kareina directed her attention on Mayliandra. The woman stared at her with bewilderment in the large, brown eyes, a hint of hurt still swimming in the dark depths. An emotion Kareina was seeing far too often and she ached knowing she was the cause in most instances. "You should get some sleep. We have a long journey tomorrow. We'll all need to be rested and alert."

"I understand, Sher Karr. Until morning," she said. Mayliandra unexpectedly leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on Kareina's cheek, before turning away and following Olaf.

Trailing Mayliandra's departure with her eyes, her body rooted to the spot, Kareina brought a hand to her cheek. The flesh still tingled from the contact of soft lips. It was getting harder for Kareina to ignore her physical responses where Mayliandra was concerned. She suspected it would get harder still in the long days ahead.

Feeling a tug on her elbow, Kareina turned toward Melrick. "Come along," he said. They were beyond the edge of camp; Melrick pulled a medical kit from this satchel and motioned her to sit. "She cares for you very much, Kareina," he said in hushed tones. "And you are caring for her, too." He raised her shirt; she automatically clutched and held it out of the way, as she had so many times and battles prior, while he began to stitch her wound.

"Big difference, though, my friend, is if she cares for her husband, because she was given no choice in this marriage. For her, it's an anticipated duty of marriage."

Melrick glanced up from his ministrations. "And you?"

Kareina met his gaze. "I also care because she wasn't given a choice. It pains me to hurt her, but I can't have her garnering false hopes or feelings this relationship is anything more than the charade we know it to be."

"But you care enough not to wish to distress or wound her unduly." He returned to his stitching of her wound, and Kareina expected he didn't want to meet her gaze as he continued.

“Answer this. Situations not forced upon you both, two women on even terms, could you care for her?”

She closed her eyes. Kareina found Mayliandra beautiful, amusing, and sensitive in a compassionate way. Instinct had Kareina wanting to caress the soft flesh, to return the gentle kisses, to delight in the feel of touching and being touched. She shook her head to release the dangerous thoughts. Melrick was as a big brother—but nothing like the one born to her by blood, who shared a womb. Melrick deserved honesty. “Yes.”

“Why do you fight it?” he asked, as if the solution were obvious. “Respond as you would to any lover.”

Kareina smirked. “I’ve had so much experience.” She sighed. “How long could I hide the truth if I engaged in any form of intimacy? Mayliandra expects her attentions, her affections, returned by a man. How do you think she’d react to find those emotions returned by another woman? Badly. No matter how much I cared, or wanted to protect her, she’d be wounded—and disgusted.”

Melrick tied off the last stitch, placed a clean wad of cloth to protect the area, wrapped a length of cloth to keep the small one in place, and stood. “I think you underestimate the young Shei.”

“And you overestimate me, Melrick.” She rose. “I will not use her. Even to assuage an empty bed...or heart.”

Fuming at his suggestions, Kareina spun on her heel and stormed away. Tears fought for release and she blinked them away. It wouldn’t do to show such emotion before her men. Frustration filled her as she strode to her own blankets, which waited in invitation beside the small tent erected for Mayliandra, Kareina’s own tent currently used for the injured. With a care for her injuries, Kareina lay on the ground, tugged the blanket up to her chin and caught the reflected shadow playing on the tent. Mayliandra was combing through her hair. The ache in Kareina’s chest was almost beyond bearing. How she wished it were possible to touch the golden strands, place her lips on the tender flesh of Mayliandra’s neck, as she had wanted to do when placing the necklace around the young woman’s throat. Swallowing the emotion, Kareina turned away, reached for the water skin she had tucked under her saddlebags earlier, took a lengthy swallow of the ale it contained, and let the tears flow.

FROM THE CONFINES of their tent, Stechyc gave a pain-filled cry. Tiilaen reflexively pulled her closer, whispering soothing words into her ear. “Be at peace, my love. I’m here.”

Stechyc woke, tears hanging on her lashes. She clung to the arm at her waist. “Oh, Tiilaen, she’s in so much torment. The closer we get, the stronger the sensations.”

“Who’s in torment, love?” Tiilaen asked, aching inside at the sadness in her lover’s voice. She pulled the long length of blonde hair away from Stechyc’s face, shocked to see the strain so evident on the features she adored.

Stechyc turned to her, nestling her face deep into the side of Tiilaen’s neck, the dampness from her eyes moistened the flesh. Stechyc slid a hand between them, cradling Tiilaen’s breast, as if for reassurance it had been a dream, and slid a leg up between Tiilaen’s. “The dual-warrior, the she who is he, or the other way ‘round.” She groaned. “I get a little confused after the nightmares.”

Tiilaen lost her next question in the sensations rippling through her body as Stechyc tenderly nibbled at her neck, closed fingers around a nipple. "My love, I can't focus on the topic when you touch me." She gulped when Stechyc stopped the motion, though didn't release her hold. Tiilaen asked, "What has her tormented? Are we too late to help?"

With a soft moan, Stechyc squeezed the hard nub of Tiilaen's nipple. Tiilaen felt her stomach clench with the pleasure. "I don't think so," Stechyc whispered, squeezing the breast beneath her fingers rhythmically.

Staying her lover's hand, Tiilaen tried to concentrate on Stechyc's blue eyes. "Talk without touching, dear one. I can't follow otherwise. What is it you feel, or see, as the case may be?" Apology was evident in Stechyc's eyes, and Tiilaen took a steadying breath.

"The magicked one is in pain. She fears her feelings." Stechyc groaned. "She wants to die, Tiilaen, has died a number of times."

"How can this be so?" she asked. "You only die once."

"Not in body, love, in her soul." Stechyc began rocking her leg against Tiilaen's mound.

Tiilaen thought she'd lose her mind from the sensations. She reached to grasp her lover's breast, feeling the beating of the heart beneath her grasp. Stechyc arched forward, pressing her breast further into Tiilaen's palm. As Tiilaen rubbed Stechyc's nipples, she shivered, her hips moving against Tiilaen's thigh. She caressed her lover's back, kissed the curve of Stechyc's jaw. Rising, Tiilaen kissed her, lost in the sensuous stroke of tongues. Groaning, Tiilaen pulled away. "What can we do?"

"Nothing this eve." Placing a tender kiss to Tiilaen's lips, Stechyc nibbled a lip, tugging gently. "We've business of our own to conclude." She pulled Tiilaen closer into her embrace, clasped Tiilaen's hand and drew it lower. "Or would you deny me?"

Tiilaen moaned. "I can deny you nothing, love," she said, one finger on either side of Stechyc's clitoris. She squeezed and brought a gasp from Stechyc. Tiilaen smiled at the sound. The hours of their journey were but a minor memory, now. Tonight Tiilaen was lost in the shared desire of her heart's love.

THE MORNING BROUGHT a hammering headache, and the steady pounding of rain. Kareina felt the dawn's chill through her very bones. She shuddered and tried to rise. Her body felt too heavy, and took all her strength to get to her feet with her rain-soaked clothing compounding the problem. She had barely stood when a figure appeared beside her. Kareina tried to focus through the haze of her vision.

"Sher Karr," Mayliandra said, "are you well? Why didn't you get out of the rain? You should have come inside the tent," she added in a trembling voice.

"Fine," Kareina said, but it came out as a hoarse croak.

Mayliandra placed a hand to her brow. "Hellfire," she whispered. "You're burning up."

Kareina swatted at her hand and missed. She took a step back, swaying on her feet, and fell to her knees. Melrick appeared at Mayliandra's side.

"What's wrong?" he asked of Mayliandra.

"Karr has a fever." Mayliandra's expression and tone held a genuine concern clutching Kareina's heart in a tight grip. "We need to get him free of his wet clothes and resting out of the weather."

“No.” Kareina’s voice croaked. “We must continue.” Pleading, she turned to meet Melrick’s concerned gaze. “We need to close distance. We can’t let the raiders get too far ahead.” Kareina tried to stand, but couldn’t get her body to respond accordingly. “Get Starsinger saddled.”

When neither moved, she growled. “Now. We go forward.”

Melrick did as bid.

Mayliandra stood still and unyielding before her. “You shouldn’t travel. It will speed your illness, Karr.”

Kareina caught Mayliandra’s gaze in the fevered glaze of her own. “All the better to release you from a life of torture to a husband not of your choosing,” she ground between clenched teeth. “Prepare to leave.” When she didn’t budge, Kareina ignored the pain pulsing through her body and stood stiff on trembling legs. “Now, Mayli, please.”

“Mayli?” Mayliandra said in a bare murmur, a note of delight in her tone at the unexpected endearment. “Yes, husband,” before fleeing to her tent.

Despite the aches coursing through every fiber of her being, Kareina moved to the fire sputtering to remain lit despite the rain. The heat barely penetrated clothing to her skin. Melrick returned with her horse. Starsinger nudged her neck, as if an offer of comfort. “Carry me true,” Kareina said. Her horse raised his head, offended. “I apologize, my friend. I trust you implicitly,” she said, glaring at Melrick, “though the same cannot be said of others who have held my trust, until now.”

“Nothing has changed.” Melrick smirked. “Other than you can’t accept we care for you.”

“I never demanded it.” Kareina wished her voice were stronger.

“Regardless, you have it.” Melrick looked away, as if it pained him to look upon her. “We’re about ready.” He took a step toward her. “Let me boost you onto Starsinger.”

Much as Kareina would have liked to accomplish the feat on her own, her body was too weak to comply. With shame in her heart, she allowed Melrick to assist her in seating her horse. She mumbled thanks, but Melrick had already walked away.

A short time later, their journey resumed. Kareina fought her body’s inclination to collapse with exhaustion and pain. Normally, she would have felt comforted by the shaded travel, the smell of the trees surrounding them, the rain soaked flora emitting a cleansing balm to her. Instead, Kareina felt the eyes of the other’s upon her, and with inner resolve drawn from she knew not where, managed to maintain a posture of alertness, and to ignore the life around her as they pushed forward. On the verge of collapse, Kareina heard the alarm from Olaf, who rode at the head of their procession. Kareina drew her sword from the scabbard once she reined Starsinger close to Mayliandra. The weapon, always a comfort in her grasp, felt heavier and more awkward than she ever remembered, even from the first time as a child.

Kareina cursed her illness and the blur it made of her vision. From the corner of her eye, she noted Mayliandra clutched the reins in trembling fingers, looking in her direction for guidance. The next instant Spallan appeared at Mayliandra’s side.

Spallan spoke in serious tones. “I would consider it an honor, Sher Karr, if you would entrust the Shei’s safety to me during battle.”

The older man was one of her best, and Kareina knew he still felt guilty about being unprepared for the attack at the fishing village. This was his way of making amends, though it had never been his fault in her eyes. Spallan acknowledged Kareina’s condition and need to have one less worry with which to contend. Silent, Kareina nodded consent.

“Be safe,” Mayliandra said, as Kareina nudged Starsinger forward. The words were a near plea, and caught Kareina’s heart in an aching grip, touched her as if spoken from a lover’s lips.

Kareina would have shaken the thoughts and feelings from her head and heart if she weren't already on the verge of falling from Starsinger. Instead, she contented herself with turning and giving a quick wink of acknowledgement to Mayliandra.

Kareina had barely made it to Melrick's side before Olaf came galloping toward them, sword in hand. "Raiders," he said. "There are five of them, but they're surrounded by a strange red glow."

Olaf had no sooner imparted the information than a battle cry pierced the air. To gods who no longer existed, Kareina prayed, "Ysannie, please protect Mayliandra and guide us in battle," as the first rider came into view. The odd glow was disconcerting. Kareina expected it was part of the ploy, giving them a demonic appearance; and, why their attacks on mere villagers were so successful.

Until now.

She grit her teeth and yelled the command to fight. Kareina, Melrick, Olaf and eight other Gradyln men charged forward. The other three remained behind the fight area with Spallan to protect the Shei. The anger at these raiders for attacking so openly gave Kareina a new infusion of strength to forget the aches ravaging her to the core. At least, she thought, it had stopped raining.

Kareina clutched her sword tight and bore down on the first raider, a paunchy man who looked better fit for a tavern than a battlefield, and swung when he was within distance. He brought up his own blade and the first clash of steel rang in the air. The engagement had begun. All too soon, more clanging and grunts followed. Starsinger, accustomed to combat, moved forward a pace and swung back. Each swing of her blade met and deflected by her opponent. Kareina was tiring, each shift close to unseating her; and she hadn't even managed to wound her enemy. Frustration made her swings wild. As if reading her current condition, Starsinger started stepping back from the raider and his horse. Surprised by the retreat, the raider gave a nasty grin of victory as he righted his horse until positioned in front of Kareina and Starsinger.

Left hand clenched tight around the saddle horn, Kareina slid from Starsinger's back. Her legs felt weak, but held, and she released the hold on her horse. Starsinger backed until out of sword range. Expecting an easy triumph, the raider dismounted and casually walked toward her.

Kareina wanted to know how the others fared, but wouldn't chance taking her gaze from the raider in front of her. Sweat dripped down her face, and she couldn't ascertain if from combat or illness. Either way, Kareina ignored the impulse to wipe it away.

"Tired already," the raider taunted, adjusting a gaudy medallion hanging around his neck. "Persimmone spoke better of your skills. You're pathetic."

Kareina frowned. Who in hellfire was Persimmone? "Could be," she said, irritated at her still hoarse tone. "Or this could be a diversion to give you false confidence."

He chuckled. "I have doubt of that." The raider closed the remaining space and swung in a downward arc.

Grasping her sword with both hands, Kareina brought it up to meet the blow and stumbled from the impact. When he chuckled, she gritted her teeth and thrust her blade forward. Rage got the best of her; knowing she hadn't been this sloppy in a fight since sparring with Melrick when she was twelve summers old. Blind luck, or his slipshod attitude, allowed her blade to pierce flesh. Too casually, he looked down at the wound in the fleshy meat of his skin, exposed through the rent in his tunic. Kareina couldn't tell if the red glow around the man or her fevered state caused the effect she saw next. The blood staunched, the wound closed and a discolored shriveling of skin marked where the sword had pierced flesh.

Almost surprised as she, the man stood staring at the new scar and began to laugh hysterically. Taking opportunity in his distraction to advance, Kareina brought her sword up in an arch and swung for his neck. The blow never landed. At the last instant, his attention returned and he wobbled backward, out of reach. Renewed by his apparent invincibility, he raised his sword and began quick slashes, up and down, in a crossing motion. Though Kareina managed to parry each blow, the assault drained her strength. She was weakening, her legs trembling from the exertion to remain standing. He forced her to move backward until her heel caught on an exposed root and Kareina landed painfully on her back, the stitching from the eve before tearing apart at the impact.

Kareina cried out in pain. From somewhere behind her, Kareina heard Mayliandra's frightened scream, even as her vision began to blur and darken. Terrified of what would happen to Mayliandra if she lost consciousness, Kareina struggled to twist on her side, and tried to push herself up with wobbly arms, even as the raider raised his blade for the killing thrust.

An unexpected whooshing filled the air. Kareina thought it her imagination until she noted the surprised expression on her opponent. Her attention caught on the arrow protruding from his neck, dislodging his medallion. As his eyes rolled upward, Kareina expended the last vestiges of energy to drag herself to the right, as his legs buckled and he fell forward landing with a thump inches away. Staring at his corpse and wondering why he wasn't able to heal from this wound, Kareina felt revulsion at watching his body shrivel into a dried and hideous husk.

Her attention distracted, Kareina hadn't heard Mayliandra's approach. The feel of soft hands as they explored Kareina's face with tender fingers brought Mayliandra into hazy focus. The hands trembled; felt warm and comforting even in Kareina's fevered state. She felt the dampness of Mayliandra's tears falling onto her face. The concern and fear in the large brown eyes broke Kareina's heart. Instead, she drew on her best strength—anger—and rebuked, "Don't cry for me."

Gasping, Mayliandra jerked her hands away and leaned back on her heels.

"That's right, Shei Mayliandra," came a voice Kareina didn't recognize. "Cry for the atrocities from such wicked magic loosed on the world."

Trying to focus, Kareina saw shapely, leather clad legs with thigh-high boots materialize behind Mayliandra. Blinking to clear her vision, Kareina followed the legs upward to a trim waist, full breasts, long slender neck and, at last, a beautiful face surrounded by a head of thick, wavy auburn hair. "Who..."

"Friends," the stranger said. "My name is Tiilaen. We're here to assist."

Though Kareina appreciated the timely intervention, she felt too exhausted to give gratitude. Her arm trembled and gave way; she landed on her side. Through the renewed onslaught of pain, Kareina remembered to ask of her warriors. "The others, Mayli?"

EVEN AFTER THE harsh words from Karr, Mayliandra couldn't bear to see him bowed so low in front of his men and the new arrival of woman warriors. She shifted to sit behind Karr, and drew his head onto her thigh, attempting to bring a little comfort. "They are well, my lord," she said. "Melrick is conferring with the...women."

Taking a swatch of worn, yet clean, cloth from a pocket, Mayliandra began to dab at the perspiration drenching Karr's face. She frowned at the scar. It marred, but didn't detract from the handsome features. "Relax a moment, and I'll see to—" She paused. Having witnessed every

painstaking moment, her eyes never leaving Karr, Mayliandra knew he hadn't acquired the injury today. She also knew, from the blood seeping through the shirt at Karr's waist he was wounded in that spot last eve, and not the blood of another. Melrick must have tended to it after sending her to bed. Obviously, her husband didn't care for her ministrations. Mayliandra tried to squelch the ache it brought her heart. "Melrick can see to your injuries." The response from Karr being a weary sigh, before his eyes fell closed. Feeling Karr's shoulders relax, Mayliandra knew he'd succumbed to unconsciousness. Karr didn't resist their closeness.

The woman, Tiilaen, squatted until eye level with her. Lifting her gaze from Karr's face, Mayliandra stared into bright green eyes filled with concern. Mayliandra felt a need to explain her comments. "Sher Karr is used to Melrick tending his wounds. The marriage is still too new—for the both of us."

"I understand," Tiilaen said, nodding. Mayliandra watched her turn away as Melrick and a lovely blonde woman approached. The quiver across Tiilaen's back shifted with her movements. "We'll need to get your husband to safety before anyone can tend to him."

Worry clouded Melrick's features when he made his way to them. Mayliandra gave a strained smile. "Unconscious," she said. His body seemed to relax a little. "We'll need to tend him before he wakes to protest." Or succumbs to the illness. Mayliandra shuddered at the thought of losing Karr.

The lady-warrior stood and addressed Melrick in confident tones. Mayliandra wished she had the assurance Tiilaen exuded. "We passed a rock formation a short distance from here." She pointed north, through the trees. "It will provide cover, and is easier to defend, if necessary." Turning left, Mayliandra noted the others had mounted their horses, waiting for the next command.

Melrick lifted Karr in his arms as if he weighed nothing at all, no matter Karr's size. Mayliandra hid her surprise as she rose to her feet. As if given an audible command, Starsinger trod forward, presenting his left side.

TIILAEN SENSED MELRICK'S consternation at the predicament. He couldn't very well toss her over the saddle like a sack of grain. Nor could Melrick mount without turning his burden over to someone else. "Stechyc should ride with him," Tiilaen suggested. "She's a high order mage among our people. Your lord will be safe," she said, stressing the word Tiilaen hoped would alert the man they knew the truth of Kareina's identity.

Melrick's brow furrowed as he stared at Tiilaen in question. She nodded, answering the query in his eyes. With reluctance, he deferred to her suggestion. "Stechyc, please mount."

Melrick sighed. When the woman complied, he raised Kareina until she lay cradled in the woman's arms. He turned and addressed one of his men. "Stallan, assist Shei Mayliandra to her horse."

When everyone had mounted, Melrick seated his own horse and nudged it beside Tiilaen. She led the procession, feeling the confusion Melrick warred with in silence.

They hadn't needed to travel far before reaching their objective. Melrick, accompanied by Olaf, had insisted on verifying for himself the tactical layout before allowing the others to dismount. Tiilaen waited as he spoke animatedly to Olaf.

“We found the perfect place for your mage to tend to Karr.” He looked up at the darkening sky. “Night will be here before long,” he explained. “Another storm’s coming, and I want us settled before it begins.”

Acknowledging with a nod, Tiilaen walked with him to where Stechyc sat patiently, Kareina held in her tender arms. She noted Mayliandra kept fidgeting with the horse’s reins as she darted nervous glances in Kareina’s direction. Would Mayliandra be so concerned knowing the truth of her husband’s identity? Tiilaen wondered. Or would the horror of being a wife to a woman destroy and squelch the distress?

Stechyc gave her charge over to Melrick, and allowed Tiilaen to assist her in dismounting. They shared a quick embrace. Neither of them could help but notice the strain on Melrick’s features. Tiilaen could feel his tension as he carried Kareina up the gentle rise of rock, careful of her injuries as he battled holding her as he would any comrade in arms, not a woman who held a place in his heart. Her attention was distracted as Mayliandra rushed to follow, and lost her footing. Had Tiilaen not been watching, Mayliandra would have fallen. “Caution, little one.”

“It would do you no good to be harmed, too,” Stechyc said.

“Thank you.” Mayliandra heaved a weary sigh. “Both of you, but you don’t understand circumstances. It wouldn’t matter.”

“You wish to be harmed?” Stechyc asked.

Mayliandra shook her head. “No, but...” Impatient, she said, “It’s not important. What is important is tending Karr before he worsens.”

“It matters, Mayliandra,” Stechyc stated. Tiilaen frowned a warning at her companion, knowing her lover intended to ignore it when Stechyc flashed a scowl. The conversation ceased as Melrick, from the cave’s opening, scowled at them.

“See to Karr,” Tiilaen said a bit too sharply. “Call for us when I can bring in Mayliandra.”

“Of course, love,” Stechyc replied with a mischievous grin. She kissed Tiilaen on the lips. Mayliandra gasped. With a satisfied smile, Stechyc turned, sashayed up the short incline and entered the cave behind Melrick.

Tiilaen groaned after Stechyc had passed from view. “Bless her soul, but she makes me crazy.” She gave a shrug, content with the warmth of her love’s parting kiss. “Knows how to silence me, too, the little minx.” Tiilaen met Mayliandra’s shocked gaze, and raised an eyebrow in feigned wonder. “Don’t wives display their affections in the open here?”

“Not when they’re of the same gender,” Mayliandra said sadly. “It’s against the laws of Kellshae and punishable by either banishment or death.”

“Pity.”

Mayliandra gave a bitter chuckle. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

Chapter Nine

STECHYC WAS GRATEFUL when Melrick had accompanied her, deep into the bowels of the cave, and more grateful when she had noted a small pool of water from a stream running through the mountain. Melrick and Olaf had lit torches to illuminate the path before escorting her, so she had adequate light. Stechyc also understood Melrick's concern for Kareina; but his hovering frustrated her.

"Please, Melrick," she begged, wiping the last traces of blood from the wound at Kareina's waist. "You're killing us both." The anguish flashing across his features twisted at her gut. "I didn't mean it literally."

After a pause, Melrick moved about five feet away and sat near the pool. "Can you talk and work the healing?" he asked, his gaze following her hands as they worked, one of his own clasp the hilt of his sword. Had his distress not been so palpable she would have replied with sarcasm for doubting her abilities.

"Yes," Stechyc answered, reminding herself he didn't trust she and her companions be friend not foe. The intervention of Tiilaen and her band had garnered positive response, for the moment. Yet, to a battle-hardened warrior, it could be a ploy to curry favors, insinuate themselves near Sher Karr.

"How did you know about her? The talisman—"

Stechyc smiled, hoping Melrick would perceive it as understanding, wanting to put him at ease. "I'm a mage. The talisman is simple magic, easy to see beyond. Plus," she added, "I had advance warning."

"Warning?" His body stiffened.

"In dream visions," she explained. "Two images, male and female, one overlaying the other. The closer our proximity to Kareina, the easier to understand what was meant. The scrying helped some in understanding certain things."

He grunted in skepticism.

"Don't worry. Her secret is safe with us, though I don't understand why your people require the need." Stechyc didn't mention she believed there was more to the visions of duality.

Kareina cried out, and tossed about. Stechyc placed her palm on Kareina's forehead and whispered a simple incantation. Though Kareina stilled, her features remained contorted in pain. In Stechyc's mind's eye, images flashed sporadically and she realized the pain wasn't only physical, which could prove to be a problem. Tossing a strip of cloth toward Melrick, she said, "Soak this, ring out the excess, and bring it back to me." As he complied, Stechyc retrieved a small jar from the pouch at her side. Melrick returned holding the cloth out to her. She took it, crooked a finger into the jar and smeared the creamy mixture of herbs onto one side of the dampened cloth before placing on Kareina's forehead, and returned to earlier attempts in mending the torn stitches.

The silence must have been difficult for Melrick. He asked, "Where are you women from?" "Langear Forest, beyond the Valley of Mist. Before the Void, of course."

“And women are warriors there?” His incredulity was obvious.

“Women are many things. Why the surprise? Kareina is a woman warrior.”

“You kissed Tiilaen on the lips,” Melrick stated.

“Yes, I did,” Stechyc answered, not looking up from her work. She’d wondered when Melrick would get to the true nature of his discomfort. Stechyc doubted he’d appreciate seeing the amusement on her face. “She’s my wife.”

“How is it possible?” he croaked.

Stechyc didn’t hide the laughter in her tone. “We share the same world, Melrick, not the same beliefs. Much is different once past the Valley.” She finished her work. After applying some of the herb salve over the wound, she covered it and did the same for the wound on Kareina’s arm. “Are you surprised or sickened by two women together for intimacy and love?”

He cleared his throat. Stechyc waited for him to reply. “Honestly?”

She looked up for her work and pinned him with her gaze. “I’d appreciate honesty, Melrick. But know your opinion matters little, because it won’t change who I am or who I love.”

Melrick’s face flushed. “All right.” His gaze darted to Kareina. “Before her, I would have been...” He paused to grimace. “I have been sickened. She’s been as my own little sister, and I’ve seen evidence of the desire in Kareina’s heart. Even after all that has happened to her, it wasn’t expected.”

Stechyc nodded. “I doubt Kareina expected it either. It has to be more confusing for her, living a double life as she has for so long. She has to ask herself if it’s true to her nature or because of her guise.” Completed with binding the last wound, Stechyc stood and gave her full attention to Melrick. “Did this unforeseen knowledge change your feelings toward her?”

“Of course not,” he said. “At this point, anyone who could care for Kareina, and make her believe in those feelings, would have my wholehearted support.”

“Even the young Shei?”

“Would solve a number of problems.” Melrick shook his head. “Nothing is easy, especially for Kareina.”

Stechyc placed a gentle hand on his forearm. “I never said it would be easy. How do you feel about Mayliandra?”

“Our association is recent and new. Circumstances were uncontrollable.” He gave a wry grin. “But, there is something about her... She’s stronger than she lets on, I think.”

“Under other circumstances, would you approve of Mayliandra?”

Melrick frowned. “What are you trying to ask?”

“Did you not tell Kareina to ‘respond as any lover’ last eve?”

His face flushed a deeper red. “How did—”

Stechyc waved the rest of his question away. “Would that be fair to Mayliandra? What of the pain such a deception would bring in Kareina?”

Sudden anger drew Melrick’s lips into a thin line. “You have no idea what Kareina has already endured. If it meant hurting Mayliandra, it’s worth it to me.” He rubbed at his eyes. “I wouldn’t want either one of them hurt in the long run, but I think of the more immediate time.” Melrick squatted beside Kareina and ran a gentle hand over her hair before looking up to meet Stechyc’s gaze. “I wanted Kareina to know a touch she wasn’t averse to, and Mayliandra would gain strength in having a place of importance, even for a short time.” He shook his head as his focus returned to Kareina. “I need time, or so I believe. Time to conceive some way out of this entire mess Kareina’s father placed her in. I’m no better...manipulating her as Hassid has done.”

This time, Stechyc placed her hand on his shoulder. “I think your heart was in the right place, but in the wrong to consider forcing circumstances.” She applied a gentle squeeze to Melrick shoulder. “You’re in luck. Tiilaen and I can assist from here on.”

Melrick looked up at her with a scowl. “Magic isn’t any truer than my intent.”

Stechyc raised a brow in surprise. “What makes you think it would take magic? Some things are evident to all but those involved. Trust me, Melrick, to help Kareina in any way I can.” As Stechyc finished what she could do for Kareina, she picked up her things and prepared to go back to the others. “With some time and combined effort, we should be able to devise a remedy.”

From the corner of her eye, Stechyc thought she saw a golden female figure on the other side of the pool. Couldn’t be possible, she knew, because the rock face was smooth, and the woman would have to be floating in air. When Stechyc blinked, the woman was no longer there. Stechyc would know if the woman was using magic. What remained was a strange voice in her head whispering, in due time young mage, we will meet.

HAD TIILAEN NOT felt the true concern radiating from Mayliandra, the pacing would have been more annoying than amusing. As it was, she too began to worry at the amount of time that had passed.

Tiilaen knew Stechyc’s magic was strong, and if Kareina could be healed, Stechyc would help her. Tiilaen also understood the patient had to want to survive. After last evening, she worried Stechyc’s concerns were well founded. Maybe Stechyc was correct in assuming the torment Kareina suffered was too great to overcome. This would be the best opportunity for the warrior to concede a battle with none the wiser about the true nature of the defeat.

“I should go to him, help in some way,” Mayliandra said, ceasing her pacing long enough to glare at Tiilaen. “It’s my responsibility as wife—”

“It’s all Karr is to you,” Tiilaen asked, “a responsibility, a duty, because of an arranged marriage?”

“How do—” A blink of confusion crossed Mayliandra’s features. “No, he’s—I mean—Oh, I don’t know.” Mayliandra sat dejectedly on the space of rock beside Tiilaen. “There is so much involved, with my people, the people of Kellshae, and these awful raiders. They all have me so muddled, especially Karr.” She turned to Tiilaen. “I don’t understand what’s happening to me. One moment I want, feel compelled almost, to touch him. The next I’m hoping he’ll become furious and shove me away. I’m drawn to Karr, yet repulsed by my very attraction.”

Tiilaen couldn’t miss the tears building in Mayliandra’s eyes. “Repulsed because of the battle scars?”

“No,” Mayliandra said, “that has nothing to do with it. I’d think less of a warrior of his reputation if he had none at all.” She sighed. “I can’t explain it. Doesn’t matter. I have a duty.”

“Ah, back to obligation.” Tiilaen nodded, feigning understanding. “You’re married to Karr, so must show at least some concern. Drawn to him, so are repulsed with yourself because he is not what you expected. There is another who has your heart, and duty has taken you from them.” Tiilaen shook her head. “I’m glad I’m not of noble birth.”

Mayliandra let her tears fall. “That’s not it at all. There is no other. I thought you, of all people, might understand.”

Tiilaen frowned, perplexed. “Because I’m a warrior?”

“No.” Mayliandra groaned in her frustration. “Because you are in love with another woman.” She covered her mouth and swiped at her tears. “I mean—”

“You can speak freely, because of my relationship, and it will remain between us. I’ll not share with the others.” Tiilaen gave a reassuring smile.

In a low murmur, Mayliandra said, “I’ve never been attracted to a man. Not before Karr.” She jumped to her feet and paced in short steps close to Tiilaen, her voice a mere whisper. “I should be relieved in the knowledge. Few can find even a small bit of happiness in an arranged marriage. I’m glad Sher Karr was who came forward. Had it been Caldier Armin or one of the other men my father had chosen?”

Mayliandra shuddered. “Yet I feel I’m betraying my own heart. I find a modicum of comfort knowing there is goodness, tenderness even, in Karr. Yet, when I consider what I’ll be expected to do...” She glared at Tiilaen. “You must promise, under no circumstances, to divulge this information. Please. It may be acceptable where you come from, but here the end results of certain couplings are public shaming and worse.”

Tiilaen stood, placed a hand in Mayliandra’s and noted the trembling. “Sometimes the heart sees more than the eyes. You should trust yours. I do swear to keep this secret.” She would have said more to bring a little peace to Mayliandra, but Tiilaen heard her name called. Glancing up, her gaze collided with the fierce scowl of question from her mate.

IT DIDN’T TAKE long to bring provisions into the cave, settle the warriors into separate sections: men to one side, women on the other. Kareina suitably covered and protected from the view of the others as they entered the farthest section long enough to assure their lord lived, and to fill water skins from the small stream. Melrick and Olaf tended to the disposition of cooking and guard duties for the evening.

Not assigned a chore, Mayliandra contented herself with placing her few belongings in the general vicinity of Karr. Nearby, Tiilaen and Stechyc were in a heated conversation she couldn’t hear. Mayliandra suspected she was somehow the reason, from the darted glances in her direction. Finished settling her things, she sat on her bedroll and watched Karr in his troubled sleep. When he moaned, Mayliandra had to curb the unbearable impulse to rush over and run her fingertips across his face. Instead, she pulled her knees close to her chest, wrapped her arms tight around them, and concentrated on the rise and fall of Karr’s chest. It appeared steady, which she took as a good sign. But what if it weren’t?

She let her troubled thoughts consume her attention, hoping it would overcome the impulses to soothe Karr. Should Sher Karr die, would they return her to clan Bredwine? Mayliandra knew she couldn’t bear the prospect. Eventually, Mayliandra would live with Karr’s people while he defended and procured more land in the name of Clan Gradyln. At least Mayliandra would have a chance to be more than a slave, have a chance to prove to Karr she was more than a meek woman to pity or despise as insipid.

Mayliandra couldn’t explain why proving anything to her husband held such importance. Even after so short a time together, Karr meant a great deal to her. After life in Bredwine, isolation in a place like Gradyln would be a welcomed relief; after all, Gradyln did produce Melrick, Olaf, the other warriors—the strange contradictions in Karr. Again, Mayliandra wondered at the parentage to raise such a man. What were his Caldier and Caldier like? Would they accept her any better than their son had? If anything happened to Karr, would they place

blame upon her for not preventing it? If anything happened to Karr, would she lose the tenuous friendships gained on this journey? If anything happened to Karr—

“Shei Mayliandra?” Tiilaen said from beside her, worry etched on her beautiful features. “What’s wrong?”

Mayliandra realized tears dampened her face. She swiped at them with a trembling hand. Had she ever cried this much before her betrothal? There was movement from behind Tiilaen, and she noticed Stechyc, the same worry on her face. Shaking her head, Mayliandra looked away, toward Karr. “A moment of feeling sorry for myself, I fear.”

“Ah.” Tiilaen settled herself on the bedroll. “A future without Karr?”

“Another marriage, I would suspect,” Stechyc said, settling on Mayliandra’s left side. “Could solve your worries. Or would it? I know so little of your customs.”

“Stechyc,” Tiilaen warned.

The sarcasm was not lost on Mayliandra. “Hellfire with custom.” Facing the mage, she glared into cold blue eyes. “Don’t presume to know me. Yes, worry of my future, in the event of Karr’s death. Where would my proper place be?”

Tiilaen placed a hand on Mayliandra’s forearm. “An understandable concern, my lady, as Stechyc well knows. Some customs of the nobility are the same in our land.”

Not releasing her gaze from Stechyc’s, Mayliandra said, “I could not, would not, return to my people. Nor am I assured a place with Karr’s people. My fear for myself was personal.” Releasing her gaze from the mage, Mayliandra turned her attention toward Karr’s prone form. “There is more to him than what is on the surface, what he allows to be seen. I’m afraid to lose him before I discover what the something is.” She shrugged, “Or learn why I care about him so strongly. Somehow, I fear, it is an important thing to learn. More than even Melrick may realize.”

“You think there is something Melrick doesn’t know about the person he’s reared since childhood?” Stechyc asked, disbelief tainting every syllable.

“Who better to deceive than one who loves us unconditionally?”

Stechyc gave a bitter laugh. “So deception is agreeable to you.”

Mayliandra shook her head. “No, it isn’t. Though deception can easily twist and distort.” She glanced at Tiilaen, hoping to find she understood, but read confusion on her features, too. Hoping to keep an ally, Mayliandra directed her responses to the warrior. “Have you never found it kinder to lie, so as not to hurt the one we loved? Even to tell a half-truth, something we believed so minor in consequence as to do no harm.”

Tiilaen gave a grin. “There is a difference in complimenting a bad meal, and something on the level you intonate as a deception Melrick could not know.”

“I never meant Melrick didn’t know, merely he may not understand the importance.”

Mayliandra felt relieved Tiilaen understood where she was going. “There is more to Sher Karr than is on the surface. Maybe deception is the wrong word, but I’m not certain what else to use.” She glanced to her husband’s prone form. “Maybe Karr deceives himself somehow. Maybe he’s done battle for so long, he rages one in his own heart, battling his truer nature.”

Tiilaen gave Mayliandra’s arm a reassuring squeeze. “Then you will need to hone every bit of patience, I should think. Karr won’t give to losing any battle easily. If you continue this course, I believe you are in for a dangerous, and lengthy, battle of your own looking for answers you may not want.”

Stechyc sighed. “Wounds to the body can heal, and not a fear you have with Karr. Wounds to the soul can fester and infect, even transferring to those we most care about.”

Mayliandra frowned at the statement. “What do you mean, Stechyc?”

The mage shook her head. “You need plenty of rest, if you wish to accomplish your goal.” Stechyc rose, Tiilaen following suit. “Here comes Melrick.”

Melrick came toward them, a plate of food in his hand. “I thought the Shei would like to eat here, instead of with the others.” He handed the plate toward her. “But if you’d rather join the rest.”

“No, Melrick. Thank you.” She took the food from him. “I’d much rather be here,” Mayliandra said. He nodded and left them.

“And we should get some fresh air,” Tiilaen said, taking Stechyc’s arm. “Call out, Mayliandra, should you need anything from us. We won’t be too far.”

Stechyc gave a nod in Karr’s direction. “Karr’s doing better. Sleep is best for healing, and he should be out until morning. Should anything change—”

Mayliandra understood how mercurial the healing process. “I’ll call out, don’t fear. See you in the morning.”

THE CAVE’S INTERIOR was dim, illuminated by the fire of a single torch placed in a recess of one wall. Mayliandra, startled awake by the sound of a strangled cry, sat up and took in her surroundings. Her sleep clouded gaze landed on Karr, tossing in fitful slumber. Movement a few yards away, alerted her Melrick was close by, but his sleep appeared undisturbed by Karr’s actions. No one else was sleeping in this section of cave.

Once again, a small cry came from Karr, this time dislodging the cloth from his forehead. Mayliandra’s concern prodded her into action before she could curb the impulse. Quick, yet quiet, she made her way to Karr’s side, retrieving the fallen cloth. Mayliandra noted it was dry. She moved to the stream, dampened the material, and returned to Karr. She laid it back on his forehead. A trembling sigh escaped his lips, and Karr’s body stilled.

Mayliandra knew she should return to sleep, but curiosity rooted her to the spot. She kneeled beside Karr’s shoulder and stared. Mayliandra knew she may never get another opportunity to study her husband unhindered. Mayliandra wouldn’t be able to fathom the depths of those wondrous smoke-blue eyes, but neither would they stare back. Tentatively, she touched the burn scar below the left eye, ran a light finger down the cheek, avoiding the earlobe holding the black skull with ruby eyes that chilled her so, and traced the scar under his chin. Her first observation was of the lack of excessive heat from earlier. She felt relieved the fever had broken.

Her finger barely contacted the flesh, yet the soft texture startled her. Leaning forward, she reached for Karr’s hand and her confusion increased, still she held tight. There was strength in the hand, though not enough to disguise fingers damaged and burned, scars white with age. The hand appeared normal for a man of his size, accompanied by fine dark hairs on the knuckles, in Mayliandra’s own hand it felt barely larger than hers. The texture of the flesh perplexed her. Confused, Mayliandra ran a hand up an arm to find the muscular strength in them, at least, as it should be, though the width didn’t seem proportionate with what her eyes met. To outward appearances, Karr was masculine, the epitome of a warrior, the scars terribly real as the contact of her fingers indicated. And yet, touching him gave a different impression of size.

Why hadn’t she noticed this when she’d flung herself in his arms, begging assistance at Bredwine? Was this an illusion perpetuated by the illness? Or her own imagination trying to give what her heart wanted? As Mayliandra looked down at the features relaxed in sleep, she realized,

despite the scarring, Sher Karr was handsome. She knew her sexual aversion to men couldn't change, but this one particular man aroused emotions Mayliandra never thought viable. Her gaze centered on his full lips, and she wondered what pleasures could be found in Karr's kisses. Careful to be gentle, Mayliandra traced the lips, startled when Karr's tongue darted out and flicked the tip of her finger as it traveled across the crease. Quickly, Mayliandra pulled back.

When no further movement came from Karr, Mayliandra realized the response involuntary. His head tilted to the side, nearly losing the cloth. She adjusted the fabric before she returned to her inspection. Karr was a contradiction of emotions, and a mass of physical inconsistencies. What would it be like to wake every morn next to him? Mayliandra suspected she'd find out soon enough, once away from battle march.

With the marriage official, Sher Karr would expect to consummate their union. Family obligations needed to be met, after all.

With a glance to where Melrick lay, Mayliandra assured herself the Guard Captain slept. Having already embarked on impulsive behavior, and before she could reason herself out of the urge, Mayliandra stretched out next to Karr, lifting his injured arm and placing it across his chest so as not to harm him further. Laying her own arm across Karr's abdomen, she pressed flush against his side and rested her head on the uninjured shoulder. Warmth suffused her body. Startled by the unfamiliar reaction in her personal parts, she nearly pulled away. Instead, Mayliandra closed her eyes. She concentrated on Karr's steady breathing and the sensations coursing through her. All too soon, sleep claimed her.

KAREINA SLOWLY GAINED consciousness, at once baffled by an unfamiliar though not unpleasant pressure against her. She expected to feel pain upon waking, in light of her injuries, but not the weight across her abdomen or flush against an entire side of her body. Or a weight nestled between her legs. Kareina was slow to realize the strangeness was the presence of limbs not her own, of the warm exhale of breath tickling her throat. Tensing, Kareina opened her eyes to the dimness of a barely lit cave. Twisting her head, Kareina found Mayliandra cradled against her and the reason behind the oddities her body experienced.

Her first inclination was to pull away. Instead, Kareina stared in puzzlement. What had possessed the skittish woman to act so boldly? Dread consumed Kareina. This close, Mayliandra would be aware of the truth. Kareina knew she should extricate herself from the woman's sleeping embrace, but hesitated.

Her hands ached to caress the beautiful face relaxed in slumber. Careful not to alert Mayliandra, Kareina removed the cloth from her forehead and let it fall to the ground. Kareina shifted position until able to face her. The loss of most of the physical connection brought a soft groan from Mayliandra, who responded by tightening the grip on Kareina's waist, and twisting more onto her side. The possessive action brought a smile to Kareina's lips. Secure in the knowledge Mayliandra still slept created a sense of bravado within her.

Kareina lowered her head and kissed Mayliandra's forehead. The simple action created an instant stir of heat within Kareina. She should stop, but her body's desires were, for a moment, stronger than her mental control. Reaching over, she clasped a few strands of the honey-gold hair in her fingers, amazed at the silky feel of it. Kareina brought the strands to her lips, overwhelmed at the incredible satiny texture. Driven by impulse, Kareina released the hair and caressed a

cheek the color of fresh milk. Misery built within her throat, near to strangling her. Such splendor, such exquisiteness beneath her fingers, and it should—could—never be hers.

Kareina dropped the hair and curled her fingers into a fist, and pulled her hand away. Though Mayliandra continued to sleep, Kareina turned her face away. Her reaction more forceful than Kareina intended, unaware she'd awakened Mayliandra until a small hand cupped her chin.

“Are you in pain, husband?”

Kareina dared not face the woman. “Don't call me husband. Please,” she growled low, the pain of perpetuating the farce far worse than any wound could be.

With gentle pressure, Mayliandra tugged Kareina's face until she looked at her. “Too formal? I apologize.” She gazed at Karr as if searching for answers. “Should I call for the healer?” Mayliandra asked, as if hesitant to wake anyone.

Kareina swallowed hard, shook her head. “I'm fine. I hadn't meant to wake you.” Her gaze darted to Mayliandra's empty bedroll, and flushed. “Was...uh...I trouble?”

Mayliandra's own face darkened with embarrassment when realizing her arm still draped Kareina. She pulled it free. “No. I—” Mayliandra stopped. “I wished to make sure the poultice stayed in place,” Mayliandra explained, and gave a wry smile. “I failed you yet again.”

“You didn't,” Kareina said, distracted by the loss of Mayliandra's arm and the warmth it gave. “I removed it a moment ago.” Kareina reached up and retrieved the displaced material. “I have no further need for it.” Mayliandra shifted as if she would move away. Unsure what came over her, other than loathe to losing the companionability yet, Kareina halted Mayliandra with a hand to her shoulder. “Wait. Tell me where we are, and what has happened. The images are unclear.”

Kareina thought a smile twitched at the corner of Mayliandra's lips, as she settled, almost as close as she was in slumber. “Warriors from a far land came, searching for you, hus—” Mayliandra paused, averting her gaze as if rethinking her original thoughts. When she continued, the words came in a rush. “Female warriors. They assisted Melrick and your men, showed us to this place. They know of you, my lord, even from so very far away.”

Mayliandra's features lit with excitement during her quick tale. Kareina hadn't missed the minor alterations to what she herself vaguely remembered. An amused chuckle escaped and Kareina tapped a finger beneath Mayliandra's chin. “Saved my hide, don't forget.”

“Oh, you had the retched man finished,” Mayliandra said matter-of-factly, wrapping her fingers around the one beneath her chin. She frowned as if something about the finger bothered her.

She attempted to extricate the digit, but Mayliandra's grip tightened. Kareina ignored the sudden race of her pulse. “Mayli, I would have died if not for their intervention. It is I who failed you this day.”

Squeezing Karr's finger as if in reassurance, Mayliandra replied, “Hellfire, I say. Given the chance, you would have stopped that raider, even in the face of fever. You could never fail me.”

Gratification consumed Kareina knowing this woman would lie to allow her to save face; replaced with the shameful realization she had failed Mayliandra from the moment they'd met. Her words meant to prove her willing to abide by wifely duty, not because Mayliandra felt anything for her. A quick pounding began to build in Kareina's head. She sat up too quick, winced at the tug of stitches, and began to search for her water skin, needing something to drink. As she dug through her belongings, Kareina caught the alarm in Mayliandra's eyes. Never, she thought, should she have allowed Mayliandra to consider a chance at friendship, or anything more. Kareina knew she should have demanded Mayliandra move away the moment she woke.

“Karr?”

Resorting to the only emotion that worked on Mayliandra, Kareina snarled, “Go back to bed, woman, preferably your own.” Kareina found what she looked for, removed the stop, and took a hefty swig. In her haste, Kareina had ignored the trickle of liquid escaping down the corner of her lip. When Mayliandra snatched away the water skin, Kareina gave an icy glare in her direction. “How dare you?”

Mayliandra gawked back. “Be a drunkard after we’re done with the raiders, and I’ll not care, or stop you. Call this a wedding gift.” Mayliandra stood, the water skin held tight to her chest. “Too many people count on you, from your people to mine, to strangers from another land. You think this is how they should see their leader, smelling the fumes on your breath, seeping from your very pores. How dare you?” Mayliandra returned to her bedroll and lay down, never releasing the skin from her grip. As the sobs built, Mayliandra flung herself around so Kareina couldn’t be witness to her anguish.

Kareina stared at Mayliandra’s back, stunned. Even as she watched the tremors ripple across Mayliandra’s body, Kareina regretted what she’d done. Maybe if she hadn’t been so short-tempered before the drink, Mayliandra wouldn’t have reacted in such a manner. Kareina knew her drinking wasn’t as bad as pronounced. Drunkard? Parrin, or Melrick, would have stated so, which they had no need to do as this was a recent habit. She had the drinking under control. The headaches, the memories, the emptiness in her heart, those Kareina couldn’t control. Who did the woman think she was to begrudge Kareina the only escape she had left?

Rubbing at her eyes, Kareina lay back. The bedroll felt chill, the loss of Mayliandra’s warming presence evident. Also missed was the comfort of a casually draped arm, the tender intimacy of the conversation they had shared, if for but a moment. The feel of silken threads of hair in her fingers, the delicate texture of creamy skin, they too would haunt Kareina this night. She groaned. I won’t miss any of it, don’t need it. Nevertheless, Kareina’s body betrayed her, grieved over the newly erected barriers, ached to rekindle the moments of physical and emotional closeness with her wife once again.

Despite the treasonous actions of her body, Kareina’s mind raged. It had to be this way, as no other option would be acceptable. Kareina lived a lie and nothing could change the fact. In time, Mayliandra would understand, though she’d be angry and hurt, doubtless maybe disgusted, but she would survive.

Kareina wondered if *she* would persevere.

Chapter Ten

MORNING CAME MUCH too quickly for Mayliandra. She was exhausted from a restless night of tortured emotions and dreams. She didn't want to get up, but the others moving around in parts of the cavern made sounds echo and she didn't want to cause problems. Mayliandra knew Melrick would check on them. She loathed the idea of glimpsing how Karr fared, afraid to see his anger had flamed rather than dissipated.

"Mayli?" Dreading what was to come, she didn't turn toward Karr's voice. "Please, Mayliandra," Karr said, "look at me so I can apologize. If I could budge without my body protesting, or Melrick carrying me, I would come to you."

The thought of Karr in pain was the catalyst. She clasped the necklace Karr had purchased for her, made a silent prayer for peace. Twisting around, she saw Karr was sitting up, though his...her...no, his face pale from the exertion. Why had she seen Karr as a woman? "What would you apologize for, my lord?" she asked, curbing the impulse to hurry to his side.

A smirk pulled at Karr's lips. "The list is so long I need isolate, huh? Then I would blanket the list with my sincerest request for forgiveness on all matters." He tried to stand and winced with each move. Seeing his determination, Mayliandra rushed over, helping as best she could by placing herself so Karr could lean on her for support. "Thank you, my lady. I am in your debt. I would bow now, but I'm afraid I might continue in a downward trajectory."

Mayliandra glanced upward to his face, noted the twinkle of amusement in the grey-blue eyes. "I could still demand the courtesy, Karr."

"Rightly so." Karr removed his arm from her shoulder and Mayliandra realized he would make the attempt.

"Don't you dare," she said, wrapping an arm around Karr's waist to prevent him from bending. "Melrick and Stechyc will have my hide if you undo any of their healing work." She felt Karr's fingers beneath her chin, let her gaze be caught by his, the warmth from his touch spreading south to areas she dared not think about. "You should sit back down, my lord." Mayliandra saw a surplus of emotions floating across Karr's features.

Karr nodded. "Perhaps you are correct, but not until I have said what needs be said to you." He took an unsteady breath. "Mayli, please accept my apologies for my barbaric behavior last night. You never invited this situation, yet you have behaved more than admirably through it all."

Mayliandra could feel the trembling in his body as he strained to stand straight. She felt him sway and was about to suggest he lay back down, but Karr held up a hand to stop her.

"I cannot give you what you need in this marriage, but for the time being, I would like it if we didn't quarrel as we do."

Was Karr letting her know he did not intend to make this a true bonding? Mayliandra decided not to dwell on the remark—for now. Although she confused herself with the rush of disappointment she wasn't expected to warm a man's bed—the one thing she feared most. What is wrong with me? she chided herself.

“I agree. We know so little of each other it can hardly be otherwise. I also prefer not to argue with you.” Mayliandra noticed the beads of sweat building on his forehead and upper lip. “Karr, you need to sit down before you collapse.” She glanced around and noticed a small outcrop of rock near where Melrick had slept last eve, and brought Karr’s attention to it. “It might be easier if you didn’t have so far to go down. Do you think you can make it over there?” He nodded. “Good, put as much weight on me as you need. I’m not as fragile as you think.”

The perspiration from the physical strain was evident by the time they made their destination a few feet away. “I feel better than I should, though still as weak as a newborn.” Karr inhaled and exhaled deeply. “Is Stechyc the woman with the arrows?”

“No, my hus—my lord. Tiilaen.” Mayliandra paused, not certain how he would respond to the announcement she was about to make. Knowing Karr was bound to find out how things stood with the new arrivals eventually, she forged on. “Stechyc is the mage and healer, wife to the woman with the arrows.”

Whatever response she could have anticipated, Mayliandra wasn’t prepared when Karr looked her in the eyes and said, “Not from around here, I take it.”

If the smoke-blue depths hadn’t already mesmerized her, Mayliandra would have missed the mischievous twinkle. Could Karr have a sense of humor? Before Mayliandra could consider the repercussions, she burst into laughter. “No, definitely not from Kellshae. They come from Langlear, beyond the Valley of Mist.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “In their land, magic isn’t outlawed either.”

He leaned forward and lowered his voice to match hers. “Explaining Stechyc being a mage, as it’s not a title many would use, otherwise.”

“Precisely.” Mayliandra laughed again, but clamped her jaw shut when she caught Karr staring with a strange frown. “This news upsets you?”

Karr shook his head. “Your laugh becomes you, Mayli.”

Mayliandra, caught off guard by the compliment, was speechless for a moment. “Thank you,” she said, stroking the necklace at her throat. As her fingers rubbed the black stone, Karr’s features appeared to blur and soften, becoming feminine. She must be more exhausted than she thought. Mayliandra shook her head to clear her vision. “Um, would you like me to fetch you something to break your fast? Maybe find the others for you?”

With a grimace, Karr said, “You’re uncomfortable being alone with me. I’ve brought that on myself, I suppose.” He shrugged. “You can go.” Before Mayliandra realized his intent, Karr rose to his feet, unstable as the position was.

“Hellfire, Karr, sit back down.” Mayliandra wrapped her arms around Karr’s waist in the hopes of steadying him. All she managed was to unsettle herself when he glanced at her with curiosity.

“A beautiful woman throwing herself at me is not a situation I’m accustomed to, Mayli. Do you intend to make this a habit?”

Embarrassment heated Mayliandra’s face. “Two compliments and no harsh words, Karr. I know we agreed neither of us is fond of arguing, but should I expect the other boot to drop soon?”

Karr placed a gentle hand on either side of her head. “I can be difficult, I know, and you don’t know much of anything about me. Understand the fault is mine alone to bear.” Karr placed a tender kiss on her forehead.

Mayliandra smirked. “Not yours alone. I too have undisclosed issues.” She became conscious of the fact Karr hadn’t dropped his hands, nor had she released his waist. Again, Mayliandra

wondered what it was that had her so comforted by Karr's touch. Was her body resolved to the concept she was a wife, and would have no choice but to endure the touch of a man? No, this was a reaction to Karr's touch alone. "Perhaps a time will come when we can reveal them to one another. This is the first occasion, after all, we have been alone together, spoken," Mayliandra hesitated, and added, "touched."

A devilish smile crossed Karr's lips. "You don't count our snuggling last night?" Mayliandra turned away, to hide any emotion which might give away how much she had enjoyed the moment; regretting the movement when their physical connection was severed. "Again, I must apologize to you, as it was a ghastly remark, my lady. You aren't some tavern wench, and shouldn't be teased as such." This time Karr didn't give her an opportunity to stop him. He returned to his bedroll and began putting his things together.

Anxiety clutched tight in Mayliandra's stomach, not understanding what was happening to her. Each time Karr showed tenderness, she did something to thwart his attempts. It was little wonder Karr became so frustrated with her. Mayliandra knew she should apologize and explain she was confused. Would it mean explaining to Karr how she could only love him if he were built like Stechyc or Tiilaen? Worst of all, Mayliandra felt some love for her husband. Maybe she needed to talk to Tiilaen.

Maybe she should have let Karr send her to Gradyln, after all. Bile filled Mayliandra's throat. She would never figure this all out.

KAREINA'S AGGRAVATION GREW as she stuffed items into her bedroll and saddlebags. Each time her barriers fell, each moment she showed some softness toward Mayliandra, the woman rejected it, rejected her. Why was she even trying? Their marriage was a sham, a way to keep Mayliandra out of harm's way and out of Bredwine. It wasn't as if Kareina intended to return home, despite telling her father so; and yet, though she hadn't expected Mayliandra to come this far on the journey, Kareina believed they could at least be civil. She'd hoped to have a chance to prepare Mayliandra for Hassid, assure her Parrin was the ideal confidante, the best possible mother ever to live. Why did she try to fool herself? She was attracted to Mayli and wanted to be near her, even if in anger. Kareina would have to find a way to send her to Gradyln. Until then, Kareina intended to avoid Mayliandra as often as was humanly possible.

"Sher Karr, should you be up?" Olaf was entering the cavern carrying two meals.

"And who would prevent me?" Kareina realized she'd snapped her response, and tried to temper her next words. "I should think if I can get up, I should be up."

A soft laugh came from behind Olaf. "Well said, Sher Karr." As Olaf headed toward Mayliandra, Kareina saw who spoke. She was a beautiful and slender blonde-haired woman. "My name is—"

"Stechyc, wife to the warrior Tiilaen," Kareina said. When Stechyc raised a curious eyebrow, Kareina glanced toward Mayliandra. For a heartbeat, Kareina felt fury when she caught the smile Mayliandra gave Olaf. "Despite what Shei Mayliandra may think me, I am not so barbaric and naïve I could not understand another's customs. And I can't speak for all my men. A topic for another time. Please, be careful in the meantime. Thank you, by the way. As a healer, you have worked magic, or is it the other way 'round?" Kareina was a bit uncomfortable, wondering if Stechyc would announce what she must have observed in tending her wounds, and reveal her for what she was.

“Whichever puts you most at ease,” Stechyc said with a slight bow.

As Stechyc moved closer, Melrick and Tiilaen entered, and Olaf came over and handed her the other plate. Kareina, a private person, was glad for the additional company. She gave her attention to Melrick. “How go things, Captain?” she asked.

“No sign of the raiders. I think we’re safe for the time being. There’s a nasty storm approaching, and I don’t think we should leave this cavern for the time being.”

Kareina nodded. “We should devise a bit of a stratagem on how best to deal with this raider situation.” Still a bit weak, Kareina moved to the shelf she and Mayliandra had used a moment earlier, sat down and began eating. Following her lead, the others trailed behind and spread out in a semicircle facing her. It didn’t escape her notice Olaf sat beside Mayliandra. Kareina gave a nod to Tiilaen. “I thank you for your assistance, and for saving my life, as has your mate. A debt I will pay in any way you see fit.”

“There is no debt, Karr,” Tiilaen said. “We have a common purpose, best suited to our working together.”

“Either way, I won’t forget.” Kareina finished the food and put the plate next to her, rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forward with a minor grimace. “From activity thus far, I see the raiders are headed southwest. Should be the route we follow.” Kareina looked to Stechyc. “You must have seen what we were up against in the skirmish you entered. As a mage, can you explain what we are dealing with?”

“Dark magic, certainly.” Stechyc shook her head. “Melrick has told me of the village by the river. The staffs he described are from an ancient time. Even in Langlear we have buried or destroyed most of our more dangerous artifacts, in the hopes to avoid this type of devastation.”

“As long as someone remembers, you can never avoid these possibilities,” Mayliandra said. “Someone was careless enough to unleash the power. Let’s hope they are strong enough to control it.”

Stechyc gave a sharp laugh. “No one is strong enough to control a god. All they can hope for is a symbiotic relationship. But we are talking of T’Dar.”

“Yes,” Tiilaen said, “an evil god who will drain dry the idiot who brought him back.”

Kareina nodded. “Persimmone, I presume.”

“Who is Persimmone?” Stechyc asked.

“Probably the careless idiot we’re talking about.” Kareina shrugged. “The raider Tiilaen put an arrow through mentioned the name to me.”

“You’ve never heard of him before?” Tiilaen asked.

“No, but he’s heard of me if the taunting is considered. Seems I have a reputation,” Kareina said with a wry grin.

Tiilaen smiled. “Yes, but yours is spoken in positive light as far as Langlear. You’re legendary, Karr.”

Wincing, Kareina said, “Langlear has gotten hold of Zeren’s stories.”

“Who is Zeren?” Mayliandra asked.

“A character in his own right,” Olaf said, rolling his eyes, “our Clan Historian.”

“Ah he writes true.” Mayliandra gave Olaf a pat on his knee. “So don’t discount accounts that have made it so far away from Gradyln.”

“Oh, I’m certain part of the truth is out there, Shei Mayliandra,” Olaf acknowledged. “It’s the parts he recounts in the taverns, the meeting hall, and at the banquets which make it to other clans.”

“And what’s so wrong with those?”

With an exasperated sigh, Olaf said, "Because in those tales, Melrick is near sainthood, and I'm a demi-god."

Mayliandra gave a huge smile to Olaf. "See, Zeren speaks truth."

Temper filled Kareina, watching the ease of conversations Mayliandra and Olaf shared, when each they shared became uncivil. Their little tête-à-tête apparently didn't go unnoticed by Melrick, either. "If we can move on, Guard Chief."

Olaf's face flamed red in his embarrassment. "My apologies, Captain," to Kareina, "my lord."

"Well," Tiilaen said, "from what Narilla's vision apparition showed me and the Matron Mage, this Persimmon is heading his raiders to the Valley of Mist."

"Narilla? The old merchant woman from Bredwine?" Kareina asked.

"Very well could be, as I've never met her myself." Tiilaen smirked at Stechyc. "My mage-wife never saw fit to tell me about some great-aunt witch who was sending me messages in the form of nightmares."

Stechyc looked more amused than contrite. "It was something you had to come to me with, and you didn't. I'm not allowed to bring it up, love, as it would be prying." Tiilaen gave a snort. Stechyc chuckled in response. She turned to Kareina. "How do you know of Narilla?"

"You already know, don't you?" Kareina scowled at the mage. "But I have to offer the information, to keep it from being an invasion?"

"Yes." Stechyc looked amused. "There must be rules, and we must maintain order. Though, in all honesty, some information is fuzzy, unclear."

"I understand," Kareina said. "Well, Narilla appeared in a shop in Bredwine. She mentioned the Eye of T'Dar, the Talisman of D'Kelri, and evil magic. Oh, wait, in my saddlebag." Kareina started to get up, but Stechyc halted her and asked Melrick to pass it forward. When Melrick handed it to her, Kareina glanced to Stechyc. "She'd slipped this in my pocket. If this is magical, maybe you should keep it in your possession."

"No, that shouldn't be necessary." Stechyc never took her eyes from Kareina's hands as she pulled the worn leather wrapped object from the bag. "Don't remove any more from the leather, yet, please."

"Why not?" Kareina asked.

"It's been enchanted, to cloak the power of the talisman." Stechyc looked from Kareina's hands to her eyes. "We need to prepare with a shielding before removing the device safely. Did she say anything of import when she gave this?"

Kareina passed it back to Melrick to put away. She gave a wry grin. "Guess you'll have to decide what was of significance. I thought her a crazy old woman, so never looked beyond the observation. I'm sorry. I was preoccupied with other matters."

Stechyc laughed. "All right, what else happened?"

"Well, after we selected a pendant for Mayli—"

"The charmed one she's wearing now?" Stechyc asked.

"Didn't know it had magic," Kareina said, shrugging.

"A little." Stechyc turned to Mayliandra. "I'll tell you more about it later, okay?" After Mayliandra nodded, Stechyc gazed back at Kareina. "Go on."

Kareina leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. "She said I would fight my true battle in the Valley of Mist, fight myself before I could conquer the evil. Narilla finished with saying I must die in order to live." Kareina scrutinized the group. "Any wonder I hesitated to share this information? I thought her mad."

Melrick cleared his throat. "Can you decipher Narilla's meaning?" he asked Stechyc.

Stechyc glimpsed in Mayliandra's direction before answering Melrick. "I'd rather try to decide which pieces are intended to be literal and which are a more figurative wording. I do believe you are correct with the direction, Karr, and I think I know why. There's a place in the Valley said to be the entrance and exit of all things magical. The Pool of Promise. This doorway also leads to Bahalkar." She paused. "And it doesn't discriminate good magic from bad magic."

Olaf rubbed the back of his neck. "I've been listening, but I don't follow."

"I believe what Stechyc means," Mayliandra said, "is if T'Dar and this raider leader, Persimmone, don't get stopped before reaching the Pool they can release all of T'Dar's evil minions."

"Precisely," said Kareina. "All the more reason we need to stop them before they do more harm to innocent people. I wonder why the Priests of Tekelrah haven't been trying to retrieve all these stronger magical objects."

"I can't be certain," Stechyc said, "but I fear they were the targets of T'Dar and these raiders. One other thing, Karr. Without the Priest's to control it, magic, all kinds, is leaking back into Kellshae."

"Which means?" Melrick asked.

"Anyone with magic in their blood will find it activated."

Kareina nodded. "So if these people didn't know of their ability, we could have a problem with those who couldn't control it. Also, could well be life-threatening if this happens around fearful folks, where normal people are no longer normal."

"And we could have another problem," Stechyc whispered, "if anyone were to have a magic device or talisman, with the magic going awry." At her raised eyebrow, the mage shrugged, and added with a pointed look at Kareina's skull ear adornment, "Others are working fine, for now, anyway."

When Kareina stood, she realized she'd regained more of her strength. Whatever the mage had done was indeed magic. "We need to get an update of this storm."

"I'll take care of it, Sher Karr." Olaf hurried off at her nod of agreement.

"May I have a word with you, my lord?" Stechyc asked of Kareina, as she, too, stood. The others followed suit. "It's about some of your men, and it may prove to be a problem."

Kareina scowled. "Has any of them—"

"No, no." Stechyc said. "Langear warriors are different from those of Kellshae."

"Yes, I've noticed," Kareina said.

"As have most your men, my lord, but their responses aren't as understanding as yours. We know the predicament of your situation, Karr." Stechyc put her arm around Tiilaen's waist possessively. "We are not without conflicts in the Forest, and often, as is now the case, warriors are away for long periods of time. Because of this, our warriors go on these more severe missions with their mates. Should anything happen, the gods forbid," she closed her eyes, "they aren't hurt or left to die alone. The warriors who have volunteered on this mission are all female—and mated."

"I see where this could be difficult." Kareina nodded at Stechyc. "I have the best of my men with me, but I know their judgment on certain subjects, and not all is positive." She gave a quick glance to Melrick. He gave her a barely perceptible nod, affirming he too had noticed the discord among the men.

"It's not that we aren't going to finish what we came here for," Stechyc said. "Tiilaen and I have made a vow, as have the others. It's—"

“I will take care of this, Stechyc. Allow me a little time today and, with Melrick’s assist, we will devise a plan to take the pressure off your warriors.”

If Kareina were to be honest, she’d already given thought to cutting the ranks into groups. She needed all the warrior strength she could get, but maybe by attacking on two fronts they could achieve their goal quicker. After their manipulation at the fishing village, using those same tactics wasn’t unexpected. Kareina would have to separate the group in a way that didn’t rebuke the men for feeling women weren’t as good as they were, no matter they were erroneous and archaic. Tact wasn’t her strongest trait, and one reason why she had Melrick around to assist.

Even now, Melrick moved closer as Tiilaen, Stechyc and Mayliandra moved away to afford them privacy. Before they could speak, Olaf returned with the news the storm didn’t look to be giving up any time soon. Kareina nodded. “Have the men form for practice exercises in one-hour. This room should provide enough space.”

“Aye, Sher Karr,” Olaf said, and left.

“Tiilaen.” Kareina waited until the redhead had joined her and Melrick. “Would your warriors be willing to participate in our practice exercises?”

Tiilaen smiled. “If you wish it, yes, they will. It will help keep them sharp.”

“I don’t doubt there’s a problem, but need to see the interaction for myself, before I cull the group. Have them join us here in an hour, please.” After Tiilaen moved away to inform her warriors, Kareina addressed Melrick in a whisper. “I believe this action is for the best, but I would listen to any suggestions or objections you may have on the subject. With the exception of you, Olaf, and Spallan, I say split men and women.”

Melrick shook his head. “With the strange things I’ve seen in battle with the raiders, I also believe a smaller group is best. Given the circumstances, even though Gradyln warriors are superior to most in Kellshae, I believe the best option is to take the mage and her warriors with us.” He leaned in closer. “I hate to admit this and sound callous, but you’ll be able to concentrate on the mission,” Melrick cleared his throat, “and your wife.”

Kareina cringed. “I wish the raiders hadn’t been so specific about her, or she’d still be heading to Gradyln. As it is, here or away, she’s a distraction.” When she realized how the words came out, Kareina groaned in annoyance with herself. Melrick gave a short laugh. “Show me around before my tongue gets me in any more trouble.

“Can this day get any worse?” Kareina asked herself as she followed Melrick.

CHAYBOEN STOOD BEFORE Zheirger Keep with a smile. She felt like she’d come home. Her dream vision demanded her presence here, suggesting the goddess Ysannie would require her assistance, and that magic had returned to Kellshae. Both prospects excited her.

Like so many others, when it became obvious she had threads of magic in her body, feared and shunned, her family hid Chayboen away from others in her village. Until the time the Priests of Tekelrah came for her when she was ten, binding her and forcing her into a box, and taken away under the cover of darkness. Rumor always stated, once the Priests took you away, they siphoned off your magic until you were dead. No one survived the priests.

Which is why, first opportunity, Chayboen ran. Then ran some more. During all those years, she always wondered why the Priests had come for her as her magic was glimpses into the future. This curse wasn’t even useful to a child, as she seldom understood what her visions were let alone what they meant. For the first few years, Chayboen hid in every abandoned structure

she could find, eating scraps and spoils thrown into alleys. Leaving a town when someone had caught her scrounging, or a new owner came.

The night was late, fourteen-year-old Chayboen was more ill than she'd ever been, enduring an extremely bad winter that had many suffering. Barely able to move, knowing she'd never get better without food and proper shelter, she'd snuck into the darkness before dawn and rummaged behind a tavern. Woozy with fever, Chayboen had passed out, tipping over the slop bucket in her journey to the alley floor, creating enough noise to alert the tavern owner. She tried to crawl away, and heard the angry growl of a man unceremoniously raised from sleep. His grumbling was intense and Chayboen believed he would kill her and put her out of her misery. The vision of a plump woman kissing her forehead flashed in her mind. When she shook her head to clear the image, she realized strong arms had picked her up, carrying her into the back of the tavern.

"What have you there, Wulk?" came a high-pitched female voice from the top of a stairway in the rear corner of the kitchen.

"Found a child passed out in the alley, Sister," he told her as he moved toward the stairs. "She has the strangest eyes I've ever seen. They're amber."

Insulted by his classification of her age, Chayboen had croaked, "Not a child." People had always commented, and feared her because of her eye color, so it was nothing new.

The man, Wulk, harrumphed while he carried her up the stairs. "She's ill, Wynd," he said passing his twin at the stairs' top. He walked toward the end of a narrow hall and stopped before a closed door. Wulk waited until the woman opened it, rushed to the small bed and pulled down the quilt, placing a small blanket from the foot of the bed atop the sheet. He entered the room and with surprising gentleness, placed Chayboen on the soft mattress. "Think she's gonna make it?" Wulk asked.

Wynd shook her head, while pushing him from the room. "Get some clean rags, a small bucket of hot water, and bowl of broth."

"Shouldn't we feed her something better?" he asked. "She looks like she hasn't eaten in months."

"Which is why we need to take it slowly," Wynd said. "Now hurry up." Once Wulk left, Chayboen watched through vision clouded with fever as Wynd retrieved a plain nightdress from the wardrobe. Her hand felt heavy and sluggish as she tried to raise it to reach for the garment. Wynd shook her head, "No child, let me take care of you."

Chayboen whispered, "Not a child. I can earn my keep."

The woman giggled. "Maybe not a child, but you're not in any shape to fight me, are you?" Wynd asked, her shrill voice like a blade slicing Chayboen's skull. She shook her head, too exhausted to speak. "Good. Enjoy the attention for a while. Once you're better, you can defend your age all you wish, 'cause this moment has you appearing to be a long-length eight year old." As Wynd removed Chayboen's threadbare clothing, she grimaced, "but I see where you could be twice that age." Wynd pulled the blanket to cover her. "What's your name?" When she told the woman, Wynd said, "Well, Chayboen, let's get you better and we'll discuss repayment, if you're serious."

Chayboen was able to get a better look at Wynd and Wulk, an hour or more later, after being bathed, placed in the clean nightdress, fed a few spoons of broth, and given some herb concoction to make her sleepy. Both had thick and wild brown hair, were heavy set, though his bulk had muscles. Both brother and sister had kind brown eyes, rosy cheeks, and honest smiles reaching their eyes. Her voice still rough and scratchy she asked, "Twins?" At Wulk's nod,

Wynd explained they were siblings who ran the *Chipped Battle-axe Tavern*. Chayboen yawned. Wulk tapped Wynd's shoulder and pointed to the door.

With a huge grin, Wynd leaned forward and placed a quick kiss to Chayboen's forehead. "Rest now. We have plenty of time to get acquainted. You're safe here."

And she was safe. For the last six years, introduced as an orphaned cousin, Chayboen was part of the family. Wynd took care of all things maternal and even taught her how to quiet her mind with meditation; while, a former warrior of Clan Nummei, Wulk secretly taught her to use the sword and to defend herself fighting hand-to-hand. This last had come in useful while serving drinks in the tavern with some of the more rambunctious customers. They never called her visions a curse, but a gift. Even though all three knew they had to keep the talent a secret, it had come in handy to keep dire incidents from befalling the Chipped Battle-axe or her owners. Then Chayboen had the vision bringing her to Zheirger Keep.

She pushed back the cowl of her robe and released her midnight-black hair, as she walked through the curtain walls' opened gate. Chayboen walked up the stairs and through the front doors. She felt the thrum of the magic in the walls, even as she could tell the rhythm wasn't right, wasn't steady but irregular. Glancing about her, Chayboen didn't stop the smile breaking across her face. She had a lot of work—cleaning, really—before the arrival of the others.

Closing her eyes in prayer, she announced, "All will be as it should. Ysannie will bring magic's knowledge back where it belongs. My heart will find its home."

Chapter Eleven

KAREINA HAD ALL the warriors in rows as Melrick and Olaf barked commands, taking them through numerous stances and positions for sword practice. One of the reasons, other than male vanity, Kellshae refused to accept women as warriors was the assumed complexity of wielding a sword too difficult for mere women to comprehend; the strain placed on the body, for which women were too weak; and the alleged hysterics that would result from witnessing the carnage of battle.

The warriors from Langear were remarkable to watch and proved a couple of those beliefs very wrong. From their physical forms, it was easy to see they had strength and could definitely handle a sword. What Kareina's warriors lacked was the fluidity of the movements, and she including herself in this observation, Tiilaen's women made the work look more like an expressive dance. A situation some of Kareina's men found distracting. Trouble was so did she; and, Kareina knew as long as her men were around, she couldn't very well learn from these women, either. Not to forget, given Mayliandra's presence, Kareina couldn't let down the machismo attitude of battle-hardened warrior.

Melrick had the Gradyln and Langear warriors face off for sparring practice. Before they could begin, Kareina whispered the suggestion to mix them in the pairings, and to start with the basic maneuvers universal enough for each clan. The very thing Kareina had hoped would not be indeed occurring. Her men were paying less attention to the details of defense and more to showing off their masculine prowess. More than once, the opponent bested her Gradyln warriors, who had performed these same moves at her side many times in true battle. The most embarrassing issue was when the women had outshone the men, Gradyln resorted to derogatory and rude remarks intended to insult and hurt, or used more brute strength than necessary in practice.

"Pitiful and appalling," Kareina said to Melrick, as her grip tightening on her sword hilt. She waved to Tiilaen, who was watching from a position near Mayliandra and Stechyc. When Tiilaen stood beside her and Melrick, Olaf still issuing commands, Kareina made apologies. "I had held some hope this pathetic exhibition from Gradyln would not happen. As penance, Melrick, put them through the paces until they are too tired to be foolish. No matter my attempts, women still hold no proper respect in their eyes. My apologies, Tiilaen, they're good men usually."

Tiilaen gave a roguish smile. "But men nonetheless, and men will be men."

Kareina chuckled and nodded. "Yes, especially with beautiful women present. This will not happen again, I assure you." Kareina glanced around, and realized Mayliandra was no longer sitting with Stechyc, who was looking a bit pale. "Where the..." Kareina caught a glance of Mayliandra at the far back of the cave before she appeared to have vanished into the stone. She knew she should go to Mayliandra and make certain she was safe. "I think you need to see to your mage-wife," she said to Tiilaen, walking with her.

"Stechyc?" Tiilaen's voice held concern when she noticed her wife's pallor. "What's wrong?"

The mage shook her head. "Feeling a little queasy."

"Maybe some fresh air will help," Kareina said, looking toward where Mayliandra had disappeared.

Tiilaen glanced in that direction, too. "I can take care of Stechyc. You should make certain Mayliandra doesn't get lost or hurt."

With a dip of her head, Kareina said, "All right, if you're certain. Rely on Melrick should you need anything before we come back." Kareina headed in the direction she had last seen Mayliandra. At the back of the cave, the sounds of sparring strangely muffled, which prompted her to turn to see if the practice had changed. Events were the same as when she stood beside Melrick moments ago. Attributing it to the caves acoustics, Kareina resumed her mission, checking the area and noting a spot in the wall, which at first looked to be seamless, but there was an edge hiding an opening behind it. Hearing movement, and worrying Mayliandra was moving about in darkness, Kareina went through, walked about twenty paces of a corridor before entering another chamber similar to the one she left, yet smaller. It too had a pool, and from a spot below glowing water, Kareina noted a hole of about three-foot in diameter from this section to the first.

Kareina became aware of splashing. Mayliandra was swimming; her face broke from the water as she took in air, arms stretched in graceful and elegant strokes. Above Mayliandra was a hole in the rock ceiling allowing the daylight, gray from the storm, to peek through, giving a shimmery glow to the water. Relaxing a little, Kareina peered about her and noted Mayliandra's dress and shoes in a neat pile at the far side of the cave floor about eight feet away. She strolled closer to the spot, and stretched out to wait for Mayliandra to finish her swim. She closed her eyes, at once comfortable.

Kareina hadn't expected to doze off, but the gentle splashing must have lulled her to sleep. It wasn't until she felt a drop of water on her cheek Kareina's eyes flashed open. Barely off to Kareina's side, Mayliandra tiptoed her way toward her dress, clad in her undergarments. The wet clothing, thin from wear, did little to hide the feminine curves they covered. "You shouldn't put those on while you're wet," Kareina said. With a start, Mayliandra spun around and flung more droplets at Kareina. "Hey, not playing fair," Kareina said, wiping at the moisture.

"My lord, I was trying not to wake you." Mayliandra bent, picked up her dress and held it like a shield before her.

Leaning on one elbow to face her, Kareina said, "I suggest you lose the deathly grip on the dress or you'll defeat any likelihood it stays dry." Kareina patted the space beside her, and Mayliandra glanced in the direction. "Come and rest, let the air dry you as you relax. I promise not to gawk at your state of undress or engage you in conversation." Kareina lay back down and once again closed her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. She heard the soft swooshing of material as Mayliandra did as recommended, felt how close she lay by the infusion of warmth through her own body. Kareina had to fight the urge to peek over and see if Mayliandra had her eyes opened or closed. A short time had passed before curiosity got the better of her. Raising one eyelid, Kareina stole a glance at Mayliandra. She chuckled when she caught Mayliandra doing the same to her.

Mayliandra joined her in the laugh. "Checking to see if you had returned to sleep, rest is the best healer, after all."

"As is laughter," Kareina said while closing her eyes again, "thank you."

"My pleasure." Mayliandra exhaled. "Was the silence to accommodate me or you, my lord?"

Kareina heard movement beside her and realized Mayliandra shifted position. She turned her head and opened her eyes again, to find Mayliandra rested her head in the palm of her hand, staring in her direction. Kareina realized Mayliandra was nervous when she clasped the black stone of her necklace, her index finger absently stroking the brown gems.

“Never fear saying what you would, Mayli.”

“It’s more I fear the words would bring injury to you.”

With a slight raise of an eyebrow, Kareina grunted. “I’ve been hurt by worse than you or what you can conjure. Ask what you will.”

Mayliandra frowned. “It’s just, though I don’t doubt you’ve been gravely wounded on a number of occasions, words can inflict more damage than any sword.”

Kareina barely contained her frustration, her body stiffened. “Mayli—”

“What got you through all the pain?” Mayliandra’s voice shook as she reached out and touched the burn scar beneath Kareina’s left eye. Kareina could feel the trembling in Mayliandra’s finger. As if suffering a twinge of pain, Mayliandra jerked her hand away, squeezed her eyes shut and shivered with enough force Kareina felt it from beside her.

“Are you unwell?” Kareina asked. She started to get up, but Mayliandra gave a wry grin and pushed Kareina back down. Before pulling her hand away, Mayliandra stared at her queerly, as if seeing Kareina for the first time, shook her head, and stared at the hand she’d removed. “Should I get Stechyc?” Kareina asked, becoming more worried.

“No. It’s...you...” Mayliandra swallowed hard. Before Kareina could take her next breath, Mayliandra had bent forward, placed a hand on each shoulder pinning Kareina in place, and crushed Kareina’s lips with her own. The bruising warmth was so unexpected, but so remarkable a part of Kareina couldn’t help herself as she felt the heat build between her legs. She reached an arm around Mayliandra’s waist and pulled her flush on top of her. Kareina lost sensation of all but the feel of Mayliandra’s lips on her own, the gentle pressure became more demanding until Kareina wanted and needed more. Clutching Mayliandra tight, Kareina rolled them, grasped Mayliandra’s wrists and held them above her head, then brushed kisses down the side of her neck. Mayliandra moaned and squeezed her eyes shut.

Feeling the heat of Mayliandra’s skin intensify made Kareina bolder. Releasing one of Mayliandra’s restrained wrists, Kareina moved her hand down the side of Mayliandra’s body, and back up until it paused above the curve of her waist. Greedily, Kareina returned to Mayliandra’s lips. The kiss deepened, Mayliandra even accepting the gentle thrust and exploration of Kareina’s tongue. As she slid her hand from Mayliandra’s waist to the outside of her leg, up and over to the inside, Kareina felt her own desires build in response. Mayliandra gasped hotly against Kareina’s mouth.

Kareina pulled back and saw Mayliandra’s eyes closed. “Please,” Mayliandra whispered, “don’t stop.” Kareina dropped her head and planted a kiss on the hardening nipple straining against the damp camisole. The warm pliant flesh felt wonderful, more incredible than Kareina could have imagined. Urged by another moan to continue, Kareina removed her hand from Mayliandra’s leg and tugged the material down, baring a breast. Lightly, Kareina traced the curve of flesh with her lips before drawing the nipple into her mouth. The nipple grew hard and Mayliandra groaned. Kareina returned her hand to the inner thigh and cupped Mayliandra’s mons. Mayliandra inhaled and arched into Kareina’s hand. “Yes. Take what is yours, my lord.”

Every muscle in Kareina’s body stilled, her blood thoroughly chilled. With an effort, pain from rejection fiercely pounding in her heart, Kareina pulled away from Mayliandra. As if her

emotions transferred to the cave around them, Kareina felt the vibrations in the rock, and heard the roar of water above Mayliandra's frightened scream.

THE AIR OUTSIDE helped settle Stechyc's stomach. The pounding in her head was taking longer to get rid of. The storm was still going strong, lightning flashed and rain pounded heavily down. Tiilaen, standing behind her, rubbed Stechyc's shoulders, her breath tickling Stechyc's ear. "Thank you, love, I'm feeling better." She leaned back into Tiilaen. "There's magic in your touch."

Tiilaen laughed. "Don't use sweet words to distract me, woman." Tenderly, Tiilaen wrapped arms around her. "Want to tell me what happened?"

"I'm not certain." Stechyc shook her head, covering Tiilaen's arms with her own. "It felt like I was struck with a massive and quick dose of bad magic. I wasn't able to pinpoint where it came from, only that it was growing. Maybe it's a result of the returning magic to Kellshae."

Tiilaen grunted. "Bad as in not done well, or as in uh-oh?"

From behind them, Stechyc and Tiilaen heard angry shouts and commands from Melrick, caught a faint blood-curdling scream from Mayliandra. In unison, they said, "Uh-oh." Drawing her sword Tiilaen said, "Stay close," and they both went rushing back into the cave.

The scene was unexpected and, at least to Stechyc, frightening. Both Langear and Gradyln warriors, recently engaged in practice exercises, were now battling raiders. Stechyc had no idea where they could have come from as they were standing at the caves entrance. Another blast of power struck Stechyc that had her doubled over. Tiilaen swung an arm around her waist to steady her. "Love?" Tiilaen watched Stechyc with fear-filled eyes. This time, Stechyc was able to get a better idea where the magic originated. "We have to get to the other end of the cave," she said, pointing to where Mayliandra and Kareina had gone earlier. "I'll need my pouch, too."

In order to accomplish the feat, they would have to get around the group of fighters closest to them. As if sensing their intention, the Langear warriors shifted their defense so they were blocking anyone from attacking Stechyc, while moving in the direction of her belongings. The progress was not without incident. Like the battle of a day ago, the raiders seemed fearless in their attacks, certain they were invincible. Despite the caves confines, the group wasn't able to inflict wounds without incurring injuries of their own. Focusing on the raiders her warriors fought, Stechyc chanted. After a moment, an invisible wall went up, though she knew it was temporary, it forced the raiders back and held them. She remembered the dislodged medallion from Tiilaen's arrow. Stechyc whispered to Tiilaen, "I need you to try something. Remove the medallion from a raider." Tiilaen nodded. "Please be careful, my love."

No sooner had Stechyc finished her request, the wall no longer functioned. The raiders rushed forward again. Tiilaen moved to the fore and engaged a raider, who snickered. "Come take your whupping, bitch."

Tiilaen flashed a wicked smile. "I believe I'll do the whupping." With the statement, Tiilaen swung her sword in a ruthless crisscross pattern, until he stumbled. Taking advantage of his lapse, Tiilaen removed a short sword from her side. Thrusting her sword into his stomach, Tiilaen used the short sword to remove the talisman from his neck. At first, the man didn't seem to realize the magic taken because he gave a loud burst of laughter. The wound didn't immediately close when the sword pulled free, and panic filled his eyes. He tried to grasp for the talisman that should have been around his neck. Screaming in rage, the raider tried to stand. He

barely got to one knee before falling face forward, bloody intestines oozing free from his stomach.

The women of Langear, aware of the new strategy shown them, gave a war cry and attacked with more enthusiasm. When Tiilaen's gaze met Melrick's, he nodded and began passing the word to Gradyln warriors. As the fighting continued, with more gusto from their own, Tiilaen made her way back to Stechyc's side, carefully pressing her toward the area where Kareina and Mayliandra had gone.

KAREINA AND MAYLIANDRA rose to their feet as a nine-foot, half-human and half-lizard creature surged from the water. The red and black colored creature had a red-tipped tail, which waved lazily behind it, and long black claws. From the corner of her eye, Kareina also noticed a large raider by the cave's wall unhurriedly making his way toward them. From the hole in the cave's ceiling swung a rope, the wet faces of others above it. She placed herself in front of Mayliandra and drew her sword. Kareina kept shifting her gaze between the raider and the thing making its way out of the water, all the while aware of Mayliandra's trembling as she clung to Kareina's back.

"By the gods, what is it?" Mayliandra asked. Kareina didn't know the answer. Instead, she tried to ascertain where the vulnerable spots might be on the creature.

With a wicked grin, the raider said, "A gyikman." His gaze traveled insultingly over Mayliandra's body, "And while my friend is busy with your man," he wet his lips with a thick tongue, "I'll finish what he started and we interrupted." He pulled his sword free from the scabbard at his waist.

Kareina glared at him. "You'll die for thinking those thoughts." With measured steps, the raider and the gyikman approached. She stood her ground; though, Kareina worried she couldn't protect Mayliandra enough while battling both.

Until the gyikman did anything to initiate her, Kareina attempted to keep Mayliandra behind her while she gave most her attention to the raider, who was the more dangerous at present. When within sword range, he engaged her with a few brisk strokes of the blade. Kareina understood he was trying to distract her until the creature fully emerged and closed distance. His smirk confirmed the intent. Kareina could feel the tension radiating from Mayliandra, observing she was smart enough to stay close and shielded, yet leaving enough distance for Kareina to maneuver.

As Kareina kept both man and beast occupied, she noticed the men from outside shimmying down the rope. Soon she'd be too preoccupied with defending her position to protect Mayliandra properly. Kareina glanced toward the opening to the outer cave. They wouldn't reach the exit in time. Her brief distraction was all the gyikman needed to stretch and rake her arm with its long black claws. Kareina heard the cloth tearing, her flesh on fire where the claws slashed the skin open.

Laughter came from the raider. "Hurts like hellfire, I know. Wait until he gets you with the tail. That's deadly, by the way." As he spoke the words, the gyikman's tail lashed whip-like to her left and aimed for her head. She had brought her sword about to fend off the attack, before she had to swivel it back to block a blow of the man's sword. Swinging the sword in a crisscrossing motion, he slammed blow after blow upon Kareina's blade, which she met while simultaneously stopping swipes from the red-tipped tail. The gyikman was advancing, pushing

her and Mayliandra closer to the cave wall. Now, the other men had moved up behind the creature to join in the onslaught.

Kareina felt herself tiring, the strain suffusing her injured arm, her body already weakened from previous injuries. She recognized the added difficulty for Mayliandra to stay behind her, out of harm's way. Spotting an opening in the creature's side, Kareina jabbed her blade forward, but the blow skidded across the scaly hide without so much as a scratch to it. Her useless tactic left a gap the raider used to lunge for Mayliandra. As his hand grabbed for Mayliandra's arm, Kareina rotated to the right, arched the sword and dropped the blow with all her strength between the wrist and elbow of the raider. He let out a bloodcurdling scream and fell to one knee. Kareina slammed her foot into the side of his face.

As he hit the floor, two others snagged his place.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before they slaughtered her, too. Kareina gave a mental plea for assistance to the goddess, closed the space between her and Mayliandra, and cursed the inability to move about and give these bastards the business end of her blade. She caught new movement from her peripheral, realized it was Spallan come to her aid, and thanked Ysannie for listening.

Spallan swung his blade to engage the two as, together, they pushed the men back, and managed to shift their position to better repel the creature's and the raider's advance. "I'll protect Shei Mayliandra, my lord."

Kareina nodded her acknowledgement. "Well met," she said, lunging toward the gyikman. Able to move, Kareina flexed the fingers grasping the sword hilt, angled the blade forward and down on her left side, allowing the point to dip slightly. This enabled Kareina to close off any openings the gyikman's tail could find as she attempted to push the gyikman backward and away from Mayliandra and Spallan.

Her frustration increased when with each step and cut of her blade, the steel skimmed uselessly across the scaled exterior. Arms slowed in exhaustion, and though the blood had stopped flowing from the newer wound, the pain had intensified, yet she took some consolation the creature shifted back toward the water. Growling her annoyance, Kareina continued her barrage of swings while studying the creature for anything resembling a defect she could use against it.

Intent on her study of the creature, Kareina hadn't noted the approach of the first raider, until hearing Mayliandra shout a warning. She turned enough to note his fury blazoned upon his face in vivid red. "You'll pay for this," he bellowed, raising the arm she'd chopped off a moment ago.

Not daring to ignore the gyikman, Kareina tried to gauge the angry raider's intent, while still trying to find the creature's vulnerability. She knew the tail was made of the same scaly stuff on the rest of the creature, so hacking off the tail was not an option. Kareina would have to remove the raider in order to concentrate on the gyikman.

In his wrath, the man was oblivious to all else. Kareina surged closer to the gyikman until she stood less than inches from his legs and waist. As the man smirked and lunged toward her, Kareina met his awkward and unbalanced swing. When he lunged forward for a frontal attack and expecting she wouldn't see the approaching tail, she knew she had to venture a risky move. The gyikman flashed his tail forward from the right and, over-extending her knee, Kareina lurched to the left. As the gyikman's tail ripped through the raider's chest, the surprise replaced by defeat, Kareina heard Stechyc yell, "Aim for the top of the sternum."

Strength failing and fatigue slowing her movements, Kareina knew she had little else to lose. While the gyikman shook his tail to dislodge the raider's body, Kareina surged forward leaping

toward the creature's neck, her gaze intent on the area above the sternum and between the clavicles and placed the last measure of strength into the sword's thrust. The creature roared, the booming sound filled the cavern as grey blood spurting from the gash left by her sword tip. She dropped to her knees and raggedly drew in breath, and rolled to the side when she realized the gyikman about to collapse atop her.

Exhausted, Kareina rose unsteadily to her feet, intent on returning to the fight, and saw the few raiders who remained alive were making a hasty retreat up the rope they had climbed down a short time ago. Melrick and Stechyc were the first to reach her.

"Let me have a look," Stechyc said, already tearing away what was left of the sleeve. "We'll have to draw the poison out with a heated compress."

"In a moment, Mistress Mage," Kareina said, taking in the extent the battle had taken while relief and irritation warred in her heart when her gaze fell on Mayliandra and Spallan safe against the cave wall. She walked toward them, Melrick and Stechyc following. Spallan looked weary, but stood his ground before Mayliandra. "You have done well, my friend," she said to Spallan, clasping his shoulder in a firm grip.

"Thank you, my lord," he replied, a grin stretching across his lips.

When Mayliandra caught her gaze, Kareina's heart lurched at the concern written there, but she ignored it, turning to Melrick. "We should see to the wounded, and prepare for the next steps we need take." Turning her attention to Spallan, she asked, "Are you well enough to attend the Shei?" At his nod, she said, "Good, see to her needs." Kareina stalked toward the main cavern.

MAYLIANDRA COULD SEE the strain of exhaustion and pain in Karr's features. She made her way to his side, prepared to do what she could to help. Nudging between Olaf and Melrick, she started to take the last steps to him, when Karr turned in her direction and shook his head. Mayliandra frowned, but held her place. Once all the warriors surrounded them, Karr addressed them. "While it is good to learn of a flaw in the raider's defenses, it is disheartening to find that other and less savory creatures from Bahalkar have made their way into Kellshae." Karr looked at Stechyc. "I fear you'll be pressed to your limits, as the only remaining source of controlled magic. We are thankful you're on our side."

Stechyc nodded. "Which is why, Karr, I rely on the warriors to keep me alive." Tiilaen reached over and squeezed her wife's shoulder. "I also believe the longer T'Dar is in our world, the more of his underlings he will bring forth. We all agree we need to stop them. If he accomplished his mission in the Valley—"

"Understood." Karr directed the next command to Melrick. "As we discussed, let's separate the warriors." Nervous and angry mumbling began among the Gradyln men, and Karr gave his reasoning. "I will count on you to flank and push them. We'll crush them between us." To this comment, the Gradyln men gave a loud cheer. Mayliandra thought she noted relief on Karr's features. "We believe their ultimate goal is the Valley of Mist. Keep that in mind, and send word if you note a deviation in this path. Melrick, work something out where we can arrange messages between the groups." At Melrick's nod, Karr said, "Fight well for Kellshae, my warriors, and may the lost gods guide our swords." After loud cheering, Karr dismissed the group.

Once again, Mayliandra started toward Karr, this time stopped by a fierce scowl; a scowl somehow transformed to being softer, more feminine, than it should on a male. Mayliandra shook her head to clear the confused sight before her. She waited while Karr outlined specific

details of plans to Melrick; waited while Spallan asked to remain as Mayliandra's personal guard; and, waited while Karr explained to them he would be scouting ahead. Her stomach tightened with an emotion she couldn't explain.

"But, my lord—"

Karr stormed away to retrieve his saddlebag, and Mayliandra nervously followed, confused at what she had done to incur her husband's wrath this time. When Karr seemed intent on ignoring her and leaving, Mayliandra grabbed his arm to halt him. "Talk to me, Karr. What have I done?"

For an instant, hurt crossed Karr's features, before masked by antagonism. He bent close. "My earlier lapse in responding to you as a woman is regrettable, Mayliandra. But know this," and in a harsh whisper Karr said, "I will not have you give your body to me because of your thoughts of duty."

Heat suffused Mayliandra's face. She thought back to the kisses, the touches, shared before the gyikman and the raider attack—take what is yours my lord, she had told Karr. "Oh, Karr, that is not how I meant the words." How could it be when the whole time Mayliandra made herself believe she was being made love to by a woman?

"It matters not."

"Yes, it does. If you'd let me explain," Mayliandra said, ignoring the catch in her voice from an emotion she didn't quite understand.

Jerking his arm free, Karr took a step away from her, his voice menacing and low. "I will not let myself be lured into believing you have any feeling for me other than as wife to the son of Gradyln," his voice dropped even lower, and she barely heard the words, "regardless of my attraction to you." Karr turned and rushed toward the outside area.

Mayliandra stood stunned as his words penetrated. How could this be happening? What was she to do? Maybe if she explained herself, Mayliandra could get him to understand, to give her time to adjust.

"Where is Karr going?" Tiilaen asked, as she and Stechyc hurried to her.

With a shrug, Mayliandra said, "To scout ahead, as far from me as possible, I suspect."

Tiilaen glanced to Stechyc, who nodded and said, "Go, my love, and be safe. We have Melrick to look after us."

"Thank you, beloved." Tiilaen pulled Stechyc into a tight embrace, gave her a deep kiss, and said, "We'll be back as soon as is possible." Stechyc nodded.

As Mayliandra and Stechyc watched, Tiilaen gathered her things and left the inner cave. When Tiilaen was out of their sight, Stechyc spun around to face Mayliandra. "Do you wish to talk about what happened between you and Karr?"

"Which occasion?" Mayliandra asked with sarcasm, and a bit of guilt at her own part in the misunderstanding.

Stechyc raised an eyebrow. "I scry Tiilaen's progress, so I always know where she's located."

Mayliandra raised an eyebrow. "Anxiety for separation?"

"Would you believe for safety reasons?" Stechyc bit her bottom lip, and Mayliandra snickered. "Maybe it's good we'll have time to talk, you and I, to work out a solution."

With a sad shake of her head, Mayliandra said, "Some things have no easy resolution, Stechyc. This may very well be one of those instances."

Chapter Twelve

WHEN TIILAEN REACHED the spot where the horses were tethered, Kareina was cinching a saddle to Starsinger. Tiilaen went about conducting the same travel preparations on her horse. She was glad for the pause in rain, though it looked as if it would restart any moment. Other than a quick glance and scowl, Kareina seemed intent on ignoring her presence. “So you know, I either ride beside you or ride behind you. It’s not safe for you on your own.”

Kareina gave a snort. “Are you to be my personal protector now?”

Tiilaen shrugged. “More like here to guard your back.” She glanced around to make certain they were alone and wouldn’t be overheard. “Mostly to give you a chance to drop the male guise, even for a little while, if you so choose. To be honest, I’ve an urge to laugh every time I have to call you ‘my lord’ and do so with a straight face.”

With a single raised eyebrow, Kareina turned to Starsinger and backed him away from the other horses before mounting. “I suggest you work faster.” Kareina urged Starsinger down the road at full gallop. Tiilaen chuckled, finished securing her possessions and hurried to follow Kareina. It didn’t take long to catch up, and Tiilaen wondered if Kareina had intentionally slowed to allow her to do so. Either way, once alongside, Tiilaen matched pace and remained silent.

They had traveled in silence for over an hour before Kareina startled Tiilaen with, “Your people must be a rare breed, indeed.”

“I agree, but you’ll need to clarify for me. In what way are we rare?”

“Because I suspect you have questions, and you’ve been able to withhold asking them,” Kareina said. Her brow furrowed. “You can’t read my mind with magic, can you?”

Tiilaen laughed. “No, I can’t read your thoughts. And I do have quite the inquisitive mind. I also know enough about what is happening to understand it can’t be an easy thing to share, your feelings, I mean. I swear to you I will not repeat anything you wish to share privately.”

“Not even telling your mage-wife?”

“It will be harder to keep I grant you, but I will do so if you wish it.” Tiilaen gave a subtle headshake. “Guess I’m entitled to some secrets, I would think, in the name of our friendship. My wife knows more of you than I ever shall.”

With a sniff, Kareina asked, “You’re looking for friendship?”

Shaking her head, Tiilaen said, “Kareina, I like you, have from the moment we met. Nothing’s going to change because you don’t return the sentiment. I happen to like your wife, too. I’d like to see the both of you resolve this issue and live happily ever after.”

Kareina smirked. “Mayliandra has been a complication I have difficulty dealing with, which I’m sure is obvious.” She snuck a glance in Tiilaen’s direction. “Think I’ve been harsh with her, maybe even cruel?”

“Would it matter what I think, Kareina?” Tiilaen asked.

“Yes.” Kareina gave a tired sigh. “After what I’ve done, things will be more difficult between us. Maybe I should have sent her on to Gradyln, not sure why I haven’t. I’m using the excuse to protect her as a reason not to send her away.”

Silent for a moment, Tiilaen decided the safest course would be to continue feigning ignorance of Mayliandra’s revelation, though it would simplify most of the issues troubling Kareina if she could tell each the others secret. “I’m guessing you have positive feelings for her, and wish them to cultivate, so you didn’t send her away. As for what you have done, I can’t respond to what I don’t know.” Kareina blushed. “Well, it helps some. Did you force yourself on her? Um, you know what I mean.”

“She kissed me first, not that I’m defending my actions by placing blame elsewhere,” Kareina stated. “Guess I got caught up in the sensations, and…” Kareina shrugged, and Tiilaen thought she saw a flash of raw pain. “This marriage won’t end well, and it’s catapulting down an incline too fast for me to control. It’s not fair to Mayliandra, and I shouldn’t make it worse to fill… Well, I needn’t make the situation more difficult.”

Tiilaen snorted this time. “What, if any, part of this situation has been fair to you?”

Kareina stiffened. “Doesn’t matter. Enough talk. We need to concentrate on the matter bringing us together in the first place.”

“As you wish it, Kareina. Please, don’t forget I’ll assist you in way you’ll allow me, even if lending an ear to fill.” Kareina stared at her. Tiilaen realized she was searching for a lie. “Honestly,” she stated with a laugh. Tiilaen felt relieved when Kareina appeared embarrassed for doubting her.

KAREINA AND TIILAEN had managed to find a good location to set camp for the night, snared a rabbit for supper, and sat side by side on a log they’d dragged over, while enjoying the succulent meat over teasing banter of fighting skills. Shaking her head, Kareina said, “Seriously, your women make warfare look a beautiful dance. My warriors and I are used to the brute strength of the motions.”

“Which is still rather effective,” Tiilaen said, her hand holding a small leg of rabbit and gesturing in a hacking motion. Pieces of cooked meat dropped into the fire, making a loud hissing sound. “Die, die,” Tiilaen ranted teasingly.

Kareina joined in Tiilaen’s laughter. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt relaxed enough to laugh this hard, with someone other than Melrick or her cousin Olaf, and, the scarce instances she’d found humor with Mayliandra. There hadn’t been cause or much opportunity for mirth after the Youlren incident. She scrunched her face in concentration, unaware of the pained expression darkening her features, until she felt Tiilaen’s hand on her arm. Kareina smirked, “Bad memory got the best of me. Works quite fast at killing a pleasant mood.”

“Are you all right?” Tiilaen asked. “I’m sorry I’ve upset you.”

Shaking her head, Kareina said, “Wasn’t you, Tiilaen. In fact, I was having a great time until my head spoiled it for me.”

“I’d like to say I understand, but it wouldn’t be fair to you.” Tiilaen squeezed Kareina’s arm in an expression of comfort before removing her hand.

Not able to look Tiilaen in the eyes, Kareina asked, “How much do you and Stechyc know about me?” She hated that her voice shook, realizing Tiilaen already felt the trembling in her

body from her seat next to Kareina. Kareina directed her gaze to Tiilaen's watching for clues of deceit, though she was beginning to doubt Tiilaen capable.

Before speaking, Tiilaen took a deep breath, and met Kareina's gaze. "Stechyc, as healer, would have access to memories—nothing intentionally sought, mind you—opened during the healing process. With you, she didn't have to heal you first. Somehow, a psychic connection began and grew stronger the closer we approached where you were. These connections can create nightmares for her. If the memories or thoughts are bad enough, she can be haunted by them too, until purged by their owner and no longer hurtful to either."

Tiilaen leaned forward and tore of another hunk of meat from the carcass on the spit, intending, it seemed, to avoid eye contact. "My wife keeps her own council, Kareina. But during one of these, she spoke of torture of both body and mind. The only person she's been linked to psychically has been you." Tiilaen looked at her. "Some of the physical damage I see since you've not hidden it with the magic making you appear male. But that is the extent of my knowledge. And judging from the intensity of my wife's nightmares can't imagine I'd want to know what haunts you. Again, I offer a sympathetic ear if you have need of one."

"Thank you," Kareina said, meaning it. She flashed a mischievous grin at Tiilaen and added, "Despite what is against my better judgment, I find I like you, too."

Tiilaen shook her head, laughing. "When this is done, I think—"

A rustling came from the trees behind them. Kareina and Tiilaen jumped to their feet, hands on sword grips. Not more than a breath later, both said, "Three."

No sooner had they acknowledged the number than three humanoid beasts walked into the clearing. The creatures stood about five-foot-six, had two legs, two arms, long torso, and head. The resemblance to anything human ended there. Their bodies were covered in coarse hair. Where the nose and mouth should be more resembled an elongated snout. The eyes were a piercing red.

The creatures started forward, their paw-like hands with razor sharp nails, held metal rods. The weapons were directed toward Tiilaen and Kareina.

Tiilaen said, "At least they waited until we finished eating."

"Wonderful," Kareina snorted, "we get considerate monsters." Chancing a quick glance to Tiilaen, Kareina said, "Welcome to Kellshae. After you."

The fighting seemed a bit uneven, at first, as the creatures were sluggish in gait. She and Tiilaen were able to avoid each swing of their rods by springing out of the way. They were quick to realize the creatures did little more but block their sword blows, and those blows landing tended to be jarring.

Kareina was about to plow her sword into the nearest creature when it pushed her roughly in the shoulder causing her to stumble backward, growled something unintelligible and stomped toward the fire as if uninterested in her. When she noted the other two became agitated when her creature was bending toward the spit, she waved Tiilaen off them. Much to their amazement, and amusement, the other two rushed to join the first, who now had the remainder of the rabbit carcass grasped in its paws. Much faster than they entered the camp area, the first hurried back into the forest with the other two on his heels, howling.

Astonished, Kareina stared at the dark emptiness the creatures had departed into, before turning to Tiilaen. "Could have asked if we were finished with supper."

Laughing, Tiilaen moved back to the log and sat, patting the area beside her. "You would have understood 'argh, argh, feed me' if they'd tried that first?"

Kareina said, "Absolutely." Kareina sat beside Tiilaen. "We've gone and worked off our food. At least we made them earn their meal."

"Well, on the positive side we learned not everything released from Bahalkar is out to kill us," Tiilaen said.

Kareina sobered. "But will we have to engage everything we meet in order to determine its intent? Could be time consuming, and prevent us from being where we need to be. Without the Priests, how are we to deal with things from a magical realm?"

"With T'Dar involved, I doubt the Priests met an easy death. Considering all the deaths of innocents by their own hand in the guise of keeping harmony, I won't grieve for them, either." Tiilaen smirked. "As for consuming our time, it very well may be the point."

The comment made Kareina frown. "Or intended to keep us so occupied, we miss something we'd otherwise see, something other than evil magic and raiders vying for power."

"We have to remember he's a banished, evil god. He'll want to have final, ultimate control over us all." Tiilaen scowled. "Surely the other, heretofore silent, gods will not agree to this and will do something."

"Maybe there's a reason they have remained silent," Kareina said, her stomach tightening in fear of the thought crossing her mind. "Destroying the other gods is what we're not supposed to be noticing."

"How could we? And, they did give up on us first," Tiilaen said.

"Not all of us have given up on them," Kareina said. She still prayed to Ysannie, and had no intention of stopping, no matter what happened to her or the goddess. That would be like giving up hope. And Kareina hoped for so many things, no matter how foolish. An image of Mayliandra flashed in her mind. Things would never work out to be a positive with her wife, but Kareina knew she wasn't ready to give up hope either. Knowing if she did give up on the impossible, Kareina might as well let T'Dar strike her down now. Without hope, what was left?

HIGH AT THE top of a mountain, beneath a shroud of thick clouds, loomed the structure used by the gods since the conclusion of the Great Harmony War, when the people of Kellshae swore never to call upon the gods and goddesses, or allow magic in their realm. In a long ago time, gods were plentiful. Many had moved on, far into the cosmos. Those who remained after followed those previous when they were no longer needed, no longer worshipped.

Ysannie leaned casually (she hoped to be perceived so) against one of the many columns circling the massive chamber while waiting for the others to arrive. A circular decline of four-steps curved around a room bare of any decoration. The bottom of the lower level was furnished with eight marble chairs. Ysannie remembered the room when it was filled in garish splendor. A knot of dread weighed heavy in Ysannie's belly knowing this session would not end well, at least not in her favor. Paksha had confirmed as much in what he didn't say to her, as in what he had stated. She watched as the others began to enter, and settle into the chairs, which much resembled thrones many of the humans used on earth to flaunt their positions and power.

Seven deities, including Paksha took their seats, careful to avoid acknowledging her presence with even a glance, or that she hadn't yet taken the last chair and completed the circle. She looked at each in turn: Zenti and D'Espel, King and Queen of the gods; Magan, God of Smithies; Sielar and Cabeil, Goddess of Earth and God of Water; Karoyne, Goddess of Hearth; and, her cousin Paksha, the ever-diligent Messenger.

Ysannie couldn't bring herself to play their game, not since she had no way of winning this one, whether following rules or otherwise. Not all of the dissention could be tossed at the feet of the others, as she had balked each time they'd proposed ignoring Kellshae altogether, moving on and leaving humans far behind them. Even she enjoyed the adulation of the mortals on occasion, and wasn't prepared to give up on them, yet. So what if humans no longer raised shrines to them, as long as they weren't forgotten. As long as even one human, like Gradyln's Kareina, called her name, and had found strength by doing so, Ysannie believed it was worth not giving up on them.

"Ysannie, take your seat," Zenti ordered. He pointed to the vacant chair.

Inhaling a deep breath, Ysannie said, "I see no need. Let's get to the point bringing me here."

Zenti gave a scowl. "Very well." He gazed at each of the other deities present, before settling his gaze on her. "We know you want us to involve ourselves with the mortals."

"I want us to involve ourselves with returning T'Dar into exile."

"To save the mortals," D'Espel said, stabbing her own thigh with a bony finger.

"To save us all. Do you seriously believe he'll not come for each of us for what we had done to him?"

"Brought on himself," Zenti said.

"Yet I doubt T'Dar sees it that way." Ysannie sighed. "I understand you don't believe him a threat. He is, nonetheless, about to annihilate the humans."

Cabeil crossed his legs with fluid grace. "We should care, why?" he asked in a bored tone.

"Yes, why care?" Karoyn asked with a nod. She always agreed with Cabeil, never inserting her own opinion. Under other circumstances, Ysannie would have found her wishy-washy attitude amusing, correlating with the reason families were so dysfunctional in Kellshae.

Sielar snapped, "You were told not to interfere, yet you appeared to one of them. And not even one who worshipped you, but a foreigner to the land in question."

"Wasn't interfering." Ysannie defended.

"How can you say it is not?" Magan asked. "Does it not infer the gods will indeed lend their assistance?"

"Which we do not," D'Espel said, slapping her palms on the chairs armrests. "Good riddance to mortals, I say."

Ysannie balled her hands into fists, pushed herself off the column and paced the upper level. "What harm could there be in giving a little spark of inspiration, a spark of hope? For millennia, we gods have provided for, watched over, and been adored by generations of mortals—"

"And we were rewarded by them turning away from us, refusing to even speak of the old days," Sielar said. "Those foreigners never acknowledged us, preferring their own set of deities long gone."

"They are mortals, after all," Paksha said, not looking at anyone in particular. No matter their relationship, he would never go against the others, not even for her. But it appeared he wasn't above helping her make a point.

"Yes," Ysannie said, "and no different than one of their own children pouting when they don't get their way. To us, the humans are children. As such, their current actions are no different from a temper tantrum. After eons of worship, three centuries since the Harmony War is miniscule to us in comparison. They can grow out of this current behavior, return to the old ways."

"No matter, Ysannie." Cabiell pierced her with a glare. "The matter you are here for is your own disobedience. You were told not to interfere. You should have stayed away from the mortals."

D'Espel smirked at her. "We understand you were also playing around in the old Keep. Zheirger is it?" She glanced to Magan, who nodded. "Why would you need be there if not to meddle with mortals?"

"We all know it is a place of strong magic," Ysannie said, "and I wanted to see how much power was coming back to the land." Ysannie directed her attention to Zenti, knowing his would be the final decision, for or against her. "T'Dar is releasing the inhabitants of Bahalkar. As such, so is the magic—all the good and the bad. Wouldn't it be best if we could nurture those who will command this power? Direct it more to our cause?"

"They are no longer our cause, Ysannie." D'Espel's temper flared. Ysannie recognized this was not a good sign. It warned her the others had already made a decision, and the older goddess was annoyed she had to participate in boring discussion. Ysannie would be disciplined. The question now was what her chastisement would be.

Ysannie wanted to hang her head in defeat, but held it high waiting for her punishment. "We could use this as an opportunity to return the mortals back to the fold. We could use this as a chance to return to, even improve, the old ways. We could be greater than before."

She watched nervously as Zenti levitated to his feet. The others straightened in their chairs, regarding him. "We have concluded discussions," Zenti said, staring at her. "It is our decision, based on the facts you, Ysannie, cannot leave the mortals alone, that you become one of them."

"What?" The magnitude of the consequence hit her hard. Over two-thirds had agreed on her punishment, or it would not be instituted; and, a penalty she hadn't considered as an option.

Zenti confirmed it with his next pronouncement. "We strip you of your immortality, your place among the gods." He walked up the four stairs to stand next to her. Stunned, she couldn't have moved even if she wanted to do so. "We cannot take your power or your knowledge. You will become a demigod. You will live with the mortals, be little better than mortal yourself. Before I send you to Kellshae, do you have a destination in mind?"

Ysannie wanted to smirk at the weak attempt to give her some compensation for the loss she was about to suffer. As the burning pain from magic as it consumed her with the removal of her immortality, she said through clenched teeth, "Yes, Zheirger Keep."

TWO DAYS HAD passed since Karr and Tiilaen left the cave to scout ahead of their caravan; and Melrick had done an admirable job of keeping them safe and moving, offering conversation with Mayliandra when the opportunity arose. Even Olaf was accommodating of their possible needs, though Mayliandra suspected his motive more to impress the women warriors. She enjoyed the company of Stechyc, too, with her quick wit, easy manner and smile. Mayliandra had learned about Langlear and of their ways and beliefs. Even if she never saw these lands, Mayliandra was happy to hear the tales.

Mayliandra surprised herself by missing her volatile husband. The nights alone had her more confused with reminders of the contradictions she recognized while in the cave, and waking more perplexed than when she originally went to sleep. Why would feminine images have come to her at all? She wanted to appreciate Karr for who and what he was, not because he was her husband. Her fingers touched her lips recalling the heated kiss before the gyikman's interruption. How could a kiss filled with such tender passion have come from a rough man? There had to be a reason she looked at Karr and saw a hint of a woman. Was it subconscious attempting to create a common ground in which they could communicate?

Mayliandra shook her head to free the confusing thoughts. She noticed Stechyc, standing outside her tent, rubbing at her forehead. They had finished setting up camp, Karr and Tiilaen expected to arrive sometime the next day, so if Stechyc were to take ill, Mayliandra was glad she'd have a place to rest. Mayliandra rushed over and placed an arm across her shoulder. "Stechyc?"

Squinting from obvious pain, Stechyc glanced at her through cloudy eyes. "Thank the goddess. I think I could use your help, Mayliandra."

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Not sure why, but the Matron Mage is calling me. Could you help me?" Stechyc rushed through the opening.

"Of course," Mayliandra said as she hurried to follow. Inside, Mayliandra stood by the opening as she watched Stechyc grab a glass orb, twelve inches in diameter, from the corner, and an iron stand about three feet high. She set the stand in the middle of the tent and placed the orb on top. She dropped to her knees and stared into the orb, which filled with a violet colored smoke. She saw more than Mayliandra did.

After a few moments, Stechyc's lips began to move, though no sound escaped. Mayliandra stared in fascination even as the tent began to fill with a static buzz bringing gooseflesh to her own skin. Stechyc sucked in a quick breath of air, blinked rapidly, and stood to face the side of the tent free of supplies. Reaching into her pouch, Stechyc pulled her fingers free and tossed a pinch of powdery substance. "We're about to get a visitor," Stechyc stated. "Hope you like children."

"Very much," Mayliandra said, wondering if she and Karr would ever get along enough to conceive a child. Did Karr even want children?

The air in the tent grew thicker. A wall of lavender colored liquid-rippled haze grew where Stechyc had pitched the powder. "Here she comes," Stechyc announced as a tall, lanky, auburn haired girl of about sixteen burst through and fell onto all four appendages with a grunt, which turned into giggling.

"Whew, that was fun," the girl said standing. She caught sight of Stechyc. "Thanks for doing this. Where's Tiilaen?"

Stechyc shook her head. "I had no choice, Tiilaen is away, and you're lucky the magic didn't lose you in Bahalkar, brat."

"Aw, you know you could use me, Stechyc." The girl seemed to notice Mayliandra's presence. Stepping forward, with hand outstretched in greeting, she said, "Hello, I'm Gionne. Who are you?"

Stechyc answered for her, "This is Shei Mayliandra, a princess in this land, so be respectful." As Mayliandra shook the offered hand, Stechyc said, "How did you manage to force the Matron Mage to send you here?"

Mayliandra liked the life and attitude of the young girl, even after a few minutes. Young and cute, she didn't appear to have adjusted to her height of an inch or so taller than herself, and stood slightly bent. Once accustomed to her apparent growth spurt, and once she'd hit womanhood in a couple years, Gionne would be beautiful. Mayliandra flashed a pseudo-stern look and asked, "Is this your punishment for some trouble?"

Gionne smiled. "I did threaten trouble, but I don't consider this a punishment."

Stechyc said, "Gionne wanted to be part of an adventure, and I'm certain she finagled herself a way to be sent here. What did you do now?"

An expression of sadness crossed her face. "Grandfather passed on, Stechyc."

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.” Stechyc pulled her into a hug, Gionne’s chin resting on the top of her head.

“I didn’t want to be alone anymore. I tried to find Tiilaen, see if she’d apprentice me, but learned you both had come here. I want to be a warrior. I need to be a warrior, like Grandfather.” Gionne shrugged, and pulled away from Stechyc. “Leenatte caught me in her potions, trying to send myself here. Don’t know why she was so upset. I might have got it right.”

Stechyc nodded. “Or you could have sent yourself into oblivion. What are we to do with you?”

Mayliandra smiled at the young girl. “I’m sure we could find useful things for her to do. Right now, we should get the evening meal started and introduce her to the Gradyln men.”

“Thank you, Shei Mayliandra. I won’t let you down.”

“I won’t let you, Gionne.”

“Neither will I,” Stechyc added with a frown. “The magic here is returning, thus unstable to the novice. Don’t try anything, please.”

Gionne’s face brightened. “I promise to do anything you ask, please let me stay here, okay? I won’t complain about anything, promise.”

“Oh, you can stay,” Stechyc said, crossing her arms over her chest. “If for nothing more than the look on Tiilaen’s face when she learns what you tried to do in order to get here.”

Flushing, Gionne shuffled uncomfortably from foot to foot. “You think she’ll be very angry at me?” From the distressed look on her face, Mayliandra realized Tiilaen’s approval was important to the girl. “I just—”

Stechyc yanked her into another hug. “Oh, honey, Tiilaen will be happy to see you. You’re part of our family now, don’t you worry. You’ll always have us. You’re no longer alone.”

Mayliandra watched relief on Gionne’s face, as a tear fell down one tanned cheek. She felt she was intruding on what should be a private moment. “I should let you two catch up.” She turned to leave the tent, but felt a hand on her arm, stilling her.

“Please,” Gionne said, “don’t leave.” With a smile and a gleam in her eye, Gionne said, “the magic took a lot out of me. And I didn’t eat before I left. Can we get to eating, now?”

As Stechyc playfully slapped Gionne’s shoulder, Mayliandra laughed. “Yes, Gionne, I think food is in order. I, for one, am glad you are here. Welcome to Kellshae. Be prepared. You may get more than you bargained for.”

Gionne giggled. “I can handle anything. I’m resilient, you know.”

Chapter Thirteen

“WELL, I FOR one will be happy for a room with a real bed,” Kareina said. “Feel like I’ve been living in a tent or under the stars for far too long.” She and Tiilaen were riding close to the capitol of Clan Catreve, due to meet up with their caravan the next day. The small doses of scrying between Tiilaen and Stechyc had kept them apprised of the caravan’s whereabouts. Kareina found this means of communication quite handy, wondered why this little part of magic hadn’t remained after the Great War, simply because of the convenience in knowing what transpired during absences, notifying of arrivals, and the like.

She and Tiilaen agreed to spend the night at an inn because Kareina wanted to investigate Caldier Armin’s overall clan attitude. They were in the area, already, she justified. She didn’t trust the man wouldn’t actualize his threat if he learned Mayliandra was traveling close by. Also, Kareina didn’t believe he wasn’t in collusion with the raiders, seeing as he had such a vindictive streak.

With the exception of the strange beasts running through the forest, there was little evidence of the raiders in any of the places they had traveled. To Kareina, it seemed an exaggeration of their presence, if not an entire falsehood, had she not witnessed their heinous destruction firsthand. Even now, Kareina was getting the impression the raider activities were constructed with the sole purpose of obtaining her involvement. Was that why the raiders always seemed to be a little ahead of wherever she happened to be? She wasn’t able to glean why her involvement would be important. Whoever was behind this plot, this Persimmone person, had not only released a vile god, creatures which had no place among humans, but the return of magic no one — alive, anyway—had any notion of how to control, outside of Langear. Kareina knew she’d find the underlying cause of it all and stop the raider threat. This, after all, was what Sher Karr was supposed to do. She hoped she’d also be able to find a way to send all the creatures released from Bahalkar back where they belonged.

Then Kareina could resolve the issue, and all entailed, of her marriage. Resolution, she suspected, would be more difficult than dealing with gods and demons.

Leaving their horses at the stable, Kareina and Tiilaen made their way into the tavern. Crowded and noisy, this tavern was like any other in most clan towns. Well, Kareina thought, with the exception of Clan Bredwine whose troubles trickled down to the poor and the women. They managed to locate an empty table close to the bar, which was erected in front of the entrance to the kitchen. No one appeared to take much notice of them. Conversation continued without even a moment’s pause. Kareina did notice the furrowed brows of men in confusion and distaste as their eyes followed Tiilaen’s walk to the table.

“I forget the men of Kellshae aren’t accustomed to women warriors,” Tiilaen said. “Seems I’m an oddity here. Maybe I should have put on a dress.”

Kareina barked a laugh. “Not that you in a dress would be a sight I’d pass up myself, Tiilaen, yet I think you might have missed the reason for many of the stares.” At Tiilaen’s frown, she

said, “You’re a gorgeous woman, as I’m certain your wife has admitted to you. I think the focus is more on how such a scarred and ugly man could end up with such a remarkable beauty.”

Reaching across the table, Tiilaen gave Kareina’s forearm a gentle squeeze. “Either you’ve not looked at your own reflection for some time, or your mirror is severely flawed,” Tiilaen said. “Scarred or not, you’re quiet handsome.”

Raising an eyebrow, Kareina snickered. “Stechyc aware you lie so well?”

Pulling her hand back, Tiilaen said, “There’s no need for me to do so in this matter, my friend. Someday, you will begin to believe it too.” She must have realized Kareina wanted to change the topic, since Tiilaen glanced around the room and managed to wave at an old woman behind the bar, who nodded and elbowed a younger woman, her back to their table, beside her. When the woman turned around, both Kareina and Tiilaen gasped. Large dark eyes glanced in their direction. Though strain made her appear older, the blonde hair, features, and size of the woman was identical to Mayliandra.

The woman arrived at their table. “What can I get you, my lord?”

Kareina couldn’t find her voice, stupefied by the uncanny similarity—right here in Catreve lands. She vaguely heard Tiilaen order food for them, and request two rooms for the night. Was this another trick to delay her? If so, for what purpose? No, this had to be simple coincidence. Kareina shook her head as the woman moved away. “What are the odds?”

“My thoughts too,” Tiilaen said, glancing in the direction the woman had gone. “I get the feeling this will not bode well for a restful night’s sleep for either of us.”

Problem was Kareina believed the same. “You worry too much. It’s not like either of us will take her to our rooms or our bed,” Kareina said, amused by the worried expression on Tiilaen’s face.

“Why does my gut tell me that is exactly what’s going to happen?” Tiilaen said.

WINNEL FILLED TWO bowls from the simmering pot on the stove with the nasty concoction the inn’s cook called stew and placed them on the tray beside the hard rolls and spoons. She finished filling two tankards when the kitchen’s door banged open and caused her to flinch, a furious Caldier Armin rushed through and hovered near the entrance to the front of the barroom.

“So, it’s true,” Armin seethed. “The son of a bitch has come here, and with a harlot other than his wife.”

“She’s not a harlot, my lord,” Winnel said aloud, knowing the comment should have remained an unspoken one. Winnel set the tankards on the tray with the food.

Armin’s reaction was instantaneous. He left the doorway and stormed to her side, backhanding her across the cheek so hard she had to clutch at the counter to remain on her feet. “Do not think you can talk back to me, bitch, because I let you warm my bed.” *Let her?* Winnel wanted to vomit at the images the comment produced. As if she had any choice. As if he didn’t own her. As if this was the life she had envisioned for herself. She didn’t need to apologize or beg forgiveness, because he would punish her regardless, even if she did express remorse for her words. Scowling, Armin asked, “For them?” He cocked his head toward her table waiting for the food.

“Yes, Caldier. They’ve also requested two rooms for the night,” she said. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn’t supply information about the guests, but she’d pay dearly if he’d

learned she'd withheld facts, especially guests of which he had an obvious interest. He was very interested in the scarred warrior and his woman friend.

A wicked gleam sparked in Armin's cold eyes. "Oh, this is going to be easier than I had hoped." He clapped his hands together, which made Winnel flinch again. He waved the Inn's owner to him. "Make certain they are placed in the room by the back stairs." The old woman nodded, ever obedient.

Winnel could imagine no good would come of the request. "They're going to question what happened to their food, Caldier." She mouthed his title with distaste.

Armin turned back to Winnel. "Mind yourself, woman. Bring them their food, and return to me, immediately."

She wanted to cringe, worried what he'd demand of her next, but self-preservation had her nodding agreement. Her customers smiled politely when she transferred food items from tray to table. She gave her own parody of a smile in acknowledgement and rushed back to Armin in the kitchen. "My lord," Winnel whispered, bowing her head.

Armin clasped a thick hand on the back of her neck in a grip intended to inflict pain and leaned close enough she could feel the heat of his sour breath on her cheek. "Your duty for tonight is to make the whelp's comfort your sole priority. Stay close, make certain he and the bitch are happy, and escort them to their rooms when they are ready. Do you understand?" She nodded to acknowledge she did. He tightened the fingers around her neck, and snarled, "You will offer yourself to him if need be to remain in his rooms."

Winnel winced, and Armin used his free hand to trap a breast and squeezed with a painful twist. She whimpered.

He placed thick wet lips to her ear. "You look enough like his whore wife he'll oblige you with a roll." Armin shoved his tongue in her ear. "Unless he's tired from screwing around with the bitch he has now." He drew away, rough when he stuffed something cold into her cleavage. "Make certain he consumes this."

"What is it?" she questioned. Winnel wouldn't poison anyone, no matter what her own punishment might be. "I won't kill a man for you."

Armin pushed her away hard enough Winnel slammed into the counter's edge. At least he's not touching me anymore, she thought. "I don't want him dead by your hand, but by my own," he said, teeth gnashing in anger. "You will let my men into Karr's room before dawn. Should give this enough time to work." A dangerous gleam caught in Armin's empty gaze. Winnel knew Armin wasn't aware of her presence when he said, "I'll learn where Mayliandra is and make her mine. When I'm done with the whelp, I'll send what is left to his new father-in-law, an admonishment for not supporting me on this."

Winnel swallowed the fear prompted by the cold hatred of his tone. She hadn't expected anything less from him. He was wicked and hateful. She also knew she would do whatever he asked. If Armin didn't get this warrior, she would be the one to pay for the failure. "What about his companion?" she asked.

Shaking his head, Armin said, "Give a little to her before you take care of Karr. That way she won't interfere. If she becomes a problem, I'll give her to my men." The corners of mouth lifted in a parody of a smile. "She's a comely bitch. Maybe I'll have a taste first, and send her to the barracks when I'm tired of her." He gave a sneer as he ogled Winnel. "She can't please me any less than you have of late."

Yes, please, take her, she wanted to yell at him, not upset in the least by his insult. But deep down, Winnel wondered if she'd willingly offer another human, even to win her own freedom.

Part of her believed she could. Winnel felt a twinge of regret at the confirmation. No one ever learned what happened to the other women Armin had grown tired of, so she wondered if leave his bed meant through death. Armin was so feared, no one asked of the women's fate. No one dared. "I'll do as you wish, my lord," she said.

Her reply was rewarded with another sharp blow to her cheek from Armin's thick meaty hand. "Of course you will."

KAREINA WAS TIRED, and uncomfortable with the barmaid's sudden devoted attention to them and their needs. There was no doubt something was going on with the woman. Since bringing their food, Kareina noticed a difference in the woman's demeanor. And the inflamed mark of a heavy hand marring her cheek hadn't escaped her notice; or Tiilaen's. Kareina had needed to restrain Tiilaen from storming into the kitchen to reprimand whoever may be the culprit.

Instead, they conceded to retiring to their rooms was the best course of action. When next the barmaid swung by, Kareina asked, "Are our rooms ready?"

"Yes, my lord," she said. "Let me show you to them."

Kareina shook her head. "I'm sure we can find the way. Tell us which rooms are ours."

A flash of panic darkened her eyes before she nodded. "Upstairs and all the way down the hall, to the left of the back staircase. Doors are unlocked, and I've had fresh linen put on."

Tiilaen thanked her as they followed the woman's instructions. Kareina made note of the patrons who seemed more interested in their progress than their tankards. The swill this place served hadn't garnered much attention past quenching a thirst. Maybe staying overnight wasn't such a smart idea, she thought, counting at least five men watching them, though they tried to appear engaged otherwise.

Inside the room, Kareina realized access to Tiilaen's room was through Kareina's; and, both rooms had a bed and a single dresser. Each had a window large enough to let in light, but not for anything larger than a small child, centered in the wall.

"Not certain if the accommodations work for or against us," Tiilaen said, frowning. "Since, it seems, we'll be having company tonight."

"Yes, we seem to have attracted more than the usual attention." There was a knock on the door. Kareina shrugged. "Can't be them yet. Bad news doesn't usually announce itself." With a hand on her scabbard, she opened the door to see the barmaid standing there with two tankards clutched in each fist.

Before Kareina had a chance to say a word, the woman pushed past her into the room and placed the drinks on the dresser's top with a thud. "Compliments of the house," she said, her voice quivering. Kareina still had the door open, when the woman started to walk toward her and stopped, her now empty hands grasping Kareina's face, and unexpectedly pulled her in for a kiss.

Eyes wide, Kareina pushed and held the woman at arm's length. "What the—"

Laughing, Tiilaen said, "I believe more than drinks are compliments of the house, my lord." She leaned against the doorframe separating their rooms.

Trembling, Winnel said, "I wish to assist in soothing you after your travels, help you relax."

Kareina hadn't missed the fear in Winnel's eyes, or the trembling body though she attempted to hide it. Was the woman the distraction or the agent to deliver whatever was in store for them? She wasn't well practiced at this deception or she would be undaunted by the task she'd been

given. Glowering, Kareina stepped closer to Winnel, grasped her by the waist, and pulled her close. “And what of Tiilaen?” Kareina asked close to her ear, before placing a kiss below the lobe.

“What—” Winnel squeaked. The trembling intensified.

“Tiilaen needs soothing, too.” Kareina ran her tongue along the side of Winnel’s neck. “Or do you believe she has not satisfied me. You wish to do better? Maybe show us both how tasty you are?”

“I...I...”

Slamming the door closed with her foot, Kareina picked Winnel up and stormed to the bed before tossing her on top. Winnel gulped audibly when Kareina made an exaggerated show of unbuckling and removing her scabbard. The fear in Winnel’s eyes softened her look, making her less harsh, reminding Kareina so much of Mayliandra she almost gave up the charade. Grabbing Winnel by the ankle, Kareina dragged her closer to the end of the bed where she stood. “Tell me, sweet Winnel,” she said as she leaned over the prostrate woman, trapping her with an arm on either side of Winnel’s upper torso. “How many have tasted your delights? Five? Fifty?”

A tear leaked down the side of Winnel’s face. “Does it matter, my lord?” Winnel’s eyes squeezed shut. “Do as you like. It is my duty to please you.”

The words froze Kareina’s blood. This woman was more like Mayliandra with every breath. She hadn’t intended to rape Winnel, not that the woman knew it, of course. But the question swirling in Kareina’s mind was: Why must tending her physical needs always be someone’s damn duty? She stood up. “Get the hell out.” The cold fury in her tone had Winnel’s eyes opening wide.

“But, my lord—”

“Get. Out. Now.” Kareina reached across the woman, grabbed a fistful of her dress at the shoulder, and used it to haul her off the bed, and pushed her none too gently toward the door. “I’m not a damned duty,” she mumbled to herself. Her fury increased when Kareina realized the woman hadn’t left. She raised an arm to the door, and the woman flinched and dropped to the floor.

Tiilaen moved between them. “Karr,” she said. “I know you don’t intend to harm her, but Winnel doesn’t know.”

“Get her out,” Kareina said. She left Tiilaen to it and went to stand in front of the window, peering out into the darkness. From behind her Kareina heard Tiilaen and Winnel.

“Please, I beg you,” Winnel was saying, “I’ll be killed if I don’t stay in here.”

“And we shall if you do.” Tiilaen’s voice was firm but comforting. “I opt for our own self-preservation. Get up.” Kareina heard shuffling, assumed Winnel obeyed. “I’m sorry. I don’t believe you a willing party in tonight’s plans for us. Good luck to you.”

Believing this matter concluded, Kareina turned toward the door.

Winnel stared at her, her expression revealing the inner turmoil of her indecision of action. “My lord,” Winnel said, “I don’t know what I did—”

“It doesn’t matter,” Kareina said, going to the dresser and picking up a tankard. Might as well drown her hurt, intended or not.

“No, stop,” Winnel said. “Don’t drink those.”

“Why not?” Tiilaen asked. She placed a restraining hand on Winnel’s shoulder.

“She’s done something to them.” Kareina returned the tankard to the dresser with a thud. Fear and indecision warred in Winnel’s expression, and again reminded her of Mayli. Kareina

sighed, sitting on the end of the bed. “Whatever the plan was has failed. Either you can deal with whoever sent you—”

“Caldier Armin,” Winnel said.

Kareina nodded, suspecting as much.

“So he was the one who hit you earlier.” Tiilaen removed her hand from Winnel’s shoulder, and crossed her arms over her chest, leaning against the exit door. “So her resemblance to Mayliandra was no accident.”

“No, no accident.” Kareina saw the awareness on Winnel’s face. She knew about the resemblance at least. “Probably hasn’t done her any favors either,” she said to Tiilaen. She stared hard at Winnel. “What are you to Armin?”

Winnel’s face twisted into a look of disgust. “Whatever he wants me to be. Armin bought me, he owns me.”

“I see,” Kareina said.

“Do you?” Winnel asked.

“More than you know,” said Kareina, her tone as cold. “How long do we have?”

“Until right before dawn.”

Kareina nodded. “All right. We can get a little rest before we leave, while we wait for the tavern to close. You’ll stay with Tiilaen until then.”

“What is to become of me, my lord?” Winnel asked.

Rubbing at the sharp ache building behind her tired eyes, Kareina said, “I won’t harm you. But it isn’t safe in Catreve for you any longer. We can take you to Iskarr territory. After, the decision is yours.” Winnel nodded. “I suggest we keep the lantern off, to further the deception Winnel is completing her task. When we leave, you won’t be able to retrieve any personal items.”

“I have none to retrieve.”

“Take her to your room, Tiilaen,” Kareina said. “If she tries to deceive us, she’ll have to get through me, too.”

Weary, Kareina lay upon the bed unable to sleep. She listened for the sounds of customers as others entered rooms on their floor, as silence prevailed. Not wanting to wait too long, in the event of an early arrival of the men coming, Kareina moved to Tiilaen’s open door, not surprised that she hadn’t slept either. And, it appeared, neither had Winnel.

Gathering their own things, Kareina and Tiilaen moved to the door, Winnel inserted protectively between them. Heart hammering in her chest, Kareina wondered if the true trap was the one Winnel told them of, or getting them to leave their rooms in the middle of the night. Either way, she guessed, something was bound to happen. Whether or not they were warned falsely, she and Tiilaen needed to leave the city.

At first, their escape appeared too easy. Kareina believed Armin’s people would expect them to sneak out through the kitchen exit in the back. She decided to use the front door. They made it out of the tavern, passed numerous alleys, and to the stables without any alarm being raised, or sign of another human being. They heard the sound of scuffling and mumbling issuing from inside the stables as they stopped in the alley.

Hiding in the shadows, Kareina motioned Tiilaen to watch Winnel as she stepped forward to see who made the sounds. The sight before Kareina had her gasping aloud. Armin and two other men, gagged and bound, were dragged from the stables by three robed men whose faces were hidden behind deep cowls; she stood next to the dark building into which they were hauled.

Armin had suspected Winnel to defect—or the original plan—intended to get her and Tiilaen as they retrieved the horses. Someone else had plans for the Caldier.

Kareina drew back into the darkness. Close to Tiilaen's ear she said, "Some..." She paused. Who were they? "Well, priests I guess, have Armin. Their plans for us seem to have been suspended."

"Priests?" Tiilaen asked.

Sensing a nod from Winnel, Kareina asked, "Do you know who they are?"

Winnel shook her head. Barely audible, she said, "They came into the city less than a moon ago. They don't speak, or haven't. Turned this empty building into a church, but haven't held any religious service."

Frowning, Kareina decided they shouldn't lose their advantage. And she wouldn't lose sleep in concern for the nasty Caldier; as he was getting some of the same treatment he intended for Mayliandra. One last check that no one else was around, Kareina led them into the stable. They located their horses quickly enough, since Starsinger snorted his displeasure at being left behind. With as much stealth as possible, Kareina and Tiilaen led the horses into the night, Winnel still silent between them.

As soon as they reached the city's edge, Kareina motioned Tiilaen to mount. She did the same, pulling Winnel up behind her. They had managed to place a fair amount of distance between them and the city before the sky began to lighten.

CHAYBOEN MADE HER way up the tower stairs, precariously balancing two plates of food atop two tankards of ale held tight in her fists. She reached the room at the tower's peak without mishap. Nudging open the door with her hip, Chayboen entered and headed to the small table beneath the large three-paned windows.

"Let me assist you," Ysannie said from the bed. Chayboen heard the shifting of bedclothes.

"I'm a bit out of practice, but I think I have it," she said, placing the tankards down, and reaching for the plates before they slipped. Chayboen smiled when she successfully deposited the plates beside the tankards. As she reached into the pocket of her tunic to retrieve the eating utensils and linen napkins, Ysannie had made her way to the table. Chayboen pulled out the chair closest to the goddess. "Not too quickly, you're still healing."

Saying the words refueled her outrage with the gods. Stripping one of their own of most of her power, her immortality was bad enough; but, they had literally dropped her at the keep, causing Ysannie bruised ribs, a strained wrist, and a broken leg. The one redeeming feature being Ysannie landed on the tower stairs, so it wasn't too far for Chayboen to carry the injured woman to the tower bedroom.

"Ah, lucky for me," Ysannie said softly, "your cooking and curative arts are allowing me to heal faster than is humanly possible."

Chayboen flinched at the last words. "I can't believe they did this to you because you wanted to protect us." A warm hand covered hers as it rested on the table.

"I have no regrets, so neither should you."

Reluctant to dismiss the event, Chayboen nodded when she realized Ysannie waited for her agreement. She didn't intend to change her opinion. Chayboen conceded, for the moment, so as not to ruin the companionable atmosphere they shared. "Eat," she ordered. "You need your

strength.” Once Ysannie began to eat, she also picked up her fork and ate. “What is needed of us first? When you’ve recovered, of course.”

“First we prepare the Keep. After, you and I travel the short distance to the Pool of Promises.” Ysannie took a drink, and appeared to study her over the tankards lip. “Have you any visions, yet?”

“We must have time, because the visions are muddled and hard to decipher.”

“Good, let me know if any of that changes. I’d like to help you in any way I can, knowing how they take their toll on you.” Ysannie returned her attention to her plate. “I’m glad we’ll have a while longer to enjoy the Keep by ourselves.”

Chayboen stared at Ysannie’s bent head for a long silent moment. Inside, her heart beat erratically. Did the goddess admit she enjoyed Chayboen’s company?

“More than you know, Chayboen,” Ysannie said. “I’ve come to care for you a great deal.”

“Um.” Chayboen was embarrassed. “You’re reading my thoughts?”

Ysannie shook her head. “No, your expressions speak your feelings for you.” A warm hand covered one of Chayboen’s. “God, demi-god, or mortal, doesn’t matter. I find I can’t get you out of my thoughts, or my heart. You may not believe my words true, or only because I’m wrestling with my new human feelings and mortality. But you’d be wrong.” Ysannie squeezed Chayboen’s hand. “My heart is yours, if you’ll have it.”

“Are you kidding?” Chayboen asked.

“I’m sorry. I had—”

Seeing the expression of hurt on Ysannie’s features had her clarifying. “I’ve worried how I’d work with you, and not blurt out my own feelings.”

Ysannie gave a wicked grin. “A relief indeed. Now I don’t need to work magic to get you into my bed.”

“Oh, you worked magic all right,” Chayboen said. “But not the kind you’re used to using.”

Ysannie pulled Chayboen’s hand to her lips, pressing a gentle kiss. “No, this magic is much stronger than any I’ve wielded before.”

MAYLIANDRA ENJOYED THE warmth of the sun beating down on her skin. She watched the Langlear warriors during their practice session in the field below where the tents were set. Earlier, she had visited with Stechyc and Gionne, shared a morning meal, and learned Tiilaen and Karr would return soon.

She had mixed feelings—frustration—about the anticipated occasion of her husband’s return. At first, Karr’s emotions, hot then cold in a fraction of an instant, had caused the irritation. Mayliandra had a lot of time to reflect on each occurrence, realizing she had initially rejected Karr, whether in an action or expression. Of course, it hadn’t been intentional. When the interactions between her and Karr started to go well, Mayliandra would see Karr in a softer, more female appearance. Inevitably, someone or something would remind her she did indeed have a husband.

If things could be different in Kellshae, as they were passed the Valley of Mist, she could have the truer love she desired. Mayliandra had seen the tender, caring side of Karr, but wished he were the visage she glimpsed on occasion. The scarred features made her think of her husband’s dead twin, Kareina, the face and person she was falling in love with—the person she could never have for herself. Why was she fighting this? Mayliandra was a wife, fulfilling her

duty to her Clan, married into a noble and esteemed Clan to a man who had done her no physical harm. And, why had the word duty been so distasteful to Karr?

Her life could be worse, she thought. Her betrothal, and subsequent marriage, could have been to Jurquette, some other less respectable noble's son, or even Armin. Mayliandra shuddered.

"Couldn't have been a pleasant thought, my lady," Spallan said, sitting on the grass beside her. It had taken a while, but she was glad he'd given up the formality of always waiting for permission. "Anything I can help with?"

Mayliandra would never be able to speak with a man about what bothered her, wondered if she could bring the topic to Stechyc. She'd have to wait for later, if she decided to do so. Needing to give some response, she said, "I know so little of your Clan's customs, Spallan. I was wondering how accepting they would be of the Langlear women."

Spallan nodded. "Ah." He shifted so he was looking at her. "The simple answer would be 'not as bad as some, still has a long way to go'. Caldie Parrin has the most leeway of any Clan noble I've heard of. Still, she wants more of a partnership for her women, in their marital relationships." He tilted his head in the direction of the warriors. "Is this commonplace in Gradyln? No. Would Caldie Parrin and Sher Karr like to see this swordplay on the castle grounds, seeing qualified women fighting alongside men? Yes."

"I know the rumors behind Karr's determination." She shrugged. "But, does Karr wish equality for his mother's sake, or his own beliefs?"

"Do you need to ask, my lady?"

No, Mayliandra knew she didn't. Never once had Karr seemed threatened or the least bit bothered by the idea or the sight of female warriors. In fact, he seemed more surprised the women of Langlear crossed the Valley of Mist to assist him in this current task. Again, she thought, further evidence Karr was an emotional conundrum, at least to her. One thing the nobility was never to do was speak of other nobility with the lower classes.

The problem was Mayliandra had no other way to get the answers she wanted, and asking Melrick or Olaf was out of the question. They would think her looking for flaws to hold against Karr, not for the honest wish to comprehend what was happening between the two of them, other than misunderstandings. Mayliandra took a deep breath and asked, "Spallan, I don't wish to put you on the spot, but, please, tell me your opinion of Karr."

"First, Lady Mayliandra," he said, his tone serious, "tell me what are you asking?"

Taken aback, she said, "I thought I had." He leveled a humorless gaze at her. "All right." Mayliandra decided to start with the positive points. "There's gentleness, a caring nature to him. Karr doesn't place his needs before another's. Karr is quick to anger at times. Though I fear, sometimes expect, Karr to raise a hand against me, he has not." She closed her eyes, reliving that one precious moment—before she had destroyed it with her careless words—the private moment in the cave. How alive, cherished, and wonderfully aroused Mayliandra had felt from Karr's kisses. There was intense passion hidden inside her husband; buried beneath layers of old pain, and her own rejections of him. How unfair it was to Karr she wasn't the right person to provide the reciprocation needed. "Is the anguish, which seems his constant companion, for Karr's sister alone?"

For a long time, Spallan remained silent. When Mayliandra believed he wasn't going to answer, Spallan shifted position a second time, so he wasn't looking at her. "Let me begin by saying first, if Caldier Hassid asked me to slice my own throat, I would refuse and question his

motives. If Karr were to ask the same, my question would be if by his knife or my own.” He paused, letting the significance of his words work within her.

Mayliandra recognized it would take a specific type of personality to garner that type of loyalty. Odd Karr had the characteristic and his father did not. Caldie Parrin’s influence?

“Being older, I remember all of Karr’s childhood.” As Spallan spoke, Mayliandra felt a chilled prickling along her skin, starting from her toes and ending with a quick buzzing at her ears. She rubbed at them with a fingertip. “The pure joy for life, and the laughter from Kareina was beyond anything I had witnessed. But mischievous, too, let me tell you. There was this little playmate from Hermitice, Ewan, and they did everything together. Ewan’s parents had him late in life, and hadn’t the health or patience to raise him. I swear Nanny Noquai prematurely aged from the antics of those two.”

Spallan gave a quick glance toward Mayliandra. “I asked her years later, if she regretted her time raising them. Noquai smiled and stated she’d do it all over again, and she wouldn’t turn down an opportunity to raise Kareina’s children for as long as she had breath.” Spallan stared at the practice fighting for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice seemed to have a different tone, like spoken with an echo. “Karr was a wicked spiteful boy, never spent time with Kareina or Ewan. I never heard Karr laugh, no matter the occasion. As they grew older, it became obvious Karr hated his sister, and anyone who loved her. Her feelings never changed for him. Kareina would take whatever vicious thing he meted to her, and say, ‘I’ll always love you, brother’. And to this day, she never speaks ill of him. Even after Karr had her lover, Hali, banished and killed.”

Mayliandra frowned. At first, she believed Spallan brought up Kareina to make a point. Was he admitting Karr is, in fact, Kareina?

Pulling his knees to his chest, Spallan looked down at the grass before him. When he spoke again, an echoing tone replaced the voice she associated with Spallan. “Before we came to Bredwine, Karr fought a challenge his father had accepted, and Karr, as you know, was victorious. Karr successfully fought Ewan in battle.” Why did Spallan go back to referring to Karr as him? The buzzing returned, and Mayliandra noticed Spallan’s lips weren’t moving, though she heard the sadness and sarcasm in his next words. “Goddess knows Kareina deserved the loss of Hali for loving a woman. And the death of a friend to increase Gradyln coffers.”

What was wrong with her? It was as if she’d heard two different conversations. She didn’t understand what was happening to her. When she heard Spallan speak—rather what she heard—Karr was he. During the moments after the buzzing and the prickling of her skin, Spallan spoke of Kareina, alive and with them, as if the true Karr didn’t exist. Spallan’s talk of Kareina was always positive, even a paternal-type of loving. Karr was a split between good and evil, like two different personalities in one person.

More baffling was the insinuation Kareina was—is—a lover of women. Was she overheated from too long in the sun, the result being she heard what she wished in her heart? Mayliandra was more confused than when she’d asked Spallan the original question.

“Overall,” Spallan was continuing in his normal voice, “our clan is better to the women than most of Kellshae. Karr is working on bettering what he can. We aren’t perfect. There are still many things women will never be allowed. Sher Karr will change Gradyln in a beneficial way. He’ll be a great Caldier someday.”

Mayliandra was reminded of the old adage of “be careful what you wish for.” She had wanted information, and received more than what she’d bargained for.

“Does that answer your questions, my lady?”

Mayliandra couldn't very well admit to her increased bewilderment. What she needed was a distraction to clear her head. Glancing at the field below them, Mayliandra knew what she needed to do. She pursed her lips as if in deep thought. "So, you're saying my husband shall not be surprised if I ask the women to teach me the use of sword?"

Spallan slapped his knee. "No, my lady, Karr will not be surprised."

WHEN SHE, TIILAEN, and Winnel rode into camp, Kareina noticed the Languar women busy with another practice session. She smiled at the sight, hoping someday it would be possible to witness this on Gradyln land. She'd never see it, Kareina realized, as she'd never see Gradyln again.

"Welcome back," Olaf said, taking the horses' leads from them. Noticing Winnel, his eyebrows rose. "Oh, hello there."

Kareina watched as he assisted Winnel from Starsinger, never taking his gaze from her. Kareina became irrationally angry, knowing how comfortable he was around women; remembering how comfortable Olaf and Mayliandra were together. If Olaf can't have my wife, she thought, he'll take a substitute, will he? Well, at least now Olaf will be too busy for flirting with my wife.

As Kareina dismounted, Winnel and the horses safely taken into Olaf's care and Tiilaen having rushed to Stechyc, she wondered where her own wife was. From the far end of the field of dueling women, Kareina heard the warm tones of Mayliandra's laughter. She walked toward her, watching her wife step as Sindi advanced, Mayliandra's sword held in a two-handed grip deflecting each blow aimed at her. Unaware, Mayliandra's heel caught against a rock, and she tumbled backward. From Mayliandra's current position on her backside, blonde hair sparkling in the sunshine, she gazed up at Sindi, happy. Both wore a broad grin. Kareina again noted how beautiful Mayliandra was. Would Mayliandra ever look at me like that? She doubted it, and the thought both saddened and hurt.

Sindi was assisting Mayliandra to her feet, when Kareina arrived at their side. Instead of her usual attire, Mayliandra was dressed in borrowed clothing, of blouse, leather trousers and vest, and looked amazing. What brought a smile to her lips were Mayliandra's bare feet.

Realizing the direction of her amusement, Mayliandra curled her toes into the grass. "There weren't any extra boots in my size." An expression of surprise crossed her features. "Karr, you're back," Mayliandra said, leaning in and giving a quick peck to her cheek. Mayliandra appeared as shocked to have given the response, as she was to receive.

Kareina smiled. "Yes, I noticed the fact myself."

"Are you well?" Mayliandra asked, her gaze traveling the length of Kareina's body as if searching for new injuries. Was she afraid there'd be another scar?

"And in one piece, Mayli, be calmed." Kareina turned to Sindi. "How goes the training?"

"She's an attentive student, my lord."

"Is that warrior code for being awful?" Mayliandra asked. Her hand clutched at her throat in distress.

Sindi seemed aghast. "No, of course not, my lady. I meant—"

"Sindi gave quite the warrior's praise, Mayliandra," Kareina said, stepping closer to her wife as if giving her confidence. "She cannot gush praise for your ability. Others, meaning some of my men, would believe Sindi weak, or attempting to garner my favor. Instead, she told me you

were alert in your application, interested in the instruction, and aware of your responses with the sword.”

Mayliandra sighed in apparent relief before flashing a grin at Sindi. “Thank you. Although it would mean more if you hadn’t walked up while I was on my backside.”

Before she realized what she was doing, Kareina draped an arm across Mayliandra’s shoulder and whispered in her ear. “Have you any idea how many times I have been in the very same position?”

Her heart beat in her chest at the bubbling laughter Mayliandra gave in response. “It would be best to leave that question unanswered. Leave me guessing, Karr.”

At the teasing sparkle in her warm brown eyes, Kareina said, “And so I shall. You are very intelligent, wife.”

Sindi snorted, reminding Kareina of her presences as she said, “Diplomatic, more like.” Sindi gave a quick bow to Mayliandra. “I leave you in your husband’s care, my lady.”

When they were alone, Mayliandra seemed hesitant to meet her gaze. “You aren’t angry with me?”

Frowning, Kareina asked, “Why would I be?”

“I know it is not acceptable for women to perform male tasks. I wouldn’t want you to suffer unnecessary teasing or anger from your men.”

Did Mayliandra care because of propriety’s sake, or because she cared for Kareina—well, Karr? Kareina knew their relationship needed to take baby-steps. “This is a good thing, Mayli. Tiilaen and I saw strange beasts on the road. A woman should be able to protect herself, should the need arise for any reason. It pleases me to know you could defend yourself, if you needed to do so. And, you should do whatever makes you happy.”

Evidently pleased with the admission, Mayliandra linked an arm through Kareina’s. “Are you hungry? I can make a quick repast, and you can settle after your travels.” She started leading them away from the practice field. “Maybe you can tell me about the strange things you’ve seen.”

Kareina noted the slow steps Mayliandra was taking, reminded her wife wore no footwear. “I could carry you,” she said. “But I don’t wish to embarrass you.”

Mayliandra chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “Would it embarrass you, Karr?” Kareina shook her head. “It would mean you eat quicker.”

Before either of them changed their minds, Kareina scooped Mayliandra in her arms and strode toward their tent, her heart lighter realizing Mayliandra hadn’t pulled away from her one time since her return. Please, she thought, let this be a good omen—at least for a little while.

The Battle for Chaos

Chapter Fourteen

FLEUREN FELT THE fear, disguised as a painful mass in the pit of her stomach. Each previous instance in which T’Dar had singled her out for a trip away from Persimmone, she finished by performing something disgusting and inhumane. Somehow, she doubted this excursion would be any different. He smiled a nasty smile never reaching his eyes. “Ready for our adventure, my little flower?”

“As you wish, T’Dar,” she replied, knowing no other answer would do.

T’Dar gave a mock pout. “Please, child, show at least a little enthusiasm.”

She repeated, “As you wish, T’Dar.” This time adding a smile they both knew was as false as his. He laughed as he moved behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. Within moments, they were floating above their campsite, rising higher. Fleuren assumed T’Dar made them invisible somehow as no one appeared to notice them hovering in the sky. “Is there anything in particular I should be searching for?” she asked, hoping to glean a little insight into this trip’s purpose.

“I want you to see the fruits of our labors,” he said. The mass of fear in her belly began to boil. She wanted to refute any labor being a team effort, but knew it would be useless—willing or not, she was involved and as culpable in the horrible acts committed at his command. Would she survive the atrocities? Or would she become a helpless pawn, much like the monks, in the new world he and Persimmone were attempting to create? “There,” T’Dar said, “next to the castle’s outer walls.” He pointed to the left.

Night was closing in upon them. Fleuren followed his finger and saw an imposing structure flush against the inside of the curtain walls of the surrounding stone. The building was a church of some sort. Fleuren realized they were dropping closer. She was able to see dark robed figures exiting the front steps and making their way into city streets, cloaked further by the oncoming night. She recognized them as T’Dar’s Monks of Silence.

“What are they doing here?” she asked.

She’d wondered why T’Dar had needed to create so many of them, but was afraid to ask because of possible repercussions; or of alerting Persimmone she wasn’t as aware of the god’s intentions any more than he was. She refused to give the little weasel of a man any advantage over her, for he would use it against her—happily. The only thing to make him happy.

“Ah, my little flower, they are preparing the way for me and mine. Once the Monks are installed in each of the clan’s major cities, and my minions released from Bahalkar, I will have the eyes and the strength to remove all who oppose my reign over this territory. Where the Priests of Tekelrah squashed those with even a hint of magic, my monks will crush those who oppose it. Then I shall begin on the next realms, starting with Languard. Much magic still exists there, and it isn’t as sporadic as the returning threads of enchantment here. I will make Languard magic mine. Then into the Void.”

Fleuren didn’t wish to incur his wrath, but the questions came unbidden, “Does Persimmone know you’ll reign and not him? Or does he get to rule at Gradyln?” She wanted to ask why he hadn’t started in Languard, but didn’t wish to press her luck.

The large hands on her shoulders bit into her flesh. “Guttersnipe can’t even rule over his emotions. Give him control of his homeland? Never. He hasn’t earned it.” He shifted behind her, and Fleuren felt his breath on her neck. “Now, you, my little flower, I would give anything if you consent to rule by my side. I would even bestow immortality upon you.”

She was glad they didn’t face one another so he couldn’t see her flinch. Immortality? If Leurette and those entombed in Smierc Keep weren’t counting on her to return them to this world, Fleuren would have found a way to kill herself, thus thwarting T’Dar from at least part of his plan. “Why would you want a pathetic mortal woman like me when you can have anyone, including goddesses?”

“You are pleasing to my eye.” He chuckled. “And you amuse me.” She felt the god pull himself straighter. “And I would wish you to continue being useful to me. Forever.”

Biting her lip, Fleuren could think of no way to respond. T’Dar didn’t seem to expect an answer, either. She didn’t know how long they floated about Kellshae, assuring the Monks were productive in their work infiltrating the various clans, but she prayed this excursion to end soon.

After what seemed an eternity, they hovered above a camp of warriors. Fleuren was stunned to see many were female, unheard of in Kellshae, which meant they were not from here. Could these women somehow also be recent released beings from Bahalkar? She didn’t remember them from history. She heard heartfelt laughter, not sinister. This camp was a mix of people from Kellshae and someplace else, but all very human. T’Dar confirmed her observation.

“This is the camp of Sher Karr from Clan Gradyln, assisted by the arrival of warriors from Languard.” Fleuren gasped, recognizing the name. “Yes, the twin to Persimmone. The woman whose destruction he orchestrated, though ineffectual at it, like so many other machinations Persimmone had constructed. And the women I’ll have when I move forward.”

“And why are you showing me them?” she asked. “Am I to—”

T’Dar bellowed a laugh. “No, no new Monks from among them. At least not yet.” Their hovering dropped closer. “I want you to become familiar with their faces. You have a special task to perform, information I need you to garner, assuring my destiny isn’t hindered. I’m on a schedule of sorts after all, and Persimmone manages to thwart even my simple wishes whenever he has an opportunity.”

“What would you have me do?” she asked. Her throat constricting even as bile rose from the back.

Floating higher again, they moved away, over Persimmone’s caravan of raiders and toward a village three leagues away.

Again, T’Dar’s breath scraped across her ear and a surge of fear caused her to shiver. “Let them save you,” he said.

“Save me—” Fleuren’s jaw snapped shut when she realized in a simple questioning blink of her eyes, they were inside the small cottage at the far side of the village. A quick glance around her told Fleuren the structure was empty. She felt solidness under her feet as T’Dar shifted in front of her. A booming sound pulsed through her ears. At first, she believed it the pounding of her fear-filled heart. Fleuren realized the cottage walls were collapsing above and around her. She screamed, throwing her arms upward to cover her head from the falling debris. A sharp pain radiated from across her back before pressed brutally onto the floor. Seconds before darkness claimed her, Fleuren heard T’Dar’s words in her head, “Learn all you can, little flower. There will be a test.” A moment of his bone chilling laughter filled her mind, followed by darkness.

THE MAJOR CITY center of Clan Iskarr proved to be as frustrating as so many other towns since this journey began; yet, now, Kareina’s group had to deal with displaced and misplaced people, raider destruction, and the fact Caldier Jurquette did not seem to be in residence. Her first command decision was to have her group move into the castle—abandoned, after all—and use it as her headquarters. Since this city was larger than any of the others they’d come across, Kareina thought it the best position to assess and assist in quadrants.

Melrick had managed to locate a map to help them in this endeavor. He had studied the layout, noted the three villages branching out from the Iskarr castle, and separated by farming land. Each of these three was close enough for easy travel in less than a day, yet far enough to isolate from another.

“Do we know why these villages are set up in this manner?” Kareina asked. She glanced at the others who stood around a large banquet table. Kareina occupied the table’s head; Melrick, Olaf and Tiilaen stood on her left; and, Mayliandra, Spallan, and Stechyc on her right.

“From appearances,” Olaf said, “it’s to keep the lower caste close yet not too close to the blessed nobility.”

Melrick shook his head. “According to the household staff, the nobility live within proximity of the castle.” He pointed to the middle village. “This is the actual farming folks. To the left are the laborers such as seamstresses, blacksmiths, etcetera.” Melrick tapped his finger on the village to the right, his face scrunched in bewilderment. “This is referred to as the religious teaching center. When I asked about the premise of a religion which would require this, I was rudely told, ‘it is the religion of our way.’ The man wouldn’t say another word. Don’t know what religion Iskarrians follow, but the man’s mannerisms gave me the willies.”

“Suggestions?” Kareina invited opinions from them all.

Spallan spoke first. “Belzan’s group came in earlier this afternoon. I suggest we all start at the left and move right, searching through one village at a time.”

“Why would you not split up into smaller groups and cover more ground in less time?” Mayliandra asked.

Tiilaen chewed on the inside corner of her mouth. “Either would have drawbacks. If we split up, and there is trouble, we’ve weakened our defensive force. If we go one village at a time, we can be more thorough.”

Mayliandra smiled. “I’m not a warrior—”

“Sindi believes you can be an asset in a fight,” Tiilaen said.

“I’d rather not have to prove myself one way or the other right yet,” Mayliandra said, head lowered. “Sindi is too kind.”

“Sindi is a warrior,” Kareina said. When Mayliandra looked at her, baffled, Kareina explained. “A warrior would not give praise for praise’s sake or kindness. Knowing there was a chance you would someday be required to defend her back, Sindi would not speak false words.” The others in the room nodded in agreement. “So, which course would you suggest?”

Straightening, as if emboldened by the words, Mayliandra said, “I’d agree with Spallan. These raiders still believe they are superior because of their magic devices. Whether they know we are coming or not, smaller groups may move easier, but a larger group can...um. Well—”

“Yeah. Corral ‘em to one location,” Olaf said. “If we can surround and enclose in each village, the raiders have less opportunity to breach our defenses to escape and warn the others.”

Melrick said, “Escape could still happen, of course, but I think our chances for surprise if raiders are still in the other outlying villages is improved.”

Kareina felt they all agreed, with the exception of Stechyc, who had yet to voice anything. Though Stechyc’s gaze was on the map, Kareina doubted her focused on it. Her hands were flat and splayed on the tabletop. “And what have you to say, Mage Stechyc?”

Her concentration appeared to break at the use of her name. Stechyc turned her gaze on Kareina, blinking quickly. “The further south we travel, the more magic can be felt running through the land. I wonder—worry—about the magic in people whose ability is buried within them. How will they be able to contain or control this new and unexpected skill? I feel a change in my own power as we move toward magic’s source.”

“How so?” Tiilaen asked with a worried expression on her face.

Stechyc smiled at her. “The infusion of magic in the earth strengthens my own. But I can feel the magic as inconsistent and unpredictable.” She looked at Kareina, and each of the others in turn. “Kellshae exiled magic three hundred years ago, and called it harmony. Kellshae has delegated the roles of women as subservient, a presence to be tolerated out of necessity. How will Kellshae react to women— anyone—with a power from newly released magic?”

“Why haven’t you said anything before?” Tiilaen asked.

“It’s spreading northward. This is the first stop were I’ve felt it as more than a premonition.” Stechyc stared at her, and it unnerved Kareina enough to send a chill along her spine.

“But there is something the healer in you feels,” Kareina said. She knew Stechyc, as a healer, could form a psychic bond with a patient. Since Stechyc had managed to form a bond with her, without healing or being in close proximity, Kareina wondered if this was happening now.

Stechyc glanced at the map spread on the table. “Yes. As I sense the magic shifting, I’m beginning to feel threads of pain within those fluctuations. And I feel fear.”

Mayliandra reached over and placed a comforting arm on Stechyc’s shoulder. “My lord husband will make this right, you’ll see.”

Kareina’s eyes widened, shocked by the statement, and the look of certainty in Mayliandra’s eyes. When had her wife begun placing her confidence in Kareina? The list of items requiring her care was getting longer and Kareina wondered how she was supposed to handle everything. This Persimmon released evil from Bahalkar, unpredictable magic was spreading through Kellshae and the raiders were killing indiscriminately. Those with magic in their blood were not only awakening but could also be coming to harm. On top of it all, Kareina enjoyed Mayliandra’s company, wished she could tell her the truth, but be accepted for it. It would never happen.

“We’ll start at first light. Leave some behind to keep the castle secure. Get some rest, my friends. Tomorrow will be a long day.” She watched the others move out of the room in threes:

Melrick, Spallan, and Olaf in one direction to check on the men and sentries; and, Tiilaen, Stechyc, and Mayliandra in another.

A sudden emptiness filled her when Kareina noted, consumed in their own thoughts and conversations, none of them even said good night. Kareina felt more alone than she had in a long time. Immersed in this particular journey, Kareina had thrived on the new camaraderie. She had almost felt accepted for her true self, not as Karr. Was it dreaming on her part?

Once in her miserable life, Kareina wanted to be accepted for herself, not what she could accomplish. A cold chill of realization rushed through her. And Kareina knew. She knew when this quest was over, one thing would always remain constant. Kareina would once again be alone—her heart an empty shell.

THE GROUP OF warriors had started out for the first village before the sun broke the horizon. They neared the outskirts of the left village where they gathered for instructions, one man assigned to watch the horses. Kareina commanded her people to flank and move forward in pairs set apart every hundred feet, except Mayliandra who had Sindi's wife Aliya, Gionne, and Spallan accompanying her. The teams were to scan for raiders, offer assistance where needed, and gather as much information as possible. "We're visitors to this little hamlet, so look as such, not so much as warriors ready to strike people at random. Relax, but remain vigilant." She didn't know how the villagers would respond to a group of warriors arriving en masse, but had little option.

Kareina had paired with Stechyc. To their right and across the road, Mayliandra, with Aliya, was inspecting bolts of fabric at a local vendor's stall. The golden strands of hair shining, her cheeks flushed from the walk, Mayliandra was a vision.

"How are things with Mayliandra?" Stechyc asked.

"Civil." What other answer could Kareina give?

"Have you considered telling her the truth?"

Kareina glared down at Stechyc with a flash of temper. "To tell her what, Mage? The ugly beast of a man you believe yourself married to is an uglier woman. And, oh yes, where I've broken two laws of Kellshae, you've broken one, even if you were unaware of doing so. If the quest doesn't kill us, our clans surely will."

"It's not like you've consummated the relationship," Stechyc said, rolling her eyes. "She hasn't been tainted by you."

They have shared kisses Kareina would never forget, or ever take back. No, Mayliandra was untainted by her perversion, but the trust Mayliandra displayed last night would be shattered irrevocably. "None of that would matter. The damage to Mayliandra would be done."

Stechyc stopped her with a tug on her arm. "What of the damage it is doing to you? You didn't ask for this any more than Mayliandra did."

Kareina responded by shrugging. "It doesn't matter. I need to make certain, before anything comes to light, she's safe." A sudden inspiration came to her. "Promise me, Mage, you'll take her to Langear, should the truth become known."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Melrick will take her to Gradyln, to my mother."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Stechyc asked, "And what of you?"

Glancing over at the happy expression on Mayliandra's face, Kareina answered. "If I still live, I'll be content to know she is oblivious to the truth of this, and is safe."

"Maybe you should let me speak—" Stechyc's face paled and she began to sway. Kareina grabbed onto her elbow to help steady her. Eyes squeezed shut, Stechyc said, "There is death of someone magicked in the wind, but I sense it isn't here."

"Not here in Iskarr?" Kareina asked. "Or not here in this particular village?"

"I wish I knew. Should we alert the others?"

"If they are doing as they should, we'll learn soon enough." Color was returning to Stechyc's cheeks. "Will you be all right?" She looked at the vendors on their side of the road, one in particular piqued her interest, and she steered Stechyc in that direction. "Come, we are about to become patrons for this village. Maybe I can manage to barter as well as Spallan."

Half an hour later, Kareina had conducted her business, learned Caldier Jurquette was absent from the castle for two turnings of the moon, and the raiders had come to all the main villages to pillage, kill those putting up a fight, but had since moved on. They all met up at the top edge of town before the sun hit its zenith. Guessing there was little else here, the entire group pushed on to the middle village.

Again, they followed the same course as with the previous village. Making their way forward it was clear to Kareina this village consisted of farmers. Small huts distanced about two acres apart or more and each surrounded by farmland growing a specific crop. No one was working the fields. Since entering this village, they hadn't seen another living person. Or animal, since now Kareina was searching. There didn't seem to be a center market either. With the exception of a few crickets, this town was silent.

Then came the shout down the left side of the line calling Kareina go to the far edge of the village. After continuing the message to alert those on to the right, she and Stechyc hurried there. Kareina realized they were close when buzzards circling in the sky caught her attention. Below them, a single lifeless tree with something—two something's—dangling from its dead limbs. As she drew closer, Kareina realized they were bodies. About twenty feet from the tree, the collapsed and demolished remains of a small wood and stone cottage.

Drawing closer, Kareina pulled her sword from the scabbard and moved forward to the two Gradyln men who had found this atrocity.

"Long dead, Sher Karr," one said.

"From the looks of it," said the second, "they were tortured first."

"Why ever for?"

"Because of their magic," Stechyc said, stepping behind her.

Kareina turned. "This is what you felt earlier?"

"Probably." Stechyc nodded. "I feel small threads of it still inside them."

The remainder of the Gradyln group joined them. Mayliandra and Gionne gave small cries of distress. Kareina wrapped Mayliandra in her arms, tugging her head away from the scene. Stechyc did the same for Gionne.

A scream came from the debris of the cottage. Melrick and Tiilaen were the first there, pulling damaged board and rocks away to clear a path. Little by little, they all joined in until first a hand, and then bloodied arm appeared. By the time the task was complete, Melrick was gingerly assisting a tiny young woman free and on to solid ground. The woman was pale, but it could be from the fear. Her hair was long and curly, dark in color, though it was difficult to determine with the liberal coat of dust from the building's collapse.

Melrick removed his water skin, and offered it to her. She drank thirstily, her hands trembling as they clasped the leather. “Are you okay?” he asked her. She nodded. “You need to sit down so our healer can examine you.” Another nod. “What’s your name?”

“Fleuren,” she said in a voice rough from her outcry.

As Stechyc moved closer to examine Fleuren, Melrick held her attention by asking questions. Kareina noted he had positioned himself to obscure her view as her men removed the hanging bodies from the tree. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“I’m not certain. Strangers came.” Fleuren shuddered. “Evil men. Two of the villagers—” Tears ran down her dusty cheeks. “They tried to stop them. I don’t know how it could be, yet, somehow they had magic.” She shook her head, as if clearing an image she couldn’t have witnessed.

Beside her, Stechyc said, “Magic is returning to Kellshae.” Stechyc applied salve to the last cut, wrapped it, and sat back on her heels. “Go on, Fleuren.”

“The house had collapsed, and I was buried before I reached the root cellar. But I could hear their screams of pain. The men did horrible things to them. I was so afraid.” Fleuren shivered, wrapped her arms around her waist. “There was nothing I could do.” She looked at them as if hoping to see their understanding of her actions, not her actions viewed as cowardice.

Mayliandra stiffened, poised as if to interject. Kareina glanced down at her, shifting close to her ear. “Is something wrong?”

Mayliandra whispered, “I’m not certain. She speaks truth about the dead. But—”

“But?”

Mayliandra clutched at her necklace and said, “When she speaks of herself, the truth is vague.”

“What do you mean?” Kareina asked.

“I’m sure it’s nothing.” Mayliandra bit her bottom lip.

Kareina pulled her aside. “Or it could be everything. Do you think she’s a danger to us?” Mayliandra shook her head. “Fine, we’ll deal with this matter later.”

Fleuren was still speaking to Melrick. “I’ve no idea how long I’ve been b—”

Melrick patted her hand. “It doesn’t matter. You’re safe now, that’s what matters.”

“It’s so quiet. Where are all the others?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“We don’t know, yet.” Melrick stood.

“You need rest to recuperate, Fleuren,” Kareina said. “Melrick, take her back to the castle. We’ll check the last village.”

“Karr.” He clamped his lips tight, and stood in front of her. “You need me. Send one of—”

“Who, Melrick? One of the women? Not a man’s task?” she asked in a harsh whisper. An embarrassed flush colored his face. “You’ve developed a rapport with her Melrick. If we learn anything of import, it will be because she’s comfortable with you. You pulled her from the debris, after all.” For a moment, Kareina believed he’d continue to balk. When he grudgingly nodded, Kareina released the breath she hadn’t realized she held. Melrick left with the still shaking Fleuren.

Once they’d buried the dead, Kareina and the group continued on to the final village, the religious teaching center. Please, sweet goddess, she prayed, let us find boring people in divine prayer.

MAYLIANDRA WAS EXHAUSTED by the time they'd reached the final village, enclosed by a wall of trees. She knew she had only to ask, and Spallan would escort her back to the castle, but she was loath to give in if she could prove to be useful in any way. After seeing the bodies hanging from the tree at the last village, Mayliandra knew she didn't want to be alone. She wouldn't be able to sleep, either. And now night was closing in.

During the trek to this last village, Mayliandra tried to understand what had happened with her response to Fleuren. Her initial impression was a positive one, and even had her heart going out to the woman trapped beneath the debris. Like her conversation with Spallan days ago, Mayliandra had the same prickling chill course through her. This time she didn't hear two different conversations. This time there were moments where the words became garbled, obscured. But what if it were her heightened emotions of anxiety as the cause? Had she been justified to bring her feelings to Karr's attention?

"Are you all right, Lady Mayliandra?" Sindi asked. "We could rest or—"

"We're not going back, Sindi." Mayliandra smiled wryly, knowing Sindi wasn't fooled by the falseness behind the expression.

As Karr gave instructions, Mayliandra marked how the setting sun softened her husband's features more toward handsome. She remembered Karr's tenderness and understanding when she was caught in practice with Sindi. When Mayliandra ignored the gender issue, looked upon Karr as a simple human being, she realized she cared more deeply every day. In fact, Mayliandra would go as far as to say she was falling into a deep caring of her husband—if she could get beyond the gender issue. And no matter the preoccupation with the raiders, Mayliandra did not deceive herself that soon Karr would expect her to relent to her wifely duties.

Maybe, if I'm lucky, Mayliandra considered wryly, when I'm required to submit, my eyes will see the feminine version plaguing me.

So preoccupied with her thoughts, Mayliandra was startled at the hand on her shoulder. "Are you ready?" Sindi asked. Mayliandra nodded. Aliya and Sindi had switched places, as had Stechyc and Gionne.

Unlike the previous village, this religious center bustled as if unaware of what had happened in the farm village a short distance away. Once again, having passed a number of homes with doors and windows shuttered closed, they were in the central part of the village. Instead of vendors selling their wares, there were pavilions intended for prayer, alters arrayed with candles and small icons of worship in deep shades of red. Ahead and to the left was a small two-story barracks-type of building with a red flag limply hanging from a pole above the entrance. They passed by a few occupied structures and those people seemed nervous, casting hesitant and frightened glances in their direction. No one greeted them. In fact, Mayliandra noticed they seemed skittish when approached close enough for speech.

"Something is very wrong here," Sindi murmured.

"Maybe they aren't accustomed to strangers," Mayliandra said. In her heart, she knew it wasn't the case.

"I don't think that's it," Stechyc said, her brow furrowed in concentration. "I'm sensing a variety of magical threads. Some of the threads remind me of—"

From the building Mayliandra took to be a barracks, the thud of a slammed door sounded loudly into the night and startled her. Weaving a drunken path, a lone man made his way into the street, alternating between whistling and singing, managing both poorly. He hadn't noticed them. As they walked closer, Mayliandra caught movement at the far end of the building and realized it was Kareina and Aliya making their way behind him.

“Sir, a moment of your time,” Stechyc said, moving forward with a smile.

He glanced toward her voice, took in Sindi and Mayliandra, and gave a leer. “My night is getting better,” he said, ogling their breasts in turn.

Although he wore no weapon, Mayliandra didn’t believe he was one of the villagers. “What have we here, ladies?” Kareina asked, giving a hard slap to the man’s back. Mayliandra had to bite back her smile at his horrified expression and widened eyes.

“We were going to ask him about an inn, since he seems to have come from one,” Stechyc said. If possible, the man’s eyes widened to the extent his eyes would pop from the sockets. Mayliandra got the impression he recognized Karr.

“N-n-no. We...we don’t—” He swallowed hard, swaying on his feet as his gaze darted back toward the building. “Not an inn. It’s the garrison guard house,” he said, looking pleased with himself.

“Ah,” Karr said, feinting going toward the building. The man paled and grabbed at Karr’s arm. He was sobering quite fast.

“Where are you going?” he asked, his voice rising unnaturally high. “You can’t go in there.”

“Why not?” Karr asked, taking another step. “We’re new to the village, and I’d ask some questions of the local constabulary.”

“Now’s not a good time. I had to leave because the men are about to—”

Since the first words out his mouth, Mayliandra had felt the chilled prickling. Now, hearing what he said to Karr, Mayliandra also heard, “Warn the others... hide the girls.” She sucked in a sharp breath. The reaction from all the others was as swift. Karr pulled a knife and pressed the point to the man’s throat; Aliya and Sindi each grabbed an arm to restrain him; and, Stechyc focused on his lips and mumbled words Mayliandra didn’t understand. She focused on Karr.

“Something wrong?” Karr asked her.

“I’m sure you also suspect he’s lying. He doesn’t want us to enter the building, something about girls. And he’s trying to devise a way to warn the others.”

“Well, he won’t be doing it verbally,” Stechyc said. “I’ve taken care of that.” Sindi and Aliya were binding his hands and feet.

As Mayliandra glanced about, she noted no one from the village seemed eager—or even reluctantly with duty—to interfere, which would make getting into the building easier. Trussed up as he was, she wondered how they’d know how many were inside; or, what kind of horrors to expect.

Karr explained he and Aliya would go in through the back entrance, Gionne would guard the back door; and, Sindi, Stechyc and Mayliandra would go through the front. He had tried to insist she remain outside and guard the door as Gionne was, but she had glowered at Karr and her husband relented.

Mayliandra hoped her rush of pride didn’t prove she’d bit off more than she could successfully chew—without choking.

Or worse.

Chapter Fifteen

MAYLIANDRA HELD THE sword's hilt so tight the metalwork was biting into her palm. Stechyc and Sindi were in front of her as they stealthily made their way into the building. The initial perception changed from barracks to schoolroom. Inside the front door, where the three stood, was a five-foot long hallway leading into a large open room with numerous tables and chairs. One of the tables was occupied by three men playing cards, about a dozen half-full and empty bottles and tankards littered the majority of the table's top. One man tossed his cards to the tabletop, rose to his feet his chair slammed to the floor. "Aha, I win. My turn at her."

Mayliandra noticed a dais at the far end, three feet off the floor, with dark red curtains surrounding three sides of a huge bed. On the right, hidden, was a staircase leading to the second floor. What horrified Mayliandra was the young girl tied spread eagle and naked laying in the middle.

Sindi gave a war cry and ran toward the table of men. Her sword sliced into the man with the winning hand, dropping him. The remaining two pulled their swords, engaging Sindi simultaneously. Sindi's blade met one sword in the down swing. She performed a roundhouse kick catching the other man on the side of his head with her foot and dropped him to his knees.

Stechyc, eyes clouded in concentration, mumbled unfamiliar words while her hands worked an intricate pattern. In an instant, the man on his knees dropped his sword, curled up and fell to the floor in a fetal position as he screamed and held his head in both hands. Stechyc turned to her, "Can you help Sindi while I check on the girl?"

Mayliandra nodded. She didn't know how much help she could be. In a few hasty steps, Mayliandra stood about two feet from the fallen man and leveled her sword tip in the direction of his throat. Remembering one of the first lessons Sindi had taught her, Mayliandra made certain she maintain enough distance between her and the prone man to back away should he lunge at her. When he reached for his fallen sword, Mayliandra kicked it out of the way.

From her peripheral, Mayliandra saw movement to the left of the dais. Her gaze flicked there, felt relief when Karr raced into the room. When Mayliandra felt a warm stickiness splatter onto her face, her attention flew back to where the man should have been on the floor. Glazed eyes stared down at her, blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. She realized the fluid was the result of Sindi's sword shoved hard enough through his back it exited his chest.

Her moment of distraction could have cost Sindi her life, she chastised herself as nausea roiled in her stomach.

Before she could make any further mistakes, Mayliandra grabbed at the amulet hanging from his neck and jerked it free, and heaved it as far away as she could.

"Sweet goddess, Sindi—"

"You did well, Shei Mayliandra." Sindi stepped close enough to whisper. "I wasn't looking forward to witnessing a kill from you. Thank the goddess I didn't have to do so."

Mayliandra gave a wry smile, accepting Sindi's words even if they didn't assuage the guilt she'd feel for her inattention at so crucial a time.

She glanced up at the dais as she and Sindi rushed forward. Mayliandra noticed someone, probably Stechyc, had placed a cover over the girl's nudity and unbound her. Aliya looked furious. Karr too, his face completely red, his free hand clenched tight as he whispered something to Stechyc, who nodded.

A figure darted from behind the curtains and made a dash for the stairs. Sindi and Aliya gave chase. Karr shot a glance in her direction. "Please, Mayli, help Stechyc." Karr rushed up to the second floor.

Mayliandra moved close to Stechyc. "What do you need of me?" she asked, already hearing the clash of sword blades above.

Stechyc had pulled some items from her healer's pouch, pinched and dropped two different powders into a small cup of water, and stirred the items as she whispered to the girl, "This will help minimize the pain. It will also make you a bit drowsy, but Shei Mayliandra and I will be with you at all times, so don't fear your safety."

As Stechyc held the cup with one hand, lifting the girl's head with the other so she could drink, Mayliandra watched, waiting for instruction. The girl could be older than she had originally surmised, maybe sixteen. She had long black hair reaching to her waist, blue eyes, and high cheekbones. Mayliandra also noted under the bruises, swelling and dried blood, was a tattoo of a white flame outlined in red, with interlacing knot work set within sinuous tines of dark purple. The tattoo took up a goodly portion of the right side of her face. And, despite the marking, this girl was exotically beautiful.

After a couple loud bangs, and the sound of splintering glass, Mayliandra reached for the robe crumpled on the floor beside the bed, shook it out, and looked to Stechyc, who was assisting the girl to a sitting position on the bed's edge. "Is it safe enough to move her?"

"I need to do a more thorough examination, and it's best she not walk on her own, yet."

Both Mayliandra and Stechyc startled when from behind them Gionne said in a reverent tone, "It would be my honor to carry her."

KAREINA FOLLOWED ALIYA and Sindi to the second floor. At the top of the landing, Kareina noted the open area with numerous bunk beds, each with a window between, and almost all occupied by female children under the age of ten, each chained to her bed by a foot manacle. From what she could see when they shifted right, each had a single flame tattooed on their cheeks. Most were weeping, trying to bury themselves beneath thin grey blankets. Sweet goddess, Kareina pleaded, don't let them have raped these children, too. To the left, near a wall with a single door, Sindi and Aliya each engaged a man in combat. Between the women and at their feet, lay an unconscious child, her torn clothing also stained with blood.

Kareina bent to pick up the child, careful to avoid swinging swords and booted feet as she did. Without the need to protect the fallen child, Aliya and Sindi were able to engage the two huge—by Kareina's standards—men properly with parries and thrusts, their bodies spinning and shifting. With a frown, she wondered where the smaller man from behind the dais had gone.

Kareina found her answer too soon. Simultaneous with her placing the child on the nearest bed, the door swung open and a man rushed out, sword raised. Sindi was standing with her back to the door, and the man slammed his blade into Sindi's back as she rammed her sword into her opponent's chest.

As the two bodies fell to the floor, Aliya released an anguished cry filling Kareina's ears as she crashed into the smaller man engulfing him in a tight hold. They both dropped through the nearest window, and landed on the ground outside.

Consumed with rage for Sindi's death, the vision of the battered young girl inside, Kareina got to her feet, hauling the dazed man to his by his leather vest in one fist. "You useless, pathetic piece of dung," Kareina said, punctuating each word with a blow to the man's body from her free fist. "I'm going to tear you apart, limb by limb." Vaguely, she thought she heard yelling close to her, but so furious was she, Kareina ignored it. "Right before you die, I'll rip your pitiful member from your body and shove it down your throat."

Kareina jumped when a hand tentatively touched her arm. Ready to defend herself from attack, she spun her head to assess the intruder and almost didn't recognize Mayliandra from her rage induced haze. Blinking to clear her vision and regain her control, Kareina glanced back to the man she still held with one fist, his pulverized face too bloodied to tell if he was alive or dead. She let him drop to the ground.

Mayliandra raised a hand to Kareina's cheek in a quick caress. "It is done."

With her fury released, Kareina was exhausted. Staring into the dark brown eyes of her wife, Kareina wanted nothing more than to fall into her arms and cry—for more than today. But it could never be real, could never be for her. This action was from a woman to her husband. She expected to see horror reflected in Mayliandra's gaze, but saw compassion, understanding. It confused her.

Kareina wasn't ready to lose the small contact, so took Mayliandra's hand from her cheek, kissed the palm, and held it in the hand not damaged from giving the raider his beating and looked around, able to focus on her surroundings.

The people who were in the pavilion earlier had not moved. Kareina noted the rest of the Gradyln and Langlear people were making their way down the main road with four bound men in tow. Gionne stood in front of the building with the young girl cradled in her arms. "Will she—" Kareina stopped, not able to voice her worst fear.

Mayliandra applied pressure to their joined hands, and said, "Physically she'll heal. Time will tell the other."

"And Stechyc?" she asked.

"She's with Aliya."

Kareina nodded toward Gionne. "I'll let Tiilaen know what has transpired here, and have the horses brought to you so you can all get back to the castle."

"Why do I get the feeling you won't be with us right away?" Mayliandra said with a frown.

"After what you witnessed—" Kareina stared at her a moment in surprise.

"You need to clear your head with one last ride through the village and all." Mayliandra glanced toward her damaged and bloodied knuckles. "See me so I can tend to your hand."

Out of all the times Kareina felt compelled to kiss her wife, this moment was the strongest. She also felt the need to explain her actions, or rather the reasoning for her extreme violence. For so long, she was in control of her emotional responses, never letting what she had done, happen. But seeing the tortured and bound girl on the bed had released the demons from within her. Kareina took a deep breath in preparation. "About—"

Mayliandra placed a finger on Kareina's lips to silence her. "I understand, Karr. Be safe and hurry back. I'll be waiting." Although she felt miserable for what Mayliandra was forced to witness from her, Kareina felt a little better Mayliandra didn't appear traumatized by it. "You might wish to hurry and retrieve the horses. Gionne may be getting tired."

Before she could curb the impulse, Kareina kissed Mayliandra's lips, and left.

TIRED, KAREINA LOWERED herself onto the fallen log and dropped her head, releasing Starsinger's lead. She had made certain all her people were headed back to the castle. Kareina had tried to confiscate a wagon for Sindi's body, but Aliya was not surrendering her wife to anyone's care but her own. After another pass through and around the village, no other raiders evident, Kareina had made her way here, for a chance to collect herself.

What in hellfire was happening to Kellshae? How was she supposed to fix all this? She groaned, feeling so tired, physically, but also weary to the very fiber of her soul. Her hand ached fiercely, but at least the bleeding had stopped.

This was the longest she'd been away from Gradyln, away from the privacy allowing her the chance to be herself, and administered to by Parrin with an open heart while she mended physical wounds. They never had to speak, drawing comfort from sharing time together, her mother's presence better than any soothing balm. Kareina could use her comfort right now.

Meow.

Kareina heard the cry before she felt the nudge to her ankle. She glanced down and saw a small grey kitten. "And where have you been hiding, little one?" she asked, picking the tiny kitten up and placing it on her lap. "Have you any idea how dangerous it is out here?"

"Of course he does," came a child's voice from the shadows of the trees. "Why do you think we're hiding?"

Smiling, Kareina rubbed the kitten's ears. "You picked a great place to hide. Do you mind if I share this spot?"

"Can't say no 'cause you're already here."

Kareina nodded. "Sound reasoning. My name is Karr. You have no reason to trust me, I know, but I promise I'm not going to hurt you. Can I see who I'm speaking with?"

Dry leaves rustled off to Kareina's right, but no one came forward. She was about to ask again when the voice whispered, "Will you make me go back if I come out?"

"I can't make you a guarantee without all facts. Why don't you want to go back?" Kareina stared into the direction of the voice. "Talk to me. I can promise I won't make you return where you aren't safe and cared for."

There was an exaggerated sigh, a groan, and more crunching of the dried leaves. From the shadows came a little girl of about seven years of age, her thick curly blonde hair tangled, her face and clothes dirty. She glared at Kareina with huge dark eyes, and stomped in Kareina's direction with fisted hands on her hips. It took a lot of self-control not to laugh at how adorable this struck Kareina.

"They don't like orphans, you know." She rolled her eyes. "Especially us different ones, since we scare 'em. I'm an outlaw now. I'm Yoshan, by the way."

"Ah, you're developing magic," Kareina acknowledged. "I see, and an outlaw. How amazing you are, Yoshan."

Yoshan scowled. "Better not be making fun."

"I assure you I am not," Kareina said, hoping her honesty conveyed itself in her voice.

"Okay. What happened?" Yoshan asked, jutting her chin in the direction of Kareina's damaged hand, rubbing the kitten behind his ears. Kareina noticed the tattoo of a manacle, its chain reaching close to the corner of the child's lip. "Hope the other guy looks worse."

The image of the raider she'd beaten flashed in her mind's eye. Kareina hadn't even asked if the man lived. "Yeah," she said, unable to voice more. Starsinger nickered and the little girl giggled. "Would you like to sit down?" she asked, shifting to give Yoshan plenty of space between them. Yoshan complied. Kareina, remembering the tattooing on the children from earlier, wondered at the meanings, as these children were the only she had seen so far with them. "Can you tell me about your marking?"

"This means we're a slave."

The anger she'd regained control of threatened to resurface. Although Kareina didn't know how much a child of this age would know—or understand—she asked, "And the flames?"

"They are the girl children of the rich." Yoshan shuddered. "I don't like what they have to do, it's bad. I'd rather be a slave."

Kareina had an idea what the girls were forced to do, but didn't understand it being asked from so many noble children. Kareina's stomach growled and Yoshan giggled again when Starsinger snorted his opinion on the matter.

"Starsinger is so funny," Yoshan said, taking the kitten from her. "Can I go with you to eat? Mokie's hungry." Shock filled Kareina because it did in fact appear Starsinger and Yoshan were communicating—and at her expense. With a glare at Starsinger, Kareina vowed to have a word or two with her traitorous horse. She would have commented further to Yoshan, but as Kareina stood, and a strange tremor could be felt through the earth beneath her feet like a rolling wave. Yoshan, with Mokie clutched to her, jumped up excitedly. "Yippee. Gonna help me get better at it."

"Better at what?" Kareina asked, glad the vibrations had stopped.

"At hearing the animals," she said, as if Kareina should know. "Each time the ground shaking happens, I hear more of 'em and hear better. That's how come I can be safe in the dark. They help me stay away from the mean people making me go back."

Kareina had an image of what happened to the two people in the last village because of magic. There was no way in Bahalkar she'd let that happen again, if she could prevent it. "Right now you have a very hungry me to look after you." She feigned a frown at the little girl. "But you better tell Starsinger-the-smart-aleck I'll sell him as a plow horse if he continues to laugh behind my back." Yoshan laughed hard when Starsinger neighed; even went so far as to wipe at tears released from the corner of her eyes. "What did he say?" Kareina asked. She wasn't certain she wanted an answer.

"He said laughing to your face was more fun anyway."

Glowering at her horse, Kareina mumbled, "I know where I can get a plow."

YOSHAN SPORTED A wide smile upon her face, Kareina walking at Starsinger's head as the child sat regally in the saddle. Kareina didn't miss the horrified glances of anyone they passed while making their way to the Iskarr castle. In fact, Kareina was enjoying their reactions as much as Yoshan did. She squelched the happy emotion when they got in view of the front castle steps and saw a disturbance that had multiple weapons drawn. Mayliandra, flanked by Melrick and Olaf, listened as an angry man with a small contingent of soldiers was yelling. A few Iskarrians stood behind them as if for moral support. The rescued girl from the last village was on the ground at his feet, sobbing. The Langear women and a couple of her own men

surrounded everyone in a circle. At the top of the stairs, Gionne stood, clenching and unclenching her fists as she watched.

Kareina dropped Starsinger's lead. She ran to stand beside Mayliandra, and ignoring the Iskarrians asked, "What in hellfire is going on?"

The relief from Mayliandra was tangible. "He wants to take Jahq." Kareina gathered Jahq was the young girl's name. "They're going to punish her, before they banish her."

"Punish for what?" Kareina asked. Sweet goddess, hadn't the girl been through enough?

"For allowing those men to touch her," the man said with contempt. "As my fiancé, it is my right to demand retribution." He stood five-feet-six, had sandy blond hair, and wore his nobility as pompously as his fancy, too colorful clothing implied.

Kareina didn't believe she'd heard the man correctly. "Allowing?" Mayliandra must have recognized the instant her rage surfaced. She placed an arm around Kareina's waist, and rested the hand of the other on Kareina's forearm as if to instill calm. From the trembling she felt from Mayliandra, Kareina suspected Mayli was also ready to lose control of her own anger. I could so get used to this closeness, Kareina thought, distracted.

It was then Yoshan rode up to the group. This drew the attention of one of the people with the leader, who whispered something in his ear. This caused the small man to launch a glare at Yoshan, who returned the man's gaze with a grin. Yoshan even wriggled her fingers in a hello gesture. "Howdy, Humkyte."

"She is ours for punishment also," he snapped. "I demand you leave Caldier Jurquette's home."

Kareina knew she had to get this situation under control or she'd beat this man. Not a smart move, as her hand still hurt from the last one. Kissing the top of Mayliandra's head, Kareina said loud enough for all to hear, "Stay close, my lady wife. You may need to physically pull me from another of these idiots." While Langlear and Gradyln people chuckled at the remark, Kareina disengaged herself from Mayliandra's arms, and squatted near Jahq and extending a hand, hoping the girl didn't pull away or become more frightened.

Jahq placed her own trembling hand in Kareina's outstretched one, tears streaming down her cheeks as Jahq let Kareina draw her to her feet. "I couldn't stop them. The priestess had already placed me for the ceremony. What could I do?" Hellfire, tying a naked child to a bed was part of a ceremony?

"Is this worm your betrothed, Jahq?" Jahq nodded, but not until she'd glanced at Humkyte to gauge his reaction to Kareina's slur. Kareina motioned toward Gionne. Once Gionne joined them, she said, "Would you please offer support to Jahq? She's still healing." Gionne pulled Jahq close to her side, holding her much as Mayliandra had done for Kareina.

Kareina turned her gaze to Humkyte, standing so close he had to look up to meet her gaze. There was a quick scraping of blades meeting and held. She knew her people were superior and able to hold the Iskarr soldiers at bay. "You're her fiancé? And you speak of retribution—on her part? Tell me, Humkyte," Kareina said his name with as much vile as she could force from her lips. "Who in Bahalkar are you? Where in hellfire is Jurquette?"

"Who are you to request anything of me?" Humkyte demanded in his haughty tone.

Kareina closed the distance so their bodies touched, clamped a hand on his shoulder and bent to look him in the eyes. "I don't know your custom, little man, so let me tell you what I'm going to do. I will give you one more opportunity to answer my questions before I put you and your friends in the castle dungeon until I find someone who will explain." Kareina caught Tiilaen's

gaze, and that woman smiled and gave a quick hand signal to her warriors. They each closed the circle by two steps.

Humkyte blanched. "You can't," he sputtered. "We are Iskarr nobility."

"What you are," she emphasized the last word, "is getting in the way of my supper. Not to mention pleasant quiet time with my beautiful wife." Kareina didn't dare turn around to see how Mayliandra responded. "Where is Jurquette?"

Swallowing hard, he said, "We don't know."

"Who is next in line for command of this miserable piece of Kellshae?"

Humkyte stiffened. "That would be my father, but he is ill. I command in his place."

"Oh, lucky us." Kareina sighed. She didn't like this horse's ass. It seemed the quickest way to piss him off was to ignore his view of his own importance. Kareina turned her face to Jahq, but didn't remove her hand from his shoulder. "Would you answer my questions, Jahq?" She nodded. "Why does Humkyte feel he has the right to punish you for what those men did?"

Another quick glance toward Humkyte, before Jahq said, "Our families had a contract recorded for our betrothal. Iskarrian way. The pledged female must undergo conditioning so we may properly pleasure the men of our husband's line."

Mayliandra gasped. "All the men?" Jahq nodded.

Melrick cursed. "Sher Karr, let me kill them now."

"Be diplomatic, Captain Melrick," Olaf said, before sneering. "At least torture them first and make it worth our time." Although Kareina would consider either option, she knew they couldn't diplomatically do so. She rubbed at her eyes. Humkyte tried to shrug himself from her grip, but she simply clamped down harder.

"I know your reputation," Humkyte said. "It doesn't frighten us." He made a lunge toward Jahq, but Gionne realized it and placed herself protectively in front of Jahq. "She's mine." He screamed and dropped to one knee as Kareina dug her fingers deeper into his flesh.

"You are done." Kareina said. "We have a loved one to honor. I'll accommodate a meeting tomorrow, if you can conduct yourself civilly. You will all leave the grounds this moment. Also know orders are left. Any Iskarrian who does not comply will die." She picked Humkyte up, and tossed him into his soldiers. "Now go."

As his men dragged him away, Humkyte shrieked, "All you do is delay their punishment. I will punish and banished them, as is my right. I will win in the end, Karr. Neither has any family, no one to protect them. And you'll be gone." The Iskarrians stopped. "They have no family. I'm the authority. They lost the chance at banishment. They will be killed for grievances against their own."

The final assault. Kareina glanced to Yoshan, knowing she would answer honestly. "Do you fear for your life, little one?"

"Yes." She gave a weak smile to Jahq. "But we can hide. I'll protect her."

Her words brought a smile to Kareina's lips. Kareina asked Jahq, "Are you without family?"

"Yes, they were killed when the raiders came. And, yes, I know my life is now forfeit."

Humkyte snickered. "Maybe not forfeited, Jahq, but you'll be stripped of title and banished. I'll need to teach you your lesson for dishonoring my family name, of course."

Mayliandra brushed pass Kareina, her face red with rage. Once she stood in front of Humkyte, Mayliandra balled her hand into a fist and slammed it into the miserable man's jaw. From her wince, Kareina knew it had hurt her.

Melrick and Olaf slid their swords free of the scabbards when Humkyte's men readied to defend the little weasel. They backed down.

“If I wasn’t concerned about embarrassing my lord husband with needing to defend my actions before his people, or in future, I would un-man you and shove it down your throat until you choked on it,” Mayliandra said. Her voice was low with menace. Kareina wanted to cheer Mayliandra, feeling a bit of concern at her earlier threat being repeated by her gentle wife, but her people did it for her.

Scowling at Mayliandra, Humkyte stabbed a finger in Yoshan’s direction, careful to maintain distance from Mayliandra. “After she is taught her place, we will send for the Priests. She claims to speak to animals, and understand them. Of all the audacity.”

Starsinger stomped a foot, and chuffed. Yoshan once again giggled at whatever mental remark he imparted. Kareina gave Humkyte a smirk. “Appears my horse has a low opinion of you, too. Oh, by the way, the Priests have been murdered into extinction. No help there.”

Kareina looked to Mayliandra, knowing what she was about to do would have serious repercussions; knowing she had no choice if she were to keep these children safe. “Melrick and Olaf.” Both moved to her side. Raising her voice so everyone present could hear, Kareina said, “Jahq and Yoshan are now my daughters, enjoying all rights and protections coming with birthright.”

Melrick pierced the small man with a glare and said, “So it is marked, Sher Karr of Gradyln. We are Jahq and Yoshan’s humble servants.”

Kareina wanted to smile at the announcement, more to make a point with the Iskarrians than out of necessity. Melrick was a friend. She took a menacing step in Humkyte’s direction. “Any who harm them will suffer Gradyln justice. Is that understood?” Kareina didn’t wait for response. “Captain, Guard Chief. As Humkyte is the reigning authority for this region, I see it fitting he should take charge of the captured raiders in our custody.” She glared at Humkyte and smiled a wicked grin. “Take whatever retribution and punishment you desire out on them. Melrick, have the prisoners taken to Humkyte’s residence forthwith.”

“You can’t,” Humkyte said. “I don’t—”

“It is done,” Kareina said, turning away from him. “Gradyln warriors, make it so, and lock down the castle upon your return.”

“Aye, Sher Karr,” was the cheerful response.

She walked over to Mayliandra, nervous about her reception. But she didn’t see anger on Mayliandra’s face, and Kareina felt a moment of elation. “Yoshan,” she said, taking Mayliandra’s hand in hers. When Yoshan sauntered over, Kareina said, “Shei Mayliandra, may I introduce Yoshan.”

“Please to meet you, Yoshan.” Mayliandra extended her hand in greeting.

Yoshan touched Mayliandra’s hand. She drew it back. She stared at Kareina. “Do you mean it? Or lies for them?”

Kareina dropped to a crouch to be more at eyelevel with Yoshan, but not releasing the hand holding one of hers. “If you accept us, I mean it. Or, I will find you another home—safe home—from the likes of Humkyte, if you would rather.” Her stomach chose that moment to growl aloud.

Taking Kareina’s free hand, she giggled, and said, “Come on, Papa. You promised me food and all I’m getting is talk.”

A laugh came from Mayliandra. “She has you there, husband.” Mayliandra glanced up at Kareina with a mischievous grin. “Could you break the news she’ll need to wash up first? I don’t want her mad at me yet.”

Yoshan groaned. “Maybe you should let me sleep with Stargazer. I won’t be tortured by him.”

Chapter Sixteen

KAREINA, EYES CLOSED as she listened to the water rushing from the statue of a naked woman, sat on a cushioned bench with her legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, and felt some of her tension drain from her. Especially as she pictured the water, spouting from nipples in two overly endowed breasts—a man’s contribution of art. She tried to imagine Jurquette for all his leanness and pinched features, enjoying comfort in a woman’s flesh. At Bredwine, Jurquette seemed so cold yet self-assured, and Kareina would never have suspected his blood might run anywhere near lukewarm. Since arriving in Iskarr, Kareina learned how perverse the bastard was, and how he’d prostituted the female children of the nobles. Didn’t any of the girls’ fathers object? She wondered what happened to them if they had. Worse, what happened to the children if a noble father did object? “Goes to show you can’t judge someone on appearances,” Kareina whispered to no one.

“My lord?”

The voice came from behind her. She opened her eyes. Kareina turned to see a nervous Jahq standing near a tiny opening in one of the many bushes boxing this little area from prying eyes. Two days passed since Kareina had publically announced Jahq and Yoshan as hers, heirs to the Gradyln dynasty. The girls got along like true siblings. Mayliandra, too, took the girls as if her own blood. Kareina smiled, stretched an arm across the back of the bench and patted the empty portion of cushion beside her. “Please, join me, Jahq.” She glanced up at the statue fifteen-feet away, and stood. “We could go somewhere else. I don’t wish to distress you.”

Jahq gave a bashful smile. “This is fine,” she said, sitting on the bench. “Return to your relaxing, please, Sher Karr.” Kareina gave a playful scowl. “All right, Karr. Seems so strange, seeing the truth but pretending not to. I need to remember to call you Papa, as Yoshan does so easily.”

Kareina nodded understanding. “You can call me by any name making you comfortable. Not my true name, of course.” She would have to talk to Stechyc about strengthening the magic of her earring. Too many were privy to her secret. Kareina shuddered.

Jahq said, “I would never do anything to bring harm to you, not after what you did for me with Humkyte and the other town people.”

She had responded rashly, not giving Jahq or Yoshan, and not even Mayliandra, an opinion or chance to discuss the matter. She had reacted to the hateful spewing of words against two children. No, one child, and another almost a woman; Jahq was a woman in all but age. And, Kareina was avoiding the very discussion with her wife on the matter of accepting these strangers as her own kin. Not because she regretted her actions, but because Kareina feared Mayliandra might not have appreciated the spot Kareina put her in, even if Mayliandra appeared fine with the situation.

From the moment Kareina had spoken with Yoshan, she knew the child could be no less than her blood if she’d born Yoshan herself. And, when Jahq was tossed aside because of what men had done—

“You’re thinking of unpleasantness,” Jahq said.

“I apologize. What gave me away?”

Smiling, Jahq said, “You growled.”

Jahq was trying to put her at ease. Kareina barked a laugh, knowing it was closer to the truth than Jahq realized. She had no reservations about what she had commanded. In her heart, Kareina already loved these girls—her daughters—as her own. But that didn’t mean the feelings were mutual. “If you have family—” Jahq’s expression appeared hurt. “I want you to have a choice, to be with any family you may have.”

“There are none,” Jahq said. “And if I did have relatives, I would still choose you and Mayliandra.” Jahq scooted closer to Kareina, placing a trembling hand on Kareina’s thigh.

The contact was a bit more intimate than Kareina expected from the young woman, dismissing it as a need for subtle connection between humans. The trembling confused her. “Jahq, is something bothering you?”

Jahq shook her head, and remained quiet for a while. After a pause, Jahq turned her beautiful tattooed face to her. She leaned in while moving her hand further up Kareina’s thigh, and asked, “Will you be my Papa in all things?”

For the space of a breath, Kareina was confused, especially with emphasis on Papa, wondering where the question—and Jahq’s hand— was heading. “Well, yes, I’m—” Then she understood. Kareina jumped off the bench to put some distance between them, her heart beating erratically at the notion of Jahq’s intent. Kareina said, “No. No, certainly not.”

Jahq gave her an odd look. “I’m not bothered by...um...” she looked around them, as if expecting someone to overhear. By the goddess, Kareina hoped no one was listening. “Not bothered by your true self.” Jahq’s face darkened a little more. “Am I not pleasing to your eye? I may not have experience with women, but can learn to please you.”

Kareina bit her bottom lip in an attempt to gather her thoughts, grasping at words which would not hurt the fragile emotions of Jahq. If ever she needed her mother’s counsel, Kareina desired it now. She wished conversation between her and Mayliandra was more than civil. But Kareina hadn’t asked permission, or acceptance of the situation. She had made a lifelong decision; so Kareina couldn’t expect to foist this on the more sensitive, the more female, of them. Drawing a deep steadying breath to calm her jangled nerves, Kareina stepped forward so she didn’t startle Jahq.

Dropping to her knees, Kareina stared straight into her new daughter’s eyes. “Yes, you are very beautiful, Jahq. Yes, I’m your...father.” Jahq gave a snort. “Clan Gradyln is diff—” Kareina shrugged. “I won’t make this a clan distinction. This is about us, and not simply you and me. ‘Us’ is you, me, Yoshan, and Mayliandra. We are family. Your new expectations are quite simple within this family, sweetie.” She took Jahq’s hands in her own. “Enjoy your youth by filling it with laughter and joy, though I can’t promise it can always be so. Let Mayliandra and I take care of you, and of Yoshan. Our obligation to you is that we love you, cherish you, and protect you as is within our ability to do so. If we do not, it is your obligation to correct us.” Kareina smiled. “We are new to parenting, after all.”

A single tear fell from the corner of Jahq’s eye. “What if I do something wrong, don’t please you?”

She wiped the tear away. “You don’t think I’m going to make mistakes? Sweetie, how else do we learn? You can please me and your mother by being yourself.”

“I don’t know who myself is.”

Kareina grinned. “Oh, Jahq, many of us don’t know the answer. All I ask is you don’t harm others while finding out who you are, or what road you want to travel. The rest will follow.”

More tears spilled, and with a watery smile, Jahq said, “I didn’t know being a daughter was going to be so complicated. I resolved to do as I am told.”

“Well, you’ll have many occasions where you’ll need to do as told. Not even I’m free of those moments.” Kareina shook her head. “And why Mayliandra is forced to look upon my ugliness and pretend it’s all right. She wasn’t given a choice. But, not your concern or burden.” Running a finger to Jahq’s tattoo, Kareina asked, “Can you explain the meaning? Yours is different than the younger girls.”

Jahq nodded. “A layer of knot work is added when successful in learning or completing a level of—” She paused. “Can I call it training?”

“Whatever makes you comfortable, Jahq. If explaining this doesn’t, you don’t have to tell me.”

Her eyes darkened in memory. “I don’t want to explain the training. Sometimes it was pain —”

Kareina returned to sit beside her, and pulled the now shaking Jahq into her arms. “I understand more than you know. Understand that although you don’t wish to speak of it now, someday doing so will help you heal.” They were both silent for a while. “Tell me about the color difference.”

“Blue inking means you’re tolerable, green means you will never master the art.” Again, she paused. “Purple means you excel in your training.” The words were filled with shame, even contempt for herself. Kareina didn’t have to wonder too hard how a man might assume she’d excelled. She was about to suggest they save this discussion for another time, when Jahq continued. “The different red shadings of the flame let the men of the contracted marriage line know what you can handle.”

Certain she wasn’t going to like the answer, Kareina needed to know what Jahq had endured. “And the white flame with red outline?”

Jahq turned so it was harder for Kareina to see her expressions, but she didn’t pull away. “It means I can tolerate a large amount of pain given during training sessions.” It took all Kareina had to remain calm, for Jahq’s sake—one of the hardest tasks Kareina had undertaken. Jahq spoke again. “Why Humkyte was angry. I would have brought pride to his family name because I was to be given to Caldier Jurquette for a full moon’s cycle. Humkyte’s honor in the clan would be increased because his future wife’s training far exceeded the rest. All the village men would envy him.”

Kareina couldn’t verbalize a response, afraid her emotions would frighten Jahq. “My pride and honor will be served in naming you daughter. That is all.”

Jahq relaxed in her embrace. They sat in silence broken only by the sound of the fountain.

Kareina stood, tugged Jahq to her feet and into a quick hug. “Come on. Let’s get supper and you can start your daughterly burdens by teasing your sister mercilessly.”

“Before she gets me, you mean.” Jahq laughed. “Yoshan is awfully quick witted.”

Kareina knew the truth from personal experience. She laced an arm through Jahq’s and led them toward the castle. “A truism if I ever heard one.”

SPALLAN STOOD AT the topmost garden stair entrance, a large brown paper wrapped package held reverently in his arms when Kareina walked Jahq from the garden. “Did you have any trouble?” Kareina asked when they drew close.

“No, my lord, none at all. Too bad since it took all the fun out of the undertaking for me.” She flashed Spallan a sincere grin. His favorite pastime was in the joy of haggling for an item, even if he could afford the original price.

Kareina clapped him on the back with her free hand. “I’m sure you’ll survive this heartbreak.”

He threw his head back and groaned. Spallan had recognized her attempt to use levity to keep Jahq feeling safe, relaxing her. “Oh, woe to me, how can a warrior be treated so?”

Kareina glanced down at Jahq and rolled her eyes. Jahq bit her lip to cover her own laughter. “Warrior? Big baby more like.” Kareina stretched her free arm, palm up, and pointed toward the entrance. “Bring Shei Mayliandra her package, and get food and rest. Tomorrow we travel.”

Spallan took a step. Stopped. He indicated the bundle by pointing with his chin. “But, Karr, should you not present this to her? It is your gift—”

“It is nothing more than what she needs. Mayliandra need see nothing more in the offering.”

A sad expression crossed his features before Spallan nodded reluctant acceptance. He went inside ahead of them to do as directed.

“Karr?” Jahq tugged her to stop. When Kareina gave Jahq her attention, she asked, “Why would you not want her to know you give the gift?”

How could Kareina explain she didn’t wish Mayliandra to feel indebted to her for something she wanted? “It is of no import.”

“Why not accept her gratitude?”

Kareina didn’t want to have this conversation, especially with her newly acquired daughter. Hellfire, it wasn’t even a suitable topic to have with Melrick, and he was her best friend. She doubted gratitude the emotion Mayliandra would feel. Wanting to drop the subject, Kareina gave Jahq a stern look. “As I said, it’s not a gift. I’ll not have my wife in the hand-downs of others.” A sharp pain was building behind Kareina’s eyes. She was taking her frustration out on Jahq, and felt horrible. “Please, let the matter go.”

Jahq gave a haughty sniff. “Yes, Papa, for now.”

Kareina walked a now silent Jahq into the sitting room Mayliandra had set aside for their family dinners.

When they entered, Yoshan was giggling as Mayliandra exclaimed with each item she pulled free. Mokie batted at the paper wrapping.

“Oh, Yoshan, aren’t they wonderful?” Mayliandra asked. Kareina knew which specific items she had selected, but hadn’t seen the results of the sword, didn’t even know if her specifications were followed by the Iskarrian blacksmith.

Mayliandra must be examining that particular item now, because her fingers were gliding across an object obscured by the wrapping. “So, so beautiful, and it even has both clan crests.”

Jahq rushed over and peered at the contents, before fixing her gaze on Kareina, eyebrows raised.

The expression caught Mayliandra’s attention. Spinning to face Kareina, Mayliandra gave a small cry, from fright or pleasure she couldn’t tell. Her answer came when Mayliandra rushed toward her and launched herself at Kareina, giving a quick squeeze of a hug, and a peck of lips to Kareina’s cheeks. Tears were flowing from her eyes. How had she managed to become

surrounded by women who cried so easily? You're the one who took on two daughters after unable to communicate with your wife, Kareina chided.

"Thank you. It is the most wondrous gift I've ever received," Mayliandra said.

Uncomfortable with the praise, Kareina said, "It was—"

"Don't say it," Jahq and Yoshan ordered. Kareina flushed in embarrassment.

For a moment, Mayliandra looked stunned. She glanced to both girls as they glared across the room at Kareina.

She spoke to the girls and moved back to the table. "Ah, you're already learning the ways of your father. We'd need to restrain him and shove a compliment down his throat." Still talking to the girls as if Kareina weren't listening, Mayliandra said, "Help me clear the table for supper, the one area your father expresses appreciation and accepts thanks without worry."

Kareina must be frowning or something, because Mayliandra turned toward her and shook her head. "We're having guests, so turn your expression into something that won't frighten Fleuren. After we eat, you and Melrick can take yourselves to a corner and growl to your hearts' content."

"But, Mama?" Yoshan snickered. "Papa growls so well."

Jahq gave a playful slap to Yoshan's shoulder. "The very point, brat. Mother wishes Father to learn a new noise."

"Who's making noises?" Melrick asked from the doorway. Fleuren walked beside him, her hand swallowed in his. Kareina, still not certain what secrets Fleuren was hiding, watched the interaction between her and Melrick. Fleuren was more than smitten with him; she was in love. This did little to make Kareina feel better, since she didn't want to see her best friend hurt, even a little. By the way Melrick returned her gazes and spoke to Fleuren, he'd already invested his whole heart.

"All right, everyone. Take a seat, it's time to eat." Mayliandra said.

Maybe after dinner, Kareina decided, Melrick and I should find a corner to growl in.

AFTER SENDING HER daughters to bed, Mayliandra joined Fleuren on the small couch near the balcony doors. Since finding Fleuren in the rubble, Mayliandra hadn't had another episode with her weaker magic. After talking to Stechyc, Mayliandra now understood she had a thread of magic for the truth, amplified by the necklace received from Narilla in Bredwine. Although, Mayliandra was startled—mostly puzzled—by Stechyc's adamancy she not remove the necklace, the mage would say no more, professing doing so could cause rather than prevent harm. And Stechyc didn't clarify who would get hurt by doing so, either.

Mayliandra wasn't forthcoming with her reason of why she would never remove it; unable to explain, even to herself, how she constantly remembered all the instances of Karr's tenderness, the necklace often providing the catalyst for those moments, which were more than Mayliandra remembered on her own. The issue she had being that most times, and often without touching the black stone, Mayliandra looked upon Karr and didn't see male features but female features. And it wasn't as if she could walk up to Karr and ask why he sometimes looked like a woman. Or tell Karr, oh by the way, the only way I could love you. Mayliandra believed the visualizations wishful hoping on her part. In the cave, Stechyc alluded the necklace was a talisman of truth. Now, she wondered—

"Are you all right, Shei Mayliandra?" Fleuren asked.

“Yes, fine. Why?”

“You seemed to have distressing thoughts. Has it something to do with the children?”

“Sweet goddess, no,” Mayliandra said. “No one could ask for more wonderful daughters.” Gosh, it felt good to refer to the two delightful girls as her daughters. It had also pleased her when Melrick noted each had a coloring to match one parent. Although Karr hadn’t given any indication of his intent, and had avoided her—fearing the conversation might arise—Mayliandra couldn’t be happier with the decision. She needed to find a way to assure Karr, had he not announced his newfound paternity, Mayliandra would have done whatever she could to protect Jahq and Yoshan. “It surprises, and frightens, me how barbaric some customs can be. How anyone can treat children so?”

Fleuren smiled. “And why they have taken to you and Karr so well. They know you care to have their best interest at heart.”

“Thank you, for your kindness. Now to shift topic,” Mayliandra said. “You and Melrick?”

A charming flush of embarrassment colored Fleuren’s face. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said, glancing away to hide the darkening of her blush. But Mayliandra hadn’t missed it. “He is a wonderful man, and we get along.”

“I doubt—” Fleuren’s blush of a moment ago was replaced with the draining of all color, as her hand shot out and clenched tight around Mayliandra’s forearm. “Please, listen.” Fear tinged the words. The prickling began under her skin, and Fleuren’s words changed and her grip constricted the blood flow in Mayliandra’s arm. Even as Mayliandra heard Fleuren speak casually of the time she had spent with Melrick, Mayliandra heard the truth within.

“Coming...soon he’ll take me. Beware...silent monks...dangerous...evil god creations...Persimmone...destroy the heads...all clans. Karr’s hope...must be you.” With a small whimper, Fleuren closed her eyes and Mayliandra noted a single tear fall.

“Fleuren?”

“Thank you, for a wonderful evening, and allowing me into your family. It has—” Fleuren swallowed hard. “But I’m tired and should retire.” Fleuren wouldn’t meet her gaze, and Mayliandra knew she would say no more. As if the hounds of Bahalkar were on her, Fleuren fled the room, Mayliandra staring after her, dumbfounded.

“What’s wrong?” Karr asked.

When it was apparent Melrick would follow Fleuren, Mayliandra stopped him. “Captain, let her be.” Melrick and Karr stared at her. She shrugged. “I believe Fleuren came to us to give warning, but someone— or some *thing*—was able to tell if she told us the truth.” Mayliandra looked down at her forearm and the imprint of Fleuren’s hand. “So she did so in the only way she knew how.”

“I should make certain she is all right,” Melrick said, pain etched in his words and on his expression, yet he didn’t move to leave.

Mayliandra knew Fleuren wouldn’t be there. Someone stronger than any of them came for Fleuren, and Fleuren was afraid. The same fearful worry filled Mayliandra and she turned to Karr.

And, in her emotional need, Karr became Kareina. She must have understood Mayliandra’s turmoil. Without hesitation, she was wrapped in Karr’s embrace, as Karr whispered in her ear, “It’s okay, Mayli, we’ll find Fleuren again.”

KAREINA HEARD THE desperation in Melrick's voice. "We'll figure this out."

"And I'll not let her out of my sight," Melrick said. As if drained, Melrick sat on the couch Mayliandra and Fleuren occupied a short while ago.

She turned her attention to Mayliandra. "Please explain what you know."

Mayliandra nodded. "Fleuren was made to be here, probably by the raiders, to report on us. Since they're working with T'Dar, I believe he has taken her away again." She glanced at Melrick before saying to Kareina, "Fleuren wanted to warn us." Mayliandra repeated Fleuren's words.

"Do you think her getting our trust was to trap us?"

Melrick scowled. "Fleuren wouldn't use us like that."

"No, I don't want to believe it either, my friend," Kareina said. "But—"

"Karr." Mayliandra focused on her. "Somehow, she knew that I would understand the hidden truth in her words. She's on our side, another pawn used by the god."

Kareina nodded. "So much is at stake, Melrick. When this is over—"

"Yeah. Got it." He scowled. "Best get some sleep. We should reach the mountains by day's end tomorrow."

"We won't give up on her," Kareina said. "I promise you."

There wasn't anything she could say or do to alleviate Melrick's pain, they all knew it; so good night was said and each went to their respective beds.

Chapter Seventeen

MAYLIANDRA AND JAHQ entered their tent and stopped. The sounds of playful growling—still his favorite noise—came from Karr, on hands and knees, while glee filled giggling came from Yoshan as she ran beneath, around, and over Karr. If it were possible, Mayliandra would have bet even Mokie laughed as the kitten mimicked Yoshan's every action. At first, it seemed their entrance went unnoticed. Karr rose with both Mokie and Yoshan dangling from his shoulders and neck. As Mayliandra made her way to Karr's cot, she noticed Yoshan rush toward Jahq, placing herself behind her new, older sister.

"Don't let Papa tickle me no more," Yoshan begged of her.

Bending a little with each slow advancing step so as not to loom over the young girls, hands held outward with fingers wriggling, Karr said with a wicked tone, "Two to tickle."

As if the fingers had already found their target, Jahq also giggled, her grin widening. "Now wait, Papa." She took a small step back. "I'm too big for tickling."

The ever-present and unpredictable veil was lifted, and Mayliandra didn't see Karr, but Kareina who teased the children; and, happier than Mayliandra had ever seen Kareina/Karr.

Kareina paused, threw her head back, and guffawed. "Hah, you're never too big to laugh."

Jahq reached for Yoshan, pull her up into her arms, then dash toward the table so it was between them and Kareina. "Now, Papa, this is ridiculous." Her tone was stern, yet her eyes reflected laughter, the corners of her lips seeming to fight the urge to smile.

"Ridiculous, you say?" Kareina growled and lunged. Jahq managed to avoid the first few attempts, her fingers barely grazing her. With a squirming Yoshan, Kareina landed more fingers eliciting surprised laughter. "Now, I'll get to serious tickling," Kareina announced. She circled the table. Jahq realized her intent, clutched Yoshan tighter and rushed toward the cot.

"Wait a minute, girls," Mayliandra said as both girls crawled behind her, using her as a human shield. Mokie scrambled over and placed himself on her lap. "I'm an observer, not a participant."

"No, you're another casualty, I'm afraid," Kareina said, dropping to her knees in front of Mayliandra her hands stretching to reach Mayliandra's sides.

"Oh no you don't," she scolded, grabbing both of Kareina's wrists and holding them away from their bodies. "I happen to be very ticklish."

Kareina wriggled her eyebrows. "All the better." It wouldn't take much strength for Kareina to overpower her, but Mayliandra noted Kareina only used enough exertion to force the laughter from her as she shifted from side to side to avoid the fingers and contact.

"Get her Papa," Yoshan cheered from behind Mayliandra.

"I'm trying, Poppet." Kareina rolled her eyes exaggeratedly. "Your mama is stronger than she looks." As Mayliandra and Kareina continued their playful charade for the girls, Mokie jumped from her lap and swatted at Kareina's cheek before landing on Kareina's chest. Tiny beads of blood welled from the scratch to Kareina's cheek.

Without thought, Mayliandra released Kareina's wrists and placed her palms on either side of Kareina's face, drawing her closer. She pulled a handkerchief from her vest pocket, and dabbed

at the blood drops. Kareina's smoke-blue gaze locked on hers, and Mayliandra couldn't find the willpower to look away. This close, she saw the tension lines etched on the side of Kareina's eyes, the scars seemed softer somehow. This close, she saw the fullness of her lips. This close, Mayliandra realized she found her...wife...to be a beautiful woman.

From behind her, Mayliandra heard Yoshan whimper. "It's all right, sweetie. Papa knows it was an accident." Mayliandra realized her breathing was heavier, heat burned in places she shouldn't be aware of—especially with children in the room.

"Are you mad at Mokie?" she asked Kareina, transfixed by the gaze mirroring her own with a sudden rush of desire.

As if aware of the sexual tension—which the seven-year-old shouldn't be—Yoshan whispered close to her ear, "Kiss Papa to make the boo-boo better." And, as if her body were drawn forward by the look in Kareina's eyes, Mayliandra leaned in.

Mayliandra's aim was off, though, not landing on the cheek with the scratch, but settling on Kareina's lips. The intended peck became a warm, gentle meeting of lips. The kiss became more demanding. Mayliandra didn't know which of them instigated the intensity, but she was no longer aware of the girls, or her surroundings. All her mind and body registered was the strength and warmth of Kareina's body when pulled close by Kareina's strong arms around her waist. Every nerve in Mayliandra's body was shivering with pinpricks of pleasure. She didn't want the kiss to end, but hazily realized they should show more restraint around the girls. Mayliandra pulled away and took a deep breath. Kareina's eyes never released hers, and Mayliandra saw the confusion warring with raw desire matching her own.

The tent flap opened and Belzan entered. "My lord—"

The passionate visage of Kareina transformed to the harsher one of Karr. A shudder of shock had Mayliandra pulling away. The smoke-blue eyes flashed a second of pained rejection before transforming into the cold gaze so characteristic of Sher Karr. Mayliandra was suspecting the male visage to be false, but couldn't prevent her body from reacting when the magic reasserted itself.

Kareina glared at Belzan as she stood. "Yes?"

Belzan sneered as he glanced from Kareina to Mayliandra, before settling on Jahq as he said, "Came to give my report. Hadn't meant to interrupt—"

"Outside," Kareina said, storming toward Belzan, who exited much faster than he entered.

Mayliandra realized Kareina was about to leave. "Should we hold dinner?" she asked, needing to say something. Instead of answering, Kareina left without glancing back. Mokie ran forward as if to follow.

Yoshan crawled down from the cot, went to Mokie and pulled him into her arms. When she stepped in front of Mayliandra, she noticed the tears in Yoshan's eyes. "You hurt Papa," she whispered.

She knew she didn't owe a child an explanation, but Mayliandra couldn't stop herself from saying, "I hadn't meant to, Yoshan. It's complicated." Mayliandra wondered if Yoshan and Jahq suspected the truth of their Papa. Mayliandra saw the sadness in their expressions. "Come on," she said, hoping to cheer them up. "Let's get supper started."

Clutching Mokie, Yoshan shook her head and headed toward the sleeping part of the tent, at least for the apparent female members. "I'm not hungry."

Jahq started to follow Yoshan. Mayliandra called her name, and Jahq turned to her and said, "Papa won't come back until we're already in bed. I'm not hungry either."

Alone, Mayliandra went back to Kareina's cot and sat. She felt bad enough about her impulsive reaction; but having the girls upset, too, left her feeling as if she'd made the most horrible mistake of her life. And Mayliandra had no idea how she was going to fix it.

KAREINA STORMED FROM the tent and became even more incensed by the smug look on Belzan's face. "Have you something to say, Belzan?"

Not recognizing the harshness of her tone, maybe not caring, he said, "Must be great to have a willing wife, and an Iskarrian whore—"

Rage, fueled by rejection, consumed her and Kareina didn't even think. With all her force, Kareina slammed her fist into his face. Belzan staggered, and she landed one blow after another. Her ears rang with her fury, and she neither heard nor was aware of anything but silencing further words from forming on his lips. He'd managed a few well-placed punches she'd feel later, but now an uncontrollable furor consumed her. By the time she'd forced Belzan to his knees, strong arms grabbed each of hers.

"Karr," Melrick said in her ear. "Stop."

Her breathing was quick and loud, but Melrick's command got through. Taking deep breaths to steady herself and get back under control, Kareina subdued any remaining fury. When Melrick released her, she noted Olaf, who was on her other side, also let her go. A small group of people had surrounded them, their curiosity obvious.

As Belzan got to his feet on unsteady legs, Kareina saw what a bloody mess she had made of his face—and didn't regret it. She took a step in his direction. Both Melrick and Olaf appeared ready to restrain her again. Kareina raised a hand, and they stopped, but didn't move away. Noting Stechyc in the group, Kareina motioned her closer, before fixing her hard gaze on Belzan. "You will give your report. After, see if Stechyc will be so kind as to tend to the damage I have done." Kareina moved in closer, dropping her tone so only those closest to her could hear. Belzan would recognize the threat for what it was meant to be. "If you ever speak of my daughter, or any other woman, with the crude disrespect you just did with me," she poked a finger in his chest, "I will finish what I have started here. Stay away from my family, or I will kill you. Have I made myself clear?"

Chastised before a crowd brought anger to his eyes, but he didn't appear ready to act on the emotions. Kareina didn't care how pissed he was, as long as Belzan recognized her words were not a meaningless threat. "Yeah."

"We'll meet in the command tent for your report. Go now, we'll follow. The rest of you back to what you were doing," Melrick said.

Belzan twisted to glower at her. "What in hellfire's happened to you, Karr? You've turned true warriors, real men—" He emphasized the last word, and paused. "You've turned us into babysitters." Belzan jabbed a finger in her direction. "You've grown soft, Karr, soft as a woman."

After Belzan walked away, closely followed by Olaf, all but Melrick and Stechyc drifted off. Melrick turned to her with a worried expression. "You need to let the mage take care of you."

"I will. I'll meet you for the debriefing," she said. Her temper, now under control, Kareina began to feel the pain in her face and hands where they had pounded, and been pounded by, Belzan. Her control lost because of the degrading way Belzan looked at and spoke about Jahq, but compounded by Mayliandra's rejection. She couldn't let that happen again.

Kareina began to believe Mayliandra saw her for who—what—she was. Their shared kiss was incredible, making Kareina's body respond and her heart fill. In an instant, Mayliandra's shudder reminded Kareina she was too ugly to expect the passion be meant for her. No matter she had fallen in love with her wife. Her wife was horrified when she looked at Kareina. And now she had to worry about Belzan, and the possibility the other Gradyln men felt as he did. She couldn't—wouldn't—let anything happen to Jahq, Yoshan, or Mayliandra.

Glancing from Stechyc to Melrick she said, "Please, be watchful of my family. I fear some of the men have vulgar intentions where they, especially Jahq, are concerned."

A tender hand rested on her forearm, and Stechyc looked at her with understanding. "We'll keep them safe," Stechyc said. "I'll even suggest Gionne guard your daughters." She sniffed. "I won't make it a command. Have to weigh which approach actually gets her to do as I wish. Although I have to note, after Iskarr, I don't believe the task too daunting."

Kareina realized Stechyc was trying to bring levity. She smiled, hissed at the pain the action brought, and said, "Though I deserve the agony to my face, I would appreciate if you could work a little of your magic."

Stechyc laughed. "Gladly."

As the three turned toward Stechyc's tent, Kareina noticed Mayliandra stood in front of their tent's entrance with a look of concern on her face. Neither made a move toward the other. Melrick seemed to realize the tension between them, recognized it for what it was, and placed a hand on Kareina's shoulder and gave a squeeze. "One battle at a time, my friend."

With a crooked smile, Kareina walked to the mage's tent, leaving Mayliandra and her newest rejection behind. Too many battles to fight indeed, Kareina thought. And the battle she wanted to win—Mayliandra's love—would never be hers to conquer.

Chapter Eighteen

STECHYC CAME UPON Tiilaen standing by the tree outside their tent, staring at the approaching clouds. Her features were set contemplatively, her cloak swaying with the occasional gust of breeze. She clasped her hand in Tiilaen's and squeezed, rewarded with return pressure. "You seem leagues away, my love," she said, brushing a stray lock of silky auburn hair from Tiilaen's face, she stared into green eyes that always seemed to swallow her whole, while giving safety and comfort. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Tiilaen kissed her brow. "Take a walk with me?"

"Of course," Stechyc said, "let me get a wrap. The temperature seems to be dropping. Going to be a cold night, I think."

Soon, they were walking toward the lake, arms around each other's waist. Well away from camp, Stechyc turned to Tiilaen and pressed herself against her lover's body, holding her tight. "Tell me, is it the dream-vision which has you upset?"

"I'll never forgive Narilla for starting these damn things," Tiilaen grumbled.

The statement made Stechyc laugh, and reply, "I doubt she started them. She nudged them into the open. You've had them all your life, and ignored them until now. Besides, you shouldn't fault the dead."

Resting her chin on Stechyc's shoulder, Tiilaen gave a heavy sigh, clutching Stechyc tight. "Yes, the vision, in part. We're here to help Kareina, and yet the task will be moot if she dies before it's completed." Tiilaen started rocking them from side to side. "I want to tell Kareina Mayliandra is a lover of women. It's frustrating. Mayliandra hasn't seen past the magic and recognized Kareina for who she is. She's seen through so many other lies, why can't Mayliandra see through this one?"

Stechyc pushed away from Tiilaen. "Love, you know we can't say anything, no matter how much I agree with you. I don't understand how she hasn't done so, either, but the way it is." She shook her head, "We could cause more damage by interfering rather than letting destiny unfold as it is meant to be."

"Could it be possible we're meant to give a gentle nudge?" Tiilaen asked.

"Well, I'm certain your dream-visions will alert us, so we'll keep waiting for more of them," Stechyc said. She couldn't stop the laughter at Tiilaen's shocked expression. It took a moment for Tiilaen to join in her amusement. "Come now," she said in a seductive tone, "a fog is rolling in soon, and we have the lake to ourselves. Let's not waste it." Stechyc placed a quick kiss on Tiilaen's lips, and darted toward the water. She pulled off her clothes and tossed them onto a squat bush beside the water. She heard the seductive growl from Tiilaen behind her seconds before she was whisked off her feet and cradled against Tiilaen's chest. "I love a woman of action," she whispered against her lovers' neck.

Tiilaen's chuckle rumbled against her cheek. "Oh, you'll love the action I have planned for you," she said, taking Stechyc's lips in a bruising kiss, as she lowered them to the ground. Stechyc felt the texture of material from the cloak, still warm from Tiilaen's body. As Tiilaen

caressed her hip, Stechyc cupped the back of Tiilaen's neck and pulled her closer until merely a breath away. "I suggest you proceed forthwith," she said, removing all distance between them.

Sated from their lovemaking and wrapped in each other's arms, their bodies began to chill with the approach of night. "We should be getting back to our tent," Stechyc said, running a finger down Tiilaen's cheek. "We don't want Gionne worrying."

"As you wish, love, let me get your things." Tiilaen pulled the cloak tight around Stechyc and pulled her own clothes on, before stepping to the bush to retrieve Stechyc's items. She turned around to find Stechyc standing behind her, gawking at the bush. "What's wrong?" Tiilaen asked, concerned by the odd look. "Is it poisonous?"

Stechyc's lips stretched across her face in a huge grin. "Honey, we may have found an alternative to your dream-vision." She noted the confusion on Tiilaen's face. "These are *brezarin* berries. Once they've dried and are ground into powder, they are medicinal for a number of ailments."

"We shall take some back to the tent, if you wish," Tiilaen said, reaching to pluck some. Stechyc grabbed her wrist to stop her. "What is it?"

"I think I'll ask Mayliandra to come back and help. The walk will do her good."

"Please don't make me regret whatever you're hatching in that beautiful head of yours," Tiilaen groaned.

MAYLIANDRA ENJOYED THE quick little outing Stechyc had arranged. The setting sun behind the clouds was bringing a cold night to join the approaching fog. A breeze flowed gentle enough to maintain the coolness but not strong enough to be bothersome, the present company was relaxing. Stechyc brought her to an area close to the lake with boulders in a random grouping within a small area, interspersed by berry bushes within and cloaking the rocks. "Gosh, this is beautiful," Mayliandra said. She indicated the lake with a toss of her head. "Think I'll take a swim when we're done."

"Don't stay out too long. There's a fog rolling in, and I'd hate for you to get lost in it," Stechyc acknowledged. "I appreciate you helping me with this."

Mayliandra took the small burlap bag Stechyc held out to her. "If I hadn't, and I don't mind, I'd never have learned about this place." Together, they began picking berries in silence. When Mayliandra had filled her bag, she leaned against one of the nearby rocks, heaving a sigh. "Stechyc, can I ask you something?"

"Of course. Are your daughters all right?" Stechyc asked, pausing in her work to give her full attention.

She nodded. "It's about the magic. Each day we travel the waves of magic get stronger around us, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"And a lot of what is happening with the magic is unpredictable, correct?"

"Yes." Stechyc closed her bag, tying it off with a small leather strap. "For those who haven't mastered their skill, the magic can be unpredictable." Stechyc moved closer and sat beside her. "Is this about your magic necklace? Perhaps a specific issue you wish addressed?" Stechyc gave a wry grin. "If this is about Yoshan and Jahq, children tell tales naturally. Are you afraid you're losing the gift to see truths?"

Mayliandra grinned. “Not with the girls, that will be easy as a parent, gift or no gift. Children aren’t as clever as they think they are.” She stared hard at Stechyc. “I know you are bound by certain rules of ethics and all, with secrets you learn through healing. What I’m hoping is you’ll be honest with me if I ask you a direct question.”

With a frown, Stechyc said, “I do try to be honest, bring no harm, it is true. What is this questioning about, Mayliandra?”

At first, Mayliandra began to look away, squirming under Stechyc’s scrutiny. She resisted and gazed at Stechyc. “My gift, small as it is, is to see the truth of things. So far, it has proven reliable on occasions of import.”

Stechyc stared hard at her. “At first I believed the magic of truth to be in the necklace. As the magic in Kellshae strengthens, I believe the magic in you, and the bauble more an enhancing agent. But I digress. You don’t believe the magic reliable in you?”

Mayliandra decided she needed to say what needed to be said, aloud and with conviction. “The gift seemed to fail me until I realized my husband is a woman. Karr is Kareina.”

“Karr has admitted this?”

“You’re saying I’m wrong?” Mayliandra began to doubt her own resolve. Maybe she was crazy.

“You should explain what has brought this conclusion to light for you,” Stechyc said.

Since Stechyc hadn’t laughed outright, or denied the accusation, Mayliandra hoped her conclusion could be correct. She leaned back on her arms and stared toward the lake, hoping the calm waters would help her explain. “From the moment I met and married Karr, I believed what I was told, what I could see with my eyes. At Bredwine, hiding from Armin, I felt something wasn’t right, incongruous with what I saw in Karr and what my heart feels when around Karr. It happened in the caves when Karr was wounded. What I saw and what my touch felt were too. And the kiss was...” She sighed. “The more we’re together... I can’t look at Karr and see a man. I perceive a handsome woman.”

“Why do you doubt you’re not seeing the truth?”

“Because the moment someone says ‘my lord’ the male visage returns, and I resolve wishful hoping is at work instead of truth.”

Stechyc gave a quick shrug. “So Karr is a man.”

“No,” Mayliandra said with more vehemence than intended. “Karr is a woman, too many other factors than my eyesight attest to it.” How did she explain? Tears of frustration were building in her attempt to explain what even she didn’t understand. “She’s Kareina, not dead at Youlren. I don’t know. I have suspicions for the need for such deception, what Kareina has suffered during this life being the biggest.” She felt the tears slide down her face. “Please, tell me if I’m doing me and Karr a disservice here.”

Extending a kerchief to her, Stechyc asked, “Which do you want?”

“I want the handsome woman. One, by the way, who is no less handsome with the scars,” Mayliandra said. “I understand the need for her to be a man. Life isn’t equitable in Kellshae.” Another thought insinuated itself, unbidden, and brought a painful tightening in her chest. “Oh, sweet goddess. What if Kareina isn’t like me, isn’t a woman who loves women?”

Stechyc gave a quick chuckle. “Not willing to settle for one crisis at a time?” She stood, extending her hand to assist Mayliandra to her feet. “Have you considered asking?”

“Of course I have. I have to believe there are very good reasons I haven’t been told the truth.” Maybe Kareina doesn’t have the same feelings for her wife that her wife has for her. “But if she were opposed, how could Kareina kiss me the way she does, even to continue a charade?”

“How far are you willing to go in investigating your theory?” Stechyc asked.

Mayliandra felt guilt course through her with the question. “Oh, Stechyc, you have no idea what I’ve done. In my confusion, assuming I see what I want to be, I’ve been cruel enough to her.”

Grimacing, Stechyc asked, “What do you mean by cruel?”

“As a husband, Karr has been gentle, kind, compassionate. And the kinder he is, the quicker I view the woman beneath. I think I’m seeing what my heart wants and what can never be. I push Karr away. If I’m correct, and Karr is Kareina, I’ve played mercilessly with her emotions while questioning myself.”

Sighing, Stechyc turned toward the lake. “As confessions seem to be in order this eve, I have one of my own.” Stechyc’s shoulders dropped. “I had intended you eat the brezarin berries, and I’d send Karr to find you.”

“You didn’t believe I’d know the berries are a hallucinogen.”

“I’d hoped you wouldn’t know. I wanted you to see Karr for who she was and talk. And you’d realize you two couldn’t be more made for each other than if you’d found each other under better circumstances.” Stechyc gave another shrug.

“So, you are confirming she is Kareina. Thank you, but doesn’t that go against your mage code?” Stechyc flinched, and Mayliandra knew she was wrestling with her own guilt. “No matter, forget I brought the topic up.” Mayliandra cast a glance at the bushes. “Does Kareina know what these are?”

“Most warriors do,” Stechyc said.

“So, if she suspects I took them, any actions would be blamed on the berries,” Mayliandra said with a smile.

A sudden flash of irritation crossed Stechyc’s features. “Kareina has been emotionally wounded too many times in her short life for games. She’s vulnerable to even a small attack on her feelings, Mayliandra. I won’t allow you to play with her, not as you’ve already admitted to. You have no—”

“Stechyc, please,” Mayliandra said. “Know I have no intention of hurting her.” She bit her lower lip. “Hellfire, I’m in love with her. That’s why this has been so hard for me. I love her and all her tenderness beneath the hardened exterior. I thought I was losing my mind. Because, what if I wasn’t seeing the truth and Karr was a man, and I was fooling myself?”

“How can you be sure I’m being truthful, and not playing mind games with you?” Stechyc asked.

“You would have disabused me of the entire need for this conversation if I were wrong. But you want me to arrive at my own conclusions.”

Stechyc asked, “What are you going to do now?”

“Have a swim, let Kareina believe I’ve had the berries, and initiate a damn conversation.”

Shaking her head, Stechyc said, “Be careful with this fire you’re playing with, Mayliandra. I won’t forgive you hurting her.” She picked up her bag of berries. “I’ll see to it she comes this way.”

Placing a hand on Stechyc’s elbow, Mayliandra said, “Thank you. I want Kareina to know she can trust me with this truth, with any truth.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing. If this goes wrong, you won’t only have Kareina and me angry with you. Tiilaen is a monster in her own right when angry, and Kareina is like a sister to her. After me and Tiilaen, you’ll need deal with Gionne, who idolizes her.”

Mayliandra nodded. "I understand. Though I can't guarantee a specific outcome, my goal is meant with the best intentions in my heart."

Stechyc flinched. "Sometimes those are the quickest to go awry."

THE PRIVACY KAREINA enjoyed from the swim and subsequent soak she'd taken behind the rocky corner of the lake were heavenly. She owed Melrick a favor, another addition to a list that grew daily, for locating it and saving the knowledge for her. She put her cloak on, not bothering to tuck her shirt in or put her chainmail on, and buckled her sword to her waist. As she made her way back toward camp, Kareina realized a fog had rolled in and blanketed the lake. At the rate the fog drifted, it wouldn't be long before it reached their tents. She would have to hurry if she didn't want to be caught in it, find herself turned around and lost.

Kareina had about made it to the opposite side of the lake, also filled with medium-sized boulders and a few bushes, when she caught movement from the water's edge. Closer inspection alerted her Mayliandra had also taken time for a swim, an activity her wife enjoyed, and was walking from the water in all her beautiful naked glory, wringing water from her hair. Her first reaction was to be angry no one stood guard to protect Mayliandra during this vulnerable time. Kareina felt the heat flush through her body. Mayliandra was beautiful, a vision, one no one else should gaze upon. Hellfire, even she shouldn't be able to gaze upon such magnificence.

Mayliandra walked to where her clothes were, pulled a tunic over her head, and began running a comb through the wet honeyed tresses. Kareina thought she should make her presence known before frightening her. "Mayliandra, we need to head back to camp," she said, walking purposefully in her direction as if she'd now caught sight of her.

"Karr?" Mayliandra questioned, looking behind her. "How'd you know I was here?"

"It seems we had the same idea. I was further around the lake. Thought I'd get back before this fog rolls in and became too thick. I saw you standing here and combing your hair," she explained, hoping Mayliandra wouldn't know she'd been watching her for a while. Kareina stood in front of her, and had to bite her bottom lip to keep from responding to the sight of the tunic snugly outlining breasts under the damp material. Her wife seemed to have an aversion to drying herself before pulling her clothes on.

Mayliandra stepped forward and closed the distance between them, raised a hand to tuck a stray clump of damp hair from Kareina's face. "An exercise you seem to have neglected, also." The feel of gentle fingers on the side of her face caused Kareina to shudder. She stared down into Mayliandra's brown eyes. An expression Kareina couldn't name hovered in them. She wanted to lose herself in the dark depths, tell Mayliandra the truth, and hold her if only for a moment. If—

"Are you all right?" Mayliandra asked.

"We should head back," Kareina said. She indicated Mayliandra's belongings still on the ground, and noted the pile of berries on the strip of cloth. Her attention moved to the bushes around them. Brezarin berries. She felt a knot of fear in her stomach. Kareina glanced down at Mayliandra. "You didn't eat any of those did you?"

With a slight frown, Mayliandra stared at her for a long moment with another unexplainable expression. She shrugged. "Maybe. I told Stechyc I'd gather her some for her herbal medicines."

Kareina swallowed and it sounded loud in her ears. Should she tell Mayliandra the raw berries were a hallucinogen? No, she should get her back to their tent and the girls, where Kareina could keep an eye on her should anything untoward happen as a result. "Let me get your

things for you,” Kareina suggested, taking a step toward the berries, and Mayliandra’s folded cloak.

Mayliandra stepped closer, effectively blocking her, and insinuating herself flush with Kareina’s body. Mayliandra raised a hand to Kareina’s cheek. Her gaze appeared to cloud as she studied Kareina’s face. Mayliandra sighed, to calm her nerves, Kareina guessed. Mayliandra leaned forward and brushed her cheek against Kareina’s, the corners of their lips meeting ever so slightly.

“Karr...” Mayliandra whispered. “I...”

Kareina stiffened with a sharp intake of breath. “I’m sorry, Mayli, I shouldn’t expect—”

Pulling back enough to place a single silencing finger to Kareina’s lips, Mayliandra gave a tremulous smile. Kareina’s pulse beat for release, her skin overheating from even this small contact. A single tear slid down Mayliandra’s cheek and she gave a wry grin before she turned around but continued to maintain their proximity. Spoken so Kareina barely heard, Mayliandra said, “Please, touch me. Touch me because we both want it, not because of obligation or of duty.”

Her breath caught in her throat. Kareina had wanted this for so long, still wanted it so much. She didn’t want to hold Mayliandra as Karr, but as Kareina. The needy part of her didn’t care, would use any chance to hold her beautiful wife; a voice in Kareina’s head whispered she could justify her action later. Mayliandra wanted her. Whichever way they touched—him/her or her/her—at least Kareina would know the feel of Mayliandra’s silky smooth flesh before Kareina died for some cause she didn’t understand. In time, maybe, Mayliandra would forgive her for what she was about to do now.

Moving in behind Mayliandra, Kareina swept the silken strands of her hair away from her neck before she pressed a soft kiss to the spot. Mayliandra tensed, but Kareina gently kissed and nipped the tender white skin with lips and teeth.

Snaking her arms around her waist, Kareina drew Mayliandra flush against her own body. Mayliandra’s breathing deepened, and Kareina traced the edge of an ear with her tongue before capturing the lobe and pulling it into her mouth. Kareina cupped Mayliandra’s breasts as if holding the most fragile treasure ever. Mayliandra let out a soft moan, before spinning around.

Mayliandra’s mouth was on hers before Kareina knew it would happen, kissing her as if her life depended on it. Mayliandra slid her hands up and held Kareina’s face in her palms, gazing adoringly at her. Her mouth a wet haven of tongue and smooth, soft lips devoured and Kareina moaned into the kiss. Each clutched the other as if there were no tomorrows, no duties for clan, or monsters stomping across Kellshae.

The two of them. Now.

Kareina dragged her closer. Mayliandra whimpered at the contact. The sensations bombarded Kareina’s body—her mouth, her body, her breasts—all culminated in her nether regions, causing it to throb and moisten as never before. Kareina had wanted Mayliandra since Bredwine. She had always assumed her internal fantasies would be the extent of it. Never did Kareina guess she’d have Mayliandra in her arms all willing and whimpering for more.

Kneading her firm buttocks with one hand while her mouth devoured Mayliandra’s, Kareina drowned in her. Her other hand cupped one breast and Kareina brushed a thumb over the tight bud. Mayliandra mewled her pleased response into Kareina’s mouth and clung tighter.

Mayliandra’s hands were in Kareina’s hair, racing up and down Kareina’s back, her moans loud. Mayliandra was disentangling herself, panting. Her face darkened in a flush, her long golden-brown hair in sexy shambles. But her eyes were downcast. “Oh, sweet goddess.”

“Mayli,” she said. Kareina saw Mayliandra’s shoulders quiver. “Please, don’t be frightened. Let me make love to you.”

“I don’t know what...” She scrubbed her hands over her face. “You don’t think me too wanton?”

“Never.” Kareina reached her cloak’s clasp and removed it, placing the cloak on the ground beside them. She took Mayliandra’s hand and drew her down as she lowered herself into a sitting position.

“Mayliandra.” Kareina slowly and gently rubbed Mayliandra’s thigh with a palm, delighted when the action made Mayliandra quiver, her skin felt like satin beneath Kareina’s touch. Kareina caught a glimpse of torment in the dark eyes. “We don’t have to do this.” Kareina decided it best to be honest. “The berries have caused this reaction in you.”

“Is that what you believe?” At her nod, Mayliandra said, “I know what I want—who I want.” Mayliandra blinked as if trying to convey some secret message. Mayliandra took a big breath. Reaching for Kareina’s hand, she lay back and spread her legs open.

Kareina’s jaw dropped when Mayliandra dragged Kareina’s hand up and under her bunched-up tunic, pressing Kareina’s palm to the damp womanhood. Mayliandra’s eyes closed, as she inhaled sharply. A growl of response came out of Kareina’s tightening throat. “Sweet goddess, it feels so good, your touch there,” Mayliandra breathed, pulling off her tunic. “Yes, please, make love to me,” she begged. Mayliandra wriggled until she had pressed harder into Kareina’s hand. Kareina’s heart skipped in her chest. A voice in her head warned she would regret allowing this, taking advantage, but Kareina feared stopping would be worse—for them both.

Instead, Kareina brushed her thumb over the tip of Mayliandra’s swollen clit. The entrance to her womanhood showing the dampness, as Mayliandra unhurriedly pivoted her hips up and around so Kareina’s thumb never stopped stimulating her.

“Ah, sweet goddess, your touch...” Mayliandra’s eyes squeezed closed.

Kareina shifted herself lower, leaned forward and blew on her damp folds, increasing the pressure of her thumb while rolling it in a circular motion. Kareina caught her woman’s scent, musky and sweet. All Kareina could think of was tasting her, watching her face contort in ecstasy as Kareina brought her to a special brink of bliss.

Mayliandra groaned and raised her hips closer to Kareina’s face.

Kareina buried a finger inside her moist, tight folds and leaned closer to her so her own bound breasts snuggled atop Mayliandra’s lower abdomen. She cried out again, panting, thrashing. Kareina nuzzled at her breasts, pale mounds of perfection tipped by taut, dark nipples. Kareina continued to slip her finger in and out, slow at first, and then picking up the pace as her tongue alternated with sucking and gently biting the nipple.

Mayliandra was wet. Kareina kissed her way up Mayliandra’s chest, continuing to tenderly plunge into her hot, wet womanhood. Mutual moans filled the air around them. Mayliandra’s ragged breathing and the rocking rhythm as she thrust her hips into Kareina’s hand almost more than Kareina could bear. This woman was all Kareina needed to fulfill her life.

If only—

No, Kareina chastised herself. She may not have forever, but Kareina would cherish this moment, for as long she lived.

Kareina kissed the underside of Mayliandra’s exquisite jaw, savoring the silky feel of her skin against her lips, the pulse along the side of Mayliandra’s neck. Mayliandra sighed and tipped her head back to allow complete access. Kareina filled her free hand with Mayliandra’s

bared breast, and a fire lighting her own groin with an inferno the likes of which Kareina had never experienced with any other woman, as few as the list contained.

Mayliandra's hair streamed along her shoulder and upper arm, giving Kareina a private cocoon to explore Mayliandra's flesh with her mouth while her hand massaged Mayliandra's breast and lightly pinched her already hard nipple. Kareina suckled at her neck and Mayliandra trembled, gasped, moaned aloud.

The entire time Kareina was making love to her, Mayliandra had her arms resting on the ground at her sides. Now they slid up and clamped around Kareina's shoulders. Mayliandra tugged her close. "Kiss me," she whispered hoarsely, her eyes two large darkened spheres of desire. "I want to see you as we kiss."

"Mayliandra..."

She clutched the hand at her breast. "Do you have any idea how long I've wanted this? Wanted the you I see? Wanted to touch you and—" Her mouth claimed Kareina's.

Needy, unable to comprehend all Mayliandra said, Kareina relished the silken lips skating over her own and the satiny tongue darting into her mouth, circling Kareina's own tongue. Mayliandra suckled on her tongue, her kisses pure passion. Kareina continued to slide her finger in and out of her as Mayliandra deepened the kisses with each of Kareina's thrusts. Kareina added an occasional swipe of Mayliandra's clit with her thumb, the small threshold of control over the mesmerizing kissing.

Not certain how, but Kareina managed to break free from the spell of Mayliandra's kiss and move back down her body. While Mayliandra moaned and bucked, Kareina made a trail along each breast, down her flat, quivering belly to her hips, giving each one exaggerated attention before Kareina finally moved forward. "Yes..." Mayliandra cried out when Kareina took the first taste of the swollen bud, the flavor the sweetest Kareina had ever tasted.

"Oh, you are perfect, Mayli." Kareina removed her finger and raised her closer. Mayliandra's glazed eyes caught her gaze over the length of swollen breasts and the flat slope of her belly. "Oh yes, perfect." Kareina chuckled and flicked her tongue back and forth over Mayliandra's wet clit, her delicious flavor burst on Kareina's tongue, while the tangy scent of her woman's juices filled the space between them, teasing Kareina's nostrils and making her crazy with desire.

Kareina smiled at her, but her grin faded. "Mayliandra..."

A haze crossed Mayliandra's beautiful face and settled in her eyes. "Oh, hellfire."

Kareina bent her head and swirled her tongue around Mayliandra's clit. "Aaah..." Mayliandra mewled, hands threading in Kareina's hair, hips came off the ground and swiveled against Kareina's hungry mouth.

No more taking her time, Kareina sucked and licked, moving downward at intervals to tongue her wet folds. Mayliandra becoming wilder, mewling as Kareina fingered her hard and fast while devouring her clit.

Sweet goddess, what heaven. Mayliandra was heaven.

Mayliandra sucked in a ragged breath and held it. Her body stiffened. She groaned as orgasm consumed her. Once the spasms subsided, Kareina removed her hand, crawled up her body and hugged Mayliandra close.

As Mayliandra's breathing leveled, Kareina realized the fog had enveloped them. Mayliandra shivered. Much as she wanted this moment to last for as long as possible, Kareina knew they'd be safer, and warmer, in the privacy of their own tent. "Mayli, honey, we should get home." Gently, she extracted herself from their shared warmth and stood, extending her hand to assist Mayliandra to stand, before retrieving the discarded tunic and presenting it to her. Once she had

dressed, Kareina picked up the cloak, shook any debris loose and wrapped it around Mayliandra's shoulders.

"Thank you," Mayliandra whispered. "For everything."

Kareina smiled. "You're welcome, Lady Wife."

After picking up the berries and other things, Kareina took Mayliandra's elbow and they walked in silence to the campsite. They passed a couple of sentries, giving the expected reply to the inquiring command, before making it to their tent.

Lowering the flap behind them, Kareina bumped into Mayliandra's back. Kareina gazed down at her, lit in the soft glow from the candle in the center of the room. A knot of fear clenched in her stomach. Did Mayliandra realize and regret what they had shared? "Mayli?"

Mayliandra turned to her and winked. "Sshh. The girls are asleep." At Kareina's nod, Mayliandra asked, "May I sleep with you tonight?" She flashed a mischievous grin. "Promise not to hog your bedding."

Nervously, Kareina agreed, indicating Mayliandra should crawl in first. What else was she to do? Removing her boots and shimmying under the blanket, Mayliandra gave a quick pat to the bedding beside her. Biting her bottom lip, Kareina sat on the edge to remove her own boots and sword belt, and stretched out beside Mayliandra.

Mayliandra's arm crossed over her stomach, her face burrowed into Kareina's neck and tickled the skin with the warmth from her breath. Kareina closed her eyes tight. In no time at all, Mayliandra's breath began to even out.

Before Mayliandra fell asleep, Kareina heard her whisper. "I love you, Kareina."

Chapter Nineteen

KAREINA GAVE A tug to the saddlebag clasp to make certain it was secure, ignoring Starsinger's impatient stomp. The fog had taken much longer to dissipate than expected, and had delayed her departure to scout the forested area ahead before the caravan moved on. Mayliandra's whispered words continued to replay in her head. Did Mayliandra know? Or had Kareina misheard in her own pre-sleep moments? It shouldn't have surprised Kareina how quickly the fates had changed, but all she could muster was a feeling of sadness. Not so long ago, it seemed, Kareina had continually stayed away from camp to avoid Mayliandra's attempts to perform her wifely duties. Now, Kareina was leaving to avoid the truth.

After last night at the pond, Kareina found it harder to be in the same tent with Mayliandra, haunted by the memory of each touch, the very taste of the woman she loved with all her heart. The lovemaking meant so much to her, but Kareina realized it created a larger wedge between them, since the whispered words and use of her true name. Mayliandra wouldn't even look her in the eyes since waking; and, Kareina didn't know if because she was aware of acknowledging her identity, or disgusted because of the reality.

Fate was cruel.

She heard hurried footsteps behind her and smirked, saying over her shoulder, "Are you finished giving Stechyc a proper goodbye?" When no reply came, Kareina turned to find a blushing, and harried, Mayliandra standing behind her. Beautiful as she was in her simple dresses, Mayliandra was more remarkable in her warrior leathers. "My apology, Mayli." Mayliandra shook her head. "What's wrong?"

"I can't find Yoshan. I had hoped she might be with you, seeing you off."

"No, she was playing with Mokie," Kareina said, "outside the tent a moment ago. We had our goodbye then." Kareina noted the resurgence of worry creasing Mayliandra's features. "Would you like me to get the men together to search?"

Mayliandra shook her head again. "No, I'm probably worrying for nothing. I'll keep looking. She's around here somewhere, I'm sure." She gave a shaky smile. "Have a safe trip, hus..." Mayliandra rubbed at her forehead. "Be safe, please." Mayliandra turned on her boot heels and started away.

Impulsively, Kareina grasped Mayliandra's elbow, aware of the sudden tensing in her arm. "I'll help you find her. I would be too occupied with worry to scout effectively otherwise. Especially as the weather is changing. I don't know how long the fog will stay around."

"No, I'm certain I'm overreacting."

"Overreacting about what?" Tiilaen asked as she walked to them, extending a hand to rub Starsinger's nose.

"It's nothing," Mayliandra said.

"Yoshan is missing," Kareina said at the same time.

Tiilaen frowned. "Not 'nothing', Shei Mayliandra. A lot could happen to a child out here, and all manner of strangeness to boot."

“As the Shei is well aware, Tiilaen,” Kareina said, upset with the insinuation, meant or not, of unconcern. Kareina glanced around. “Mayliandra and I will take the hill to the west. Get the others to fan out north, south and east. Yoshan couldn’t have gone too far no matter how fast she pushes those little legs of hers.” With a nod, Tiilaen moved off to do as requested. Retying Starsinger’s reins, Kareina turned to Mayliandra and saw the clear worry etched there. “Don’t worry, Mayli, we’ll find her safe and playing with Mokie, having forgotten the time, or unaware how far she’s strayed.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Karei...Karr,” Mayliandra stuttered as they started walking west.

Both were silent except for the occasional call of “Yoshan.” So far, there was no reply. As they walked up the hill, Mayliandra noticed an old footpath heading off to the right, around, and behind the hill, and drew Kareina’s attention to it. “Maybe she followed this.”

“Let’s find out,” Kareina agreed. “If she believed she and Mokie were on an adventure, she’d give it a try.”

“Yes, you may not share blood with her, but she shares your spirit,” Mayliandra said, smiling. “She’s already made mention she wishes to grow up and be like her Papa Karr. She adores you.”

Kareina flinched. “Mayli, we need to have a serious talk.” Kareina’s voice trembled in her nervousness. It was impossible to continue as they had. Not after last night. Not after holding Mayliandra in her arms, on her bed, throughout the night. The longer she was in her wife’s company, the more Kareina couldn’t ignore how much she loved her, needed her. What broke Kareina’s heart was the fact the announcement would put a further wedge into their already tremulous relationship. “I’ve kept a serious piece of information from you.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure we can work through it, *husband*.” Mayli said this over her shoulder from her position in front of Kareina. Did Mayliandra stress the word husband? Did she already know?

In her hesitation to broach the topic, Kareina had slowed her pace. She quickened it considerably when she noted Mayliandra paused, staring toward the side of the hill, and gave a quiet moan. Kareina rushed to stand behind Mayliandra, glancing over the top of her shoulder. The sight in front of her had Kareina placing her hands on Mayliandra’s shoulders, forcing Mayliandra to her side as she whispered, “Go back to camp, Mayli. I’ll take care of this.”

Mayliandra shook her head, her voice as low. “I can’t leave her like this. Or you either.”

Kareina didn’t want to take the time to argue about her own safety. “Please, do not leave this spot. Promise?” At her nod, Kareina released her, and took a silent step forward while ascertaining the path best to reach Yoshan without alerting the large boar-like beast forcing Yoshan against a tree.

Yoshan was crying.

There was a greenish-grey mucus substance dripping from the animal’s tusks as it stood, with flesh quivering, in front of Yoshan. She had a death grip on a squirmy Mokie. Kareina would have thought the frightened mewling and the razor sharp claws imbedded deep in Yoshan’s arm would have been a distraction from her concentration. Yet, Yoshan kept her gaze locked on the beast. Kareina moved around the tree so she could come up from behind her little girl.

Yoshan must have sensed her coming because the beast shifted a step forward, causing the kitten to let out a caterwaul raising the hair on the back of Kareina’s neck. Kareina raised a quick finger to her eye and then pointed at the beast; pleased Yoshan seemed to understand her intent. As Yoshan refocused on the beast in front of her, Kareina reached her and gently, yet slowly, raised the child into her arms.

“You’re doing wonderful, sweetheart,” she whispered with pride in Yoshan’s ear. “Think you can hold him while I walk us back to Mama?”

Fresh tears slid down the little girl’s face. “I don’t know Papa, I’m tired.”

Kareina placed a kiss to Yoshan’s temple. “It’s all right if you can’t. I’ve got you safe, and won’t let anything happen to you.” With a quick glance from her peripheral in Mayliandra’s direction, Kareina tried to gauge the distance needed to place Yoshan in Mayliandra’s arms, and draw her sword before the beast attacked. She was about to share this plan of action with her daughter when Aliya arrived.

Unfortunately, this new distraction caused Yoshan to lose her concentration long enough for the beast to take another step closer, and for the creature to shift one slimy tusk into Kareina’s left side, piercing the flesh above her hip. Yoshan, realizing what had happened whimpered, even as she regained mind control of the animal. “I’m sorry, Papa.”

“Hush. It’s all right, honey. We’re okay.” Aliya was now in sword range, Spallan joining the group, Kareina pressed herself back into the tree’s trunk until she had detached herself from the tusk, and shifted away so she wouldn’t be further gouged once the creature was released from Yoshan’s telepathic control. Moving behind the tree, and rushing in Mayliandra’s direction, Kareina said to Yoshan, “Relax, Poppet, Aliya and Spallan have the beast.” She could feel the tension leave her little girl’s body, as Yoshan slumped in her arms and cried loud and in earnest. “Here’s your mother,” Kareina said, placing Yoshan in Mayliandra’s trembling arms. She turned to see Aliya and Spallan had already dispatched the beast.

“Oh, Yoshan, honey, it’s okay. It’s all going to be okay,” Mayliandra cooed, clutching the little girl close to her chest. Kareina, caught by surprise when Mayliandra leaned into her side, hesitantly wrapped her arms around Mayliandra until all three were hugging, the kitten now barely protesting with the danger gone.

“We need to get her back to camp, sweetheart,” she told Mayliandra. “Make certain she’s okay.”

Yoshan gave a watery hiccup. “I didn’t mean to get in trouble.”

Mayliandra gave a quick laugh, as she pulled away. “You’re not in trouble, Yoshan.”

The little girl, her eyes still moist with tears, gave an uncertain glance to Kareina. “Does Papa know?” she asked, and burst into giggles at Mayliandra’s shocked expression.

Mayliandra glanced from Yoshan to Kareina, who stuck out her tongue at her daughter. Kareina shrugged. “I think someone backed her parents into a corner.”

“I believe she may have,” Mayliandra agreed.

Spallan and Aliya joined them. Spallan asked, “Everybody all right?” At their nods, he asked Yoshan, “You know, that was the kind of stunt your Papa used to pull, don’t you?”

The little girl seemed more relaxed with the event put out of her mind. Slyly she asked, “Oh, really, Papa?”

Kareina gave a feigned frown in Yoshan’s direction, and growled. “Don’t get any ideas, Poppet.”

One hand released her hold of Mokie and she placed it on Kareina’s shoulder. With an exaggerated shake of her head, Yoshan said, “Too late, Papa.”

THE SMALL GROUP made it down the hill to Karr’s tent, Yoshan and Mokie given over to the care of an anxious Jahq, and Spallan and Aliya having returned to the main part of camp.

Mayliandra felt a tad uncomfortable, not certain what to say, though so many things needed saying. Since Kareina made love to her at the pond, Mayliandra couldn't look at Kareina without wanting to demand to know why she hadn't announced the truth. Of course, Mayliandra knew why, but had hoped Kareina would come to trust her by now. The affections shared hadn't embarrassed her, the intimacy being the most beautiful and remarkable experience Mayliandra had participated in, and more wonderful than she'd ever imagined.

No, it was, after waking in Kareina's arms this morning, she could no longer look at Kareina and see any hint of a man, further confirming the truth. Karr was in actuality Kareina. This recognition released the terrible burden of hurting a husband, even unintentionally, as Mayliandra would never have to lay with a man.

What was Mayliandra to do now? She looked at Kareina who was a woman in guise of a man, and Mayliandra's heart was full, happy.

"We still need to talk," Kareina said, bringing her out of her thoughts. Mayliandra nodded. "We need postpone this for a moment, and scout the area. I can't have another of those creatures near you and the girls." Kareina glanced at the tent. "Please, make sure Yoshan is all right, and that Jahq is too. Jahq is resilient but doesn't bounce back as well as our Poppet."

Mayliandra nodded. "I will do my best."

With a grin, she raised a hand and cupped Mayliandra's chin in her hand. "I know you will, Mayli. I have every confidence in you." The sincerity in her expression about broke Mayliandra's heart. She had to tell Kareina, had to let her know she cared for her so much, had fallen in love with her—as a woman. Tell Kareina she'd seen her as a woman for so long. All this time, Mayliandra thought fate treated her cruelly to force her into a marriage with a man. Now Mayliandra knew the truth of it. If fate treated anyone heartlessly, it was Kareina, because as long as she had to be a man, Kareina could never relax her emotions fully. Mayliandra began to understand more of the information Spallan had attempted to impart.

"You should see to your wound, first. Maybe have Stechyc take a look, since the creature—"

"On my return, I promise. I need to make certain you're all safe from other monsters, if they are of a pack mentality." Kareina frowned. "I wouldn't want one or more sneaking around." She paused. "Or worse, something getting into the tent during the night."

Their much-needed talk had to wait a while longer, Mayliandra knew, but she could try to make some comments without speech. She didn't know how to convey all the things she wanted to say. Cupping a hand behind Kareina's neck, Mayliandra drew her closer, settling for simple, earnest words. "Take care and be safe, my heart," she whispered against Kareina's lips, before kissing her husband-wife thoroughly.

The shocked expression on Kareina's face was priceless, and she stared at Mayliandra. "Hurry home," Mayliandra said, turning to enter the tent. She paused, glancing back at Kareina one last time. Kareina appeared ready to follow her, before Tiilaen approached her and began speaking animatedly, in hushed tones. Mayliandra went inside to check on the girls.

Mayliandra had convinced Yoshan to take a nap before Papa Karr came home from scouting when Stechyc entered the tent, Gionne awkwardly standing behind her. She felt bad for the young warrior-intraining, knowing Gionne, still ill at ease in her too quickly growing body, had developed an instant crush on Jahq the moment Gionne had carried her from the building in Iskarr. Jahq sat at the table, and as if she sensed Gionne's feelings, ignored her. So as not to wake Yoshan, Mayliandra signaled Stechyc and Gionne outside.

"How is Yoshan faring from her ordeal?" Stechyc asked.

"Appears fine, but it wore her out."

“And Jahq?” asked Gionne.

Mayliandra bit back the smile threatening to burst forth. “Also shaken up the creature was so close, but relieved no one was hurt.” She remembered the gouging Kareina had taken.

Mayliandra glanced to Stechyc. “Were you able to look at the beast?” Stechyc hesitated before she gave a slow nod. “This is where you tell me not to worry, I suppose.”

“Actually, Mayliandra, I believe you should be concerned enough to make sure Karr comes to me straight way from returning. It was a baby morzek, so a mother is still out there.” With the discouraging comment, Stechyc and Gionne left Mayliandra to her day.

Although she tried to hide it, Mayliandra felt panic build inside, knotting her stomach. Please, no, she begged whatever deity may be listening, don’t take Kareina from me, when I’m realizing I love her. So many of us need her, I need her. Why couldn’t I have seen the truth from the beginning and confronted her outright? Why couldn’t we have trusted each other? She hadn’t given Kareina reason to trust her, playing all hot and cold. Mayliandra remembered the snide, hateful remarks from Belzan mere days ago.

No, Kareina had to be so very careful with the truth. Kareina wasn’t only protecting Mayliandra anymore, but her two daughters as well. The horrible things men like Belzan could and would do to them if they realized Kareina wasn’t male—and her wife was impersonating a man.

As much as the distrust hurt, Kareina hadn’t been left any alternative. Mayliandra knew she would have to accept and find a way to move beyond the past, to build on the relationship from this mark forward. Maybe another night by the pond would help Kareina relax enough for them to talk.

With enough anxiety to make her nauseous, Mayliandra trudged through the day, having spent time with the girls. She’d even attempted to practice her sword work, but her heart wasn’t in it with Sindi dead. Another fog was creeping in, night wasn’t too far away, and still Kareina, Tiilaen and Aliya hadn’t returned. The girls were fed and playing with Mokie in the tent, so Mayliandra opened the flap and decided to wait their return in the fresh air.

Mayliandra had waited less than a quarter-hour when she heard movement from beside the tent. Believing Kareina had returned, Mayliandra made her way over. A cloaked figure was crouched at the far end, near the rear of the tent. She realized too late it wasn’t Kareina or anyone from their camp and prepared to sound an alarm, her head was covered with a scratchy hood leaving her in darkness. And then a sharp object slammed into the side of her head, making the darkness complete.

MAGAN ENTERED THE chamber, deep within the volcanic mountain, where he always came to think alone, far from the other deities. Here he created new pieces of enchanted metalwork in the forge heated by the molten lava deep in the core. With few mortals taking the charge and duties of their preferred gods, Magan had an entire portion of the cave of creations that would never be wielded by mortal hands in his or any other deities name; every manner of weapon, from swords and shields, to talismen. All to be lost to the ages of either this retched harmony, or to whatever demon may find them when chaos and the minions of Bahalkar were released.

Since the moment Zenti removed Ysannie’s immortality he had regretted not speaking up on her behalf. He’d given the matter much thought since then. Ysannie was always kind to him.

Whether she had or not, he would have liked her determination and compassion where the mortals were concerned, thinking of them as more than game pieces for the gods to manipulate. And Magan had already considered giving up Kellshae for the stars, off on other adventures. The one thing the remaining gods failed to consider in their petulant haranguing of the humans was they were dying anyway; fading into obscurity as the mortals, with the exception of a small handful, had forgotten them. And better to go willingly than fall to the clutches of a vengeful T'Dar.

Yes, Magan resolved, I'll finish this last piece, and move on. He looked down at the sword near completion. The black steel veined with a special virtually translucent teal colored marble found deep in the bowels of the Virtutis caves of Languard. A special material which could detect and collect the magic and souls of those struck by the blade. The same gem-sized marble, four set into the pommel, was enchanted to locate beings with magical abilities. Knuckle guard and quillons of the cross guard were forged of the same indestructible black steel as the blade. Magan traced the fuller with a thick finger, concentrating on the words of enchantment, while visualizing the intended owner in his mind's eye. Power buzzed through his finger pad and caused the marble to glow eerily. The last incantation finished, Magan took a step backwards, and caught movement in his peripheral vision from the shadows of the cave passageway. Magan picked up his forging hammer, walked to the forge, and placed the hammer on the hot stone. He hoped T'Dar didn't notice his newest work. Magan said, "I wondered when you might seek me out. Need me to cast a blade for you?"

T'Dar moved into the light. "I'm surprised you're here."

Magan shrugged. "Hadn't planned on it, but couldn't leave without one last swing of the hammer, one more glimpse at what I'd leave behind."

"Now it's too late," T'Dar said, smirking.

"So be it. I'm tired anyway."

T'Dar moved closer. "Your miscalculation will cost you." Magan put the hammer down, and crossed his arms over his massive chest.

"Not even going to put up a challenge?" T'Dar asked, irked there wouldn't be a fight.

"Told you, I'm tired, T'Dar. I'm not thrilled to watch the demons of Bahalkar return; and, not to watch your dead shamble around not even sport for the demons to chase down. Do what you wish."

An actual pout crossed T'Dar's lips. "But I had so hoped for a good stretch of my muscles before I beat you." T'Dar pulled one of the magic blades, which had kept the banished god in Bahalkar, from a sheath at his belt. "Oh, well, it is what it is." T'Dar raised the knife and plunged the blade into Magan's chest.

While the blade absorbed his energy, Magan again whispered an incantation. In a flash of emerald green light, the sword disappeared. The burst of energy caught T'Dar's attention and he glanced in the now empty space. "No fair, you bastard."

In a whisper, the last of his essence drained, Magan said, "Oh, you poor baby."

CHAYBOEN AND YSANNIE stood in the tower bedroom packing the last of their travel bags. This journey either would prove their preparations fruitful, or be a waste of time and hope, Chayboen thought securing the last buckle.

“Never a waste of hope, my love,” Ysannie said from behind her. Ysannie wrapped Chayboen in her arms, kissing her temple.

“It’s hard, knowing so much relies on so many others doing their part in the scheme. And those others aren’t aware of what their part is.” Chayboen leaned back into the embrace.

Ysannie chuckled. “Such are the games of mortal and god.”

Turning in Ysannie’s arms so they faced, Chayboen kissed her lover deeply. “As long as I have you by my side, all things are possible. Win or lose, it’s all in how we play the game. My wish is to have a reasonable idea how nasty the other side will play.”

“Ah, darling, always assume the worse with gods,” Ysannie said. A spark of green flashed in the space between them, prompting Ysannie to push her back.

“What the—” Chayboen clamped her lips closed. Appearing in the space she’d occupied only seconds before was the most beautiful sword, the tip buried into the stone floor enough to keep it standing. “Oh, sweet goddess.”

“Yes, you call?” Ysannie asked with a playful grin. Chayboen nudged an elbow into Ysannie’s rib and gave a low growl. Curiosity got the better of them and both inched closer to the weapon, examining the sword from every angle, though careful not to touch it. Every instance when Chayboen was closest, the gems in the pommel illuminated. After breathless seconds, Ysannie said, “I appear to have misspoken earlier.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is intended for you. And only a god, one in particular, could have forged such a marvelous creation.” Chayboen stared at Ysannie in question. “You, my love, have been gifted a magical sword from Magan.”

“But why?” she asked, not expecting an answer. Gods didn’t need a reason for anything they do, she supposed. Maybe she shouldn’t question such a magnificent gift. Staring toward the ceiling, Chayboen did the only thing she could. “Thank you, Magan.” She glanced back at Ysannie. “Now what? It’s not that magical weapons are commonplace any longer.”

Ysannie moved behind her and gave a gentle shove. “You must claim it.”

“Claim it?” Chayboen glanced over her shoulder.

“It is intended for you. So you must touch the weapon so it will know who possesses it. Go on.”

After another breath of hesitation, Chayboen extended a hand and grasped the sword’s grip. A flare of near unbearable heat rushed through her as the teal veins interspersed through the blade, and the gems in the pommel glowed. The blade returned to black, the gems looking as any other stone. She stepped away from Ysannie and swung, parried, and slashed. The balance was perfect. “I have never seen the likes of this blade.”

Ysannie frowned. “And you never will again. It must have taken much for Magan to smith this, let alone specifically for a mortal, after what happened at the council.”

Chayboen glanced to the gash in the stone floor. “So what can it do?”

“No steel is as strong as the black blade was forged from. The gems and the lines in the blade appear to be *Virtutis* marble. If the two compounds have been mated, I’d have to surmise your blade would absorb the magic of your victim. Experimentation—or asking the creator directly—will tell the whole tale. We should count our favors with the gods, and get some rest. Morning is going to come too soon as it is.”

Trading the new blade with her old in the sheath, Chayboen gave one last caress, turned and did likewise to Ysannie’s cheek. “There are favors I would bestow on the only god I have any interest in.”

“But I am no longer a god,” Ysannie said.

“You’re wrong.” Chayboen cupped the back of Ysannie’s neck and drew her closer. They kissed, each giving the other a taste of the passion in their hearts. “When I have finished worshipping every inch of your remarkable body,” Chayboen said, steering Ysannie back toward the bed. “You’ll know you’re the only goddess of and in my heart.”

“Honor me with your devotion, my love, so I may return the favors tenfold.”

A HARSH BARK of laughter came from behind Mayliandra as she gained consciousness, followed by a man’s voice, “Our guest is waking, Persimmone.”

Mayliandra tried to focus on her surroundings. She was in a large tent and bound by rope across her chest to a chair, her hands secured behind the chair’s back and her ankles strapped to the legs. Two men in black monk robes, with cowls so deep she couldn’t make out their faces, stood by the open entrance. She recognized the man who had spoken— Jurquette. The traitor wasn’t Armin after all; although she had come to dislike Jurquette after their travel through Iskarr. Any man who did what he did to children was capable of aligning himself with T’Dar.

There was a pasty-fleshed man pacing in front of her. She blinked her eyes to get her swimming vision to focus. When it did, Mayliandra couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Standing about five-feet-ten, with black hair and blue eyes, weak and thin, was the spitting image of Kareina.

Persimmone sneered at Mayliandra. “So this is what my father would have saddled me with. Kareina and all her pretense at playing a man—playing me—and this is the best Hassid has found, another woman wanting to be a man.” Her confusion must have registered on her face. “Hasn’t she performed her husbandly duties, perverted as they may be? Have you been able to see past the pitiful magic she uses?” He puffed out his scrawny chest. “I am the real Sher Karr. You’re traipsing around with my pathetic sister. The fool woman doesn’t know her place. I could be sitting comfortably at Gradyln if she had died like I had planned all those years ago.”

Mayliandra, hardly shocked by the revelation, felt a bit relieved at the final confirmation she hadn’t been crazy. She had fallen in love with a woman. Must have been what Karr—no, after seeing the other twin, she’d never think of Kareina as Karr again—was trying to tell her, to admit openly. The relief was short lived when Mayliandra’s brain processed what he had said. “What plan?”

He paused. “All Kellshae knows the story of her alleged death at Clan Youlren. But she didn’t die—she stole my identity completely. My very birthright, and all because Guldrac wanted to play with his toy rather than follow our agreement. Ah, but now I’ll get all of Kellshae, while I make Gradyln my home base. Hassid will have to kowtow to his true son, acknowledge me for the better man. If I let him live.” Persimmone’s eyes glazed as he visualized this future event in his mind.

Kareina was tortured and repeatedly raped and her own brother had deliberately arranged it. As if a floodgate opened, all the knowledge of what Kareina endured, the emotional turmoil Mayliandra herself had caused her flashed into Mayliandra’s thoughts. Despite living in a man’s world, Kareina had remained caring, tender. She’d taken two children and made them her own, protecting them from the likes of Belzan, Jurquette, and even this foul excuse of flesh. Try as she might, Mayliandra couldn’t stop the tears for all the misery which had befallen such a wonderful person. Would she live to apologize to Kareina?

A hand grasped the back of her neck and Mayliandra was jolted out of her thoughts. Jurquette was behind her. “Why the tears? Let me guess. You’re afraid to die before knowing a true man? I’ve wanted you as bad as Armin. I will get you.” She wiggled in her bindings, trying to shift enough to dislodge his hands, but couldn’t do it.

“You’re no man,” she said, glaring at Jurquette and then Persimmon, “either of you.”

Persimmon, his face an angry red, backhanded her across the cheek. If not tied to the chair, Mayliandra would have collapsed to the floor. “I could kill you without breaking a sweat,” he growled.

“Quit whining like an old woman and do it.”

Another rough blow came. “If I didn’t need you—”

Mayliandra, face throbbing, swallowed the blood trickling into the back of her throat. “I won’t do anything to hurt her.”

He smirked. “Anything I do to you will hurt her.”

She gave a snort. “Kareina could despise me for all you know.”

Jurquette, unfazed by her comment on his manhood, stroked the back of her neck and shoulders. She felt her skin crawl. “Not what our confederate has reported. Kareina, confused about her true gender, has fallen in love with you.” His hand dropped to the top beneath the opening of her shirt and rubbed across the top of her breasts. “Had I known the truth of Sher Karr at Bredwine, I also would have been as tempted as Armin to appropriate your company by nefarious means.”

Mayliandra wanted to disagree that it would have been so easy a task, shout how she’d have fought off either of them. Jurquette knew as well as her she wouldn’t have fared well. It wasn’t until meeting Kareina she was able to voice an opinion without worry of a beating for insolence. She wanted to ask who was the traitor in their camp was, but didn’t. As long as Mayliandra didn’t know, she could pretend it was a ploy by these men to know more than they did.

Looking to Persimmon, Jurquette asked, “So, what now?”

“We send a poignant message to my dear sister.”

“Aw, I was hoping for a bit of fun,” Jurquette said, his tone noxious.

Persimmon grimaced distaste. “Oh, as you like, but leave her with enough breath to pass on my message.”

A wicked glint appeared in Jurquette’s eyes. “Tell her now so I can get on with it. I’ve contemplated this for too long a time and don’t wish to waste any more.”

Dread filled Mayliandra. She had to think of a way out of this, though limited by so many things: her inability to think of a strategy in her panicked state; outnumbered and having only rudimentary fighting skills; trussed up like an animal for slaughter. It took a slap to her already abused face to remind her to pay attention to Persimmon and his message for Kareina.

“Let me start over,” Persimmon sighed. “I will wait for her at the Pool of Promise, and she should be there during the eclipse in a fortnight. If Kareina believes she can defeat me, this will be her opportunity to prove it. Once I have finished the ritual, I will rule Kellshae.”

“You might as well disabuse yourself right now. You’ll never win,” said Mayliandra with more calm than she felt. “She will stop you.”

“How can I lose? I have the power of a god behind me.” Persimmon smirked.

“A good thing, too.”

Persimmon’s brow scrunched in frustrated confusion. “What the hellfire is that remark supposed to mean?”

She raked her gaze across his body. “There isn’t any way you could work up a sneeze without someone else’s help.”

“You bitch.” Persimmon swung his fist into the left side of her face. This time the force threw her to the floor, the snapping of the wooden chair loud in the tent. A boot landed in her midsection, once, twice, again. Mayliandra tried to suck air into her lungs, but the attempt brought sharp darts of pain.

“Stop,” Jurquette said. “You need her alive, and I prefer her conscious.”

Persimmon stepped back and ran his hands through his hair. From her position on the floor, gaze hazy from pain and the swelling in her face, Mayliandra noted the addition of another pair of boots. They made their way to Persimmon’s side, paused, and were off again. “Do what you will. Final preparations are underway,” he told Jurquette. “We leave in moments, and you need to complete your part as I’ve assigned to you.”

Jurquette didn’t wait to be told a second time. He pulled a knife from his belt, and came toward her. Mayliandra flinched. Jurquette cut the ropes at her chest and feet, freeing her from the damaged chair. Grabbing her jerkin, Jurquette pulled her violently to her feet and dragged her to a section of tent behind her. A heavy weight of dread filled her when she saw a field cot and table.

A fresh wave of panic suffused Mayliandra as Jurquette slammed her stomach against the table, and he pushed her upper body forward onto it. “Don’t let him do this, Persimmon,” she said, her gaze forced to look in his direction. “Kareina—”

Mayliandra felt Jurquette’s nails rake her lower back, welts rising on the flesh as he yanked her breeches down to her knees. Mayliandra ignored the pain in her abdomen and chest from Persimmon’s beating, and struggled to break free. She couldn’t get any purchase with her bound hands. When she felt his now exposed flesh touch hers, Mayliandra fought harder, tears blurred her vision, panic taking her breath. She was barely aware the monks were moving toward them.

Jurquette, annoyed with her struggles, buried a knife into the flesh of her upper left arm, pinning her to the table. Mayliandra screamed.

Suddenly, he no longer held her.

Mayliandra heard a surprised rasping sound from behind her. As an angry Persimmon approached, Mayliandra saw one of the monks grab him by the throat and hold him in place.

Before she comprehended what was happening, another figure, female, entered the tent. Through the haze of pain, she had a twinge of recognition. It was confirmed when the woman spoke.

Fleuren said, “You are both more stupid than I thought possible.” Fleuren swiftly made her way to Mayliandra, pulling the knife free and catching her before Mayliandra collapsed to the floor. “How do you think T’Dar will respond when he finds out you’ve almost disrupted his plans?”

With the hand still clutched around his throat, Persimmon croaked, “How do you figure, witch?” Despite his predicament, he managed to fling a sneer in Fleuren’s direction.

Fleuren gave a sniff and shook her head. Ignoring him for a moment, she used the bloody knife to cut the rope binding Mayliandra’s hands. Fleuren half-carried a weakened Mayliandra to the cot, adjusted her clothing to cover her. Fleuren sat beside her. “You foolish little man,” she said to Persimmon. “She would come for you. Had Jurquette raped her wife, Kareina would not stop until he had paid with his life. I doubt it would be a quick death, either.”

Fleuren looked toward the cloaked form holding Jurquette. “Release him.” The silent monk complied. “T’Dar wishes you to forget the mission Persimmon gave.” At his frown, she said,

“You are now to join us as we make our way to the Pool of Promise. T’Dar has already dispatched another to complete the task originally yours.”

Jurquette gave a startled glance in Persimmon’s direction. “But I didn’t take her. Don’t see why T’Dar can’t leave things as they were and forget this minor indiscretion. Persimmon egged me on.”

With a raised eyebrow, Fleuren said, “You’re welcome to plead your case to T’Dar yourself.” When he gulped, Fleuren gave a mirthless smile. “Just so. You may leave now.” Once he left the tent, she turned to the second monk. “Release him.”

No sooner had Persimmon been released, he clenched his hands into fists and started in her direction. Mayliandra cringed, and Fleuren put a reassuring arm around her shoulder. “Stupid witch, you’ll pay for—” The first monk moved to block his path to them.

“I suggest you rethink any further objection,” Fleuren said, unfazed by his anger. She cocked her head to the side as if listening to someone speaking, though Mayliandra heard nothing. “And unless you’d like to personally deal with Kareina within the next few moments, I suggest you also leave right now. As it is, you too need to deal with T’Dar over this matter.”

Persimmon stared at Mayliandra, then Fleuren. “This isn’t over,” he said, before storming from the tent.

Fleuren turned her attention to Mayliandra. “I wish I had known their intention. I could have stopped this sooner. I learned you were here moments ago by chance.”

Mayliandra focused through swollen eyelids. “How did you?” she asked passed split and bloody lips. What Mayliandra wanted to know was why such hateful men feared this sweet, small woman. “You left us for them? Why help me at all?”

Fleuren gave a pained expression. “Because you’re a friend and needed me. I haven’t time to explain the rest. Lie down.” Cradling Mayliandra’s head, she helped Mayliandra lower herself and stretch out. Fleuren pulled a square of material from a pocket, snapped it open and tied it over the knife wound. “Please, I know you’re in pain but I need you to listen carefully. Kareina must be at the Pool of Promise at the scheduled time, at all costs. I can’t explain more, and we both know you have no reason to trust me. Especially when I show you what you need to see.” Fleuren motioned toward the monk who had stopped Jurquette from raping her.

When he pulled his cowl away, Mayliandra whimpered and trembled at the sight. “Sweet goddess, no. Reese?”

“All must be made aware the Monks of Silence are dead warriors and villagers,” Fleuren said. “I see them, speak to them, even see through their eyes, but T’Dar controls those who died under his magic. Persimmon and T’Dar must be stopped before the Monks can complete their assigned task.”

“Why?” Mayliandra asked, too drained to ask more.

With a weak smile, Fleuren said, “I hope to live long enough to tell the story. Right now, rest. Kareina is close.”

Mayliandra grasped Fleuren’s arm before she moved away. “Thank you.”

Fleuren gave a tender squeeze to Mayliandra’s hand. “I wish—” Fleuren stood and ordered the Monks to leave. “T’Dar is coming for me.” She rushed to the tents entrance and hesitated. With her head lowered, avoiding Mayliandra’s gaze, Fleuren said, “Melrick—” Her voice hitched. “Tell him I’m sorry, but I cared for him.”

Before she could respond, Fleuren fled the tent and Mayliandra was all alone. She closed her eyes and thought of Kareina. Would she ever forgive the emotional torment Mayliandra had

caused her? How could she not have trusted her own eyes, her own heart? Would the damage be repairable?

Mayliandra shuddered at all the lives damaged by one man—Persimmone. She wanted—needed—to be the one to help Kareina, to make their marriage right. To help make everything right. Did Kareina know her twin still lived, and what he had become? She doubted so. As darkness claimed her, Mayliandra prayed she'd be the one to make him pay for the damage done to her love, her Kareina.

KAREINA SAW THE tent in the distance and urged Starsinger faster. She didn't want to panic, knowing anything could have happened to Mayliandra during her short captivity. The dread consumed Kareina. She needed to be strong for Mayliandra's sake. Kareina circled the tent to find the entrance. She pulled back on Starsinger's reins when she found it. Kareina jumped from the saddle before he'd come to a complete stop. She stumbled when dizziness all but dropped her to her knees, pain slicing through her stomach and side where the slime-covered tusk had impaled her. Kareina drew a deep breath to steady herself, pulled her blade free of the sheath and stepped through the entrance.

Kareina heard the labored breathing from the left, confirming her fear Mayliandra had come to harm. Swift strides took Kareina to the cot and she knelt down beside Mayliandra, even as the growing wound in her side made the action pain filled. In the dimness of the faltering lantern, she could see the beating Mayliandra had taken, eclipsing her own pain.

"Oh, love," Kareina whispered. Mayliandra shifted in response to her voice; and outrage consumed Kareina as she noted the breeches hastily pulled up and still unfastened. Pain-filled tears burned a path down her cheeks. "I have failed you again."

Melrick and Tiilaen rushed into the tent. "Kareina?" Melrick asked and moved closer.

Tiilaen said, "I'll get a blanket." Once she returned, Tiilaen helped Kareina wrap it around Mayliandra.

"We need to get her to Stechyc," Kareina said.

"It may be best not to move her," Tiilaen said. "I'll go back to camp and get her."

"No," Mayliandra mumbled through swollen lips. "I can make it back."

Kareina bent close to Mayliandra. "Moving may worsen your injuries."

Mayliandra's head swiveled toward Kareina's, who noted one eye totally shut and one opened by a mere slit. "Please, take me out of here."

"But, Mayli—"

"Please?"

Kareina remained silent, contemplating the best course not tainted with emotion. She said, "As you wish."

Careful to be as gentle as possible, Kareina lifted Mayliandra into her arms, murmuring apologies when Mayliandra moaned from pain.

Kareina knew she herself was trembling from her own rage and fear, but cautiously moved to leave the tent, knowing the other two followed. "I'll make Persimmone—and anyone else involved—suffer for this atrocity." Outside, Starsinger gave a soft whinny at her approach. "Let's get her safely away, my friend," Kareina said to Starsinger, "and be as gentle as you can." Tiilaen was at her side, as was Melrick, though he stood slightly away.

“Let me help you, Kareina,” Tiilaen offered with extended arms. Kareina wavered for a split-second before placing Mayliandra in Tiilaen’s arms. She jumped into the saddle and as soon as Tiilaen returned Mayliandra to her embrace, Kareina cradled her close, resting Mayliandra’s head against her shoulder. Holding the reins loosely in one hand, she applied pressure to Starsinger’s flanks with her knees, and they left the horrid tent behind.

Somehow, Starsinger seemed to comprehend the situation as he increased his stride to cover the ground without galloping, and appeared to know the way without further prodding. This made it easier for Kareina to concentrate on Mayliandra. Mayliandra was still beautiful to Kareina, despite the swelling, the drying blood on her lips, the awful discoloration from the bruised flesh and eyes swollen shut. Mayliandra’s warm breath at least was steady against Kareina’s neck.

Hands trembling, Kareina tugged and tucked the blanket around Mayliandra to keep the night air from chilling her, only to be reminded once again of the unfastened breeches. She groaned at her inability to protect the very person who needed her, who should expect it from her.

Mayliandra’s hand covered her own. “He didn’t succeed,” Mayliandra whispered.

“Thank the goddess,” Kareina croaked.

“No, it’s thanks to you.” Kareina stared at her in confusion and Mayliandra said, “They knew you were close and Fleuren was able to stop them in time.”

“Fleuren? She’s with—”

Mayliandra swallowed and managed to cough and choke for a full minute.

“Careful, love. Hush.” Kareina twisted the hand under Mayliandra’s so their hands clasped, and she lightly squeezed Mayliandra’s. “We’ll talk once you are well.”

“Which one of us is burning up?” Mayliandra asked. Kareina ignored the question. “I feel better in your arms,” Mayliandra whispered. “I know I’m safe here.”

At a loss for words, Kareina took a deep breath, her heart beating stronger as it filled with an impossible hope. Kareina felt Mayliandra remove her hand from hers, and shift it to Kareina’s waist, where Mayliandra tightened her grip as she eased away and attempted to raise her head from Kareina’s shoulder. Starsinger stopped. “Please, Mayli, don’t exert yourself.”

“I’m sorry, but I must.” Mayliandra shook her head. “You need to know.”

“What can’t wait?” Kareina asked.

“Persimmon,” Mayliandra said, “is the real Karr.”

Kareina was glad for the darkness of night, hoping it hid her shock and confusion, as a wave of panic coursed through her. “Mayli, I—”

The hand Mayliandra had at her waist shifted to her cheek. Mayliandra’s thumb rubbed a gentle path, before her arm dropped in exhaustion. “He means you so much more harm. You need to prepare yourself—” Her breathing more labored.

“Mayli, I need to explain,” Kareina stuttered. “Right now, save your strength, please.” She drew Mayliandra closer, placed a lingering kiss to her forehead. Realizing what she had done, Kareina glanced pleadingly into the bare slit of a gaze directed at her. “I’m so sorry. Forgive me.”

“I’m not sorry. But you should never have lied to me, Kareina. This is something I should have known from the start.”

With a raspy sigh, Mayliandra fell into unconsciousness, leaving Kareina to wonder if Mayliandra wasn’t sorry or wasn’t forgiving her. Either way, she hadn’t missed Mayliandra’s wounded tone about the lying. Kareina had always suspected she would lose Mayliandra once the truth was out; but now it was known and she still wasn’t certain how her wife felt about it.

Chapter Twenty

KAREINA, TIILAEN AND Aliya rode from camp after leaving Mayliandra with Stechyc and the girls, still needing to search for and destroy the morzek, before anyone else was harmed—or worse, breed more of the vile demons. The terrain was becoming more mountainous, with large sections of forest making perfect hiding spots for all creatures, natural or otherwise. The wound in her side had become infected, her body burning with fever and wracked with pain, Kareina refused treatment when Stechyc asked her about it. Because, for Kareina, what hurt most was, after all they'd been through, the positive growth in their relationship, miniscule as it was, losing Mayliandra would hurt more than anything. Early morning darkness surrounded them, making it almost impossible to track the demon, had it not been for the sliver of moonlight providing some illumination. It would take luck before skill to find the beast.

Aliya was silent at the back of the trail, much as she was since they held funeral rites for Sindi in Iskarr, Sindi's ashes hung in a pouch at Aliya's neck, for return to Langear. Kareina hoped never to know such a particular pain.

Tiilaen, Kareina knew, was finding it more difficult to remain silent, especially when her heavy sighs were ignored, and Tiilaen squirmed in her saddle. "Why?" Tiilaen blurted.

"Because I don't want my daughters coming on another beast," Kareina said, purposefully misunderstanding.

"You know what I mean," Tiilaen said. "The illness will get worse, as well you know. What good are you in battle if you're too ill to sit in the saddle?" Tiilaen cantered up even with her. "It happened before."

"I was holding my own quite well," Kareina said.

"Barely." Tiilaen shook her head. "We both know your ability isn't what this is about. I'm worried, Kareina. The situation wasn't complicated enough, but to learn the raider leader working with T'Dar is your brother, the real Karr, is going to make matters worse."

"You believe I'll fail you?" Kareina demanded. "Because—"

"It isn't you I don't have faith in."

"What is it, then?"

Tiilaen pointed back to Aliya. "We've lived with magic our entire lives, so we always saw beyond the magical disguise. We prepared ourselves to respond to you as male."

"And so?" Kareina tried to understand her point, but illness made it difficult. With each step Starsinger took, Kareina found it harder to concentrate. And she had to focus. Kareina hadn't arranged for Mayliandra and the girls. Parrin would have to be told. Melrick would take care of it, wouldn't he? Her mother would understand. Parrin always knew the right thing to do.

"Kareina, some of your men have stayed away because they don't wish to incur your wrath. Belzan is case in point. But what about when someone with magic newly acquired sees you for who you are, and makes the observation known? My warriors and I can defend ourselves long enough to return to Langear. Mayliandra, Jahq and little Yoshan, though, will Melrick and Olaf be enough to protect them?" Tiilaen gave a shudder. "What happens to you when your men find

you're merely a woman—who's deceived them all these years? This far from Gradyln, will men like Belzan remember you are their future sovereign? He can't be the only in your command to disagree with women being treated equal to them."

It wasn't as though Kareina hadn't worried about all these same points for so very long. The concern about her identity had especially been of concern since she, herself, had felt the ripples of magic when in Iskarr. "I need to get passed this matter with Persi—with my brother. Valid as your concerns are, it won't matter if Karr and T'Dar win."

Saddened, Tiilaen said, "And, an easier win for them without you."

"One person can't make—"

Aliya had moved closer. "Tiilaen," she said, pointing to the left.

A twenty-foot clearing of high grass. The morzek occupied a section to the west of them and tore into the bloody carcass of a deer. The horses grew skittish. Kareina hoped, if the horses smelled the blood of the kill the morzek hadn't caught their scent. They tied the horses' leads to a tree, before pulling weapons free. "We need to surround him," Kareina whispered. "Aliya, you hold this point while Tiilaen goes left, and I take right." Aliya nodded, and Tiilaen and Kareina moved off.

Staying close to the trees to lessen exposure, Kareina was able to get within six-feet before the creature raised his head. She looked back to Aliya, who had edged closer. Across from her, Kareina saw the auburn hair before Tiilaen poked her head from behind a tree approximately ten-feet from Kareina's position. Matching advancing steps, all three closed in on the morzek.

Kareina became concerned when they were mere feet away, and the demon had yet to attack, giving no other acknowledgement of their presence since raising his head.

This had to be a trap.

Instinct suggested she run the morzek through, but it could be the goal of whoever baited them. If they left now, raced back to camp before the ambush sprung, the morzek could kill many more innocents. Kareina decided the best course of action to be the latter. "We—"

A bolt of red lightning flashed across the sky, and down into the clearing piercing the demon until he caught fire, the impact so hard it threw all three women off their feet. A red vapor blanketed the area, and Kareina felt groggy. From the confused expressions on Tiilaen and Aliya, she assumed the effects were the same for them.

A shimmering shape formed beside the burning morzek, coalescing into a woman with black hair, deep-set eyes, darkening powder surrounding them, and blood red lips. "Not leaving already, are you?" asked a sultry voice. But it wasn't a normal voice. This bit deep into Kareina's head, making her want to cover her ears, though it would do no good. "We haven't had a chance to play." The woman gave a mock pout. "And I'm so hungry after so long in Bahalkar." Her eyes darkened further, until the face seemed to have empty sockets—if it weren't for the red eyes piercing Kareina's gaze.

Kareina tried to fight the groggy feeling, managing to stagger to her feet. "Who are—" She didn't finish the question. The red-eyed woman raised a hand and stabbed a finger in her direction. Suddenly, Kareina was floating backward, slammed painfully into a tree trunk, while whip thin limbs came alive, and wrapped around her wrists and ankles, binding her to the tree. She cried out, squeezing her eyes closed from the excruciating pain tearing through her body. When the agony subsided into a tolerable ache, Kareina opened her eyes to find the woman had done likewise to Tiilaen and Aliya, on either side of her.

"Now, we're ready to play." The woman glided across the clearing, hovering scant inches away.

“Who are you?” Kareina asked, feeling an instant of panic at how fragile her voice sounded. Floating until flush with Kareina’s body, she said, “Nehlari.”

“She’s a succubus,” Tiilaen said. Nehlari grinned wide as Tiilaen fought against her bindings. “Stupid bitch has to tie woman up to get a date.”

Nehlari snickered. “A jokester to entertain me, I see.” In the blink of an eye, the succubus hovered close to Tiilaen. She glided a red fingernail down Tiilaen’s cheek. Whatever Nehlari was doing magically caused Tiilaen to grit her teeth as her eyes rolled upward. “I’m going to adore my time draining you. You’re experienced with an inventive sense for play. You’ll be sweet on my tongue.”

“I won’t submit,” Tiilaen said through gritted teeth.

“What about you, child?” Nehlari asked, now in front of Aliya. Enthusiasm flashed in her red eyes. “Your hurt is fresh and raw. You’ll be quick to submit, yet potent like ambrosia.” Aliya didn’t respond.

Now Nehlari stood before Kareina, and she felt the bone deep chill the path of Nehlari’s finger left in its wake. Unable to stop what was happening, Kareina realized the action pulled memories, specific memories, into her mind’s eye. Memories of the taste of shared kisses with Mayliandra, of the silky feel of her flesh, even Kareina’s restrained desire not to push Mayliandra. “Why would you deny yourself?” Nehlari asked. The succubus brought her lips to Kareina’s, and the chill became bitterly cold, stiffening her muscles. She shivered. The memories went deeper, the whips, the poker, the blade carving into her, the men—Nehlari jerked away. “You’ll taste sour, but I’ll savor every morsel of your pain.”

Hot tears at the resurgence of those terrifying memories and all the returning emotions fell down Kareina’s cheeks. “Bitch. And you’re ugly.”

“Naughty, naughty.” Nehlari curled her fingers into a claw, a small ball of red fire danced in her palm for a split second before she released it into Kareina’s infected wound.

Kareina screamed as wave after wave of agony consumed her, screamed until her throat was raw, until exhaustion overcame her and only the tree bindings kept her from collapsing in a heap on the ground. Unbidden, an image of a laughing Mayliandra flashed in her head, and Kareina felt her lips twitch in an attempted smile. I’m sorry, Mayli, she told the vision in her mind. I wanted you so, wanted us to be a real family, yet I failed you all.

Darkness consumed Kareina.

TIILAEN THRASHED IN her bindings, feeling the bark from the thin tree limbs bite into her flesh as she tried to pull free. Kareina’s screams echoed in her ears still. Why did you never let Stechyc teach you magic? she chided herself. Even in the meager light of the moon, Tiilaen could see how pale Kareina had become, could see how shallow her breathing. “Hellfire, we will not die here,” she mumbled. But she didn’t know how they were going to escape before their essence was sucked dry by Nehlari. Dying from multiple orgasms might hold a certain appeal, but Tiilaen would rather the real Stechyc were the reason, not a succubus feeding off enhanced memories of her wife. Maybe, if she could distract the succubus from killing Kareina by torture, Tiilaen would formulate a plan before Nehlari killed her, too.

“Succu-bitch,” Tiilaen said. Nehlari turned angry eyes in her direction. “Oh, get over yourself. Thought you wanted to play, not torture one too sick to even give you any sport.” Oh, sweet goddess, what am I doing?

“No, you said it yourself. You need to taste the ambrosia.” Aliya spoke more than she had in days, and this wasn’t the right time to do so.

“Don’t listen to her,” Tiilaen said. What was Aliya doing?

Nehlari glanced to Aliya, who said, “I’m what you need. Let me show you.”

“Aliya, don’t.” Tiilaen tugged so hard against the bindings she felt blood drip from the wounds she inflicted upon herself, a ball of panic lodged in her throat and made it hard to breathe. Aliya intent became clear. “Please don’t do this.”

Wicked gleam in her eyes, Nehlari floated close to Aliya, and sighed a breathy moan while caressing Aliya’s hips. “Perfect.” Nehlari reached for Aliya’s chin and raised it until their eyes met. Nehlari leaned forward and kissed Aliya’s eyes shut. “I’m not heartless,” Nehlari said. The compassion in her tone surprised Tiilaen, as Nehlari said, “Think of her. Think of Sindi.” Aliya sobbed. Nehlari kissed Aliya, her hand drifting up from Aliya’s hip, cupping Aliya’s breast and kneading. The touch must have been gentle because Aliya’s body seemed to relax.

Tiilaen realized she had ceased her own attempts to escape or to help, mesmerized by the tenderness the succubus applied to Aliya. But she’s sucking her life away, Tiilaen chided herself.

As Nehlari teased and caressed Aliya’s breasts, the bindings fell free and Aliya, on the bottom, and Nehlari atop her, floated smoothly to the ground. Nehlari never removed Aliya’s clothing. Except for the constant kissing, Nehlari never touched any physical flesh on Aliya, yet the soft flushed expression on Aliya’s face—even as she paled, her breathing more shallow—was wondrous in her pleasure.

Why aren’t I doing something, anything? Tiilaen demanded of herself. Her mind knew she should stop this before Nehlari killed Aliya. And Tiilaen understood that was Aliya’s tormented goal. Aliya died in her heart the instant Sindi died in Iskarr.

Tiilaen’s body wouldn’t respond to any mental command.

Nehlari’s touches became more frantic, her kisses rougher and demanding. Aliya began to writhe beneath her.

Fixated as she was on the approaching climax which would take the last of Aliya’s life, Tiilaen gave a startled cry when a woman appeared behind Nehlari and pierced Nehlari’s back with a black bladed sword. Nehlari’s ear-piercing howl filled the night.

Barely a whisper, Aliya pleaded to the woman, “Continue.” The stranger shoved the blade deeper until it passed through Nehlari—and pierced Aliya’s heart. As Aliya’s eyes fluttered closed for a final time, she breathed, “I love you, Sindi.”

Tears of anguish poured down Tiilaen’s face. “She died well,” a soft voice said. Tiilaen turned her head to find a golden woman standing beside her. The bindings fell away with the end of Nehlari’s cry, and Tiilaen dropped to the ground, her mind and body numb. She made her way to Aliya on hands and knees. “I’m sorry,” Tiilaen said to Aliya’s still form. “I never believed I’d lose either of you, let alone both of you.”

A hand came down on her shoulder, and Tiilaen turned away from Aliya. The golden woman stood above her. “We’ll perform the funeral pyre when we get everyone to the inn. Kareina will die if we don’t hurry and get her wounds tended to.”

Tiilaen glanced guiltily toward Kareina. She’d been so focused on Aliya and Nehlari. “Yes, of course,” Tiilaen said. Her attention was pulled to the other woman, now leading the horses into the clearing. “Who are you?”

The woman with the horses spoke. “I’m Chayboen and this is Ysannie. The effects of the succubus will wear off soon.” The last name sounded familiar to Tiilaen, but she didn’t focus on

it. “Ysannie will take Kareina and Aliya to the Inn. You and I need to get the others.” Tiilaen nodded. “We need to hurry,” Chayboen said.

“Yes, of course.” Tiilaen inhaled deeply. Her mind clearing. She took the lead of Aliya’s horse. Tiilaen pulled a cloak from the saddlebag and wrapped Aliya before draping Aliya’s body over the saddle. She turned to assist Chayboen and Ysannie with Kareina but stopped short. Kareina and Ysannie were gone. Even as she looked around for them, Aliya’s horse blinked out of sight. Explaining Aliya’s fate to Stechyc and the others would be hard enough. How was she supposed to explain to Mayliandra and the girls how Kareina was magically whisked away?

Chayboen gave an understanding smile. “She’s safe with Ysannie. Once we get the other’s all will be explained.” Chayboen didn’t wait for Tiilaen to respond before getting on her horse and heading in the direction of their camp.

“Okay, I’ll follow you,” Tiilaen said, her tone sarcastic. She got on her horse and followed. The carcass of the morzek and corpse of Nehlari left behind for whatever scavengers might be interested.

MAYLIANDRA FELT LIKE a pariah confined to her room, saying she needed rest to heal. From what? Only a red puckered scar remained as memory of Jurquette’s knife. Kareina could be dying. Did they believe her presence would negatively affect Kareina? She had asked, demanded, and pleaded to see Kareina; still, Olaf had refused. Half a day had passed since Tiilaen and Chayboen brought them to this place. Well, she’d had enough.

So, as any wife would do under the circumstances, Mayliandra enlisted the aid of her children. Wrapping a cloak over her nightdress, Mayliandra threw open her door and stomped to the closed door of Kareina’s room. She stood defiantly before Melrick. “Step aside, Captain,” she said with vehemence.

“I’m sorry, Lady Mayliandra, I have orders—”

She didn’t allow him the opportunity to finish the sentence. “I’m sorry.” She swiftly kned him in the groin. In the first second of distraction, Mayliandra grasped the knob and pushed the door open to the startled stares of Stechyc and a petite older woman. Ignoring them, Mayliandra rushed toward the bed, staring down at the unconscious and ashen features of her wife, bruised skin around her eyes, cheeks sunken and gaunt. Kareina was naked under a sheet draping most of her body, except the large hole of damaged flesh, puss, and some other undistinguishable brownish fluid. The outer rim of the wound blistered and burned. A basin of water, medicinal pouches, and damp cloth were beside the bed, and Mayliandra realized someone had bathed Kareina.

“Oh, love. Even with this grievous wound you came to save me.” Mayliandra grasped Kareina’s larger hand in her own, and sat on the side of the bed. “Why isn’t she awake?” Mayliandra asked.

“Mayliandra.” Stechyc said from behind her. “This is Caldie Parrin, Kareina’s mother.” Mayliandra turned her head in Parrin’s direction. “Are you why they kept me from her?” She glared between them.

Caldie Parrin smiled at her with compassion. “It was never intended to last as long as it did, my dear. I have been—” She glanced to Stechyc. “What shall we call it? Conveyed?” Stechyc nodded. “Yes, well, the most charming young man assisted in bringing me.” Parrin came toward Mayliandra. “I can see why Kareina has fallen in love with you. You’re beautiful.”

Mayliandra squinted at Parrin with suspicion. “All well and good, but it doesn’t answer why I was kept from her.”

Stechyc stood behind Parrin, and placed her hands on her shoulders. “We wanted Parrin here in case—”

Mayliandra knew the reason, and she was light-headed with fear. “No, Stechyc. Please. Do something.” Mayliandra clutched Kareina’s hand tighter. “You have to do something.”

“The very problem, my dear. The mage has done all she can. Even Ysannie can do no more for her. Kareina isn’t fighting back. My daughter is giving up.”

“I don’t understand,” Mayliandra said.

Sullen, Parrin covered Stechyc’s hands on her shoulders. “Kareina is lost in her own mind and not fighting back. She’s given up.”

“She wouldn’t do this, wouldn’t leave us.” Even as she said the words, Mayliandra had no idea if they were true. She remembered Kareina teasing the girls, threatening them with tickling. “No, Kareina wouldn’t leave Jahq or Poppet without a fight. Something’s wrong.”

“You don’t believe she’d fight for you?” Parrin stared at her quizzically.

How does anyone answer such a question with her wife’s mother? “I’ve done much to hurt Kareina, intended or not. But the matter is between us, and for another day. Is there no way to bring her back, Stechyc?”

“There’s a way, but it’s dangerous.” Ysannie said, appearing beside Stechyc.

“Something I can do?” Mayliandra asked Ysannie.

Ysannie nodded. “Kareina is lost in the veil. Stechyc is hesitant to tell you that should Kareina’s body die here, she’ll be lost forever. She isn’t able to cross into the veil because she is needed as the anchor here.”

“Tell me what I need to do. I’ll bring her back.” Mayliandra felt a trace of hope.

“But Mayliandra, what would become of the children?” Parrin asked. Mayliandra frowned in confusion. “You see, if Kareina dies while you’re in the veil with her, you will also die, unable to return to your human shell.”

“Doesn’t matter, because it won’t happen. I’ll bring us both back, so the girls will be fine.” But shouldn’t she plan for the worst-case scenario? Mayliandra glanced questioningly at Parrin. “So I know everything before I do this—and I will do this—could you tell me how Jahq and Yoshan will fare with you, should something happen to me and Kareina?”

Parrin stepped beside the bed and placed her hand on top of Mayliandra and Kareina’s joined hands. “They are Kareina’s daughters, my granddaughters,” Parrin said. She squeezed Mayliandra’s hand. “You are Kareina’s wife—laws be damned—all of you are my family. All of you have a place in my home, and in my heart. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if Kareina hadn’t seen something in each of you, which meant something important to her and her heart.” Parrin cupped Mayliandra’s cheek. “You would be taking a great risk—”

“Kareina is worth any risk.”

“I have to agree with you.” Parrin smiled at her. “I offered to do this myself, but I’m not strong enough for this kind of journey.”

Mayliandra shook her head. “This is something I must do.”

“Then we are in agreement,” Parrin said.

Stechyc took a deep breath. “I suggest we hurry. Kareina is failing fast, and I don’t know how long we have to even attempt this.”

“Tell me what I need to do.”

IT DIDN'T TAKE long for Mayliandra to lose consciousness. Stechyc had explained what she needed to know, Ysannie gave directions and suggestions about the veil, and Parrin whispered, "Bring both of you home." Ysannie explained to Mayliandra how the veil was devoid of color, and everything would be shades of grey. But she hadn't explained how the grey against her spirit-skin would feel bitterly cold. She worried it would be too much for Kareina, who'd been inside longer.

The voices began. The membrane of the veil shivered and sparkled with voices from the past, muffled and faint, but the emotions behind the memories determined the movement's intensity. Mayliandra knew these were Kareina's memories. And now they would be an eternal memoir of torment until Kareina left here or died.

Mayliandra continued to walk. She lost track of time, the dreary sameness of her surroundings making what could be minutes feel like hours. The bleakness wore on her nerves, and Mayliandra was about to scream into the grey when she sighted the glow of a fire from a window of a small cabin up ahead. Kareina. Mayliandra picked up her pace.

As she walked up to the cabin, she saw a short walkway, lined with flowers, leading to a door ajar. Mayliandra didn't call out. Instead, she pushed the door open. The inside was small, one room, with a table and chair set in the middle, a bed to the left of the door, and fireplace, which was the source of light, against the right wall. Kareina sat slumped in an armchair before the blaze, in leather pants and a simple white cotton shirt.

Kareina must have sensed her presence. Without looking away from the fire, she said, "It doesn't warm, and I can't block out the voices."

Misery coated every word. Mayliandra bit her bottom lip to keep from crying. She rushed to Kareina and knelt facing her. "Please, sweetheart, let me take you from here."

Unshed tears swam in Kareina's eyes. "Why, Mayli? I have failed you so often, as a protector." She sniffed. "You now know you're married to a woman—who has defiled you."

Mayliandra chuckled, which brought Kareina's confused gaze to her own. "Thank the goddess for the last." Kareina's frown deepened. "If what happened between us at the pond was defilement, please do so often." Mayliandra took one of Kareina's hands and kissed the palm. "I'm the one who failed you. Also our biggest problem, the sharing of truths."

Mayliandra put a finger to Kareina's lips when it appeared she'd speak. "Please, sweetheart, let me get this out." Mayliandra lowered her hand and inhaled deeply. "In Bredwine, I wanted to understand you better, even though you frightened me a little. When Armin sent his men to kidnap me, and we hid in the kitchen storage, I barely knew you, and yet I felt safe in your presence and in your arms. With those rare moments we kiss, I feel cherished and cared for," she smiled at Kareina, "and on fire, craving your touches. I know it's not normal, but I've always wondered about and wanted a woman's touch. Not a man, though I knew marriage the only future I could have—with a man. And I'm betrothed and forced to marry you."

"I could have walked away," Kareina said. "Oriun couldn't have pressed the issue."

"Why didn't you?"

Kareina gave a quick one-shoulder shrug. "You weren't safe."

Mayliandra felt there was more to the answer, but didn't want to get too far off topic. "Well, I'm glad you did. You have such a big, compassionate heart."

Kareina rolled her eyes.

“After we left Bredwine, I would see evidence of your kindness, of the way you wanted to protect everyone, when the strangeness began. Sometimes I’d look at you and not see—” She paused, unwilling to say the name. “Your features would appear feminine at times, and you’re so beautiful to me, scars and all.” Mayliandra added the last hurriedly when Kareina would have protested. “But I didn’t realize I was learning to see beyond the magic. I thought my mind was creating the vision to deal with my falling in love with you—the man. And it wasn’t fair to you, like I was teasing you, playing a game. So I’d push you away because it wasn’t fair to you. You, who hadn’t asked for our situation either. Or I’d see the woman, and someone would call his name, and I’d be reminded what my mind was doing to accept you. But, there was the pond.”

“Where I took advantage of you,” Kareina said, snarling.

Shaking her head, Mayliandra said, “No, I took advantage of you. I never ingested the berries because I knew they were a hallucinogen. I wanted you to make love to me. At the very least, prompt this conversation—which of course we should have had long before now.”

Kareina remained silent for a while, her expression perplexed. “You knew I was a woman that night? How?”

Mayliandra cupped Kareina’s cheeks. “I suspected the visions of you were magically induced when all the ripples of magic were running through Kellshae. I couldn’t suspect or understand all the reasons for you wanting to appear male. But I knew enough about the reasons why Kareina, warrior, would need to hide and those I could understand.” She took a step back, her body warming at the memory of Kareina’s lovemaking. “No man could love a woman as you did, with tenderness and passion, caring about my needs before their own. Although it could be possible, I guess.” Mayliandra smirked. “A man would have tossed me over a rock, or assumed satiating his own desire the important result.”

Again, Kareina stayed silent for a long time. She stood. “Thank you, Mayli, for telling me. But it changes nothing.”

“What?” Mayliandra didn’t understand. “Yes, it does. We need to leave here. Your body is dying because you aren’t fighting to stay alive. So many of us need you, the girls—” She flung herself at Kareina, wrapping her arm around Kareina’s waist and sobbed. “Please, Kareina, I need you. I’m so very in love with you.”

Kareina stiffened, but her arms enfolded Mayliandra’s shoulders. When Kareina spoke, her voice was hoarse with emotion. “I couldn’t be good for you, Mayli. I’m damaged inside and out.”

“I don’t care.” She squeezed Kareina tighter. “I’ll take you any way I can.” A thought occurred to her and Mayliandra reluctantly pulled away. It was a possibility, but not one Mayliandra had considered. “Sweet goddess, you don’t return my affections.” Another step back. “It is you who cared for me because of your duty as husband, as a protector and warrior. So Jahq and Yoshan would have a mother?”

An expression of shock crossed Kareina’s features. “No, never that, Mayli.” She turned away. Her body trembled. Mayliandra worried she’d pushed too far.

Her voice barely above a whisper, Kareina asked, “Did you look at me while I’m unconscious? Truly look at me?”

Perplexed, Mayliandra asked, “What is it you’re afraid I’ll see? Something to keep me from loving you, I assume. Well nothing can, Kareina. I love you, no matter what.”

“Because you don’t know, can’t understand until you do,” her voice broke.

“What do you think is so bad it would frighten me?”

“This,” Kareina snarled. She removed the cotton shirt and tossed it on the table. Mayliandra stared at numerous old scars on her back from a whip, burns—and the scarred skin, from the deep cuts of a knife blade, read: whore.

“Do you wish to look upon this in our marriage bed, day after day, year after year? Always reminded how I’m damaged? A monster?” Kareina smirked. “Of course it would be the perfect thing to throw in my face when I lost my temper—we know that’s a common occurrence—or we had a marital argument.”

“Kareina, no, don’t do this to yourself.” Mayliandra rushed to stand behind her and ran tender fingers all across the skin of Kareina’s back. “You’re neither a monster, or damaged, sweetheart.” Again, Mayliandra wrapped her arms around Kareina’s waist. This time resting the side of her face against Kareina’s scarred back. “I would never use your pain against you. Please tell me you don’t believe I could be so cruel. Please, Kareina, come back with me. Let me show you—”

Kareina moved so fast, Mayliandra wasn’t aware they’d moved until Kareina plunked her down on the table, grasped the back of Mayliandra’s neck, and pulled her into a rough kiss. Mayliandra’s body responded immediately, returning the kiss and drawing Kareina closer, moaning when Kareina’s bare flesh pressed against her. She cupped Kareina’s breast, rubbing her thumb pad against the nipple, delighting in the feel as it hardened. Mayliandra broke the kiss and gasped for air.

“Oh, sweet goddess,” Mayliandra breathed.

“Prove to me you have feelings.” Kareina kissed behind Mayliandra’s ear, sucked the earlobe into her warm mouth, and lightly bit with her teeth. “Let me make love to you, Mayli.” A hand was at her breast, gently kneading.

“Oh, yes. Yes.” No, they couldn’t do this; not here, not this way. They had to go back through the veil. Mayliandra reluctantly broke contact, scooting away from Kareina and off the table. “No, we can’t do this.” She rubbed at her head, trying to clear her thoughts, get control of her heated flesh.

Kareina’s features flashed hurt, and then it was gone in an instant. “So, everything you said was to get me back.”

“I meant everything I told you, Kareina.”

“Of course.” She didn’t appear convinced. Kareina retrieved her shirt, her hands shaking as she pulled it back on. “Go back, Mayli.”

“Not without you.”

“I’m not leaving.” Kareina returned to the fireplace and plunked down in the armchair dejectedly. “You gave it your best, Mayliandra. No one will fault you because it won’t work.”

What was she to do? Why didn’t Kareina want to go back? Did she believe Mayliandra refused her affection? Yes, Kareina did. How could she explain, explain she wanted Kareina to make love to her, wanted to love Kareina. Show her, Mayliandra realized. She tugged a chair from the table to the fireplace, and placed it next to Kareina’s and sat.

“I told you to go.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Why haven’t you?”

“I told you, Kareina, I’m not leaving without you.”

A long silence before Kareina asked, “What happens to you, in here, when my body dies?”

“I die, too.”

“What about our daughters?”

“Your mother is there. She promised to look after them,” Mayliandra said. “They’ll be fine.”
“You can’t do this, Mayli.”

“I can. And I will.” Mayliandra shifted to stare at Kareina’s profile. “I do love you, Kareina. Yes, I want to make love with you, but not here. I want you to know the feelings are the same in the real world. If we love each other here, in the veil, you’ll wonder if I’m your imagination. Since I’ve walked through the door, how many times have you asked yourself, ‘Have I conjured Mayliandra so I won’t be alone?’ Have you, Kareina?” A single tear fell down the side of her face. “Don’t you care for me at all?”

“I’ve wanted you since Bredwine. I’ve loved you wholly since not long after.”

“And I love you. Please, sweetheart, come back with me. My feelings for you won’t change, I promise.” Mayliandra stood and extended a hand. “Let me prove myself to you. Let me help you heal— and not only from this wound. Let me demonstrate. Trusting me is not a mistake. Because, Kareina, no matter what you decide, I’m never leaving you. You are mine.”

Mayliandra’s extended hand remained empty for a long time. It was her turn to feel failure. She squeezed her eyes shut, halting the building tears.

Warm flesh engulfed her hand and Mayliandra squeezed Kareina’s hand reassuringly. “Let’s go home, love.”

PAKSHA AND YSANNIE watched from the fringes of the veil between life and death as Mayliandra led Kareina back to the living. “Thank you, Paksha, for what you’re about to do.”

He waggled his eyebrows. “It’s a minor thing for me.”

“Maybe, but to Kareina the deed will mean so very much. Some scars cut deeper than the flesh.”

Mayliandra walked through the veil first. Kareina hesitated. Paksha took the opportunity to do what Ysannie had asked of him. Before Kareina’s spirit returned to her body, Paksha mended the scarred flesh of the word she detested, the reason she was lost in the veil. He’d offered to remove them all, but Ysannie had explained the other scars held a different significance. Paksha suspected the explanation to be something understood by mortals alone. So, he performed the request he was asked. In the single moment it took Kareina to step across the veil’s threshold, the scar was gone, and Ysannie was able to heal the ghastly wound in her side.

Paksha glanced seriously at Ysannie. “Will she battle T’Dar on our behalf now?”

Ysannie shook her head. “Not on our behalf, cousin. T’Dar has done much to the people she loves. Kareina will battle him,” she sighed, “and her brother, because it’s the right thing to do.”

“It will be no small undertaking. Will you be there to assist?” he asked. Without her immortality, the battle could kill Ysannie as if a mortal. But Paksha knew Ysannie wouldn’t have it any other way. She’d be there, because now his cousin had someone to fight for, too. “Well, I’ve delivered the delightful mother, mended the daughter, and watched as a mortal relationship was mended.” He flashed Ysannie a wicked grin. “Which was almost more erotic than my young eyes should be subjected to, I might add.”

“Young eyes?” Ysannie questioned. “You’re millennia old.”

“I beg you not to tweak my vanity,” he said. “All kidding aside, cousin, if you’ve nothing else, I should go see what’s going on back home. The loss of Magan has everyone quite disturbed. I should make certain none of them do something too drastic.” Paksha scrunched his nose. “Besides, we wouldn’t want D’Espel to incite a riot.”

Paksha returned Ysannie to Chayboen, who gave a relieved glance in his direction. “Thank you.”

Blowing them both a kiss, Paksha left.

MAYLIANDRA SENSED THE change around her, knowing when she was back in the room at the inn. Opening her eyes, she looked beside her. Kareina still slept, but her breathing sounded normal. Mayliandra tugged the covering down and realized the wound was no longer gaping open, but appeared to have been months in the healing. She was surprised, and happy, to find the room was empty of anyone but them. Mayliandra left the bed and hurried to the door, throwing the bolt closed to prevent interruptions. She wanted to be certain how Kareina fared after this illness, before sharing her with anyone else. Admittedly, the action was partly in punishment for keeping her from Kareina earlier.

“Should I be worried?” Kareina’s voice was raspy, but sounded marvelous to Mayliandra’s taut nerves.

“You should be very afraid,” Mayliandra said. She went to Kareina, picked up a tankard of water. She put a hand behind Kareina’s shoulder to assist her into a sitting position. “Here, drink a bit.” Kareina did. She had reached for the tankard, seen the trembling in her hand, and tucked it under the sheet. “Welcome back,” Mayliandra whispered, kissing Kareina’s forehead.

Kareina smiled, wriggling herself back against the headboard. “Thank you, I think.” Mayliandra smiled at her, hoping to reassure. Kareina became agitated, her eyes darting around the room.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” she asked.

“Um. I...I have to...uh—” Her face darkened in embarrassment.

“Oh, of course. Let me help you.” Mayliandra assisted Kareina to the chamber pot, enclosed in a small closet at the far end of the room, and back into bed. She added extra pillows behind Kareina to prop her up, when Kareina refused to go back to sleep. With each breath, Kareina’s pale breasts rose and dipped. Desire filled Mayliandra. With a silent groan, she wretched her thoughts—and her gaze—from Kareina. She went to the fireplace and removed the bowl warming on the stone, bringing it back to the bed.

“You should drink some broth. You need your strength back.” Mayliandra’s hand shook and she managed to spill the first spoonful. Wiping the liquid from Kareina’s pale naked flesh made the shaking worse. “Hellfire,” she grumbled.

“It’s all right,” Kareina said, a touch of chill in her tone. She glanced away from Mayliandra and stared into the fire. “I won’t hold anything you said in the veil to heart. You’re released from any promise you’ve made.”

“What? Why?” Mayliandra didn’t understand what had changed between them already.

“You’re shaking and uncomfortable.”

“You think I’m—”

“Already regretting what was said in the veil. I won’t force myself on you, Mayli.”

She wanted to laugh her relief, but Mayliandra realized that would exacerbate the situation. Kareina’s state of mind was fragile from too many rejections in the past. Mayliandra put the bowl down. “Look at me, Kareina, please.” Slowly, Kareina complied. “You’re observant, but not close to target. Yes, I’m shaking and uncomfortable, but not from regret.” Mayliandra ran a finger across Kareina’s clavicle. I haven’t lied to you. I wouldn’t, not even to save you from the

veil, from dying.” Mayliandra sighed. “You’re still healing, weak from your wounds. And I gaze at you and I’m on fire with wanting you.”

“You don’t—” Action was the one thing Kareina was going to understand, to believe. Mayliandra undressed and stretched out beside Kareina. “Mayli?”

“Shush. No more talk.” Mayliandra wrapped her arms around Kareina and pulled her lower, closer. Kareina stiffened, before she relaxed into her embrace. Mayliandra kissed Kareina, continued to kiss her, long and slow and passionate, her hips pressing against Kareina’s softness to convey the truth of her feelings through their contact. She moaned, the pure heat consuming her. Kareina echoed the moan sensuously into Mayliandra’s mouth, deepened the kiss, and Mayliandra knew she’d never be able to stop on her own. “You’re still healing—”

“I’m fine. My strength seems to be infused with energy,” Kareina said breathily.

Mayliandra leaned down and kissed beautiful nipples, first the left, then the right. Kareina jumped a fraction when Mayliandra first licked the right nipple. She loved the feel of Kareina’s breast against her lips. Mayliandra explored for several minutes, sucking, kissing, and licking them entirely.

“You’re mine.”

MAYLIANDRA’S HANDS JOINED in, lightly tracing the outline of Kareina’s breasts in delicate paths across the pale mounds, swirling and dipping, drawing closer to Kareina’s areolas and vanishing once again.

Kareina gasped. This is pure sweet torture, Kareina thought. A line of fire replaced the trail of Mayliandra’s fingertips. The careful slowness roused Kareina’s desire, igniting a low throbbing in her womanhood, blood rushing through her veins on every movement of her wife’s hands.

Rising on one forearm, Mayliandra’s brown eyes bore into hers. “Love, I have a request to make of you. Please, don’t touch me. I can’t think when you do. I can only feel under your caresses and kisses. And I have two goals to meet before someone comes pounding on the door.” Mayliandra frowned, and said, “We are surrounded by family, friends, and assorted warriors, so I must make this more sterile than I would wish for us. I also don’t want you to believe me disengaged. Or bring forth memories to frighten or make you uncomfortable.”

She didn’t want to talk, but something in Mayliandra’s words worried her. “What goals?”

“I would bring you release, for one. Second, and most important,” Mayliandra ran those fire-trailing fingertips around Kareina’s belly button. “I want you to know the feel of my mouth on you.”

“Are you telling me you’re about to give me a tavern quickie? How do you know about those, anyway?”

Mayliandra chuckled. “In a manner of speaking, yes, I guess I am. Sometimes it helps to learn when you’re invisible, as women in Bredwine. And, it’s not that I don’t want to make love with you for hours, but—”

Kareina shook her head. “Not to sound pathetic, Mayli, but I’ll accept whatever you’re willing to give.”

Mayliandra gave her a quick kiss, and “thank you” from her lips. She scooted lower, prying Kareina’s legs apart, and Mayliandra lightly plunged her tongue into the folds of Kareina’s womanhood. She probed in and out, swiping tenderly. After a few more minutes of exquisite

bliss Mayliandra's tongue wandered to Kareina's clit, teasing with short swipes, but soon picking up speed until Kareina hit the verge. As if sensing this, Mayliandra withdrew and re-positioned.

Kareina felt Mayliandra's fingers at the rim of her nether lips. The first stroke was one finger tentatively testing, and the next a little stronger and deeper. Mayliandra thrust, in and out, in and out, two fingers in a steady rhythm. Each thrust induced a louder groan from Kareina's throat. When Mayliandra flicked her tongue over her clit, Kareina felt the building inside of her, a unique blend of heat spreading through her muscles and blood. Small waves of pleasure and minute muscle contractions convulsed through her body. The walls of Kareina's womanhood clenched around Mayliandra's fingers, and Kareina wanted desperately to keep them there forever.

"Sweet goddess," Kareina murmured. Mayliandra carefully slid her fingers out and moved up to lie alongside her, resting her head on Kareina's chest.

Mayliandra heaved a contented sigh. "That was more enjoyable than I ever imagined possible."

Kareina chuckled. "Imagined this a lot, have you?"

Mayliandra's head popped up and she met Kareina's gaze with a serious expression. "There were the occasional musings of youth, of course. More often since the first kiss you gave me in the cave." She caressed Kareina's cheek for a moment. "But after the night at the pond," Mayliandra said, her eyes darkening with passion, "it's been a near constant image." On a serious tone, Mayliandra said, "There has been penetration, love, we've consummated our marriage. You can't be rid of me now."

Pulling her into a tight embrace, Kareina whispered in her ear. "I will never let you go."

Chapter Twenty-one

JAHQ WANTED TO do something useful. When Caldie Parrin—it was still too strange to refer to her as Grandmother, yet—had mentioned needing tea, Jahq had volunteered. After all, the older woman hadn't batted an eye when told Kareina and Mayliandra had adopted her and Yoshan, or little Yoshan had magical abilities. They didn't know about hers. Parrin didn't even turn away from the tattoos. In fact, Parrin pulled both children into a tight hug, as she whispered, "Welcome to the family, my dearest, dearest grandchildren." Jahq smiled to herself, remembering the warmth of breath on her neck, as she whispered those words; the tenderness of the arms wrapped around her; and, the softness of the lips kissing the crown of her head. Parrin acted like her past had no bearing against the person she was now. Like Kareina and Mayliandra treated her.

"I wanna help, Jahq," Yoshan said from beside her. Mokie was tucked in his usual spot under her arm. Jahq glanced down after setting the flame beneath the kettle.

"Let me boil the water first," Jahq explained. She noticed Gionne stood silent at the kitchen door before it closed. "Why didn't Gionne come in, too?" she asked her little sister, feeling disappointed.

With a shrug, Yoshan said, "Said she was standing guard."

"Why?"

"Dunno," Yoshan said, rummaging in the larder. She pulled out the milk, and placed it on the floor. Jahq grabbed a saucer from the shelf. "Thank you," Yoshan acknowledged, and scrunched her face in distaste. "Maybe 'cause Belzan was hanging around."

Jahq could feel the color drain from her face, as her heart beat in panic and she felt lightheaded. Glancing around, she realized the door Gionne had closed was the only exit. There was no other escape. A heavy bang landed on the kitchen door, followed by several more. She wanted to be wrong, but couldn't take a chance with Yoshan present.

"What's happening, Jahq?" Yoshan asked, her eyes large with fright.

"You gotta do exactly what I say, all right?" Yoshan nodded as tears filled her eyes. "Take Mokie," she said, picking up the saucer of milk and walking to the storage cupboard. "Get in here and no matter what you hear, don't make a sound or come out until I tell you."

Jahq had hidden Yoshan when Belzan pushed through the door and leered in her direction. His face still had bruises and swelling from Papa's punishment. "Ah, if it isn't the Iskarrian whore left all alone. Daddy may die and your mother won't be able to protect you. I'm here to console you."

"I don't need consoling. Papa's not dead," Jahq said. She wondered if Gionne went to get help. "You'd best leave us alone. Papa won't like it."

"Papa can't help you, girlie." He came closer, pinning her against the stove. Belzan grabbed her hair, wrapped it around a fist, and jerked it painfully. She cried out. "Even if Karr lives, the beating he gives will be worth it for the taste of you." Jahq's gaze darted toward the door. Belzan

noticed and laughed so hard in her face, spittle landed on her cheek. “Looking for your little puppy? She won’t be coming to help. I left her busy—bleeding on the floor.”

“But she’s a kid. And Gionne isn’t a puppy.” After she said the words, Jahq felt stupid. Men, at least men like Belzan and even Humkyte, didn’t care how old, simply that they were female and less than men were.

Belzan pulled her against his chest. He slammed his lips against hers, the growth of beard abrasive against her skin. When she realized he intended to stick his tongue in her mouth, Jahq clamped her teeth closed, nipping his top lip. “Bitch,” he said, then punched her. She would have fallen if his hold wasn’t so tight. Jahq felt her dress being hiked up, his hand abrasive against the skin of her thigh.

Panic gripped her. Gionne would have been trying to protect her, still this man hurt her—badly if what he said was true. What would he do to Yoshan, or Mother? Jahq could feel it coming. She’d hidden it for so long, but now she was afraid for her family, her friends. Body growing warm, muscles tingling as the magic built up, Jahq squeezed her eyes shut.

And let the magic go.

The room filled with the sounds of pots slamming into pots, utensils clanging, and Belzan cursed. Jahq opened her eyes to see most of the kitchen items swirling around the room, some close enough they pounded against Belzan’s head and shoulders. Jahq saw movement behind him right before he released her.

Chayboen had an arm tight against his throat, and slammed a fist into his kidney, once, twice. Belzan dropped to a knee and Chayboen, dodging the flying utensils, dragged him to the door. Jahq stood statue still for a heartbeat. She let the kitchen items drop, and followed Chayboen. When she opened the door, Jahq sucked in a startled breath at the sight. Gionne, beaten savagely, was bleeding all over the floor, her breathing ragged. Jahq yelled into the kitchen, “Yoshan, come out. Hurry.” She rushed to Gionne, but didn’t know what to do. Yoshan screamed behind her. “Go find Stechyc.”

Yoshan ran off and Jahq was aware of the sounds of raised voices from the courtyard, where Chayboen must have taken Belzan.

“Where is everyone?” Jahq asked aloud. Gionne’s breathing was getting too shallow. Jahq wanted to hold her, comfort her, but there was so much blood. She didn’t want to hurt Gionne any more than she was already. Instead, Jahq bent close to her ear and said, “You can’t protect me from the floor, warrior.” Gionne shifted and groaned. “Shush. Be still, Gionne. Help is coming.” She wanted to cry, but thought it might make Gionne do something stupid. Like you haven’t already, Jahq thought. “Gosh, Gionne, what were you thinking taking Belzan on?”

Jahq knew what had happened and why. “You’re gonna be a protector of the innocent, no matter the personal cost, like Papa, aren’t you?”

KAREINA HEARD THE commotion downstairs. She and Mayliandra had finished dressing, Kareina had returned the magic earring to her lobe, and opened the bedroom door. When a shaken Yoshan, tears streaming down her cheeks, ran up to her and latched onto her leg, Kareina felt a moment of panic. “Are you hurt?” she asked. Yoshan shook her head. “Calm down, Poppet, tell me what’s wrong.” Even as she spoke, Kareina took Yoshan into her arms, looked over to Mayli and they both hastened toward the stairs.

Pandemonium had come to the Inn. Jahq and Parrin hovered near the kitchen over the bloody form of Gionne, Stechyc working diligently with her pouches and words of magic. Outside, the sounds of fighting. The damage done to Gionne was excessive, for any reason. Fury filled Kareina. “Who did this?”

Jahq threw herself against Kareina. “Belzan tried to—” A fresh wave of tears fell. “Gionne tried to stop him.”

“I believe you’re needed outside,” Parrin said, pulling Jahq away from Kareina. “I’m glad to see you both back.” Parrin took Yoshan from Kareina. “We’ll stay here until you’re finished.”

Taking Mayliandra’s hand, Kareina pulled her outside. The courtyard was crowded. Seventeen of her original twenty Gradyln men, Tiilaen and her warriors stood on either side of the courtyard, weapons drawn but standing ground. Melrick, Olaf, Winnel and Spallan stood closer to the kitchen entrance. In the center, Belzan faced off with a furious Chayboen. “Stop this.” Belzan attempted one more swing, which Chayboen deftly avoided, before he also faced Kareina.

“Sher Karr, good to see you alive,” Belzan said. He spit blood to the ground.

Kareina released Mayliandra’s hand and walked toward him. Mayliandra followed but remained a discreet distance behind her. “I’ll bet you’re jumping for joy.” She glanced to Chayboen and dipped her head in acknowledgement. “Thank you.”

Chayboen gave a slight bow, keeping Belzan in view. “My pleasure, I assure you. I cede responsibility to you.” She moved behind Kareina, next to Mayliandra.

Belzan sneered as best his bloody face would allow, his body swaying, but still he asked, “So Karr, here to give me a spanking for not playing nice with your little whore?”

She had expected his slurs, anticipating he’d try to get her riled enough to make a mistake, so Kareina didn’t physically lash out. Instead, she asked with a calm she didn’t feel, “What have you hoped to gain from all this, Belzan?”

“I’ve said before, you’re getting soft. We’re men. Women owe us for protecting them. I take what I deserve.” Belzan stabbed a finger toward the group of Gradyln men. “The real men in the group, those who don’t need to suck up to you, will agree with me.”

Kareina gave a slow nod. She glared toward her men. “Let’s set the game board. I’m sure of the loyalty of my finest men,” she said pointing to Melrick and the others. “Don’t seem to know the loyalty status of the rest of you. I won’t have you at my back if I don’t trust you. Nor should you fight beside me if you have no faith in me.” She looked into the face of each of them. “Belzan may have a tiny point. Marriage may have softened me toward women, because I never had it in my nature to believe a woman less than capable as a man with many things. This is politics. You follow because I’m your Sher. You don’t have to agree with me, but you have to do as I command. So, here is your chance to make your opinion known. How many of you agree with Belzan, raping one sixteen-year-old and beating another near to death, is justifiable?”

One of the men took a tentative step forward. “Sher Karr, Belzan made a misjudgment—”

“A misjudgment?”

“I’m not making light of what he has done. It was a bit excessive.” He shrugged. “Punish him as you will.”

“Oh, yes, I do intend to punish Belzan, quite severely as I’ve warned him to stay clear of my daughter. But maybe I should reword the question. How many disagree with my vision of a woman’s place, and agree with Belzan? A man is justified in taking what he pleases, because it’s a warrior’s, or any man’s, right?”

Eight men stepped forward with little hesitation to join the one who’d spoken for them.

“So be it.” Kareina gave her attention to Belzan. “You’re now in command of nine men. Congratulations.” Kareina paused. “Now, Belzan, it’s time to punish you for your attack on Jahq, and for beating Gionne.” Kareina twisted around, saw what she needed, and motioned for Olaf and Melrick. “May I use your sword, friend?” she asked Melrick. Melrick handed it over. She indicated an old tree stump in the corner. “Could you and Olaf bring Belzan over there, please?” Melrick appeared to understand her intent.

Mayliandra gave her a strange look, and ran into the Inn’s kitchen. Please, she silently begged, let her understand why I need to do this.

Melrick and Olaf dragged a cursing Belzan to the stump, pushed him to his knees, and held his left hand across the top. Kareina said nothing as she swung the borrowed blade and severed Belzan’s left hand at the wrist. Belzan screamed, held down by Melrick and Olaf. Mayliandra reappeared with a red-hot knife and applied it to the stub. Kareina glanced at her gratefully.

Kareina glared at the nine men, staring back with a mix of fear and hatred. So be it. “You men are banished from Clan Gradyln, and any lands under our rule.”

“You can’t do this,” the original spokesman said, vehemently.

“Yes, I can. We’ll notify your families of the dishonor to me, and Clan Gradyln. They can decide whether they wish to also leave and join you in banishment.”

The air shimmered and a handsome man with dark hair appeared amidst the angry men. “Zenti,” Chayboen said in an angry tone. “Why are you here?”

“Zenti, King of Gods?” Kareina asked.

“Yes, the very same.” Chayboen had pulled her sword free, and headed in his direction.

Holding up a hand, not as if he need fear her, Kareina thought, Zenti said, “Druid, we will speak later. I’m here to assist.” Chayboen snorted, but held her ground.

“Assist how?” Kareina asked.

“By removing the trash,” he said, grinning. “You have much preparing and strategizing to do. Can’t have you distracted by these men. Banished they shall be, where they can’t interfere with what is to come.” Flashing a mischievous grin at Chayboen, causing her scowl to deepen, Zenti said, “You will leave the sword in your room when we speak, won’t you?” He didn’t wait for an answer. As quickly as he appeared, Zenti was gone, Belzan and nine men with him.

Mayliandra moved closer to Kareina, Chayboen maintained position next to Mayliandra, and Parrin appeared in the kitchen doorway. A knot of fear clenched in her throat. Kareina stared at her mother questioningly. Gionne? Parrin gave a nod of encouragement, and moved to stand with them. Still Gradyln warriors at heart, the men all bowed, and said in unison, “Praises be, Caldie Parrin.”

Parrin shook her head. She took Mayliandra’s hand. The three of them had to bend to hear her whispered words. To Chayboen, she asked, “You believe Kareina’s presence significant in the future?”

“It is Caldie Parrin.”

Parrin squeezed Mayliandra’s hand. “You love my daughter, and will stand by her? You and my granddaughters?” Mayliandra glanced at Kareina before answering. Kareina’s heart lurched at the love she saw reflected in the dark pools. “With our last breath, yes.” Parrin turned her attention on Kareina. “I know you didn’t want to return to Gradyln. I’ve seen glimpses into the future, and know new adventures await your new family, Kareina.” Kareina, a little concerned the glimpses didn’t show her, listened. “They speak of you positively, and refer to you as female. I believe it is a sign you should drop this pretense of being male, right here. It matters not what these few men think. What matters is what future generations hear, learn, and grow from.”

Kareina felt the fear which always accompanied the chance of exposure. “But mother—”

Reaching up to caress Kareina’s cheek, Parrin said, “You’re changing Kellshae. Kellshae needs to embrace the changes, grow with them. You are the catalyst.” She let her hand drop. “You need to be true to yourself, for yourself and for your family.”

“But I’d never see you again, if I do this.”

“Bah,” Parrin said, waving a hand at her. “I’ve already worked it out with your mage. You can’t be rid of me so easy.”

Glancing at each of them, Kareina received a reassuring smile from her mother, a waggle of eyebrows from Chayboen, and the mouthed words “I love you” from Mayliandra. Kareina was so tense, her stomach hurt.

Kareina looked to her remaining men. “No fear of severe repercussion. Well, except for—” Kareina turned to Melrick. “Captain, I’m about to further prune the rank and file.” He gave a shrug. Her hands shaking, Kareina removed the skull ear post. The remaining seven Gradyln warriors gasped, a couple murmured her name. Everyone else must already know. “Although I’m the same as always, I realize this new knowledge will not be met favorably. I need loyalty, and I need to trust you. So, once again, I ask who will not follow a woman?” Three of the seven either held up a hand, or took a step forward. “Melrick, these three are no longer warriors of Gradyln. You three may return to the Clan and to your families. You aren’t to be banished, but neither will you be counted among those brave men who defend a better way of life.”

Kareina glanced at Chayboen and asked, “Could you watch for flying knives aimed at my back?”

Chayboen snickered. “Life isn’t boring with you, at least.”

With a curt nod, she dismissed the remaining people in the courtyard. Kareina took her mother’s elbow, wrapped an arm around Mayliandra’s waist, and led them toward the kitchen. “Hope listening to my mother, at my age, didn’t make for a big mistake.”

Parrin chuckled. “If it did, I stand by the old saying.”

“Which is? In case I need it for your granddaughters?” Mayliandra said.

“Mothers always try to do what’s best, not always know what’s best.”

Mayliandra smiled at Parrin. “Well you didn’t do at all bad with this one, so I think we need to assume you’re correct in this matter.” Though the implication alluded to Karr, no one acknowledge him. “But this will make matters a bit more difficult for Kareina, I fear.”

“Why?” Parrin asked, her tone curious.

Tilting her head so it rest on Kareina’s arm, Mayliandra said, “Because the girls refer to Kareina as Papa. And we all know men don’t understand women at all.”

HAVING FINISHED A hearty stew prepared by Spallan, the warriors were ready for battle planning. Kareina and Mayliandra had checked in on Gionne, happy to find Stechyc and Ysannie were both tending to her healing. Kareina had difficulty reconciling that adding children to her raider detail had placed them in danger they wouldn’t otherwise encountered. Of course, having the goddess she prayed to as part of her assembled warriors wasn’t much easier.

Mayliandra reminded her, “A warm body was better than no body.” She’d also reminded, with the exception of Gionne, who had placed herself in their group, their girls, and Winnel, weren’t better off if they had stayed where they came from. Spallan offered to stay with Jahq, Yoshan, and Gionne until the planning session was finished.

So, the remaining warriors were all in the Inn's barroom, planning their next steps. Kareina glanced to all present. She felt confident the best of the group, the ones to be trusted, were all in this room.

"All the players are aware of each other now, and nothing is left but the actual battle," Ysannie said. "We know for certain they will have magic on their side, they don't play fair, and the ultimate goal is within their grasp."

"What is the ultimate goal?" Kareina asked. "The Pool of Promise is a gateway, I know, but I don't see what makes it so important to T'Dar."

"This part of Kellshae—the Pool, the Valley of Mist, and Langear— has the greatest concentration of magic."

"And why," Chayboen said, "later, we'll want to discuss Zheirger Keep. Because, like the rest of these places, who defends and wields the magic decides if it will be used for positive or negative purposes."

"Yes," Ysannie agreed. "And if T'Dar opens a portal to Bahalkar, releasing all the negative energy in demons, and evil magic locked away so long ago, and they reach these places first, the power advantage will be theirs."

"We need to understand, or at least have an idea, of what will happen when I show up." Kareina frowned, bothered about the importance of her presence for this. "What is the significance of my being there? It would seem having as few people aware of what T'Dar wants to accomplish would make the goal easier."

The same shimmering from earlier in the courtyard filled the corner of the room, and Zenti arrived. "Because, my dear, there's an ancient prophecy, which few remember, addressing this very occurrence. The prophesy reads:

When beneath a mystical moonlit pool, the veiled portal
Digests two of blood that boils and flows identical,
Though one flows with compassion, one boils only to maim,
Will the darkness then spew forth upon the land to devour and reign.

And you and your twin, Kareina, are the first to meet the criteria."

"Why couldn't T'Dar get another set of twins?" Tiilaen asked. "Why them?"

Melrick answered, "Because of the character of the twins." He glanced apologetically at Parrin.

"Oh, please, Melrick. I realized Karr to be a bad seed a very long time ago. Though it pains a mother, there's little she can do." The words were bitter, and Parrin slammed an open palmed hand on the table. "He had every advantage, more than the female twin, and it wasn't enough."

Mayliandra covered the hand with one of her own. "So the fact Karr is power hungry and uses whatever means, he's the twin 'to maim.'" Eyes filled with love turned to Kareina. "The other comparison is obvious."

Zenti rolled his eyes, and asked Ysannie, "Want me to reverse my decision?" He shuddered. "I never intended to torture you. Mortals."

Ysannie gazed lovingly at Chayboen. "Never. This torture is my destiny."

"Agh." Zenti shuddered. "Very well, let's continue. There will be a blood moon, which is part of the 'mystical moonlit' portion. It is T'Dar's intent to release all the demons."

Chayboen crossed her arms over her chest. "Why are you here? Ysannie warned the gods of this. She told you T'Dar would even come for you." Her tone was belligerent, and she appeared

ready to launch a physical attack on him. Not wise, Kareina thought, but was curious about the answers herself. “So you strip her of her immortality and drop her on the cold stone steps of my keep.” Chayboen’s breath came in rapid bursts. “It’s because T’Dar killed Magan, right? All of you are panicking now, aren’t you?”

Ysannie moved closer to Chayboen and placed her hands on Chayboen’s shoulders. “They’re here to help now, love. Give them a chance to make all this right.”

Chayboen still glowered at Zenti, and mumbled, “He can never make all of it right.”

“We’re leaving,” Zenti proclaimed. All eyes regarded him in surprise.

“Meaning?” Parrin asked.

“We’ve faded from the world when humans decided to abandon their faith in our divination, to cast away magic. It is the time for mortals. After we remove T’Dar, we will leave for good.”

“You’ll die?” Winnel asked.

“No,” Ysannie said. “We lose strength when our names aren’t invoked. Mortals have lost heart, so they will go out into the stars, find other places.”

Mayliandra beamed a grin. “Ysannie must have survived on Kareina’s prayers alone.”

Kareina blushed. “And the best wishes to the gods and their future. But I’m a bit more concerned about my own future, at the moment, and the future of my loved ones.”

Plans were made. Olaf and Winnel would go with Parrin to Gradyln, and from there alert the other clans of the Monks intent to infiltrate and destroy the Caldiers and Caldies. Spallan, the three remaining Gradyln men and half of the Langlear women, would take Jahq, Yoshan, and Gionne to Zheirger Keep and watch over them. Tomorrow, they’d travel on their separate courses.

Kareina prayed it wouldn’t be the last time they all saw one another.

Chapter Twenty-two

KAREINA COULDN'T SEE Persimmone and his men, but she could feel them. With the exception of T'Dar, but he was a god and would want to make a performance of his entrance. And to Kareina's surprise, as she moved into the cleared area of the Pool of Promises, all but the god was standing in the open. A full moon illuminated the area, but Kareina doubted it was necessary, as the Pool gave off a greenish glow.

They must think this an easy victory, Kareina thought. Of course, up until a few days ago, she would hazard bets on their side, too. Behind her, Kareina's own little defense force: Melrick, Tiilaen, Stechyc, Mayliandra, and four Langlear warriors. Hopefully, Ysannie and Chayboen were making their way around Karr's force.

"Come, sister," Persimmone/Karr said, his voice cold as ice. "Let me rid Kellshae of the blight that is you, once and for all." He sneered in Mayliandra's direction. "And you brought Karr's wife to witness your destruction."

"Love you, too," Kareina drawled. "This is your last opportunity to switch and fight on a winning side, brother." Knowing what she did now, acknowledging their kinship was bitter on her tongue. "You'll never touch Mayliandra again. Speak of her before I kill you, and I will inflict more pain than your frail body can handle."

Karr sniggered. "I would suggest the same of you, under different circumstances. Unfortunate for you, Kareina, I despise and can't wait to annihilate you. I intend to finish what Guldrac-the-idiot couldn't."

"Weren't man enough to kill her before," Mayliandra said. Kareina curbed the impulse to hug her for rushing to Kareina's defense. "Had to get—"

"Enough." Karr's face was red with rage. He peered toward the moon, which had darkened during their exchange, and Kareina followed his gaze. The moon was slowly shadowed. "It's almost time." As if the words were an invitation, T'Dar materialized behind Karr— beside him a bruised and bloody Fleuren.

"You're a bastard." Melrick leapt forward toward Fleuren, but Tiilaen and Stechyc grabbed his arms to halt him.

"Anything's possible, I guess," T'Dar drawled. He shoved Fleuren to the ground and away from him. "My little flower has wilted. Offered her godhood and she chose you, future corpses, for I will defeat you." T'Dar raised a palm in Fleuren's direction and her battered body was flung to the Pool's edge. He glared at her. "When I release my minions, I will cast you in, little flower. You'll have eternity to regret your decision."

"I'll regret nothing," Fleuren said through split and swollen lips.

"If your intent, kill me now."

"You've disappointed me. And, well, I'm not done playing with you yet." T'Dar pointed a finger in Fleuren's direction. An orange bolt zapped into Fleuren. With a pain-filled scream, Fleuren convulsed, slumping unconscious when the torture ended.

Kareina could tell it was harder for Tiilaen and Stechyc to hold Melrick in his place. She glared at T'Dar. "When you're done torturing the defenseless—"

“Oh, so quick to die.” T’Dar tsked. “Definitely got the wrong twin, but you’d never have released me from the mountain, I suppose.”

“Not hardly,” Kareina agreed.

It was T’Dar’s turn to glance at the moon. Now it was a coppery red color. T’Dar smirked, nodded to Karr, and said, “It’s time.”

“Thank the gods,” Karr said, pulling a large sword from the sheath at his waist.

“My pleasure,” T’Dar said, as if he’d anything to do with the condition of the moon.

“Prepare to die, Kareina.” Karr dashed toward her, awkwardly, as if the weight of the sword hampered his steps. The signal for the battle to begin. Fleuren, unconscious by the pool, and Mayliandra, who Kareina had given strict instructions to beforehand, did not join the fray.

Kareina smirked at Karr. “In such a hurry. You do realize we both have to be dead for the completion of T’Dar’s spell.”

Karr’s approach faltered for a moment, before he recovered. “You’ll not distract me with lies.”

“Either way, you’ll be dead this night,” Kareina said. “I wanted you to know what to expect.”

Karr’s heavy sword swung out in wide arcs. Kareina held her ground, parrying the desperate strikes. Karr raged at her, and lunged. Kareina ducked as his sword sliced in a sweep intended for her head.

“Missed me,” Kareina taunted.

“Argh.” Karr continued his barrage of fury-fueled swings.

Kareina met them parry for parry, thrust for thrust. Around her, she heard the sounds of battle rage.

MELRICK WAS RELIEVED when the battle commenced, since Tiilaen and Stechyc were forced to release him to defend against the approaching raiders. He fought through two himself, their blood now staining the ground, making his way to Fleuren.

Out of the dark forest beyond the Pool, Jurquette ascended on him as Melrick reached her side.

“Uh-uh, an addition to my collection, not yours,” Jurquette said.

Melrick snarled at him. “Like the helpless children in Iskarr? Over my dead body, you disgusting waste of flesh.”

“That, my man, is how it shall be.”

Their swords clashed, Melrick a bit surprised at the unexpected strength in the skinnier man. Grudgingly, Melrick admitted he had sword skills. But, he visualized the treatment of children like Jahq and Yoshan, the tattoos would forever encourage bad behavior like those people in Iskarr, and men like Belzan.

Melrick stepped to the side and Jurquette mimicked the direction change. Swerving, Melrick altered direction, dropped his shoulders back, and delivered an angled chop into Jurquette’s side, bending him over in pain. Melrick swung his blade high and brought it down with all his force on Jurquette’s neck.

As the severed head rolled, Melrick said, “Children and woman should be protected, not exploited, fool.” Jurquette couldn’t hear the words, but it brought a modicum of liberation to Melrick.

MAYLIANDRA FELT HELPLESS as she stood aside watching the pandemonium of battle and doing nothing to help. Kareina told you to stay safe, she reminded herself, saying Mayliandra would know the moment her presence was required to destroy T'Dar. Melrick engaged Jurquette, while hovering close to Fleuren. Tiilaen, Stechyc, and the Langlear women fought against the raiders. She gave a second's concern for Stechyc who was a healing mage, and though she held her own, it appeared her skills were as limited as Mayliandra's own.

Kareina took as many hits from Karr's blade as she gave and still forged on. Mayliandra worried no matter the horrible things Karr had perpetrated, Kareina might be loath to kill her twin. Her heart felt pain at the dilemma for her wife as she watched Kareina defend herself, but ignore the many opportunities Karr's weak swordsmanship provided her.

She could tell Karr grew weary. Mayliandra thought Kareina would take the next opening, instead she angled the fight toward the Pool and T'Dar.

T'DAR DISCARDED THE Eye at his feet and began the silent incantation, stood beside the Pool, now a roiling mass of green water and fog. Small wisps of grey colored smoke belched from within the water and floated away into the darkness of the forest, each wisp a released demon, which would soon convert back to original form. He sensed the loss of Jurquette and felt nothing. Fleuren was beginning to stir, and for her he felt the heavy weight of betrayal, having offered her everything and yet she refused him—siding with mortals she barely knew. Maybe he would wipe her mind and keep her anyway.

Elation filled him with his twin puppets. Where Karr was tiring, Kareina displayed an inability to finish the kill. Either way T'Dar had them in his grasp, or soon he would. Dead or alive, he'd achieved his goal of releasing all occupants in Bahalkar, and closed the portal. His dominion over the mortals in Kellshae would be short lived as his demons would annihilate them before too long.

The whimpering twin called out. "T'Dar, please, suffuse me with your might."

"She's a female," T'Dar said. "Aren't the men of Kellshae always touting how inferior they are?" T'Dar could have used the telepathic link to make his point, but enjoyed teasing the useless man.

"My god, I—"

"Fine," T'Dar said, flinging an orange bolt into Kareina. "Satisfied?"

MAYLIANDRA SCREAMED, HORRIFIED. Kareina stumbled back at the assault, almost falling to her knees. She had to do something, couldn't let Karr win—especially through cheating. And she couldn't lose Kareina, didn't think she could survive without her. In her panicked state, eyes blinking furiously to staunch the tears of anguish, her gaze fell on the strange gold and silver sculpture with two daggers, tossed near the water. She rushed over, pulled a dagger free, and sprinted to Karr and Kareina. Neither of them appeared to notice her approach.

Mayliandra lunged at Karr with the dagger gripped tight in her hand. Karr, sensing her, spun about to avoid the tip, but was too slow. Karr hit the ground, eyes wide in surprise, as her blade slid into the soft flesh of Karr's throat. Blood gushed from his neck. Tears trickled down her face as she stared down into his sightless eyes.

"Bastard. You should have suffered, as you made Kareina and so many others suffer."

KAREINA HURRIED TO her, pulling Mayliandra into her arms. "Hush, honey. You did what you had to. I owe you thanks."

"Well, done. He was quite the irritant," T'Dar said. With a crooking of his forefinger, T'Dar pulled Karr's corpse closer to the Pool. "On to the next game piece." A blue-green flow of energy encompassed them. Another bolt, this time aimed at Mayliandra, who fell writhing to the ground.

"Leave her alone," Kareina said. She picked up Karr's fallen sword and flung it at T'Dar. Anticipating this blast, Kareina quickly veered aside.

"Last chance, Kareina," T'Dar said. "Take your brother's place at my side. You don't whine, either. For me it's a win-win."

Kareina smirked. "Nice try. I know you need both of us to release the larger demons."

T'Dar gave an exaggerated pout. "After all I've done for you. I had Armin turned into a Monk, so you wouldn't miss this playtime."

The blue-green energy was working as a barrier. Kareina struggled against it to reach T'Dar. "All the things you've done to everyone." Kareina said, managing to gain another foot in his direction. "You could've done me the favor of handling Nehlari. She, at least, was an admirable adversary."

Pain exploded all along her left side from two bolts, one after the other. But she ignored the pain, forcing herself to take the next step, another, her focus entirely on T'Dar.

She struggled to pull the Talisman of D'Kelri free from the inside pocket of her leather vest. Kareina focused on Mayliandra, behind and to the left of T'Dar, giving her the motivation she needed.

"I'm a god, mortal," T'Dar taunted Kareina. "You can't defeat me."

"You keep on believing," Kareina said through gritted teeth. "The shock on your face when I do will be all the more glorious."

From her peripheral, Kareina noticed Stechyc join Mayliandra, Tiilaen disposing of the last of the raiders. Near as Kareina could tell, none of the dead were hers.

One more step. Another.

Exhaustion was taking its toll on her muscles, Kareina was losing focus, could see the outlines of blackness on the edge of her vision. Ysannie appeared behind Mayliandra and whispered in her ear.

Kareina caught a glimpse of Chayboen hidden behind Stechyc and Tiilaen.

"Give it up, Kareina," T'Dar said. He pointed in the direction of the moon, but didn't look, wouldn't be distracted.

"Getting worried?"

One more step. A couple more to go.

T'Dar, god or not, let himself be distracted with his belief of control—like a mortal. Chayboen held Cerno, her magic sword from the god Magan, firmly in her grasp and crept up behind T'Dar.

Kareina knew she had one chance, and it would take all her remaining strength. Lunging forward, angling, and diving into a roll, Kareina came up in a leap in front of T'Dar, burying the Talisman of D'Kelri in his throat. And was promptly flung backward wracked with pain, sliding uncontrolled across the grassy ground, stopping only when she collided with a tree trunk.

A strange translucent bubble, rising from his feet upward, encased T'Dar, his roar of rage sending a tremor through the air, vibrations through the ground.

Almost forgotten, Kareina watched powerlessly as Fleuren shouted something and ran toward him. Severe pain filled Kareina as she got to her feet. What was Fleuren—

Fleuren flew at T'Dar before the bubble fully encased him, reached for the amulet hanging at his neck, and clutched it in her left hand. So focused on achieving her goal, Fleuren lost her balance. Kareina watched as Fleuren threw her right hand forward to stop her fall as the bubble closed. Her blood-curdling scream pierced the air and she fell to the ground, hand clutched to her chest.

“Fleuren!” Melrick cried out her name as he raced to her side. Even from where she stood, Kareina could see the bubble had severed the last two fingers of Fleuren's right hand, and had taken a chunk of her palm. Luckily, the bubble seemed to have cauterized the wound.

Ysannie, still behind Mayliandra, who now stood before a furious bubble-encased T'Dar, was whispering in Mayliandra's ears. Mayliandra repeated the unfamiliar words aloud, and the black stone of her necklace flared. T'Dar and the bubble shrank with each utterance. Unlatching the clasp of the necklace, Ysannie removed it from Mayliandra's neck and held it in front of her.

Soon, the shrinking stopped, the bubbled T'Dar shivered from a solid to a gaseous mist pulled into Mayliandra's stone—and was gone. Mayliandra slumped, and Kareina rushed to her side, enveloping her in a tight embrace.

“Are you all right, Mayli?” Kareina asked, kissing the crown of Mayliandra's head. Mayliandra nodded.

“And you?” Mayliandra asked.

Kareina pushed Mayliandra away enough to peer into her eyes. “Better now you're safe.”

Ysannie shifted away toward Stechyc, who tended to Fleuren, despite Melrick held her so close to his chest Stechyc didn't have much space to work in. Kareina, not releasing Mayliandra, joined them.

Bending to gaze at Fleuren, Ysannie asked, “May I have the amulet, Fleuren?” Fleuren whimpered. “I promise not to harm her.” After a long pause, Fleuren passed the amulet she'd pulled from T'Dar's neck, to Ysannie. Standing, Ysannie again whispered strange words of incantation. The amulet exploded into a spray of sparks, and a woman stood before Ysannie.

“Leurette,” Fleuren said, as the woman gasped air, gawking at all the strangers surrounding her. She appeared to recognize Fleuren, who gave her a wobbly smile.

Ysannie turned to Fleuren. “She is safe. I will return her to Smierc Keep, and restore what T'Dar has done. You have done well, Fleuren.” At Fleuren's nod, Ysannie gave a smile to Chayboen. “Be back. You know what to do?” Chayboen nodded, and Ysannie and Leurette were gone.

“What needs to be done?” Kareina asked of Chayboen.

Chayboen glanced at the moon. “Before the blood moon disappears, we need to toss the raider bodies, the Eye of T'Dar and Mayliandra's amulet in the Pool. By this, we will close the

portal and seal it. The only magical items able to reopen this portal will be locked away in Bahalkar forever.”

Kareina crouched near Melrick. “Okay, my friend?”

Melrick nodded, and glanced to Stechyc. “Will she be all right?”

“Yes, overall, but I can’t fix this injury. The damage to her hand is permanent.” To Fleuren, she said, “I’ll prepare something for the pain.”

“Watch over her. We’ll clean up here and start for Zheirger Keep. She’ll need rest.” Kareina rose.

Fleuren regarded Kareina nervously. “Kareina, I didn’t want—”

“Hush. There’s nothing to explain. You have protected my wife. So, other than thank you,” Kareina smiled at her. “All I can say is welcome back.”

Mayliandra was tossing the necklace holding T’Dar trapped as the moon began to dim in its cycle to return to normal. “What happens now?” Kareina asked Chayboen.

“The Pool will seal.”

“What of the magic?” Tiilaen asked.

“A great deal has already leeches through Kellshae, and there may be some residual. But the important thing is the Pool of Promise will no longer be a portal.” As Chayboen spoke, the moon returned to normal. When it did, the Pool darkened and the water turned to mud, and then clay. “It’s done.”

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” Kareina said, her voice loud enough for everyone to hear, “but I’m ready to head home.”

No one disagreed with her.

Epilogue

ZHEIRGER KEEP WAS a massive fortress surrounded by mountains on two sides, a sheer drop of hundreds of feet on a third side, and thick timberland fronting. Five miles west, was the Valley of Mist, and Langlear at the edge (the Void beyond both). Their journey was almost over. The air was chill, soon winter would be here, but Kareina had her family and friends with her. They had used the time during the trek from the Pool of Promises to reexamine the plans of Ysannie and Chayboen.

“It’s the perfect solution, Kareina,” Ysannie said. “We’ll provide a safe haven for the children with magic, and their families should they want to be part of the magic. There will be schools, educating them on the proper handling of magic, and they can live normal lives.”

“And I’m to protect you all?” Kareina asked. “Can’t see where I’m providing a valuable service. I’ll be a drain on resources without giving back, and you’ll wish to be rid of me.”

Mayliandra gave Kareina a hug. “It will be a village where we set the rules. We’ll also be a safe haven for women who love women, and men who love men. We’ll be safe. Our children will be safe.”

Ysannie also promised one of the first objectives, with the assistance of the Langlear mages, would be to build a magic bridge through the Valley. She intended an easy passing of the warriors to assist with training a new Zheirger guard, and for the mages to help teach, use and control of the magic. It all sounded too good to be true, but Kareina knew you didn’t achieve anything without trying.

Kareina expected Melrick to comment, but he didn’t. She glanced behind her and noted his concentration entire focused on Fleuren. For this blessing, Kareina was glad. She wanted the best for her friend. Fleuren cared for Melrick. He’d put up with so much from her. From the moment Hassid announced her betrothal, Kareina had gone off the edge of an emotional cliff. But Melrick remained strong, the perfect sounding board and often brunt of her outbursts. Observing them now, Kareina felt relief. Melrick and Fleuren made a wonderful couple.

Now, at the bottom of the path, staring up at the structure, Kareina realized how much of her life had changed—was about to change more. This would be a new beginning. A new life, as her real female self, complete with a wife and children to love—who loved her—and surrounded by the love of friends. The others had moved ahead. She looked forward to seeing the girls again, needed to make sure Gionne was indeed healing and going to be okay. From the top of the Keep stairs, Gionne was leaning on Spallan and looking happy. Jahq and Yoshan had sited them and now raced toward them.

This is it. I’m home, Kareina thought, a sense of peace filling her.

“I could sleep for days,” Kareina said.

Mayliandra socked her in the arm. “You have honeymoon duties to perform.” She glanced at the Keep. “And I’m betting there are lots of places to do so—for long, long hours—without interruption and prying ears.”

“Wife,” Kareina said, feigning shock. “Are you suggesting we abandon the tavern quickies for all-nighters?”

Mayliandra’s eyes widened. “Sweet goddess, no, only put the quickies on sabbatical.” She pulled Kareina into an embrace, planting quick kisses to her chin and cheeks. “We’ll need those moments when the Keep gets its first influx of students, and refugees.”

Kareina shook her head. “Winter is coming, with extensive hours trapped with little to nothing to do. I expect you to share the uncharacteristic knowledge you have on lovemaking.” She dropped the playfulness in her tone. “I’m a bit worried I might not satisfy your needs as you deserve.”

“Oh, Kareina, you need never fear.” Mayliandra said, “The past was about release, and not as you believe I’ve implied. You, Kareina, you are the only one I ever have and ever will make love to.”

“I will hold you to the declaration, wife,” Kareina said. “And I will hold you close to me, in my arms and in my heart for eternity.”

Mayliandra stared at her. “I love you. You believe don’t you, Kareina? You know I will always love you?”

Lifting Mayliandra into her arms, Kareina rained light kisses on her face. “You have made my life complete, brought me laughter, shown me tenderness. I would be a fool to doubt you.”

“And you are no fool,” Mayliandra whispered.

“I love you, too, heart and soul.” Kareina brought her lips to Mayliandra’s, kissing her deeply, hoping to make clear her words through lips breathily communicating feelings in her kiss.

“Yuck, go do it in your room,” Yoshan said, encasing Kareina’s leg with her body and arms. “Yeah,” Jahq said, beside them. “Much as it hurts, I have to agree with Yoshan.”

“I intend to do precisely that, Poppet.” Kareina placed Mayliandra on her feet. Mayliandra gave her a shocked glare. “Later, of course, because I know it’s family time now. And I don’t want to miss a moment with my family.”

The End

About the Author

Sharon lives in beautiful Colorado. She enjoys finding new trails to hike and playing mahjong, although not simultaneously as she's awkward enough under normal circumstances, and the magic of quiet time. Most of all, she likes to read, and is thankful for electronic reader—or else it would be obvious how many books she owns.

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by S.Y. Thompson

Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon

deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison

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Once Bitten

by R.G. Emanuelle

Fiona lost her mortality unwillingly to a woman she once loved. Now she wanders through the decades, a vampire in search of a soulmate. After 200 years, she thinks she's found her, in an upper-class family in New York City at the turn of the 20th century. Her name is Rose, and if only she will come to her willingly, Fiona will have her eternal companion. But Rose loves another, so Fiona sets in motion a twisted scheme that involves the woman Rose loves and a betrayal that will lead Rose into transformation. Will Rose succumb to Fiona's machinations and forever lose the woman she truly loves? Or will she find a way to foil the vampire's devious plan and save her soul-and her beloved's life? She's running out of options and, worse, out of time.

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