

~ Clans ~

by silverwriter01

All characters are mine and mine alone. If they look like anybody you know or think you know, you must be dreaming. This story does contain some scenes of violence, sexual acts, and women loving women. If any of this is not your cup of tea, go try some coffee. Copyright 2007

Comments and feedback are welcome at silverwriter01@yahoo.com. Please be gentle, but honest.

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A bird flew across the treetops. He had to get home quickly. He flew on past what seem to be a never-ending forest until a large clearing came into sight. He could see humans in the clearing, working hard. He could tell they were building nests and searching for food. He past over the large river on one side of the clearing and looked down to see the humans trying to get fish from the river. He let out a chirp of relieve as he spotted his tree and his wife. She looked at him expectedly and he proudly dropped the twig he had carried in his mouth. After his wife placed the twig where she wanted it, their home was complete.

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A mouse tentatively poked his head outside of his home. He looked left and then right. He could see the human that hated him cooking at fire. He couldn't spot the human who tried to kill him at the other human's orders. He ran across harden floor. He never could figure out what they had done to the floor. It was not wood like the wall he had made his home in, nor was it dirt.

He avoiding running across the skin of other animals that the humans placed on the ground to walk upon. He ran outside the house, heading towards the smell of something sweet that had been calling him. He avoided all the humans walking around outside and made it to the sweet smelling house. He frowned at the noisy children playing in a fenced in yard beside the sweet smelling house, and then entered the home. He knew he had reached paradise.

There was bread just laying on counters and cookies on trays. He could see meat being cooked on racks and vegetables being cut. He didn't know he had entered the town's Tavern, which was prepping for their evening crowd.

The mouse didn't know what to try first. He then spotted what looked to be an easy target. There was a line of cookies sitting on the window sill, cooling. He hurried over to a broom and scuttled up it. He crept slowly to the window and hopped on the sill. He saw the largest cookie he had

ever seen and just as he was about to take a bite out of it, a hand appeared from outside and snatched it from him. He watched as a faired hair human child ate his cookie.

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Laura was on the verge of crying as she was led into the barred room. The door made a really loud noise as it shut behind her. She held back a snuffle as she turned to look at her new roommate. The brown haired girl grinned at her. "First time in the pen?"

Laura nodded, still feeling tearful.

"What did you do?" Her companion asked.

"I took food without asking," Laura confessed. "What did you do?"

"I pushed a boy who was bullying some clan mates of mine. I was the only one to get into trouble," The brown haired one said.

Laura turned to stare out through the bars again. She started to cry, "I don't like this."

The darker haired girl took pity on the blonde, who probably had never been in trouble before, and moved over to wrap an arm around her. She said, hugging the girl close, "Come on, it's not so bad. We'll get out of here soon. Come on, let's lay down."

Laura complied, feeling tired. She laid down beside the brown headed girl and allowed her to cover them both with the blanket that was in the cell. Laura whispered, "What's your name and what clan do you come from?"

"Rowan from the Heartwood clan," Rowan answered in a yawn. "What about you?"

Laura yawned as well and said, lazily smacking her lips and her eyes fluttering close, "Laura from the Timber Wolf clan."

Rowan's little eyebrows frowned as she moved her tired eyes to look at Laura's necklace. Sure enough, there was a wolf emblem around her neck. Rowan glanced back up to her golden haired companion's face and found her asleep. Rowan shook her head and tucked the blanket more securely around her. She said before falling asleep herself, "Good night, little hunter."

Both awoke in to the sound of their names being called. They both sleepily blinked awake and looked up to see both of their mothers standing above them.

Laura cried happily, "Mommy."

"Mama," Rowan cried, holding out her arms to be picked up.

Both mothers grinned as they bent down to pick up their daughters. Ash laughed as her four year old daughter nuzzled her neck lovingly and asked, "So what did my little trouble maker do today to get sent to the quiet pen?"

Rowan grinned and said, "I pushed a boy."

Ash frowned, slightly, and said, "You did? Why?"

"He was bullying Toby and Markey. He was bigger than them but not bigger than me. I made him stop," Rowan said as she told her story.

Audrey smiled at her daughter, who cuddled close, "And what did you do Laura?"

Laura confessed, her lip trembling, "I took a cookie without asking. I'm so sorry, Mommy."

Audrey brushed the back of her daughter's head and said, "It's okay, Laura. I should know how that wolf's stomach of yours never stays full long. Just next time, ask Elder Miller, sweetie. And do without if they say no."

Laura nodded. She was glad that her mother wasn't mad at her.

Audrey said, "Say goodbye to your friend, Laura. It's time to go."

Laura waved at Rowan, "Bye-bye, Rowan."

"Bye, little hunter," Rowan called as Laura was taken away by her mother.

"She's a Timber Wolf," Rowan told her mom in a solemn whisper.

Ash gave a smile but it didn't reach her eyes. She had already known that fact from the emblems they wore. Everyone wore the emblem of their clan. Everyone's clan belonged to one large tribe. The Heartwood clan dealt with trees. Whether it be from gathering sap, cutting wood, or building with that very wood, they dealt with trees. The Timber Wolf clan was the tribe's main supplier of food. They hunted and they protected the tribe from outside creatures.

The Heartwood clan and the Timber Wolf clan were known for their ability to *not* get along. The Timber Wolf clan was always complaining that the Heartwood clan was scaring off the game with their sawing and destruction of the forest. The Heartwood clan, also known for it's stubbornness, fought back passionately that they were not overusing the forest and if the Timber Wolf clan was having a hard time finding game, it was because they weren't looking hard enough. Needless to say, they did not get along.

Every clan had their rifts with one another but in the end, they all worked together to maintain the tribe. They had to since they had long ago chosen to forgo the increasing technology of the world. The tribe had seen other societies crumble from depending too much on technology and refused to let the same happen to them. That's why all the clans stuck together.

6 years later

Laura crept closer to the sound of pounding. It sounded like someone was banging two rocks together over and over again. When she found the source of the noise, she found that someone *was* banging two rocks together.

A lanky brown haired girl, about the same age as her at 10 years old, sat on the ground with a large round rock sitting on the grind between her legs and a smaller round rock in her hand. She brought the smaller rock down on the larger one. The girl pressed down and started to turn the smaller stone. Laura then realized she was trying to ground something.

Laura frowned at the discourtesy to hunters. All the noise was scaring the animals away. If the girl was going to do that, she should do that near her home or at least somewhere away from the forest.

Laura watched as the girl took another rock, this one black, and laid it on the larger stone. She brought her grinding stone down upon it and smashed it until chips broke off onto the larger stone. She then started her pounding and grinding again. Once satisfied that it was ground enough, she poured it into a cup that was sitting beside her, one that Laura hadn't noticed. The noise-making girl then moved to start the process all over again.

Laura moved out from her hiding spot, her mind set on scolding the girl for scaring away her game. Laura growled, "What are you doing?"

The brown haired girl looked up and Laura found herself pinned by startling green eyes. She knew the girl from years ago and had seen her on several more occasions, but only from afar. It was considered wrong, by her clan, for Laura to play with Rowan so Laura had stayed away on purpose. Laura doubted if Rowan remembered her.

She was wrong.

Rowan grinned as she saw who it was. She greeted, her smile dazzling, "Hello, little hunter. What are you doing?"

Laura glared at her. At the times they had spoken to each other, Rowan had always called her little hunter. Laura hated that name. True, Rowan always had been taller than her, but it was not right to call her little. Laura was average for most of the tribe. Rowan was just taller.

"I asked you first," Laura snarled back.

If Rowan seemed surprised by Laura's aggressive tone, she didn't show it. She answered as she went back to grinding the black chips, "I'm making powder."

"Why?"

It slipped out of Laura's mouth before she could stop it. She recovered. "I mean you're scaring away the animals. Why don't you do that somewhere else?"

Rowan looked around as if to look for protesting animals and gave Laura a ludicrous smile. "If they want, they can file a complaint against me with the tribal elders."

"Are you making fun of me?" Laura demanded.

"I wouldn't do that, little hunter."

Laura moved closer to Rowan until she was standing above her in all of her fury. Laura said through clenched teeth, "Don't call me that."

Rowan looked genuinely confused, "What? Little hunter? But I've always called you that."

"And I've always hated it. Now stop calling me that."

Rowan shrugged and went back to grinding her powder. Feeling on a roll, Laura ordered, "And stop pounding those stupid rocks together."

Rowan turned her head slowly to Laura, raising a single brow. "Make me, little hunter."

Laura was taken back. Sure, other children of the Timber Wolf clan would fight with her but no other kids dared to fight anyone of the Timber Wolf clan. Laura's blue eyes quickly turned navy from rage and she said, struggling to remain calm, "Stand up so you can eat those words."

Rowan shrugged and she poured the powder into the cup. She set the cup aside and stood up. She quietly dusted her hands and raised up her body to stand tall, which was two and a half inches taller than Laura. She looked down at her.

"Your height doesn't scare me," Laura snapped.

Rowan shrugged and motioned for Laura to come on. Laura's eyes flashed before she charged.

Laura whined, "Why are you putting that rubbish on me?"

Rowan smiled as she painted more strips along Laura's arm. She had taken the black powder and mixed it with water till it was almost soupy. Once it dried, it would be gray.

"Because I beat you fair and square. Now stop wiggling, you'll mess up my paint job."

Laura still couldn't believe a member of the Heartwood clan beat her in a wrestling match. But Rowan had, fair and square. Matter of fact, she had had Laura flat on her back with her arms pinned over her head, sitting on her stomach. When asked where she had learned that, she had

said it was something her Mama, Ash, always did to her Mom, Sawyer, even though Sawyer looked stronger.

"I'm starting to look like a zebra, Rowan. Hey! You're not putting that stuff on my face," Laura cried as she ducked and rolled. Laura groaned as she found herself pinned by Rowan again.

Rowan said, cheerfully, as she reached for her cup of paint, "Stop whining so much, little hunter. It washes off."

Laura closed her eyes as she felt Rowan's strong, nimble fingers paint a design on her face. Rowan grinned as she finished.

"Okay, you're done. Now you can do me."

Laura's eyes opened to show an eager, interested look. She quickly took the paint from Rowan and started drawing swirls on her arm.

After they were done, they were both laughing at how silly the other looked. They stopped laughing as they heard the footsteps of someone coming towards them. Someone called, "Rowan?"

Rowan called back, "Over here."

A few more footsteps and out stepped a medium sized woman with a strong build and the same startling green eyes as Rowan. Sawyer blinked several times at the sight of her daughter and her companion.

Rowan grinned, "Hi, Mom. This is Laura."

"Hello Laura," Sawyer greeted, glancing over her emblem.

"Hello Elder," Laura waited as Rowan whispered her Mom's name in her ear. "Elder Sawyer."

All children greeted adults as Elder unless they were family or well-known. The tribal elders, who ruled the counsel, were called Master Elder.

Sawyer took a long look at her grinning daughter as she struggled not to grin, "I hope that washes off, Little Tree."

"It does, Mom. We were just going to wash up," Rowan said.

Sawyer took a towel that she had slipped through her belt before she went in search of her daughter and threw it at Rowan. She knew Rowan would find something messy to do.

Rowan gave her Mom a wave goodbye before she grabbed Laura's hand and took off to a nearby creek. Laura called back respectfully, "Goodbye Elder Sawyer."

"Bye, Laura. Nice meeting you."

Rowan yelped as she splashed water on her face, "It's cold."

Laura rolled her eyes and started scrubbing her arms with the freezing water. Once most of the paint was off, they dried off with the towel Sawyer had given them. Rowan said, "Hold still."

Laura held still as Rowan wet a corner of the towel and scrubbed a stubborn spot of gray paint off her cheek. "There, all better."

Laura shook her head. She couldn't believe she had just spent so much time with a member of the Heartwood clan. She knew her mother and her father would be displeased. But still, it had been fun playing with Rowan.

Rowan sighed as she glanced up at the sun for the time, "Mama will have supper done soon. She'll skin me if I miss it."

Laura glanced up to check the time as well and agreed, "Yeah, I need to go too."

Rowan grabbed Laura's hand as she turned to leave and said, "Hey, hold on a moment. Here, take this. It's for friendship."

Rowan laid something in Laura's hand and closed her fingers around it. She gave one last silly grin and turned to dash away. Laura slowly opened her hand to see what Rowan had placed inside. It was a marble sized piece of the black stone Rowan had used to make the gray paint.

Laura rolled the black stone around in her hand for a long time. Finally, she reached down into her tunic and pulled out her totem pouch.

Every member of the tribe wore two things around their neck. One was the emblem of their clan and the second was their own personal totem pouch. Inside that pouch lay the symbol of their personal totem that was given to them when they were born by a shaman.

It could be made of wood, rock, bone, or cloth, whatever the shaman who delivered the baby decided to use. The shaman was shown the baby's totem in a vision that they always received when the baby passes from its mother's womb into their hands. They would then carve or paint the totem onto a piece of material and place it into an ordinary pouch the mother had already made. The mother of the child would hold onto the totem pouch until the child reached an age where they are considered responsible enough not to lose it, usually when the child turns seven.

Then, for the first time since the shaman closed the bag, the child would open it to see what their totem was. They understand they are to never give out the secret of their totem. If anybody found out someone else's totem, they could gain control on that person.

A person's totem is only revealed after their death to honor their spirit and allow the totem to be able to return to a new baby. It is considered an extreme crime to look into another's pouch without permission and is punishable by death.

When something of great importance is given to a tribe member, and if it will fit, they will place it in their totem pouch. Hunters put a tooth or claw of their first kill into their pouches. Weavers, a string of the first yarn they spun. Carpenters, a piece of the first tree they cut down. Mates put the first token their loves gave them in their pouches. It meant the item was of great value.

Laura placed the rock in her pouch.

Five years later

Ash said, half in amusement and half in frustration, "Would you quit fidgeting?"

Rowan groaned, "I don't like just standing here. I feel like a pin cushion."

The tailor, who knelt beside her, said, her mouth full of pins, "If you don't stop moving, I'm *going* to make you into a pin cushion."

Rowan sighed deep and heavily for the thirtieth time since she was forced to go to the tailor's. She hated standing still to have clothes fitted.

Ash said as she walked around Rowan to inspect her, "You need new clothes for the festival, Rowan. All of your other ones have holes in them. Now stop fidgeting. You're just like your Mom when you act this way."

Sawyer had so cleverly volunteered to work that day so she wouldn't be forced to shop for new clothes with Rowan.

"This is an important festival, Rowan. You know you've been looking forward to it all year. So just stand still a little while longer."

Rowan sighed again. She was looking forward to the festival for it was the first one she would be attending as an adult. All the youths on the verge of leaving adolescence had to take a test to prove their worth as an adult. She would take the Tribal Ceremony of Maturity and then she could attend the feast. Yes, she was looking forward to it.

Rowan then silently sighed from the heaviness in her heart. Sure she was looking forward to it but what was the point of looking forward to anything if Laura wasn't there to look with her?

It had barely been three months since they had last spoken. Rowan had spent the last few years charming her way into the good graces of Laura's clan. To see if Rowan could really have a true

friendship with Laura, Audrey and other Elders decided to take Rowan out on a hunt without telling Laura.

Laura had gone to find Rowan one day only to find out what her mother and others had done. Laura was suddenly sent into terror. What if Rowan saw the others kill and became disgusted by it and then by her? What if she didn't understand? What if she didn't want to be her friend anymore?

Laura was on pins and needles until Rowan returned with the other hunters at the end of the day. Fear had transformed into anger by the time Rowan returned. Knowing it was unwise to say all she wanted to say in front of the Elders, Laura grabbed a startled Rowan's hand and started pulling her into the forest.

Once she was certain they were away from prying ears and eyes, Laura dropped Rowan's hand and turned to face her tall friend. "Just what were you thinking!"

"Huh?"

"Don't you 'huh' me. What was in that wood block of a head of yours when you decided to go on a hunt? And without even telling me?"

Rowan held out her hands in a gesture of peace and one of surrender, "I was just trying to see what that part of your life was like. You've been with me on logging trips and watched as I learned my lessons in crafting. You've even been off on trips with my Mom without me. I don't see what the problem is."

"Problem? Problem? I'll tell you what the problem is. Cutting down a tree is not the same thing as killing a blood-bleeding creature. I saw the doe the hunters carried. Can you honestly tell me that you had no problem with it?"

Rowan's normal merry expression, which was already dim, faded into solemn. She couldn't lie. She did have a problem with it. Rowan had watched without comment as they spotted the doe grazing in a clear spot. She said not a word as a hunter aimed his bow and her face showed nothing as he fired. His shot was true, hitting the doe right behind the shoulder and straight through her heart.

Rowan *knew* that fawning season was over and the doe did not have children to take care of. She *knew* that the tribe would greatly appreciate the tender meat of the fine deer. She *knew* that was the way life was but it still didn't help the sick feeling in her stomach as they gutted and skinned the poor, dead creature.

Seeing the grave look on her friend's face, Laura felt her heart fall. A slow dread started seeping into her stomach at the thought of what her friend must be thinking, at what she thought about her.

In an attempt to ignore her own fear, Laura used anger. She seethed, "See? Do you see what happened because you didn't tell me what you were doing? Do you see how stupid your actions were by going on a hunt? A *carpenter* has no business being on a hunt."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew they were a mistake. But the Timber wolf clan was one of the most prideful and stubborn clans there was and Laura was not about to take back her words. Heartwood was the other.

Rowan felt outraged at her friend's words. How dare Laura judge what she could handle? How dare she judge her by the profession she chose to follow? And how dare she call her ignorant?

"Well since a carpenter has no business being on a hunt, a carpenter has no business socializing with a hunter. Oh...my mistake...I meant a killer. Yeah, you're just a little killer."

Rowan regretted the words as soon as she said them. They were what was going to make her lose a friend.

The last words Laura had spoken to her were, "I don't ever want to talk to you again." And her last words to Laura were, before storming off, "Fine by me."

Pride had kept Rowan from going and apologizing the next day, and the next. A week went by when Rowan felt as if her guilt and shame were about to shallow her up and she knew she had to apologize soon.

Unfortunately word had spread throughout the Timber Wolf clan of how Laura and Rowan's friendship had reached a halt and several of Laura's clan mates were happy about it, especially the youth around Laura's age. They had taken the opportunity to use Laura's anger at Rowan in their favor.

Laura had always protected Rowan in the Timber Wolf clan, from verbal and physical assaults just as Rowan had done for Laura in her clan. But now, Laura wasn't going to protect the lanky wood beaver.

When the sun had set upon that day, Rowan was sporting a black eye and walking with a limp. Nobody said anything when they saw her, especially when they saw youths of the Timber Wolf clan in the same condition. Laura had not made one move to defend her old friend, though it killed her deep inside.

Rowan sighed again. She really should forget about Laura. They were just too different, just like their clans. Besides, if she had continued to stay friends with Laura, she would have to start answering for these startling new feelings she had been having. She had begun to think of what the future would be like with her and in her vision, they were starting to change into a little more than friends. No, she did not need to go there.

Laura tried to calm the butterflies in her stomach as Rowan was lead away to take her test of maturity. She was to go last because she had drawn the last number. So she had to wait, and wait. Laura thought she had always been good with patience, one did have to know how to wait for the right moment in hunting, but she realized then as she waited her turn, she wasn't very good at it. She also did not want to admit she was worried about Rowan. The last few months had been torture to her. She never realized how much of her life revolved around her friendship with Rowan until Rowan was no longer in her life.

Laughter filled the air as the new adults joined the tribe for their first feast as an adult. Every youth had passed, though all still held a faint color of pale on their face from their test.

Rowan went through the line of elders in her clan and shook each of their hands and took their congratulations. She endured the long, tearful hug of Ash and smiled at Sawyer who was beaming with pride.

While Rowan was lured into a conversation with Master Elder Cyprus, who was the Heartwood clan's tribal councilman, and Ash was busy boasting about her little baby growing up, Sawyer made her way towards Laura, who was standing by herself in a far corner of the feast.

Laura blinked as Sawyer appeared at her side. She was finally able to address her, "Hello, Elder Sawyer."

Sawyer grinned, "You're an adult now, Laura. You can call me just Sawyer if you like."

Laura said nothing. What could she say to one of the mothers of her ex-best friend?

Sawyer saw the uncertainty that Laura tried so hard to hide and decided to ease her discomfort, "I just wanted to congratulate you on passing the test. There were only a few doubts in my mind and I'm glad to see they proved to be false."

"Doubts?" It slipped out of her mouth before she could stop it. Sawyer had had doubts about her? What about Rowan? Everyone knew she was far more mature then Rowan.

Sawyer gave a tiny corner grin and asked, "Has anyone given you a lecture or advice yet?"

Laura nodded deeply, that was something everyone had done.

Sawyer gave a chuckle and said, "Well this is about the most serious thing you're ever going to hear out of my mouth. I did have doubts about you. I've often told you that you had an old soul because of the seriousness you take upon yourself. I've often told you that you were very smart. However, being an adult does not mean being old, serious, smart, or clever. Being an adult means being mature and wise. There's a difference in being old and being mature. There's a difference in being smart and being wise. Those differences, you're just going to have to find out for yourself."

"What of Rowan?"

'Darn it,' Laura thought. 'I'm known throughout the entire tribe for being solemn and stoic. Why can't I keep my mouth shut now?'

Sawyer turned her head to look at her only child standing tall and proud in the new clothes Ash had tortured her into getting.

"I've always been more concerned about Rowan's heart than I have been with her maturity. I let Ash worry about if Rowan's ready to be an adult. She will always be my Little Tree to me."

Laura had enough humor to return the parting smile Sawyer gave her. Rowan stood over a foot taller than Sawyer and Sawyer still called her little. Just like Rowan still called her little. Well, when they were still talking to each other. Laura's smile faded.

Five years later

"Are they finished, *yet?*"

Rowan sighed as she wiped the sweat from her brow, "You're just going to have wait, Elder Grafter. I told you before I started it would be a week before I could get the tables you requested to your shop and it's only been 2 days."

Needless to say impatient Grafter stormed out of Rowan's shop. Willa, her apprentice, laughed after he left. Willa said, "For a man who grows plants, he sure doesn't have a lot of patience."

Rowan gave a corner grin, a trademark she had inherited from Sawyer, and said, "I guess he just runs out."

Rowan stopped to watch her 15 year old apprentice put the finishing touches on a decorative wooden loom. Most carpenters wouldn't accept 15 year old apprentices yet unless they were in their family, and most carpenters wouldn't even think of having apprentice at all until they were in their thirties. Rowan was only 20 and Willa was of no relationship to her but by clan. However, Rowan wasn't most carpenters and Willa wasn't just some apprentice.

Rowan nodded approvingly as Willa let out a sigh of satisfaction as she moved away from the loom. She clapped Willa on the back and said, "The Spider clan's Master Elder will be very pleased with this. I say this calls for a special supper at the West Tavern."

There was only two Taverns in the entire tribe and they were both located in the heart of the tribe where the markets lay. The Taverns were run by one family who had started them a long time ago. The Taverns were called the West Tavern and the East Tavern.

Willa beamed at the idea. Rowan couldn't help but tease, "And I'm sure that boy you like will be working. You know, the Keeper's second son. The one who is as big around as a toothpick."

"He is not," Willa retorted as she tried to mask her blush.

Rowan laughed and wrapped her arm around her apprentice's shoulder. They made their way to the West Tavern, which was the closer than the East Tavern.

As Rowan was caught up in a conversation with an elder just outside the tavern, Willa looked inside to see if she could see her crush. Instead her eyes found a sight that made her wince and look at Rowan in sympathy. Laura was inside.

Willa could remember a time when Rowan and Laura were inseparable. She didn't know quiet why their friendship fell apart but now, if Rowan and Laura were in each other's company for more than an half a hour, sparks were going to fly. Willa wondered how it started. She remembered the first few years they didn't even speak to one another and then sudden outright rage appeared just a few years ago. Everyone tried to stay out of their way if they were ever within seeing distance of one another.

Willa grabbed Rowan's arm as she moved to go inside and said, desperate, "You know what? I'm not in the mood for Tavern food. Lets just head home. I'm sure we can make your Mama cook us some food."

Rowan smiled her corner grin smile at her apprentice's strangeness. "We're already here, Willa. Let's just go in."

"But..." It was too late, Rowan had already walked inside.

The little silver bell above the door rang and some spared her a glance or a wave of hello when she entered. She nodded at a few as her eyes moved over the crowd to find an empty table or good company to join. As Willa entered behind her, her eyes fell upon the sight Willa hadn't wanted her to see: Laura.

Seeing Laura did upset Rowan but seeing Laura as she was now twisted her insides even more. Laura was sitting with her boyfriend, another Timber Wolf called Jarred.

Rowan had always disliked Jarred ever since they were young and he picked on some of her clan mates. Matter of fact, Jarred was the reason she met Laura. That fact only caused her stomach to twist more.

Willa watched from a few steps back as Rowan's normal green eyes start to darken from rage and to look as if they were on fire at the same time. Rowan was the most level headed, easy going person she knew but Willa knew that once Rowan lost it, she *really* lost it.

Laura looked up as the silver bell rang. Her eyebrows came together in a frown as Rowan entered with her red haired apprentice. She felt the body by her stiffen as Jarred saw Rowan as well.

Jarred had always hated Rowan. He had been one of those who had attacked Rowan as soon as she lost Laura's protection in the Timber Wolf clan. With his gray eyes and jet black hair, he was considered one of the most handsome men in the tribe. He was also ranked among the best hunters rivaled only by Laura. They had been courting one another for two years now and though he hadn't gotten her to agree to marriage yet, he planned on a wedding once the harsh winter months had passed.

Rowan gave them both a glare and made her way towards a table where some clan mates of hers were sitting, Mark and Toby. Willa followed her.

Mark grinned as Rowan sat down and said, glancing at Jarred, "Good night for a bar fight."

Willa cautioned, "Don't even think about it."

Toby nodded his agreement. He was the more cautious one out of Mark and himself.

Mark snorted into his drink and said, loudly, "Those numbskulls couldn't do anything to us. They like to think they're all high and mighty because they run around with bows and kill things."

Willa watched as several Timber Wolf members stood up and start their way. She sighed and said, "Well so much for a peaceful dinner."

"Ouch, Mama. Ever hear of being gentle?" Rowan asked as her mother roughly placed a slab of meat over her eye.

Ash gave her a look that suggested she not speak. She scowled, "What were you thinking? You are an adult, an elder, and yet you act as if you are a mere child again. You are a model figure for several youths. The children look up to you."

Rowan mumbled under her breathe, "I never asked them to look up to me."

"What was that?" Ash snapped.

"Nothing," Rowan lied with a look of innocence.

Ash let out a frustrated growl and stormed out of her home. Once Sawyer thought it was safe, she chuckled from the corner. Rowan grinned at her Mom from behind the slab of raw meat.

Sawyer laughed but said, serious, "You should know better, Little Tree. Other clan members are not happy with your frequent disputes with the Timber Wolf clan."

Rowan groaned, "Not you, too. And why should other clan members worry about my disagreements with the Timber Wolf clan? It's not like it's a new subject, a Heartwood disagreeing with Timber Wolves."

Sawyer gave a nod of agreement but said, "But some feel you are passing the normal boundary of dislike. The Timber Wolf clan will soon be filing a complaint about you if you persist in getting into fights with their members every other week."

All Rowan said before she, herself, stormed out, "Let them."

Rowan stomped right past her home, which was a street down from her mothers', and into the thick woods that surrounded the tribe. It crossed her mind that she should just keep walking.

She thought about walking through the forest and head towards the Yamin River, which supplied her tribe with water. She would head north up the river and she wouldn't stop until she reached the Grengots Mountains, where the Grengots mined for a living. She could either turn west or east. If she traveled west enough she would see the great Sea of Nort, which traveling raconteurs told her was a site to see before she died.

If she traveled east, she would come upon the Desert of Trines. She had heard tales of the ruler of the deserts and Rowan shuddered as she recalled some of the tales. Rowan made up her mind if she did ever runaway to the mountains, she wouldn't take a right once she got there.

Rowan then stopped walking and turned around with a sad smile. She could never leave the tribe. It was home no matter what. She would do her best to behave around the Timber Wolf clan.

One year later

Laura sighed in relief as her group of twelve, including herself, neared home. They had been away on a hunting party that took a week longer than expected. They had traveled several miles away from the tribe into deeper forests and hunted larger game. They were now finally returning home and all were eager.

Jarred sniffed the air and said, "Someone burning something."

Everyone smelled the air and one offered, "Probably just some wood beaver trying to clear more of our hunting land."

Laura smelled the air again, it was definitely wood burning but there was something else in the air. She froze as she recognized the scent. It was death.

She drew an arrow from her carrier and notched it in her bow. Others took her lead, never questioning her. They slowly and cautiously made their way towards the tribe. The smell of death grew stronger and heavier. Through the trees they could see thick smoke rising in the sky.

If those weren't signs of something horrible had happened, the dead body they found clued them in.

Laura watched as someone knelt to take the arrow riddled corpse but they all knew he was dead. Her fellow hunter, Nava, remarked softly, "He was Burin, a farmer."

"Come on," Laura ordered. They had to keep moving though they all knew they would be too late.

As they came upon the large hill that over looked the majority of the tribe, they froze in shock. Everything lay in ruin. Everything was burned down to ruins and bodies littered the ground. Their tribe had been ransacked.

The group split apart upon the large hill and everyone ran in desperate search for their love ones. Several were found. Wails of pain, agony, anger, and grief soon filled the air as members of the Timber Wolf clan found their dead.

Laura stood near the row of dead they had moved into one area. She fought not to let the pain over come her. A few were crying. Everyone had lost someone they loved or knew.

Nava had found her brother and father dead, the evidence around them showed they had died fighting. Her two little sisters, both who were young, were missing.

Jarred had lost his little brother and one of his good friends. Dolan, Fibrin, Niles, Cavan, Godwin, and Mandel had lost a parent each and many friends. The other three females of the group, Eloise, Delta, and Mia, had also lost several.

Out of the six hundred of those who lived in the tribe, only around a hundred had been found. A good majority was of elders in the Timber Wolf clan. Everyone knew if a battle started, they would be the first to fight. The group of twelve knew the others had been taken and by the looks of all the women and children missing, it had probably been slave traders.

Laura had lost dear ones of her own. She had been expecting it as soon as they found the dead. It still hurt but she knew to expect it. She had found her father among the dead with his bow and arrows. She carried him by herself back to the row of dead they had made. To her surprise, she had not found her mother, Audrey. She had been sure she would have found her since she could not picture her mother being taken captive.

What tore Laura the most was when she and the others had searched the Heartwood's area. She had been the one to find her. Sawyer lay dead with her hatchet still in her hand and two slave traders lay dead around her. The stab wound though her heart told of her death.

Sawyer had always made it her business to be nice and cheerful to Laura after her friendship with Rowan ended. Now she was dead. She had died protecting her tribe, her friends, and most of all, her family. Laura noted, in a secret relief, Rowan had not been among the dead.

As they set fire to the dead so that their spirits could reach the afterworld, Laura thought of what they should do next. There was only one answer.

"We're going after them."

One Week Later

Gathering what supplies they could from the ruins of their tribe, the group set out at a hard pace to catch up with the people who destroyed their tribe and had captured their people. They rested little, walked fast, and ran hard. They knew the chances of saving their people but they persisted nevertheless.

The trail was easy to follow, the traders made no move to cover their tracks. They didn't think there was anyone left to follow them and there was really no way to cover the tracks of the hundreds they had captured. Laura and the others could make out dozens of heavy loaded wagons and another several hundred footprints and horseshoe prints.

During one of their rare breaks for rest, Cavan said, "It has to be the Grengots. No other tribe near us has enough people to take over ours."

Delta offered her opinion, "It could be a roaming army. The Grengots are doing very well with their crops and such. They wouldn't take the risk of so many of their people's lives just for money. And they didn't look like Grengots."

Godwin agreed, "If it was an army, it would explain why they were able to over take our tribe so well. I know we are a weak tribe when it comes to the art of war and battle but we should have been able to kill more then the two dozen or so we found. These people had to be trained."

Jarred snapped the twig he had been twirling in his hand and growled, "I don't care who they are. Whether they be Grengots or some damn foreign army, they can still be killed and that's all I care about."

Laura, who had said nothing except orders since they had left their tribe's land, said, softly, "We should figure out what we are going to do."

Eloise asked, "What do you mean?"

"There are hundreds of those who took our people. We are a group of twelve. We can not defeat them by ourselves and there is no one to help us," Laura replied, staring into their fire.

Niles asked, "What are you saying?"

Dolan snapped, "She's saying we have to decide if we want to die or allow ourselves to be captured, you idiot."

Niles sprang to his feet, his knife at ready, "Watch your tongue."

Dolan stood and sneered, "Or you'll do what, you pansy?"

Mandel leaped between the two and ordered, "Settle down, both of you. We are not going to fight each other. So sit down, now."

Dolan and Niles glared at each other for another minute and finally sat back down.

Mia sighed and said, "Laura's right if that's what she's trying to say. We have to choose whether to avenge our fallen or unite with our loved ones. We have to decide."

Nava said, "They killed my father and my brother. I'm the only one my sisters have left. Hayden's twelve and Emily is six. I couldn't be there for my Dad and brother, but I can still be there for Hayden and Emily as long as I can."

Fibrin said, darkly, while sharpening a razor's edge to his knife, "My father was the only one I had left. He was well aged and should have been here teaching his wisdom to the little ones. He was a Timber Wolf to the bone. He protected his pack and he died doing it. If I am going to die, I'm going to die killing as many as those bastards as I can. He was my pack and I'm going to avenge him."

Jarred growled, "Same here."

Dolan, Cavan, and Eloise sided with them. Mia, Niles, Godwin, and Delta sided with Nava. Mandel, always in the middle, chose to be neutral. The decision was up to Laura.

She was silent for several moments until she decided upon her plan. She said, "Those of you who wish to rejoin with your families will go with me until we are ahead of the army. We'll lay right in their path and they'll more or likely take us prisoners. This is the safest way I can think of to get captured without dying. Those of you who wish to fight will stay behind and along the sides of the army. Pick off stragglers but wait until we're captured. I would like to view the army and how many they have before we split up. If it is at all possible, the ones of us who get captured might be able to rally a rebellion. If not, then those of you still fighting kill as many as you want."

Everyone agreed to this plan. But it was a pity it would not be able to be placed into action. They found out how little they knew of their surrounding tribes and lands. They found out the army and their people had stopped moving. They found the large complex that had been erected upon a large plateau style hill. There was a twenty foot wall surrounding the prison and needled wire surrounding that. It was large but only covered about half of the land their tribe's land covered.

Laura had heard of such places. They were training and holding velocities for slaves. There were people inside who would beat lessons into captives until they were meek and mild. Buyers would come from all around when a large auction was held to sell off all the slaves. The traders would then take up their complexes and move out before local tribes who did not like slave trading

would come to overthrow them. They only stayed in one place for two to three months before moving on.

Eyeing the several hundred guards who were guarding the inside and outside of the complex, Laura said, "Well, I guess we're going need another plan."

"Oh she's a feisty one. Not half bad looking either with her brown hair and green eyes. What I wouldn't give to get a piece of..."

"Don't even think about it. There's no sampling the goods."

The Sergeant leered, "I know, I know. But look at the way she holds up. I swear. She fights the guards daily even though she knows she'll get slapped for it. She takes the beatings and comes back for more the next day."

The Lieutenant replied, "She is a stubborn female. I'll give her that. We'll have to work extra hard to break her before the auction. She'll either make someone a good bed warmer or a hard laborer."

"I'd use her in bed myself but from those muscles on her, I'd say she is used to hard labor. She sure does give the guards a run for their money. I don't even think our punches mean anything to her," The Sergeant laughed.

The Lieutenant unworriedly took the whip from his belt and handed it to the Sergeant. He said before turning to leave, "Well see that she gets the meaning of that."

The Sergeant grinned as he gave the whip a practice crack. He laughed, "Oh yeah, this should work. Let's see how you like the whip, girly."

Willa and Audrey had their arms wrapped around Ash, who was struggling to break free from them. Ash shouted, "Let me go! I'm going to..."

Audrey jerked Ash back till they were facing each other and said, her voice firm, "You are going to do nothing. Rowan makes her own choices."

Ash shoved her away with all of her strength and turned to save her daughter, who was strapped between two poles and being flogged by a metal-bitted whip. Willa stepped into her path and said, a mature tone in her young voice, "I promised Rowan I would keep you safe. I don't tend to go back on that promise."

Ash cried, "What kind of world is this where the daughter tries to protect the mother? Let me be the one. I already lost my mate, do I have to lose my only child as well?"

Audrey moved to stand beside Willa and said, "You're not the only one to have lost a mate, Ash. Or friends or children. You want to protect your daughter? Look around, you can't. You're a middle aged woman who is trapped inside a prison. Your daughter is surrounded by twenty guards, not to mention the guards surrounding us. You can't do anything to save her and you'll only make things worse if you make a scene. So pull it together, for your daughter's sake."

Ash stood in her spot, her shoulders heaving in sobs at the sounds of pain coming from her daughter as she received lash after lash. She finally whispered, "I hate you as much as I hate them."

"I can live with that," Audrey said, seemingly unconcerned.

Ash swallowed hard and lifted her head. Her daughter made her own decisions and she would not dishonor her by looking away.

Laura lay staring up at the night sky, rubbing the totem pouch hidden beneath her shirt. She knew every object that lay in there. There was her personal totem that only she had ever seen, a piece of antler from her first buck, a dulled piece of steel from her first hunting knife, and a little black rock. The black rock was what she kept rubbing her fingers over. She allowed herself to wonder if Rowan was all right but that was as far as she allowed herself to think. She closed her eyes.

They didn't open again until morning when a small patrol of the slave traders found their camp. The patrol group took in group of seven, four women and three males, all of whom were in fit condition to be sold. The squad leader of the patrol reported they were travelers trying to get home to their tribe and didn't know their entire tribe was now enslaved or dead. They took the new hostages' weapons and did a full body search. They left only their emblems and pouches for them, too, respected the beliefs of totems and clan spirits.

Laura moved calmly among her tribesmen while she kept a sharp eye out for her mother. Someone whispered, everyone was trying not to draw attention, that she was near the rear eastern gate in a ragged tent like all the others that scattered the courtyard where the slaves stayed. Laura made her way to the back, not answering the several questions that came up about how did she get there and such.

Laura was walking past a tent when someone exited from it with a bowl of bloody water and bloodstained bandages. The redhead gasped, "Laura?"

Laura turned and recognized Rowan's apprentice, Willa, immediately. Laura greeted her, "Hello, Willa. Would you know which of these tents my mother would be in?"

Willa stood there, blinking at her in shock, until she snapped out of it. She said, gesturing with her full hands at the tent she just exited, "She's in there."

Laura frowned at the bloody bandages in her hands, "Is that her blood?"

Willa looked down at her hands and shook her head, "No, this is Rowan's. If you'll excuse me, I have to dump this waste and bring fresh water."

Willa walked away, not seeing the look of alarm and panic that crossed Laura's face. Laura dashed into a tent within her next heartbeat. She gasped at the sight before her.

Rowan lay on her stomach, unconscious, as Ash, who had tears in her eyes, and Audrey cleaned her wounds. There were dozens of open cuts from where the whip had broke her skin, from the top of her shoulders down to the small of her back. Even if Rowan received the best medical care, she would still carry scars. But she wouldn't be able to receive the best care and Ash and Audrey worried about infection.

Audrey turned her head as she heard the gasp and let out a loud one of her own. She exclaimed, "What are you doing here?"

Laura, unable to take her outraged stare from Rowan, was unable to answer her mother. Audrey rose and asked, almost shouted, "What are you doing in here? You were safe out there. Why did you come in here?"

Laura finally looked at her mother, seeing the disappointment and concern deep inside her eyes. She said, softly, "This is where I belong."

Audrey stared at her daughter and finally shook her head. Ash said as she continued to clean her daughter's wounds, "Now you get to feel a bit of my misery, Audrey. Having your daughter be made a slave right in front of your eyes and not know what to do about it."

Audrey glared at her. Laura said, hoping her mother would catch her point because she worried of prying ears, "They caught the seven of us near here trying to get home. You know how worried Jarred would be if we didn't make it home in time to see his brother get married. Now, I guess there will be no marriage."

Audrey frowned at her for a moment and then nodded. She knew there were supposed to be twelve of them, Jarred had not been with the tribe when it was attacked, and that Jarred's brother was dead and had never been thinking of marriage. She knew her daughter had something planned.

"Bastard."

Audrey and Laura turned to Ash, each arching an eyebrow. Ash shook her head and looked down at her daughter. Rowan gave a little moan as she flexed her muscles a little and repeated, "Bastard."

Ash asked, resting her hand on a woundless part of her daughter's back, "Who is, Rowan?"

But Rowan had fell back into unconsciousness as her pain overwhelmed her body.

Rowan groaned only to realize how much groaning hurt when one's throat was parched. She croaked, "Water."

The tent was dark, Rowan guessed it was nighttime from the lack of noise outside. Someone moved in the darkness and Rowan felt a hand rest upon the back of her arm. Rowan begged again, "Water, please?"

Rowan heard a soft okay as the person drew away for a moment to return with a bowl. The person placed the bowl beside the bed and asked, "Can you roll over and sit up?"

"This dog has always been good at doing tricks," Rowan rasped.

Rowan heard a soft chuckle as hands, familiar but still mysterious hands, helped her roll over onto her side, mindful of her wounds, and sit up. Those hands helped her cup the bowl to drink in small, refreshing sips of water that washed away the roughness in Rowan's throat.

Rowan sighed after her thirst was quenched, "Sleepy now."

Rowan heard another soft chuckle as hands helped her back onto her stomach and she heard before she fell back to sleep, "You always were a big baby."

When Rowan awoke in the morning, she found strength to sit up by herself and toss her legs over the edge of the bed. She looked around, groggy and waiting for the splinters of pain in her back to stop hurting. She finally rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, hissing when she pulled a muscle in her back that was injured.

The sparks of pain were not just dull throbs. Rowan could tell scabs were healing over open wounds and many were sore from fighting infection. Just as she was about to try standing, the drape of the tent moved aside and someone came in.

Rowan blinked and then blinked again just to make sure she wasn't seeing things.

"Laura?" Rowan exclaimed in disbelief. "But you're not...supposed to be here."

Laura shrugged, not really knowing what to say to her.

Rowan's brow furrowed with frustration and anger, "You and your stupid pride. Just had to come and play the tragic hero didn't you? Came to save your people."

No one in the world could make Laura's anger appear as quickly as Rowan could. She shouted, "So what if I did? Someone has to help our people. And don't you dare talk about my pride! Look where yours got you! Laid up in a bed with a mutilated back!"

Rowan rose, fury written clearly on her face, "So what if my back is scarred? I can still walk and talk. I am still able."

Laura gave a snort of disbelief, "Like you could last night? You couldn't even drink water by yourself."

Rowan recoiled. "That was you?"

Laura shrugged once again. They stood there, staring at each other, anger still shimmering on the surface. When Ash, Willa, and Audrey entered, they found them still glaring at each other.

Audrey looked Rowan over, who seemed to have forgetting she was topless, "Rowan, you're looking well."

Willa coughed, "Boss, your shirt."

Laura glanced towards Rowan's chest and pulled her gaze away sharply. How had she had missed that little fact? Well two facts actually and they were more medium sized.

Rowan looked down and shrugged. "It's not like anyone in this room doesn't have a pair of these."

Ash rolled her eyes, secretly thrilled her daughter was well enough to be jesting, and fetched Rowan's shirt. She helped Rowan put it on without straining her injuries.

Ash said as she started buttoning the front, "Would you try not to anger the guards? I would like to keep you since you're the...you're the only one I have left."

Ash's voice broke off. Rowan covered her mother's trembling hands with her own and then pulled her close in a hug. Laura, Willa, and Audrey tried to pretend they weren't intruding on a private moment as Rowan whispered comforting words into her mother's ear. Ash held onto her daughter a moment before pulling herself away. She would stay strong. She had to. With Master Elder Cyprus dead, the Heartwood Clan looked to her for guidance. Ash had been the likely candidate to take Master Elder Cyprus's place when he retired but no one had expected his retirement for years, or his death.

Audrey said, using code, "There are six groups leeches more or less in and around the complex. They suck blood really well. There's only 5 groups of us and over half can not suck blood."

Laura grinned wickedly, "Wait a few days and that there will be a few less leeches to worry about."

Rowan scratched her head, wincing as a back muscle moved, and asked, "Did I hit my head? Because that made no sense."

Laura replied as she walked out of the tent, "You never made any sense, anyway."

Willa sighed, "This is going to be a fun imprisonment."

The Lieutenant shouted, "What do you mean destroyed? That was the Fifth platoon! They were among the best I have trained! What do you mean they are all dead?"

The Sergeant looked as if he wanted to find a hole to crawl into. He answered, cringing, "They were checking out the reports of rebels living in that canyon nearby and the sides of the canyon just... fell in on them. There were no survivors."

The Lieutenant was boiling. The Fifth platoon had over 90 of his best men and now they were all dead.

"Should we investigate?" The Sergeant dared to ask.

"No, you idiot! Everyman has double duty inside of the complex. Keep patrols within a five mile radius. I don't want to lose anymore men."

The Sergeant protested, "But Lieutenant you said if we kept the men locked up in the complex that they would start using the slaves and ruining the goods. Ruin the goods, prices go down."

The Lieutenant shouted, "When I want your opinion, Sergeant, I'll ask for it!"

Willa admitted to Rowan as they dug trenches around the complex under heavy supervision, "The gorillas are doing a good job on leeches."

Rowan shrugged in reply. No matter how secretly glad she was at the decreasing number of soldiers, she and Laura were still at each other's throats. Their arguments had almost drawn attention from the guards and sharing a tent didn't really help.

Willa was beginning to think Rowan and Laura's hatred was simply hereditary. Some of the arguments she had seen Ash and Audrey have made her certain she never wanted to get on either woman's bad side. It didn't help there was a thick air of grief, sadness, and rage around and no one was allowed to truly vent out their emotions. Everyone was short on patience. It was still hard to think of how her crush had died. He had been trying to defend his family's tavern when they had killed him.

As if sensing her emotions, Rowan stopped digging to gently pat Willa on the back. Willa gave her a forced smile before a soldier shouted at them to get back to work digging trenches. The complex didn't really need a trench around the complex, but hard labor kept the slaves exhausted, and easier to handle.

The people who lived in the tent next to the one Willa shared with Rowan, Ash, Laura, and Audrey warned Willa as she started to go inside her tent. "I wouldn't go in there if I were you. Rowan and Laura are at it again."

Willa took a step away from the tent.

"You are so infuriating. You would think you would have learned manners somewhere along the way," Laura snapped.

Rowan retorted, "Like you are the role model of perfection. When I want lessons from you, I'll ask for them. And the only thing I could learn from you would be how to kill things."

Laura took a step towards her, her fists clenched by her side, "You take that back."

"Make me, little killer," Rowan dared. Rowan had only called her little killer since their friendship had ended.

Laura let out a muffled scream of frustration as she threw herself at Rowan.

Willa winced as she heard something break inside the tent. She sat with her neighbors, trying not to think of the bloodshed that was going on inside her tent. One of the neighbors remarked, "Maybe they'll be able to punch it out."

Another laughed, "Unlikely. I place my money on Laura, what do you say?"

Willa chuckled, slightly, "I'd go with Rowan. Come on, lets tally up the bets."

With the eerie move that Laura had never seemed to be able to copy, grasp, or outmaneuver all the years of their friendship, Rowan had her pinned on her back. As heavy pants filled the air, blazing green eyes and fiery blue ones stared at each other.

Laura was reminded of the last time they had been this close. The thought made her stomach tighten.

It had been almost three years since it happened. They were both eighteen and it had been spread around the tribe that Laura and Jarred were courting. Laura had been tracking a deer that ventured near the tribe and she had stumbled across Rowan who had been checking the growth of saplings she had planted a few years before.

They stared at each other for a long time, both knowing they should turn around and walk away. But pride wouldn't let them.

Rowan spoke first as she eyed Laura's bow slung over her back, "Going to kill something?"

"Nothing you would understand, wood beaver," Laura sneered in reply.

"At least my hands aren't covered in blood. Just like your boyfriend's are as well. Tell me, how is the bastard doing?"

They exchanged more angry words until Rowan said something, Laura didn't remember what, that pushed Laura over the edge. She attacked. They wrestled, drawing blood and forming bruises. Rowan used the move that she had learned from watching her mothers and pinned Laura on her back with her arms above her head.

Both were out of breath and their tempers were still shimmering. It was Rowan's temper that changed into lust first. The feelings of want for Laura that had worried her when they were friends had only worsened during the years they weren't friends. Since the barrier of friendship had faded, Rowan had been able to look at Laura in desire without having to stop herself.

Laura, with her serious moods and iciness, was the most beautiful woman in the tribe to her. Her body caused something inside of Rowan to twist and turn, to make her damp, and weak at the knees at time. Some called it love but Rowan refused to believe in love at first sight. She knew what she felt was lust, pure and simple. She didn't want to but she couldn't help herself.

Unable to stop herself, Rowan kissed her. She kissed her fierce and hard, the passion of her anger mixed with the yearning giving the kiss it's force.

Laura was shocked still as she received her first kiss. Sure, she and Jarred were courting but she had only let him kiss her on the cheek so far. She hadn't let anyone kiss her on the lips except for her family. It wasn't how she expected to be kissed for the first time. She didn't know quite what she expected but she knew it wasn't like this. She *knew* Rowan wasn't the one she had been expecting to kiss her. But she was.

Now Rowan knew why people kissed so much. To feel someone lips under yours felt nice, really nice.

Once Laura got past the shock and was about to push Rowan off, she noticed how soft Rowan's lips were, even though they were pushing hard against hers. It was only their lips touching but it felt very... intimate and special. It amazed her that Rowan thought of her that way, that Rowan

wanted her that way. Rowan, the girl who knew her stupid faults and the girl who hadn't spoken to her for years. This was Rowan kissing her.

As much as she wanted to deny it, as much as she told herself it never happened, she kissed Rowan back, if only for a moment. She could honestly say she had never thought of Rowan like that. She could honestly say she had never wanted to kiss Rowan but here Rowan was, kissing her. And it didn't feel bad or wrong. It felt nice. It felt even nicer kissing back. Then they both really realized what they were doing.

Neither spoke of what happened. They both jumped to their feet and walked away from each other as quickly as possible. Afterwards was when the true fighting between them started.

Laura hadn't been able to look at Rowan the same way since she kissed her. She started noticing how fine Rowan's muscles were sculpted from hard work and how bright her green eyes could become. A kiss that probably didn't last a minute had changed the way she thought forever.

When she finally let Jarred kiss her, it didn't feel the same as Rowan's. She didn't like comparing the two but she couldn't help it. Jarred's kisses always seemed more egotistical, as if he was just doing it because he could, to show off.

Rowan had had a few attempts at courting over the past three years, none of them lasted long and all were with women. At least it wasn't hard telling her mothers that she liked women. Ash merely nodded and Sawyer had laughed and said, "Just a chip off the old block." But she never felt anything like she felt towards Laura with any of the people she had courted.

Laura could tell Rowan was remembering the last time as well. She was mature enough now to recognize the look of desire in Rowan's eyes. She also knew she was feeling the same.

Rowan couldn't stop herself again. Laura's blue eyes had taken on a new flame, one that wasn't anger. As she started lowering her head, fully intent on kissing her, Laura whispered, "Don't."

Rowan drew her head back and stared down at Laura in disbelief. She released her grip of Laura's hands and Laura immediately brought them up to Rowan's chest to push her away. Rowan allowed herself to be pushed off to the side as Laura leaped to her feet. Laura stared down at Rowan and said in a strange voice Rowan had never heard her use before, "Don't ever try to kiss me again."

She then spun around and walked outside, leaving Rowan laying on the dirt floor.

The Lieutenant came up to stand next to his Sergeant as he watched their men force hard labor upon their slaves. They were running on simply bread and water and being made to work from sun up to sun down with no rest. Some were already broken, given in meekly to whatever the guards demanded of them. Others were still fighting.

"How is that troublemaker you had to whip a few weeks ago?" He asked.

The Sergeant pursed his lips and said, "Still bothersome but not nearly as much."

The Lieutenant nodded his head approvingly, "Good. Shows what a good whipping will do."

The Sergeant shook his head sadly and said, "As much as I would love to take credit for her lack of fighting with the guards, Lieutenant, I can't. The reason she fights less with the guards is because she fights more with that captive the patrol group found. You know, the pretty blonde haired one? If it wasn't for the fact that I have never seen them touch each other, I would say they were married."

The Lieutenant stroked his chin and said, "The blonde? Ah, yes, I do remember her. She will bring quite a few coins when it is time for the auction. And you say they appear to be fond with one another?"

The Sergeant laughed, "Not fond, sir. They are at each other's throats like wolves fighting for the right of leadership. There is just an air about them that says they would love to get the other in the sack. See for yourself. They are right over there."

The Lieutenant looked to where the Sergeant pointed and watched as a young red haired girl tried to stop the troublemaker and the blonde from arguing. After watching them for a few more moments he nodded and said, "They do seem quiet infatuated with one another. If we were to sell them as a couple, they would bring very high prices. I can only imagine what it would be like to watch those two together. Mark that down. Those two will be sold as a pair."

Rowan said as she watched more people arrive for the auction, "I thought you had a plan."

Laura snapped, "I do."

"Uh huh," Rowan said, not quite believing but still holding onto hope. There had been no more news of soldiers being killed, no more news of their tribe members who were still free. Everyone's hopes were falling as their future as slaves came closer and closer.

Though Laura would never admit it, she was getting worried as well. She was without a plan if the group outside of the complex failed.

Willa appeared beside them out of nowhere, looking slightly frazzled. Rowan asked, placing a hand on Willa's shoulder, "What's wrong?"

Willa glared at the both of them, "It's your mothers. They're at it. *Again*. Now I know where you two get it from."

Rowan started laughing. She laughed so hard she had to let go of Willa's shoulder to grab her stomach as she bent over from laughing so hard. Watching Rowan laugh made both Willa and Laura struggle not to smile. Rowan fell to the ground and covered her face, her shoulders shaking. Willa and Laura stopped smiling when they realized Rowan wasn't laughing anymore. Her shoulders shook from sobs.

It was Willa who reached out but at the slightest touch, Rowan jerked away and stumbled to her feet. Wiping away tears, angrily, she scanned the area for the closest guard. Seeing one in her sight, she started towards him, a rage in her eyes making her green eyes terrifying. Everything was just too much, and she wanted blood.

Marching towards her prey, Rowan found her way blocked and herself staring at fierce blue eyes.

"Where do you think you're going?" Laura demanded.

Rowan blinked at the blonde and then, ignoring her, lifted her head to find the guard again. She moved to step around Laura when a hand became planted firmly on her chest. Rowan looked down at the hand and back up at Laura.

Rowan warned in a dangerous tone, "Move it or lose it."

"I think you need to go back to the tent, Rowan, and cool off."

"Take your hand off of me," Rowan growled.

Laura looked at her with defying eyes, "Make me."

Rowan's hand came up to clench Laura's wrist but with fury dulling her senses, she wasn't able to react as fast as cool headed Laura. She found herself pinned to the ground on her face with her arm twisted behind her back.

Laura teased, "Looks like you're getting rusty, Rowan. Not so good anymore."

Willa glanced worriedly towards the guard, wondering what he would do. There was actually now a group of guards. They were all placing quick bets on who would win.

Rowan bellowed in rage and struggled. Laura twisted Rowan's arm higher and said, now dead serious, "Don't make me break your arm, Rowan. I will, if it keeps you from attacking that guard. Stop struggling."

Rowan pushed her head into the rough dirt, trying to ignore the sharp bolts of pain coming from her arm. She didn't want to give in. She didn't want to react. But as Laura twisted her arm higher, mere seconds from breaking, Rowan gasped in pain.

"Promise you wont attack the guard. Promise now, Rowan or I'll break your arm."

Rowan said, struggling not to have it come out in a desperate cry, "I promise."

With the promise and feeling Rowan's body go limp with surrender under hers, Laura let go of her hold on Rowan's arm. Climbing off her back, she stood ready in case Rowan decided to attack again.

Rowan stumbled to her feet, cradling her abused arm against her chest, and looked around at the people who gathered to watch. She jerked away from Willa's helping hand and made her way through the crowd, her pride hurting worse than her arm. Knowing that Rowan kept her promises, Laura let her go.

The Sergeant frowned, "I don't recall that rich merchant being on the list of buyers."

The Lieutenant nodded but said, "He has bribed his way into the complex. The guards tell me he has a lot more money to spend and only four bodyguards. He is of no threat and can only cause us gain."

The Sergeant nodded reluctantly but he still didn't think a man who looked as dashing as the rich merchant did would need to buy slaves. However the rumor was he needed work slaves and not bed warmers and he could understand that.

The Lieutenant smiled as a horn sounded the arrival of the buyer he had been waiting for. The Lady of Trines was a very good client, always buying the most worthwhile slaves at whatever price she could get them for. The Lady was known for her excellent tastes in bed warmers of either sex.

Ash gaped in horror and rage, "Excuse me?"

The guard frowned at her and said, "I said you are going to be sold in a pair with that one. Now let the man put the chains on or do I have to get rough?"

Neither Ash and Audrey could believe their luck. Not only to be enslaved but to be enslaved with someone they loathed.

Rowan and Laura would have thought it funny if they weren't watching their mothers be chained so they could be sold as slaves.

"All right, next. You two, the Lieutenant personally declared you two would be sold together. Chain them."

Rowan and Laura became wide eyed when they realized he was referring to them. They soon found chains connecting them at the wrist and ankle with only a foot between them. Both glared at each other for a moment before pretending the other didn't exist.

Some people were grouped in pairs of twenty and thirties, they would be sold as work slaves. Others were sold as couples and some of the more desirable ones would be sold separately.

Laura snarled under her breath as buyers started coming around the area they were chained to get a glimpse of what was for sale, "It's as if it's market day in the tribe."

"And we're the goods," Rowan added as she glared at those who met her eye.

After being leered at for an hour, the auction began. Since everyone knew the best selling happened during the middle of the auction, the least desirable slaves were sold first. Large groups of the elderly were sold as low as a gold coin.

Coins were only used by travelers. Most tribes and villages used credit and trading to get the things they wanted but gold, silver, and iron coins were accepted everywhere along the world. One gold coin was worth ten silver coins and a silver coin was worth ten iron coins. If one was to rank a person's wages in coins, an average carpenter could make around eight gold coins in a good year where as a wealthy noble could make thirty off their lands.

Then, the bidding began for the most desirable ones after most of the elderly and younglings were sold off. Everyone took special note of who bought their families, especially those who had to watch their children be sold before their eyes. Most noted the majority of the bidders were buying yet and the main buyer was a hooded man surrounded by four hooded bodyguards. All the people could find out was the man was a rich merchant looking for work laborers. The man had already bought most of the tribe's elders and younglings, only a handful going to others.

Before long, it was Audrey and Ash's turn. They were pulled up on a large wooden platform where the auctioneer was. He looked the middle aged women over before turning to the crowd of buyers.

He shouted, "Ok, here we have two aged but very nice looking ladies. Come on folks, take a look at these two. Everyone says middle aged women are in their prime and by the looks of this couple, they love to go all night together. All right, I'll start the buying at six silver coins."

A man raised his number. "Ok, six. What about seven? Do I hear seven anywhere?"

The rich merchant raised his number.

"Ok, seven going to the rich lad right there. How about eight silver coins? Come on, who will give me eight? Ok eight to the lady in the far back corner, thank you ma'am. Do I hear nine silver coins?"

Laura and Rowan watched in muted horror as their mothers were being sold onstage as if they were animals. The price continued to raise until it was at nineteen silver coins.

"Ok, twenty anyone? No? Ok, at nineteen silver coins going once, going twice, and sold to my Lady of Trines. Ok our next item is..."

In utter disgust, Ash and Audrey allowed themselves to be dragged off into the Lady's holding pen.

Watching a couple of men and women being sold together, it was Laura and Rowan's turn. Finding themselves placed upon the platform, feeling exposed as dozens ogled them, they're lives were bid upon.

"Well aren't these two a handsome couple? My, my. Can you see these two in bed? Sex just screams off of them. Look at how strong they are and how attractive they are. Oh, looks just speak for themselves on these two. I have strict orders to start the bidding at fifteen silver coins. Do I have fifteen silver coins?"

Rowan and Laura's eyes flew back and forth as the bidding started. Each glaring at those who staked a price at them. Their price was soon at thirty three silver coins, a price rarely heard of for two slaves. It was down between two bidders, the rich merchant and the Lady of Trines.

"Ok, 34 silver coins to merchant here. How about you, my lady? Do I hear 35? Ok, 35 silver coins, back to you, my good sir. My lady is already betting 36, so it's back to you sir."

Rowan watched the rich merchant carefully. His bodyguards were getting restless and appeared to be telling him to stop. She knew then who he was and why he didn't want to lose this bid. Rowan slid her eyes to the infamous Lady of Trines. She sat in a chair, shaded and fanned by slaves and protected by guards. She was calm where as Jarred was getting desperate.

"Your boyfriend needs to stop bidding on us if he wants to buy most of the others back," Rowan whispered so softly only Laura could hear.

Already figuring out Jarred was the merchant, Laura gave the barest nod. Their price was already far too high and though she didn't know how much money, or even how they could afford it, she doubted it was enough to buy herself and Rowan back.

Tiring of the bidding, the Lady of Trines called, "I'll take them at six gold coins."

Everyone froze. Sixty silver coins was almost unheard of and no one, not even Jarred, made a move to beat it.

The auctioneer called, after getting over his shock, "Ok, 6 gold coins or 60 silver coins going once, going twice. Are you sure, sir? Sold to my Lady of Trines."

Laura and Rowan were transported to the same holding pen that their mothers were in. No one could say anything to the other. There were a few others in the pen with them. All were either handsome or beautiful. There was no doubt what they had been bought for.

Their pen had a good view of the selling platform. They watched as everyone was sold. Most of their clan went to Jarred and that made them feel easier. Rowan stiffened as Willa was brought up on stage. She swore in on her soul that no matter where Willa was sold, she would find a way to save her even if she had to cross the entire world to find her. Willa was more than an apprentice and more than a friend, she was the closest thing to a sister she had ever had.

To Rowan's surprise, horror, and tiny joy, Willa was bought by the Lady of Trines. Well to be more correct, by the Lady of Trines' son. Willa was brought to their holding pen, a little shaky and pale. She gave a weak smile and said, "Couldn't let you leave without me."

Altogether, the Lady of Trines bought twenty of the most expensive slaves, including Willa. Laura had no clue as to what Jarred was up to or even how many of their tribe he had bought back but she hoped he succeeded in whatever his plan was.

The new slaves were quickly loaded into four carts, five slaves in each with at least a half a dozen well trained and armed guards in the carts or surrounded them. No one spoke a lot during the journey to Trines. They knew little of what lay ahead of them and what they did know did little to comfort them. The Lady of Trines bought slaves for pleasure and sex.

They also didn't speak because that would cause their mouths to become dry, and they were warned that they wouldn't be given a lot of water on the journey. It took three nights of riding through the sands of the desert and three hot days of tortured sleep.

They finally arrived at a large oasis. The lush green grow contrasted the white sands that surrounded it. There was a village prospering on one side of the oasis and on the other was the palace of Trines.

The slaves gazed up at the palace of Trines in wonder. Most having never left their village found the palace, and the village, completely amazing. Of course, they only thought that for a moment or two and then went back to worrying about their futures.

The palace was surrounded by a large two story wall with towers strung along it. The wall was made of sand mortar mix but the palace was made entirely out of white marble. It had cost a fortune to make, but it stood out beautiful against the clear blue sky.

The new slaves were led inside the wall and through the palace which was draped with soft and sensual colors. Pictures of erotic positions hung on every wall and several couples of all kinds could be seen kissing or engaging in other sports on some couches or beds that lay in various places.

The slaves were placed in the dungeon. Though it was not moldy or infested with rats, it was a dungeon nevertheless. The plain stone walls and floors were cold and hard and there were no windows. They were left with no idea of what lay ahead of them.

Over the next several days, the guards took the slaves out of the dungeon for several reasons. Some times it was for a meal and relieving themselves. Other times it was for stretching their legs and working out all of their pent up energy. None of them talked.

Then, one day perhaps after a week of their new life at the palace, the guards started taking slaves away from the dungeon and they weren't brought back. Everyone could only guess what was happening.

Laura and Rowan were both taken on what appeared to be the night of a party. Even from the dungeon they could hear the sounds of laughing and drunken games. Audrey, Ash, and Willa were left in the cell with a handful of other slaves. There were no words that could be said, only meaningful looks passed between them.

Laura and Rowan were led up the stairs and into two separate rooms where a dozen plain looking slaves waited for them each. They had to stand, humiliated, as they were stripped and dunked in water. Once cleaned and scrubbed till their skins glowed pink, they were dressed.

Laura was placed in a sleeveless white, soft tunic that laced up in the front. It was short enough that it showed off her tight, firm stomach and fit so that it pushed her breasts out to maximize their size. She was forced into weird lacy underwear that she had never seen before and then was made to step into loose drawstring breeches. Laura, who had her teeth clenched as well as her fists, was ready to kill someone when they thrust her back into the hall.

Rowan was already there, looking just as hassled. They had placed her in extremely tight black breeches that had to be peeled on her and would have to be peeled off of her. She got to wear a loose, gray, short sleeved shirt that buttoned along the front.

With rage just sprouting off of them, they had the appearance of hungry women on the hunt for someone good to eat. It never really occur to them that since they were sold together that they would be forced to be together. It wasn't long before that little point was explained to them.

They were led into the Lady's personal partying chamber. It was a circled room that was dark but lit with flickering torches and candles. The Lady was laying upon a large platform in the very back with several men and women around her, all either naked or close to it. A man massaged her feet while she stroked the arm of a beautiful woman bedside her.

All along the walls of the chamber were couches or beds of pillows laying along the ground with various couples lounging on them. There were various activities of sucking, fondling, and kissing going on all around the room. In the center of the room lay an empty bed of fur blankets and pillows.

The Lady grinned and said, her voice causing all noise to stop, "Our entertainment has arrived."

Rowan and Laura glared at the Lady of Trines but she ignored them. She said as the guards left Rowan and Laura by the center bed, "I'm sure you two know what you are supposed to do and if you don't, I'll tell you. You two are going to have sex in front of all of us so we may get the pleasure from watching you. If you don't agree to do so, I'll simply order the guards to kill some of your friends down in the dungeon. I am clear?"

Rowan and Laura understood what the Lady had said but the shock was overwhelming. They looked at each other, involuntary, and both saw the others shocked and slightly revolted look. Not the part of having sex with each other but the part of having sex with each other in a room full of people.

The Lady of Trines laughed and said, snapping her fingers, "They appear to be a little tense. They could probably use some relaxing before they fuck each other."

A man and woman, both wrapped each only clothed in a thin leather thong, stepped away from the wall and started towards Laura and Rowan. Laura clenched her fists and growled as the man stopped in front of her and reached for the laces of her tunic. Rowan was in shock as the woman stopped in front of her and started reaching for her crotch.

"Or," Everyone froze as the Lady began to speak. "Would you rather just get started on each other?"

Green eyes met blue ones. Rowan's eyes flickered towards the man standing in front of Laura and she knew she did not want him touching her. Laura had to admit she was ready to rip the almost naked woman's arm off as she was about to touch Rowan intimately.

Rowan moved away from the woman in front of her and walked towards Laura. Laura merely stood there, keeping her eyes on Rowan as Rowan pushed the man in front of her away. Rowan stood in front of her, the space between them sizzling. Laura thought Rowan was going to kiss her for a breathless moment as she leaned in close. Laura couldn't help but close her eyes as she waited for Rowan's mouth to touch hers.

She never felt it. Laura's eyes opened as she felt Rowan nip at her neck, leaving small bites along the edge. Oddly disappointed, she nevertheless tilted her head offer more room to the teasing little bites. They were soft and fluttery and felt really good. Laura almost swooned as she felt Rowan move up to her ear and suck the fleshy lobe in her mouth. Her hands came up to hold onto Rowan's shoulders as her tongue swirled over the sensitive ridges of her ears.

"You asked me not to kiss you. I'll try to keep that promise since it's the only thing I can do," Rowan whispered softly in her ear before pulling back slightly.

Laura stiffened when Rowan whispered in her ear and then was left shocked at Rowan's words. As she met Rowan's eyes again, she saw the sad kindness that lay in Rowan's eyes.

Part of Laura had thought Rowan would jump at this chance. Rowan had wanted her so she would obviously enjoy the one chance she got to have her. Laura realized she must have been

thinking of someone else. Rowan wanted her yes, but Rowan also respected her and her right to say no. She didn't know what to say.

They were brought back to reality as someone cleared their throat. Laura knew what had to be done. She lowered her hands to the first button of Rowan's shirt and started flicking them open one by one. She then pushed the loose shirt off of Rowan's shoulders.

Rowan blushed in embarrassment and fury as several people let out calls of appreciation. The scars on her back were visible but only close up and the ridges were very small. The people couldn't really see her scars but they could see her breasts and that was what they were cheering at. Laura wanted to give her an understanding look but she was caught with agreeing with the others. Rowan's breasts were beautiful. A little smaller than her own, they could fit nicely in her hands if she dared to touch them.

Laura whispered, placing her hands on Rowan's chest, just above her breasts, "I don't know what to do."

Rowan laid her hands on top of Laura's and gently pushed them down until they were on top of her breasts. She nodded and whispered, "It will be okay."

Rowan had understood the silent message that Laura had sent to her. Laura wanted Rowan to take the lead, knowing Rowan had been with women before.

Under Rowan's guidance, Laura was amazed to watch Rowan's nipples rise slowly to her touch. Rowan was having a little trouble forgetting about everyone watching them but still, the woman she had wanted for so long was touching her so she couldn't help but become aroused.

Laura froze as Rowan's hands reached down to laces that held her tight tunic together. Their eyes met again and Laura reached up to untie the laces herself. Though she wanted Rowan to take the lead, Laura found it hard to surrender control.

Rowan let Laura untie the tunic but brushed Laura's hands aside before she could part the cloth. Rowan slid her hands up under the tunic, slowly raising her fingers to the underside of Laura's breasts. She slowly allowed her hands to cover Laura's slightly larger breasts before sliding her hands up to hold Laura's shoulders. She gently pushed the tunic off of Laura's shoulders, baring her chest to everyone.

Laura fought a blush as Rowan exposed her. It wasn't just from embarrassment, she flushed from the intense look of passion in Rowan's eyes. There weren't as many whistles of approval at the site of Laura's chest because everyone was getting into the scene being performed before them. Everyone eagerly awaited for the couple to move lower.

Rowan moved to cup Laura's breasts in her hands. So firm and yet so soft, they seemed to fit perfectly into Rowan's hands. Laura wouldn't look at Rowan as Rowan softly brushed her thumbs across her rose colored nipples. She was embarrassed that they rose up so eagerly to

Rowan's touch. Laura took a long breath as Rowan's hands started down her body, down her ribs and to her firm stomach.

A door slammed open, scaring several and breaking the mood. Everyone spun to look at who dared interrupted them. The Lady looked annoyed. A red faced guard hurried to the middle of the room and gave a quick bow, "I'm sorry my Lady but the palace is under attack. What looks to be three desert clans are already too close for catapults and are almost upon the gates."

The Lady of Trines sighed and rose. Her voice was full of calm control and authority, "Everyone is dismissed. Go back to your rooms until you are informed it is safe. Guards, take these two slaves to their room and place an armed guard at their door."

Before two guards grabbed them, Rowan bent to retrieve their shirts. They shrugged on their tunics as they were led away from the large room. They were led down several passages until the guards stopped in front of a door. He unhooked a set of keys from his waist and unlocked the door. Opening it, he motioned them inside. The door slammed close behind them.

The room would have had a more comfortable aura if there weren't thick bars on the window that made it feel like a cage, which it was. A comfortable looking bed, that looked like it could hold two people, resided on one side of the room and a table with two cushioned chairs stood on the other side. There was also a large mirror behind the bed that covered a large portion of the wall. When Laura glanced up, she saw mirrors were also on the ceiling above the bed. The room was lit by automatic torches in the room that were controlled by a dial near the door. A doorway was at the end of room that led to a privacy.

Rowan moved to look out of the heavily barred windows and saw they were covered with a screen to keep the bugs out and there was a switch to close the shutters to keep bad weather out. Looking past the screen, Rowan saw the window looked down on a beautiful courtyard and past that she could see blue sky above a large palace wall. She could faintly hear shouting and orders but it sounded like Lady of Trines' men were having no problem.

Rowan turned away from the window to look at Laura. Their eyes met for a moment but hurriedly glanced away. Neither knew what to say or what to do. Rowan finally gave a forced grin and pointed at the window, "So how many cookies did you steal to get in this pen?"

Laura gave her a short glance with confusion written on her face. A tiny smile broke out when she realized what Rowan was talking about. She shrugged and said, "I suppose you pushed more than one boy to get here."

Rowan gave a very short laugh, "More than one."

Laura looked at the bed and sighed, "I suppose we should get some sleep."

Rowan looked panicked. "I suppose. I'll sleep..."

"Rowan if you dare suggest sleeping on the floor I'm going to toss your butt right out of that window," Laura interrupted. "Now get in that bed and shut up."

Rowan rolled her eyes as she moved over to the bed. She said as she pulled back the covers and slipped inside, "You're bossy."

Laura shook her head as she turned down the lights to a dim glow, the window still giving off plenty of light. She walked to the bed and slipped under the covers. "You just realized this?"

Rowan gave a bare chuckle but that was all she gave. She barely moved as Laura settled on the bed next to her. Laura slept with her back facing Rowan, trying to give them both their privacy.

Rowan laid as still as she could until she sure Laura was asleep by the sound of her deep, even breathing. Sitting up slightly, she reached over to tuck the covers more securely around Laura and whispered, "Goodnight, little hunter."

Before Rowan could lay back down, she found herself pushed flat on the bed with the force of Laura seizing her in a large hug. She hadn't been asleep as Rowan tucked her in and called her the dear little nickname she hadn't called her in years. She almost felt like crying when Rowan called her hunter and not killer. She couldn't stop herself from flinging herself over and wrapping her arms around Rowan, tightly. Recovering quickly from the surprise, Rowan hugged her back.

Neither really knew what to say. What had happened not an hour before left them speechless. How did you talk to someone you almost had sex with in front of a group of people? So they continued what they were doing, simply holding each other.

After a long time, Rowan squirmed slightly and Laura glanced at her. Rowan said, looking sheepish, "These pants are weren't made for sleeping in."

Laura lifted the covers slightly to look at the black, tight leather pants that Rowan had on and said, "No, I don't suppose they were. But they do show off your ass nicely."

Rowan blinked, then blushed. "Why are you looking at my ass?"

It was Laura's turn to blush as she realized she had said her last comment out loud. She finally retorted, "You can't miss it in those pants."

Rowan squirmed again, "Well I'd take these pants off if I wasn't worried someone's going to come bursting through that door at any moment."

Laura nodded but said, "You could undo the buttons, that should help some."

Rowan said, still wiggling, her hands under the covers, "It's what I'm trying to do. Took two of them to button them up."

Laura laughed, "Do you need some help?"

Rowan grinned, "I'm not two years old. I can unbutton my pants by myself. Thank you for the offer though and in another time and place, I would have accepted."

Laura gave a weak smile and then looked away, biting her lip. Rowan frowned, "What's wrong? Besides the obvious that is."

Laura looked at her briefly and then stared down at her hands in her lap. Rowan placed a hand on top of hers and Laura took a deep breath. "You don't have to keep your promise."

"What?" Rowan asked, confused.

Laura took another breath, "Your promise not to kiss me, you don't have to keep it."

"What?" Rowan repeated, shocked to think she had heard what she had.

"Never mind," Laura snapped, feeling vulnerable and stupid. She laid down on the bed, her back to Rowan. Rowan shook her head to clear her thoughts and rolled Laura onto her back. Laura looked at her with cold blue eyes and Rowan leaned over her slightly.

"Why are you telling me I don't have to keep my promise?" Rowan asked, softly and quietly.

Laura turned her gaze away from Rowan's green eyes and said, quickly making up something, "They are going to make us finish what we started and if we don't do good, they'll hurt the ones we love. If you don't kiss me, they're not going to think we're putting on a good show."

Rowan leaned away slightly, discouraged, but then noticed the tiny blush on Laura's cheeks. Rowan gently brushed back some hair away from Laura's face and said, "Yeah, I guess we do have to put on a good show."

Laura held her breath as Rowan leaned closer towards her, their faces coming closer together. She closed her eyes and waited. She felt soft lips brush her cheek and then the other. She opened her eyes, slightly surprised and disappointed again. When Laura opened her eyes, Rowan gently kissed her lips, staring into blue eyes with her own loving green ones. Rowan felt like smiling as she saw a hint of warmth that had been missing in Laura's eyes since they were kids, return but she was preoccupied with the incredible kiss they were sharing.

When the kiss softly broke, they lay staring at each other. Rowan finally whispered, "I know it's too late to say this but I want you to know that I respect what you do now. Hunting, protecting, and even killing is part of what you do and though I did not understand that as a child, I do now. I take back what I stupidly said that day our friendship ended."

Laura softly smiled as she cupped Rowan's cheek in her hand. She whispered, "I take back everything I said too. And I also want to apologize for not taking up for you when you tried to come and talk to me a week later. I'm sorry I let them gang up on you."

Rowan smiled. "It's okay. They would have tried to get me even if our friendship hadn't ended. Jarred and I have never gotten along."

Laura chuckled, "Yes, you do share that common passion."

Laura had meant the passion of hate for each other but as soon as she said it, both realized it could mean their shared passion was also Laura. That made them remember Laura was already spoken for and engaged to be married. Rowan moved away.

Rowan was bored out of her mind. She was beginning to wish the guards would come carry them off to have sex in front of a mass of strangers. At least it would get her out of this room.

They had been at least two weeks. They took turns looking out the window, watching as a battle raged outside and around the palace wall. From the shouts they could hear, the desert clans attacking the palace had grown in force. They could see a large army in the distance, settled far from the range of Lady Trines' catapults.

They had mixed feelings about the battle. They wanted the attacking army to defeat Lady Trines, but they didn't know what would happen if she was defeated. Would the other army let them go or treat them like slaves? Would they and their families be killed if the battle infiltrated the walls?

Rowan allowed herself to look at Laura through her peripheral vision. They hadn't made eye contact since that night. They also weren't speaking to each other. The only thing they did was look out the window, exercise, and wait for bread, fruit, and two flasks of water to be shoved through a slot at the bottom of the door once a day.

Laura was doing crunches by the bed. Rowan guessed she had to have already done a hundred which meant she was only halfway done. Rowan preferred pushups to crunches. Rowan tried not to think about how muscled Laura's stomach would be if they were kept contained that way for any longer.

Rowan went back to looking out the window. There was another attack going on. Archers were in the towers shooting down as fast as they could. Rowan figured they were running low on oil to boil and toss over the sides of the wall since they hadn't done so during the past few days. Rowan wondered how long the palace could hold out. The bulk of the palace's army was protecting the village since it didn't have a large wall and from what she could see, the invading army was getting stronger by the day.

Rowan went back to scraping at the stone around the bars on their window. She was using one of the metal buttons she had ripped off her tight leather pants before some slaves had come to take away the clothes they had worn and replace them with the normal gray slacks and tunics all normal slaves wore.

Rowan had rubbed one end of the button into a sharp rounded chisel. It wasn't even the size of a copper coin, but it was all she had to use. She had barely scraped away a few grains of sand. Rowan knew it was pointless, but she had to do something to keep from going insane.

Laura allowed her mind to wonder as her body continued to exercise. She thought about Rowan, her mother, Jared, her engagement, Rowan, love, if they would ever escape, ways to escape, and Rowan. Laura almost wished that night hadn't happened. Arguing with Rowan was better than not talking to her at all. Laura then decided this was too much processing and put her mind back on counting her numbers of crunches.

When the sun had faded into night, Laura and Rowan jumped as the door flew open. There stood a guard twice the size of Rowan with a large, menacing sword. Another guard appeared in the doorway, about the same size as the first. The second guard ordered them to follow them.

Having no other choice, Laura and Rowan were led to a large bathing chamber where they were quickly washed by slaves and dressed in fine silk robes. Laura overheard the second guard joking with the first. "Our lord prince wishes for entertainment tonight. He has ordered many female slaves to his chamber. I knew he was a real man after all."

Rowan clenched her fists so hard that her nails dug into her skin. She didn't think she could have sex with a man and she knew she really couldn't watch Laura having sex with a man.

Rowan and Laura were led up some stairs and through some corridors until they reached a large doorway. The doorway was guarded by two guards standing at ease. They had orders not to come into his room unless he called for them, because the prince wanted to enjoy this night. His mother was so happy upon hearing how many slaves he wanted, she reinforced the order.

Rowan and Laura were pushed inside of the room and the large door was closed behind them. There was a robed slave wearing a dark veil in the middle of the room. She gestured for them to follow her through the prince's sitting room. Laura couldn't help but notice how many books the prince had. The walls were covered with oak bookcases which were filled with scrolls and books.

The robed slave followed Rowan and Laura into the room. They gasped in surprise to see their mothers already waiting there. The robed slave took off her veil. Willa smiled.

"Are you ready to go home?"

A year and a half later...

The atmosphere all around the tribe was filled with happiness and excitement. There was to be a big celebration to mark the one year anniversary of regaining their freedom from slavery. A year ago that day, with the help of a betrayer, the last of the tribe escaped from palace Trines and returned home.

Rowan stood beside Willa and merely stared at the sight before her. She blinked once, and then twice. She tilted her head, slightly, and finally turned her head slowly towards Willa.

Willa said, defensively, "He's trying."

Rowan gave a slight nod and turned her head back around to watch Alexander finish decorating the front of her shop. What he had done so far looked horrible, but she would never tell him so.

It had been a great surprise for Rowan to see that the son of Lady Trines was really a shy bookworm who had purchased Willa only to discuss books, though he did admit he had developed a crush on her the first time he saw her.

Rowan couldn't help but like the quiet boy. His courtship with Willa was slow and at a pace that Rowan liked. He always treated Willa with the respect she deserved and Rowan knew he was going to ask Willa to marry him tonight. She knew because he had asked her for permission since Rowan had taken on a guardianship-big sister role to Willa, who had no one left after the massacre. Alexander was to play a big part in the celebration today since he helped them escape from the palace and his twisted mother.

It had been a long journey home and once they got home, it had taken a year to get to where they were today. It would take several more years before the tribe was the way it used to be, but it would never be just like it used to be. There was a large wall in construction around the tribe and everyone went through combat training now. No one wanted to be captured and sold like slaves ever again.

Rowan turned her head at the sound of familiar bickering. She watched as her mother and Aubrey argued their way down the street over some matter. She watched as they paused to share a kiss and continue on their way.

After returning home, and after Ash and Aubrey had taken their places as Master Elders of their clans, Rowan had noticed her mother becoming more and more depressed. She had also noticed that her mother was always trying to tell her something but could never seem to spit it out.

Finally, after asking her one night, Ash had admitted to her that she was in a relationship with Aubrey and was scared of what Rowan would think. Rowan's opinion meant the world to her and she wouldn't see Aubrey unless Rowan gave her blessing.

Rowan had been silent a moment and then had said, "If she makes you happy Mama, then you should be with her. Mom would want you to be happy. I think that was always the most important thing for Mom, to make sure you were happy."

Ash confessed afterwards, "I have always had a little crush on Aubrey. She was one of the most beautiful women in the tribe. I guess I liked the way she could drive me up the wall because we always seem to be arguing. And before you ask, your Mom knew about my crush on Aubrey and she respected it. But never doubt me when I say that Sawyer will always have my love. I really didn't even like Sawyer to begin with, except as a friend, but she was patient and slowly won my

heart. I could never love anyone more because together we made a life. Together, we had you. Aubrey feels the same about her husband."

Ash said, "I guess what Aubrey and I share is a fondness that grew from the trust and respect. During the few weeks where we were imprisoned together and the journey home, we grew to like each other and want the other for companionship."

Rowan had paused a moment and said, "This is embarrassing to talk about, but you do have sex right? Or at least want to do it? Because if you two are together just for companionship and don't have sex with each other, it's going to be a boring relationship."

Ash had blushed and slapped the back of her daughter's head before confirming there was desire in their relationship.

The news of the relationship between the Timber Wolf's Clan Master and the Heartwood's Clan Master had taken the whole tribe by surprise. It was so surprising. No one knew what to say. Even if they did, Ash and Aubrey were two of the most feared and respected women in the tribe, along with their daughters.

Rowan turned her attention back to Alexander as he finally got off the ladder he had been on and beamed proudly as Willa complimented him on his terrible decorating job. She would have been laughing over it but she didn't feel much like laughing. Another reason why today was to be a great celebration is because today was the day Laura and Jarred would marry.

Rowan had already made herself promise that she would go to the wedding, smile as best as she could, and leave before the shaman asked if anyone objected to their union. If Jarred was who Laura wanted then Jarred was who Laura would have.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

Rowan frowned as she heard angry shouting come closer towards her. She turned to see an extremely red faced and enraged looking Jarred storming towards her. To say he was upset was to say the least.

Jarred screamed as he charged at Rowan, "You bitch!"

Rowan blinked in surprise and ducked at the last minute. Jarred rounded about and tried once again to take Rowan's head off. Rowan shouted, "What is your problem!"

Several bruises and bloody injuries later, Rowan had her answer as Jarred lay knocked out on the ground. Laura had broken off the wedding because she said she was in love with someone else. Jarred had easily guessed who Laura was in love with and took off to kill her.

Rowan was in a daze. She had to go find Laura. She looked around wildly and stopped when someone thrust a towel in her face. She looked behind the towel to see Aubrey shaking her head at her. "She's at your house. Now clean up and go get her you big goof."

Rowan kissed Aubrey on the cheek and took off running towards her house. She called over her shoulder, "Thank you Mommy Dearest!"

Rowan ran the short distance to her house, while wiping away the dirt and blood from her face, and crashed through her front door. Laura stood in her sitting area, looking around. She said, not looking at Rowan, "I don't want you tracking sawdust inside the house all the time."

Rowan paused, catching her breath before saying, "I don't want dead animals hanging off the walls."

Laura turned to face her, "There will be no more fighting with my clan."

"Only if they don't start it first," Rowan retorted.

"You will change those old sheets on our bed and keep this house clean."

Rowan said, thinking, "I can do that."

"And don't think cause I'm moving in here means you can boss me around."

Rowan raised a brow, "Do I look like I just got hit in the head?"

Laura smirked, "Yes, you do actually."

Rowan gave a crooked smile, "Well it's your fault."

Laura's smirk faded and she said, "I know and I'm sorry."

Rowan took a step towards her, "It's okay. I'll go through a hundred beatings to be with you."

Laura smiled, moving closer towards her, "I know you would and so would I."

Rowan said, now close enough to wrap her arms around Laura, "I only have one last thing. Don't ever doubt that I love you because I do."

Laura said, wrapping her arms around Rowan, "I wont. I love you too. I'm just sorry it took awhile for me to accept that."

Rowan said, lightly kissing her lips, "You're forgiven."

Laura smiled, "I just have one last requirement."

"Name it," Rowan laughed.

"Our first child, whether it's a boy or girl, we'll name him or her Sawyer. I think your Mom always knew we would end up together."

Rowan blinked away a few tears and could only nod. She then claimed Laura's lips with her own. For a long time, they only held each other until Rowan said, "You know, there is supposed to be a ceremony today. I wouldn't want anyone to think you weren't an honest woman."

Laura laughed and said, "You really want Jarred to try and kill you?"

"That's why I have you to protect me, little hunter. For now and until forever."

"Forever," Laura promised, staring into green eyes that held only love for her and she knew her eyes said the same.

End

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