

~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: I honestly made these people up long before I heard of XWP or fanfiction. However, fanfiction is what gave me the courage (whimper) to post and its influence may well show up in my characters.

Love/Sex: Umm, yes. Between women, yes. However, sex is not the focus of the story.

Violence: Yes but I don't get too graphic.

Language: No worse than shown on primetime TV.

Many thanks to the talented bards of the Xenaverse for sharing their talents and proving that it's okay to dream.

Feedback is welcomed: blitteer@comcast.net



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Part 1

The dark shadows lightened slowly as the first brush of the coming dawn painted the landscape. Pale violet eyes stoically watched as the artistry of the Mother's hand dappled the land in soft colors of pastel. Those same eyes waited patiently for the light of the day to greet and illuminate the surrounding woodlands. Birdsong fluttered through the air in a welcoming chorus of the start of a new day. The watcher rose in a fluid motion of muted strength and inherent grace. A startled rabbit darted off as Tristian Thomas uncoiled her powerful frame and stretched to her full six-foot length. A soft snort of amusement escaped her as she eyed the startled animal's departure and she ambled down to the gurgling stream to wash. Clear cold water woke her quickly, eyes the color of the Mother's dawn surveyed her surroundings as well honed instincts took comfort in

the natural sounds of the woodlands telling her that all was clear.

A gentle whicker greeted her return to the camp and she smiled at the muted gray form of her mare. "Morning Shadow. Last day out, my friend." Tristian let that thought weigh heavily on her mind. She wasn't looking forward to returning to the populated areas of Mhyr. Too many people...too much noise. She hated the feeling of being caged and the constant need to deal with the barrage of emotions most of the nobles projected. It taxed her and usually left her feeling tired and irritable. Shadow snorted and shook her dark head as if in agreement.

She packed up her minimal belongings, put out the fire and saddled Shadow quickly. The two were well on their way by the time the sun finally crested the horizon. She kept to the woods, only Shadow's soft gait breaking their silence. Theirs was a partnership of years and both were as one with the wild land they rode as the forests own denizens. Tristian paid scant heed to their direction trusting her mount to make her own way and lead them safely to Mhyr. She studied the land instead, her eyes constantly roaming their path, ears twitching at the slightest noise, her whole being in tune with the land around her as instincts proven over the years categorized, marked, and dismissed the rustlings of the woods as harmless. This ability was so much a part of her that Tristian no longer recognized she was doing it. While a part of her kept watch for danger, her conscious thoughts were centered on the problems being experienced in the Holding of Mhyr.

Mhyr was a Holding in the land called Riger. The second largest Holding in the land and they'd been having trouble with bands of roving brigands. Mhyr's outlying herd and produce farms were systematically being ravaged. Animals and people suddenly disappeared, produce farms were burned to ashes and no trace of the culprits had yet been found. Tristian's journey had taken her out to the last herdfarm. As had been the case, all tracks led to a solid wall. In this case, literally. The bandit's trail had been hard enough to follow, they'd used every trick in the book to cover their tracks. They had not, however, counted on Tristian being sent out after them. Only the fact that no clue had been found after six months allowed Tristian to convince their Leader that she be allowed to leave the city and survey the site in person. Staunton Grier, Leader of Mhyr, did not care to have her outside the Holding during these times.

Tristian sighed remembering the argument.

"You cannot go," Staunton pleaded. "What if it's a trick to get you out of the Holding so the raiders can come here?"

"Staunton," Tristian growled softly, "You're surrounded by the entire Guardian force, what raider in their right mind would enter the Holding proper?"

"I don't like it," Staunton replied, huffily. "I don't like you not being here. Let the others search, you're needed here to protect the Holding."

"You won't have a damn Holding to protect, Staunton, if this keeps up. The outlying farms are already beginning to have thoughts of relocating."

*If we lose them, how do you plan on feeding this Holding. I must go.
Maybe I won't find anything, but...maybe I will."*

Tristian's lips pursed in annoyance. She'd found something, all right. After three weeks of losing the trail, finding it again, riding through mud, rain and snow, she'd finally found the raiders true point of departure. A granite wall set into the High Reaches Mountain. She could find no trip device that may have hid an entrance. No hidden trail, no carefully disguised path. Nothing. Just the face of the mountain itself, mocking her attempts. She felt Shadow stop, her nostrils testing the wind, and Tristian's thoughts returned to the present. "Home, eh? That's right. I smell it too." She patted the mare's neck fondly and allowed the smells of the city to lead them forward.

The sounds of the city were overwhelming to these two daughters of the wild. Shadow snorted and shied as they entered and encountered the ebb and flow of the babbling populace. Tristian sighed and dismounted. Taking hold of the unhappy mare's halter, she spoke gently soothing her upset mount. A firm hand held the halter and Tristian led them further into the maelstrom of merchants hawking their goods. She kept them to the wide path used for passage through the city and absently responded to greetings being sent her way. She fully expected to be met knowing that Staunton would have received word by now that she'd returned. Tristian made her way to the Guardian's compound. Shadow calmed at the sight and nickered softly knowing that soon she'd be brushed, fed, warm, and settled into a quiet stall.

"Thomas," an arrogant voice barked across the stable. "The Leader wishes to see you at once. Come with me."

Tristian sighed in disgust. "Staunton knows that I'll be there as soon as Shadow's been cared for, Lionae."

Althea Lionae, Commander of the Guardian forces of Mhyr, stalked forward in anger. "I didn't ask for your opinion," she spat. "I gave you an order. At once."

Violet eyes turned icy cold as they surveyed the fuming Commander. "You forget yourself, Commander. I'm not a member of your military and I answer only to Staunton. I'll be there when Shadow has been cared for, Lionae, don't fuss me none, it's been a long trip."

Commander Lionae bit her tongue to keep from losing it. Tristian's temper was legendary. Although rarely seen, rousing the slumbering beast was not something one did lightly. Althea took in the tense form of the woman before her and recognized the beginning signs of warning. A faint essence of anger emanated from the taller woman and good sense prevailed. Still, appearances needed to be maintained, "One day, Thomas, you'll go to far," she muttered heatedly.

Tristian gave her a lazy smirk, "And you'll do what? Pout?" Turning back to Shadow, knowing the horse would warn her if Lionae decided to be stupid, Tristian addressed the fuming Commander. "Leave us, Staunton will expect me when I arrive."

Staunton Grier turned at the knock to her door, "Come."

A tow headed youngster peeked in, "Leader, Dyan is here."

"Thank you, Kata, seat them in the conference room and have refreshments and snacks served. I'm on my way." The youngster nodded in acknowledgement and pelted out slamming the door hurriedly. Staunton's gaze dropped to the desk. Dyan had come, as she'd asked. The largest Holding in Riger, home of the Warriors of Dyan, led by the House of du Aulstet. Dyan, the home of the mages. She shuddered as a sliver of fear sliced down her back. Dyan had always been feared. After generations of rumors, Staunton was now the first outsider to ever invoke the promise kept in the old scrolls. The promise that Dyan would come, would help, anywhere, anytime, if the need was there. Still, what does one do with a mage? She inhaled deeply, searching for calm and straightened her back. Time to meet the House of du Aulstet.

Staunton entered the room and halted abruptly. Her gaze drawn immediately to a tall woman lounging negligently against the conference table, slate gray eyes filled with warmth and humor eyed her in askance and she found herself at a complete loss for words.

"Leader?" A soothing voice washed through her and she managed to find a smile somewhere.

"Yes, please, forgive me. I...I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Nothing that I can see," the woman teased gently. A warm smile was offered, "Will you join us?"

Now Staunton realized she was still standing in the doorway. She tried to will away the crimson blush she could feel rising as she stepped fully into the room and accepted the woman's extended hand. "Welcome to Mhyr. I am Staunton Grier, Leader of this Holding."

"I am Emma, it's my pleasure to meet you." Emma du Aulstet smiled gently as she guided the woman to her chair. Turning she indicated the third occupant in the room. "My daughter, Sidell."

Staunton decided she'd gone blind and stupid at that moment. The woman seated at the table was a golden beauty. Hair the color of sun-bleached wheat framed a honey gold face that showed strength of character and green eyes filled with a wisdom far surpassing her youth. Those green eyes twinkled with warmth as a sweet voice penetrated her stunned senses. "Leader, it is a pleasure to be here. Both Mother and I hope this meeting will lead to a more active interaction between our Holdings."

"But," Staunton stammered, "Dyan...prefers their..."

"Isolation," Emma finished for her. "Perhaps those before us, Staunton. Sidell and I feel the time for such segregation has long since past. It is time for Riger to unite as one and put aside our tendencies to seek refuge in what has become the status quo." A quirk of her lips invited Staunton in on the joke and Staunton couldn't have stopped the smile that came to her lips if she

tried. Riger was home for five Holdings. Four of those interacted daily with each other. Only Dyan held themselves apart. Emma was poking fun at her own Holding and Staunton couldn't help the amazement she was experiencing. Dyan was planning to end their isolation, by the Mother's hand, what next?

"Don't look so stunned, Leader," Sidell chided her in amusement. "Not all of our ancestors were foolish. We," she indicated her mother and herself, "like to think we come from the more...progressive side of the family."

Emma's shouted laughter startled her but also gave her the indication that these two had discussed this possibility before. It seemed to be an old subject between them and both mother and daughter gazed at each other with open affection. This was not quite the reaction she'd expected from these two who were considered to be the most powerful mages in all the land. No, Staunton had expected, she snorted silently in amusement, stuffy haughtiness. Instead she'd found an offer of friendship. They chatted amiably as the refreshments were served, the two women from Dyan apparently happy to let Staunton take the lead in this meeting she'd requested.

Emma studied the Leader of Mhyr unobtrusively. She noticed the concern the woman showed while talking about her holding, the excitement in her voice while discussing their plans to expand, and the sadness she heard in that same voice as the conversation turned to the reason Staunton had called them.

"We have been hard hit by raiders in the past six months," Staunton began. Her face turning grim as she recalled the reports she received from the Guardians. She brought them up to date and looked to see if the two had any questions.

Emma turned to Sidell but her daughter shook her head allowing Emma to lead the questioning. "Staunton, what have the Guardians found?"

Staunton bit her lip. She'd not wanted to have this conversation but acknowledged it would be silly to hide this and still expect Dyan to help. What was she hoping for? A wave of their hand and all would be well? She grimaced in self-disgust and turned to Emma. "We've been having trouble with the Guardians, Leader. A year ago, Flain Martin, the Commander at the time, was killed in a particularly nasty raid. His second in command managed to hold back the brigands and bring home as many of our Guardians as possible but the need to replace Flain was now necessary."

Emma frowned in confusion, "Wouldn't you just promote his Second?"

"Normally," Staunton sighed in regret. "Mhyr is still bound to the Caste system, Leader. My father before me tried to fight it and I continue. Unfortunately, my Sire was respected more than I and I'm afraid some ground has been lost."

Sidell's furrowed brow showed her confusion and Staunton smiled wanly. "Bear with me, Sidell. It will all make sense soon." She cleared her throat, "The hierarchy of the Caste system is Noble, Merchant, Commoner. After generations we managed to remove the other numerous roles and

have settled on these three. The Guardians," here, sarcasm could be heard dripping from Staunton's tone, "should not be lead by other than those of the Noble houses. Only the Nobles understand the importance of a strong protective force and an important matter such as that cannot be left to the lower classes."

"I take it you disagree?" Emma remarked wryly.

Staunton hesitated. She had no way of knowing if her comments would be considered an insult to Dyan. "Occasionally, there are times when the Nobles would do best to stay out of certain situations." She watched as Emma's brow quirked but could read nothing else on the woman's calm face. She continued her tale, "My father had, through sheer magnetism, received approval to put a commoner in charge of the Guardians. That was Flain and this move was never regretted. His second could have taken his place but...after I took over, the Nobles had begun making noises about giving up some of their privileges. I was caught between starting a war that was bound to hurt the commoners more than anyone else, or, giving in to the Nobles at strategic times. Unfortunately, one of the most important things they wanted restored under their control was the Guardians. The Commander now is a fool and I don't have enough support to have her replaced."

"What happened to Flain's Second," Emma asked quietly.

"Tristian quit the Guardians. She really had no choice; Althea Lionae hates her and would have made her life miserable. I asked Tristian to stay on as my advisor. That leaves her free to do what she needs to do and she answers to no one but me. It also keeps her here, which has helped greatly. The Guardians come to her for guidance and those that Lionae put in to the ranks know better than to try Tristian's patience. However, since she's not included in the daily tasking, things have become lax. The brigands couldn't have picked a better time to strike, I doubt Lionae could find her head without help, let alone some clever brigands."

"And what do you need from us, Staunton?" This was Sidell. She was curious as to just what the Leader expected them to do.

"I need help with the brigands, Sidell. I'd not expect you to fix the problems in Mhyr but the outlying farms are being ravaged. We've already lost a half years crops and livestock. If this keeps up, Mhyr will be unable to feed itself through the rest of this year."

Emma gazed thoughtfully at the floor; Sidell studied her mother for a minute before returning her attention to Staunton. "Where might I find someone that has more information on the brigand activity, Staunton?"

Staunton was once again reminded of the younger woman's outer beauty and the inherent inner strength she could feel emanating off of her. "Tristian should be here shortly. She finally argued me into allowing her the freedom to track the activities herself. I received word that she was back in the city and I expect she's caring for her mount."

A sharp rap on the door announced the entrance of a brunette of medium height and average

looks. She could have been pretty if not for the cruel sneer that seemed to be stamped onto her features. She strode arrogantly into the room, her crafty brown eyes boldly assessing Sidell. "I am a Althea Lionae," she announced grandly and was somewhat taken back when the two women continued to sit quietly and eye her in amusement. "Of the House of Lionae," she inserted pointedly, "a name honored back to the time of our founding."

Staunton shook her head and responded before her visitors could comment. "What brings you here, Althea? I did not summon you."

Althea looked at her reproachfully, "No, Leader, you did not. I caution you again on taking such risks with your welfare. I must be informed by my officers that a transport ship of unknown origin has entered our Holding and that two strangers are guesting with the Leader of our Holding." She eyed Staunton in a manner reminiscent of one eyeing a recalcitrant child, "Staunton, you know better. As Commander of the Guardians, it is my duty to be here for your protection." With that she turned to the quietly watching women obviously expecting an introduction.

Staunton sighed. She would have preferred to have no one else present but Althea's family was very powerful in Mhyr and Staunton needed to watch her step if she didn't want to see a Lionae leading the Holding. That thought brought a shudder of disgust to her body and she shook herself turning to her guests. "Althea, may I present Emma du Aulstet, Leader of Dyan and her daughter and Heir, Sidell du Aulstet."

A calculated glint of satisfaction flickered across Althea's face to be quickly replaced with a facade of imminent pleasure. "Ladies, I am honored to be in such company. This is indeed a surprise. I'm sure our noble families will be delighted to guest the two most revered women in Riger." She moved forward boldly and claimed the chair to the right of Sidell. "Lady du Aulstet, it is indeed a pleasure for me," she drawled lazily.

A golden eyebrow quirked in amusement and Sidell responded wryly, "I'm glad to hear that." She ignored her mother's muffled chuckle and returned her attention to Staunton. "You were saying we should be receiving a briefing soon?"

"Yes, Sidell. I expect Tristian shortly."

"You give that commoner too much leeway," Althea muttered. "She is caring for her mount and refused to present herself to you in a timely manner. I don't know what you were thinking, Staunton. It's not a good idea to give commoners the impression that they are our equals." She turned a winning smile to Sidell and explained in a martyred manner. "Staunton has learned some...bad habits from her adored father. Unfortunately it's given some of our commoners a misplaced sense of importance. I'm sure it's something I will be required to attend to shortly." She reached casually over and patted Sidell's hand. "I'm sure Dyan does not have these tedious problems. No doubt your commoners are firmly reminded of their position in life."

"No doubt," Sidell agreed, her lips pursed tightly in annoyance. "Seeing as how Dyan does not subscribe to such a policy, our so-called commoners are well aware that their place in life is

whatever they're willing to work for."

Both Staunton and Althea stared at her in shock. Althea's eyes turned to Emma, "Surely, Leader, she jests?"

"No," Emma drawled. "Not at all."

"But," Althea's gaze returned to Sidell and noticed that she had lost the attention of her audience. "Sidell?" she murmured hesitantly. Sidell's gaze was held firmly to the doorway and Althea turned to see what might be happening there. Her jaw clenched in irritation. "Wait outside, Thomas. This is a meeting of the Noble houses and your presence is unacceptable."

Tristian's impassive face never faltered and she nodded then turned to leave.

"Wait." A gentle voice called and halted her in her tracks. "Please, join us."

"She's a commoner," Althea sputtered in outrage. "She should not be in this room while we are discussing important matters. They have no sense of the needs of the Holding. Sidell, I must protest."

Sidell rose gracefully, her gaze never leaving the icy violet regard of the newcomer. "Then allow me to join you. May I assume you are Tristian Thomas?"

The dark head nodded once in agreement and Sidell stepped around the table ignoring Althea's admonishments. "May I call you Tristian?" Sidell asked gently, approaching the formidable figure framed in the doorway. "I am Sidell," she offered.

"Tristian is fine, m'lady. Perhaps our Commander is correct. If you require assistance, I'm sure she'll be happy to provide it."

Sidell smiled gently, "And I am sure she'll be happy to try. It's her ability to succeed that I doubt." She laced her hand around Tristian's arm, "May I join you, Tristian?" She asked hesitantly.

"I...of course, m'lady. Would you care for some refreshments?"

"I would," Sidell agreed and turned to Emma, "I'll meet up with you later. If I can convince Tristian to take me with her, I'd like to ride out tomorrow and see what she has found regarding these raiders."

Emma smiled indulgently and in mock ferocity sternly warned her companion, "Be careful with my heir, young warrior. She can be a handful but I trust you're up to the challenge."

Tristian blinked as warm gray eyes belied the tone behind the words and the smile following them invited her in on the joke. Tristian's lips twitched and she nodded, "I'll do my best, m'lady."

"This is unacceptable," Althea shouted standing in rigid anger. "Sidell I..."

Sidell raised a hand and gave a gentle wave; Althea's voice disappeared although her mouth continued to move. The Commander faltered when no further sound was forth coming. Coolly, Sidell addressed her, "You seem to be very conscious of my position, Althea. Allow me to remind you of not only WHO I am by WHAT I am. Try not to further irritate me, I'm not a very patient person."

Sidell turned to her taller companion and admitted sheepishly, "I don't usually resort to such measures." She sighed and shrugged, "I just couldn't seem to help myself, and she's been annoying me since her entrance."

Tristian face remained a stoic mask of indifference and she merely nodded at Sidell's gentle admission. "She has that ability, m'lady. I'm sure no irreparable harm has been done."

"None," Sidell assured her. "The spell will wear off when we leave." She looked up again at the woman beside her and felt a tug on her senses at the close proximity of her companion. "I believe you offered refreshments?"

Tristian nodded and led them out. She stopped outside of an overly ornate tavern and Sidell felt her hesitate. "Something wrong?" she asked gently.

Tristian paused. "I'm not sure they'll let me in."

"Then why are we here?"

"It is an establishment more suitable for a lady such as yourself," Tristian answered honestly as she gathered her wits and entered the doorway, Sidell keeping pace at her side.

A sour looking man eyed them, "What do you want, Thomas? You know better than to enter my establishment."

Before Tristian could mutter an explanation Sidell stepped forward. "I am Sidell du Aulstet. My mother and I are here to visit your Holding on a request from your leader."

The tavernkeeper almost swallowed his tongue in shock, patrons of the establishment murmured in excitement and a rather large, rather greasy individual rose and approached them. "Lady du Aulstet, it is the pleasure of Mhyr to host the Heir of Dyan. Please, join me and my House." He extended his arm and turned to Tristian. "You are dismissed, Thomas. I will escort the Lady and counsel Staunton on the sheer effrontery of her actions that allowed you to escort the Heir."

Tristian nodded having expected no less but Sidell wouldn't release her arm. Nor did she move to accept the arm of Vernid Lionae. Sidell's gaze sharpened and cooled as she eyed the speaker. She swept her eyes across the room, judging and dismissing the occupants as if nothing more than insects. She performed a thorough inspection of the man before her, noting the dried food stains on his clothes, the unkempt aura of sloth, and the excess weight on his small frame. She sniffed

delicately and wrinkled her nose at the distinct odor of the unwashed. She looked up to her companion. "I will not stay here, Tristian. Let us leave, please."

"But..." Tristian stammered, beginning to lose her composure as Sidell literally dragged her out of the establishment. "M'lady...forgive me, perhaps another, tavern? I'm not familiar with the Noble's choices of establishments."

Sidell stopped and turned to face her. Tristian expected icy disdain and was at a loss to understand the humor on the woman's face. Sidell rested both hands flat against Tristian's chest. "Listen to me, okay? Just listen." She waited for Tristian's agreement before speaking. "I am from Dyan. I am the Heir to the Holding of Dyan."

"I know that..." Tristian began in exasperation. She stopped at the glare she received and inhaled audibly as she clamped down on her words.

"Now, Dyan has no commoners, nobles, or whatever other..." she searched for the word and Tristian helpfully supplied it, "castes, M'lady?"

"Whatever," Sidell snarled. "We don't have them, we don't believe in them, and from what I've seen so far, we never will in my lifetime." She waited for Tristian to digest the news. "So, somewhere in this Holding is probably a tavern that you visit. You probably enjoy going there and I'd wager the food and drink is quite good."

At Tristian's hesitant nod, she continued. "Good, then please take us there. No more peeking into the so called 'proper' establishments." She looked up shyly, "Okay?"

Tristian bowed her head and shuffled her feet in an endearingly adolescent manner. "Okay," she agreed softly.

Sidell smiled and took her arm as Tristian led them off. She could feel the tension in the tall frame of her companion and she gently squeezed the firm arm she was holding. She began a rambling description of Freeelock, the colony she preferred to live in and was glad to notice her companion beginning to relax. They approached another Tavern, not quite so ornate but sturdily built and clean on the inside. The enticing smells of cooking caused Sidell's stomach to loudly protest its empty state. She ignored the raised brow of her tall shadow and smiled winningly at the tavernkeep.

The lady tavernkeep eyed the two of them in pleasure and smiled broadly at Tristian. "Thomas, you're back I see. Safe and sound?"

"Aye, Lucan, not to mention hungry."

"Then set you and your lady down and I'll have platters sent out immediately. We'd not want you starving."

Tristian's face was a study in contradictions. She couldn't help but be pleased her friend thought

of them as a couple and yet realized the insult to Sidell such an assumption could be. She opened her mouth to introduce the young heir only to find herself outmaneuvered.

"Thank you tavernkeep," Sidell exclaimed with a smile. "I am Sidell and I'm looking forward to the meal. Tristian holds this establishment in high regard."

Lucan chuckled, "I humbly admit that we've got the best meals in the Holding. Come in and sit down. Any friend of Tristian's is always welcomed. I trust you're visiting from another Holding. How are things going at home?"

"Very well," Sidell answered easily, managing to avoid having to name the Holding she was from. "With spring on its way we're preparing the crops, the herdstock is excited to be out roaming again and everyone is glad to see the last lingering bits of winter pass."

Lucan nodded sagely and the two women were off on a discussion ranging from crops to weaving. Tristian sat in silence watching Sidell interact so easily with a commoner and she tentatively began to believe that the golden woman truly did not believe in caste differences.

Tristian absently returned the greetings she received and tried to ignore the blatant nods of appreciation she was getting for her companion. She sighed softly, her mind wondering at the freedom of living in a Holding such as Dyan. Where her birth did not automatically make her incompetent. She was brought out of her reverie by a gentle hand on her thigh and she turned to meet green eyes softened in gentle concern.

"Something wrong, Tristian? You seem...sad?"

"No, m'lady. It is nothing."

"You're sure? Am I making you uncomfortable?"

"No," Tristian rushed to assure her. "Really, you are not. Perhaps I'm just.." she hesitated, "it's been a long three weeks."

Sidell nodded and turned as their food arrived. She inhaled deeply in appreciation of the pleasing aromas and Lucan chuckled. "Don't just smell it, girl, eat it for Alwyn's sake."

Tristian tensed at the overly familiar tone the tavernkeeper was using but the hand on her thigh kept her silent with a gentle squeeze. Sidell winked at Lucan, "I intend to, Lucan. But good food, like many other things, deserves to be savored for a bit before being consumed and relegated to a mere memory."

Lucan laughed heartily, enjoying the young woman's openly honest warmth. She sent out a tray of sweets that she made for her special customers and smiled as Sidell hastily nibbled a sweet roll and groaned in delight. "Oooh, can I take you home with me?" Sidell teased wickedly.

Lucan returned to her kitchen, a wide smile on her face. She clasped an affectionate hand on

Tristian's shoulder before disappearing. Tristian grinned as Sidell efficiently dove into the platters of meat, cheese and fruits set out for them. They spoke of little inconsequential things, the smaller woman keeping up an almost constant chatter as she tried the various offerings and presented her favorites to Tristian for tasting waiting for the dark woman to murmur in agreement.

They were halfway through when the tavern fell silent. Sidell looked up to see Staunton Grier hovering in the door and Emma striding smartly towards them. Emma pulled up a chair and sat down poking at the various meats and gingerly taking a piece to taste. She moaned in appreciation and Sidell chuckled beckoning the now concerned tavernkeeper over. "Lucan, if you please, another platter? My mother appears to be starving."

"Of course, young one," Lucan answered with a grin, relaxing again at Sidell's easy presence. "More sweets also?"

"Aye, especially the rolls. Tristian ate them all." Sidell pronounced this declaration in all seriousness knowing full well that the tavernkeep was aware of who really ate the rolls. Tristian rolled her eyes at the blatant falsehood.

Playing along, Lucan glared at Tristian; "I've told you before, share. I'll get more Sidell, you slap her hand if she steals anymore." She winked at the grinning blonde and shouted her orders for more food. She turned then eyeing Staunton's form warily. Staunton was still in the doorway.

Emma snorted and snapped out, "Staunton, either get in or get out. You're blocking the damn door."

Staunton continued to hover and Emma turned an irritated glare at her. She shuffled into the room and sat hesitantly. She looked for all the world as if she would either faint or flee any minute now. Emma sighed, "Remove yourself, if you cannot relax. I'd prefer you not ruin my meal with your presence. I'll meet with you in the council chambers after my morning meal." Emma inhaled the delicious aroma of the platter in front of her and munched in appreciation. She smiled at the hovering Lucan, "Excellent, tavernkeep. You'd do well to commend your cook."

Lucan smiled shyly, not sure who the woman was but aware that she was someone of import. Staunton had made a visible effort to relax so Lucan nodded differentially, "Thank you, Lady. I'm glad you enjoy the meal."

Sidell coughed almost inhaling a piece of cheese. Tristian turned to her in concern and she waved her off. "Okay, it's okay." She chuckled, "I think hearing my mother being called Lady was more than I could handle this morning."

Emma flashed her an annoyed grimace and then laughed along with her daughter. Turning to the tavernkeep she smiled, "Emma, Lucan. Please, call me Emma."

Lucan smiled shyly and left the four women to their meal.

Sidell continued her lighthearted chatter with Emma now joining in on some of the tales being told. She added a mother's perspective to the adventures her offspring related. Tristian laughed gently, the two women's warm presence overpowering Staunton's unease. Sidell continued to ply Tristian with little morsels until the dark warrior was forced to lean back and plead for mercy. "No more, m'lady. I'm about to burst as it stands now."

Sidell patted Tristian's belly comfortably and grinned, "Yup, all full up."

Emma laughed at their antics and finished her meal in relish. "Tristian, thank you for bringing her here. I dread to think what would have happened if she'd eaten in one of those places Staunton insisted we eat in."

Sidell grinned, "Tristian tried to get me in one. I didn't care for the smells coming from the kitchen nor the presence of the imbecile who offered to escort me. I'm afraid I begged her to take me someplace with real food."

Emma waved her fork in dismissal, "Whatever the reason, I'm pleased with the result. I was hungry."

Sidell snorted, "That will teach you to bundle us up in such a hurry that we missed breakfast."

"I thought we'd eat here," Emma defended herself. "You know, have a relaxing meal and discuss the problems."

"Ahhh," Sidell pronounced in satisfaction. "That was incredible."

Emma chuckled, "Well we," she indicated Staunton and herself, "are headed back to the council room. Apparently, we now have to meet every noble idiot in the Holding."

Sidell's brow lifted in amusement, "I trust you don't expect me present."

"As if," Emma agreed easily, "No, I know better. Don't forget, Tristian has been on the trail for the past three weeks and she could probably use some rest. Try not to wear her out."

Sidell grinned. "No, if she's tired she's free to take herself off for a nap. I plan to wander the Holding and talk to the citizens." She turned to ensure Tristian knew she was serious. Sidell wanted her to rest before she did anything else.

"Good," Emma agreed and stood. "Let me get Staunton out of here before she passes out from having to breath all this common air," Emma muttered in biting sarcasm. Staunton winced but rose also. "Meet up with me later and if you two decide to leave the Holding, let me know first."

Sidell nodded and her mother almost shoved Staunton out the door. She turned a warm smile on Lucan as the woman approached their table. "Lucan, that was incredible. Thank you so much."

"My pleasure, cooking is something I enjoy doing and I'm good at it."

Sidell nodded in agreement and extracted a gold piece from her pack. She laid it gently in Lucan's hand, "For a most excellent meal, Lucan."

Lucan stared at the piece, "Sidell...I...this..." she stammered knowing she couldn't give the young woman adequate change without leaving herself short the coins she'd need for the day."

Sidell closed Lucan's fist around the coin. "Decide how many meals it's good for. If I leave before I've used them all, feed Tristian for me."

Lucan smiled and agreed. "I will, young one. Don't you fret, I won't short you none."

"The thought never crossed my mind, Lucan." Sidell assured her.

The two women were gone before Lucan noticed the engraved stamp of Dyan on the coin. She almost fainted in awe. She hastily stashed the coin for safety vowing that she'd never spend it on anything.

Sidell walked quietly beside her companion deep in thought. She liked the woman. She chuckled at the thought, okay; she more than liked the woman. Tristian's brooding manner seemed to gentle whenever Tristian spoke to her. She felt a curious connection to her silent shadow and admitted to being well on the way to instant infatuation. She smiled, one step at a time, Sidell, she admonished herself. This one would not be easy to catch...but Sidell couldn't help but feel as if this one was more than worth the effort it would take not only to catch, but also to keep. She looked up as the noise level increased and she eyed the market. "Oooh, shopping," she declared in delight hiding the grin she felt at Tristian's pained expression. "Tristian, you're probably tired, why don't you go and get some rest?" Sidell smiled gently, "I'll be fine. I doubt anyone here could hurt me if they tried."

Tristian smiled at that. "No, I doubt the same. I am not really tired, m'lady. Sleeping on the trail is something I enjoy doing. Being on the trail is something I enjoy doing. Unless you wish to be alone, I...don't mind accompanying you."

Her soft words were rewarded with a dazzling smile. "I enjoy your company," Sidell assured her. "If you're sure...and if you think you can take this babble."

Tristian chuckled, "Therein lies the problem. But, I think I'll be alright for one day."

"Good, shall we?"

"Uhhmm, I have to tell you." Tristian started hesitantly, "We...have a market square for the commoners and another for the Nobles."

Sidell rolled her eyes. "The difference?"

"I'm not really sure. I can't shop in the Noble's square."

"Can you enter?"

Tristian smiled wryly, "Aye. I think they allow it so we'll know what we're missing."

Sidell squeezed her arm in sympathy. "Let's wander here, I assume it's the common square?"

At Tristian's nod she continued, "And then we'll go to the Noble Square to see exactly what the differences are."

"As you wish," Tristian agreed turning them to brave the crowds. Tristian's large frame easily towered over the majority of the people in the square and they made room for her to maneuver having been treated to her irritation at being constantly poked and stepped on. Sidell found herself moving along easily and she hid a grin thinking it sure is handy to have your own warrior escort. She bit her lip to keep the smile from turning to laughter and set her sights on enjoying the day.

Tristian watched in continued fascination as Sidell moved through the crowds at the tables effortlessly. She talked with everyone and bartered fairly with the merchants often winning concessions just because of her charm. The people in the square were quite taken with the golden beauty in their midst and engaged her in active discussions ranging from fashions to food. Sidell also visited all of the tables that sold little snacks and practically ate her way through the square. Tristian snorted in amusement as the woman's face creased into a warm grin at a particularly flavorful morsel. She was unsurprised to find a piece being held up for her consumption and admitted that the sweet-coated nuts were very tasty. After a few hours in the square Tristian realized Sidell had garnered more information during her chats than the Guardians did during an interrogation. A truly gifted woman, Tristian acknowledged, listening to the latest discussion.

"I'm telling you Sidell, there was a mage with them." The woman was a herdfarmer and neighbor to one of the raided farms. "I know what I saw but these people," she hesitated and placed a hand on Tristian's arm, "not you Thomas, you know that."

Tristian smiled and the woman continued. "These people think I'm just a scatterbrained commoner."

"What did you see, Lesta?"

"After the raiders left, me and mine followed them. Hoping we could figure out where they were headed. Sidell..." she shook her head. "They took full herds, carts, wagons, you get the picture?"

"Should have made a clear trail." Sidell responded encouragingly.

"Aye," Lesta nodded vehemently. "Anyways, this older woman walked behind them. I thought she was a bit soft in the head," she snickered and looped her finger in the air, "she was talking to herself. Muttering as she followed the herd, Sidell...wherever she walked, the trail disappeared. No indentations in the ground, no marks to follow. It has to be a mage."

Sidell turned to Tristian who nodded slowly. "That would explain what I found. The trail I followed was primarily broken branches, a chip off a tree bark, and marks of something scraping on the stones. There really wasn't a path. I found it unusual but I didn't dwell on it.

Lesta smiled up at Tristian fondly, "So you found them then? I knew you could do it."

"I found their entry point. I'm not sure that's going to help us much." Tristian admitted.

Lesta shrugged in easy acceptance, "It's more than we had yesterday, Thomas." She moved off as some little trinket caught her eye.

"Shall we see what we're missing in the Noble Square?" Sidell asked dryly.

"Of course, m'lady." Tristian replied and made a clear path through the crowd. Sidell vowed that her next major task was to hear her name from those lips. She smiled and deemed that a worthy goal.

"Do you think they'll let me shop in the Noble Square?" Sidell asked in mild amusement.

Tristian grinned, "I imagine that the nobles have been fully briefed on the presence of Dyan. I'd be surprised if you were not known by now."

Sidell grimaced, "Then do you think we'll find anything to buy?"

Tristian only shrugged and smiled gently at her.

"Lady du Aulstet," a smooth voice echoed across the square and the merchants all turned to see who was being addressed. Althea Lionae approached and offered an arm. "Lady, it would be my pleasure to escort you."

"I'm sure it would be," Sidell commented mildly, not releasing her clasp on Tristian's arm.

"However, as you can see, I have an escort. I'm sure you're extremely busy, Althea and I'd hate to be responsible for the Guardian's Commander to be remiss in her duties."

"Lady, there are others to care for the colony. I am allowed some time off on occasion." She held Sidell's gaze in steely determination, her arm extended for Sidell to accept.

"Well, Commander. I do thank you for the offer but as I've said, I have an escort. Please, enjoy your time off."

Sidell pulled Tristian along effectively dismissing the now irritated Commander. The merchants fell over themselves to help the young heir but Sidell noticed the marked difference between the two merchant squares. Here the prices were extravagant and the quality abysmal. She found a bit of jewelry she thought she could stomach and engaged the merchant in a round of haggling. Sidell was very disappointed to learn that one does not haggle in Noble Square. It was beneath

the dignity of a Noble. She snorted in disgust and left the merchant holding the bauble still touting its fine qualities. "I will not shop where I cannot haggle. That takes out half the fun of shopping."

She and her shadow made their way through and Sidell found the food lacking and conversation stilted to polite nonsense. They walked through once and she decided she'd had enough. "Tristian, let's head back. I need to find an Inn, I guess we're staying the night."

Tristian turned to a large building occupying the back corner and nodded towards it.

Sidell groaned, "Let me guess, Nobles reside there?"

Tristian shrugged but led them towards the establishment. Sidell peeked in, now thoroughly afraid of what she'd find. So far she'd found the nobles to be rude, lazy, dirty, and their services left much to be desired. The scent of musty carpet and burning food had Sidell backing up quickly her head shaking emphatically from side to side. "No way, not now, not ever." She looked up at her companion, "Weren't those rooms above Lucan's place?"

Tristian winced, "Aye, m'lady."

"They're not good?" Sidell asked misunderstanding Tristian's wince.

"No. They're fine, equal to the quality of her food."

"Then what's with the wince?"

Tristian sighed, "Let's just say that you've managed to offend just about every noble in Mhyr and perhaps you'd like to reconsider?"

"Just about?" Sidell asked mischievously.

Tristian groaned softly but nodded in agreement.

"Oh goody. Let's get them all." She hooked her hand on Tristian's arm and pulled her back to what Sidell had decided was the 'real' side of Mhyr.

Emma du Aulstet stood in the foyer of the Inn her daughter had refused to step into looking around in disdain. She listened in impatience as Staunton explained the history of the establishment.

"This Inn was built back in my grandfather's time for the purpose of guesting visiting nobles. The architecture is exquisite and no expense has been taken to ensure that the furnishings are the best in the land," Staunton continued trying desperately to get the woman to agree to at least stay in an acceptable Inn.

"Staunton, perhaps it would be better if they spared no expense in keeping the place clean." The overpowering scent of mildew was driving her nuts and she already knew Sidell would never stay here. Sidell wouldn't be able to breathe after being in this place for a quarter hour. She noticed the dust and the dirt? Yep dirt tracked across the carpet and floors and didn't want to begin wondering how old the dirt was. The burnt smell of the kitchen had dissipated but what was now wafting out of there turned her stomach. She sighed and mindtouched her daughter asking if Sidell had arranged accommodations. The answer she received put the first smile on her face since she'd left her offspring that morning.

Staunton was hopeful as the smile crossed Emma's face. This was a short lived feeling when Emma muttered, "Come on, I've got a room already and stalked out of the Inn." She stopped short as Vernid Lionae intercepted her on the steps. Since Emma had never met him she merely nodded and moved to go around him. He stepped in front of her and she looked up angrily. "Something I can do for you?"

"Leader, I am Vernid Lionae, Scion of the House. I'm sorry I was unable to meet with you and hoped to see you at the banquet this eve."

Emma remained silent waiting for the point.

"Uhhmm," Vernid murmured, not comfortable with the woman's silence. Women weren't silent they talked constantly. She should at least have responded. "I...uhm, can I be of assistance? I see you've already gotten yourself settled in our Inn." He smiled pleasantly.

Emma frowned. "No, I need no assistance and no I'm not staying in that pig sty. Excuse me; if you really want to chat I'll see you at the banquet. At the moment I'm in need of some food and some peace and quiet." Not to mention some intelligent company Emma added silently. She pushed past Vernid and made her way to Lucan's place not caring if Staunton was with her or not.

Emma peeked in the connecting door to Sidell's room and found her daughter staring idly up at the ceiling. "Hey you. I know your day was tons better than mine."

Sidell grinned impishly and agreed, "I'm sure it was."

"Well, I have bad new for you. I need you to attend a formal banquet with me this evening. I'm also bringing Aurora here to attend."

Sidell chuckled, "Aurora and I at a formal affair? Mother is it your intent to remove Mhyr from the face of Riger?"

Emma laughed, "Aurora has promised to behave. I want the same from you."

Sidell laid back and considered her mentor. Aurora Mardred was Dyan's mage instructor. Sidell had known her forever and though the woman's patience was incredible when it came to teaching...she had no tolerance for political posturing. This could be a challenge. Which one of them would cave in first and pop someone. "Deal," she replied with a smirk.

Emma eyed her warily but didn't press the issue. "Good, would you wake me? I really need a nap. These people can give a rock a headache."

After leaving Sidell in Lucan's capable hands, Tristian felt the need to escape. She decided to take Shadow's daughter out for a ride. Summer, the golden mare that was her mother's complete opposite, stretched out eagerly on the open pasture, the long strides powering them quickly across the ground. Tristian felt most at home when not in the colony and she gave Summer her head not really concerned on when she got back.

Sidell and Aurora were exchanging glances of amused frustration across the room. The conversations of the nobles appeared to be limited to where they stood in the hierarchy of the caste. From there it led to the so-called feats their ancestors had accomplished. Sidell found it quite amusing that not one of them could claim to have done anything of import in their own lifetime. Except for Althea who commanded the Guardians. Althea conveniently forgot that her father had forced Staunton into placing his daughter in that position. Sidell smirked; I suppose it's all in one's perspective. The evening had been long and boring and it didn't appear that Emma would allow them to leave soon. She hated these things but Emma only asked it of her on rare occasions so she gave in and was as polite as she could manage. A loud commotion came from the kitchen and she watched several of the Guardians rush to the site.

"My guardians will handle that, Sidell. No need for concern, you are as safe here as you would be at home.

Sidell notice Aurora moving to rescue her from Althea's presence when a ringing scream full of terror pierced the air.

"AURORAAAAA,"

Aurora spun in surprise. Sidell joined her and they made their way to the commotion literally pushing people out of the way. "Hold," Aurora commanded. "Hold damn you or I'll hold you myself."

The guardians quit struggling with someone. Althea pushed her way in front of Aurora, "Please Mage Mardred, allow us to handle this."

Aurora shoved her aside and finally looked down at the individual that lay sobbing on the floor. "Selene? Goddess bless. Unhand her you dolts," Aurora barked watching the Guardians scamper

out of her way. "Selene?" she murmured gently gathering the woman to her and helping her up. "Selene what's wrong. What's got you so upset?" Aurora was trying desperately to ignore the other questions clamoring in her head and concentrate on the present. "Shhh, easy now, easy. You'll make yourself sick."

Sidell handed her a glass of juice and Aurora thanked her absently. Holding Selene in her powerful embrace she helped the still shuddering woman to sip. "Now, easy and tell me what's happened."

"Tristian," Selene gasped, feeling the body holding her jerk in rigid attention. Sidell's head snapped up to listen and Emma moved closer. "Tristian...Aurie please, they're hurting her?"

"Who? Where?" Aurora questioned forcefully.

"I...Aurie I don't know..." She pointed to her head, "Here...I see it here."

Aurora held her tighter and spoke soothingly. "Okay, you know what I need to do?" Selene nodded and pleaded silently with her to hurry. Aurora's hand pressed gently to the side of Selene's head and she forced a mindlink. She felt Sidell join the link and they watched the scene playing out in the distraught woman's mind.

They saw her tied to the rafters and five women in Guardian uniforms pummeled her in gleeful enjoyment. One snarled that Lionae would be pleased with their work and Sidell snapped. Her eyes scanned the crowd and found Althea at her side watching in amused concern. Sidell grabbed her and muttered a quick spell.

Althea found herself enveloped in a blue cloud, as Sidell demanded Tristian's location. Try as she might she couldn't lie. She couldn't keep silent. She found herself babbling the information Sidell requested and was immediately engulfed in darkness as she lost consciousness.

Sidell didn't know Mhyr well enough to port and she had to run, she could hear Aurora and Selene following her and knew that Emma would remain to settle things down. She entered the stables and moved to the back corner. Desperately brushing the straw aside she found the trap door. Pulling it open she jumped down into the black hole counting on her powers to see her safely. She landed softly and rushed to the sounds of someone being beaten.

Turning a corner she saw in reality the scene that Selene had running through her mind. Sidell didn't stop to think. She raised a hand and power rose. The two inflicting damage on the bound woman were ripped to pieces without a chance to scream. Blood splattered everywhere. The last three women huddled in cowering mind numbing fear and Sidell felt no mercy as she looked at the wreck hanging limply from the ropes attached to the overhead beams. She never turned to them as she left them screaming in a ball of flame. Gently she used her gift to support the unconscious woman, her eyes filled with tears at Tristian's tortured body. Cradling her in a soft hold of power she explained to Aurora and Emma that she was taking Tristian to Dyan. They could come at their convenience. Sidell ported the two of them directly into the Healer's Hall and barked an order to have Jax, their senior healer summoned at once. Laying Tristian down on a

soft pallet she sat on a stool and held Tristian's hands softly speaking to her. "Stay, please. I need you to stay. I've just found you. You can't leave me. Tristian, if you can hear me, stay. Please." She continued her gentle pleadings and murmured soft words of comfort and encouragement as Jax came in and began to work on the injured warrior.

Tristian woke to a world full of hazy pain. Dizzy and slightly nauseated she tried to roll and laid back gasping for air and fighting the need to throw up. She felt a soothing hand on her forehead and the soft tingling of gentle warmth flowed through her. Her discomfort eased and she slipped back into the darkness.

She woke again, still hurting but not the mindfilling pain of her first waking. She tried to blink to clear her vision but the images remained fuzzy and her eyes wouldn't open wider.

"Shhhh," a gentle voice she barely recognized crooned and she quit trying to move her head. "Easy, that's right, easy," the soft voice coaxed and she relaxed enough to recognize Sidell. She felt a cool touch and turned to accept the drink. Feeling her parched throat she mumbled a complaint when the water was withdrawn.

"No," Sidell murmured, "not too much. You'll be sick and you don't want to go there."

Tristian quieted and waited a bit until she was offered more. She sipped and was rewarded by receiving more. This continued for a long agonizing time until Tristian's throat felt better but her body hurt from the effort.

"Hey, do you need something for the pain?"

Tristian tried to shake her head no but stopped at the instant pounding.

"Sorry," Sidell soothed her. "Listen, squeeze my hand once for no, twice for yes." Sidell waited and felt a single barely perceptible squeeze. "Okay. Think you can eat something?"

Another single squeeze.

"More water?" She got a yes for that and helped Tristian sip. The door opened behind her and Tristian turned to the sound. A low groan escaping her and Sidell supported her chin turning her head back to the forward position. "Quit moving around, silly. You're gonna hurt yourself more."

Tristian felt a familiar touch on her head and she smiled weakly. "Mom," she whispered.

"I'm here sweetheart. You're safe now, just rest." Selene could barely keep the tears from falling as she looked at the broken body of her daughter. "Just rest." She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the still warm forehead. "Sleep, I'll be back later, you're safe here." Tristian felt the darkness claim her as she drifted on her mother's voice.

Sidell turned feeling the gaze resting on her. She stood quickly and moved closer to the pallet. "Hey you. Welcome back."

Tristian managed a grin. She shifted her eyes to the water jug and sipped slowly when she was offered the cup. She didn't hurt quite so much and felt clearer headed. "Where?" she asked hearing the cracking in her voice.

"Dyan. We brought you here rather than chance your care to those fools," Sidell responded heatedly.

Tristian's brow rose in question and Sidell just shook her head. "Later, you get well first. That's what's important."

"How long?"

"Two weeks." Sidell answered seeing the surprise in the violet gaze. "Yeah and I'm glad you're awake. Trying to get soup down your throat while you're unconscious is not something I'm looking forward to trying again."

Tristian smiled. "Hate soup."

"So your mother said. But, we couldn't just shove food down your throat and the soup managed to keep your strength up." Sidell grinned saucily, "Now that you're up you can have your soup while your conscious."

"Hate soup," Tristian repeated stubbornly.

"You haven't tried our soup. Be good and taste it." Sidell turned to a tray resting on the low table. She tested the temperature and smiled, it was perfect. She grinned at Tristian's wary look and offered a spoonful. "Be good," she reminded her patient and watched as Tristian accepted the spoonful. It was a thick almost chowder like soup seasoned lightly to be easy on her stomach and flavored with the golden maize Dyan loved to grow. Tristian's brow rose at the light pleasing taste and eagerly accepted the next offering. "See," Sidell teased, happily watching her patient eat a full meal for the first time in weeks.

"Good," Tristian praised finishing the bowl and sipping the lukewarm tea Sidell offered. She laid back in a pleasant daze her body sated, warm, and almost pain free.

"Mom?"

"She's probably resting. She's been here most of the time and she needed to sleep. Aurora took her home. We'll see her soon I'm sure." Sidell looked at her, measuring her energy level and asked gently, "Do you remember what happened?"

"Some," Tristian murmured closing her eyes and letting her senses relax. "Took Summer for a ride. Came back and was finishing her brushing. Heard others come in but it is the common

stable so I didn't think twice about it." Tristian breathed deeply, the talking tiring her quickly. She sipped more tea and finished with, "I felt a sting, on my neck and..." she trailed off remembering the aching pain that greeted her when she woke. Remembered the crunch as bones shattered from the beating.

Sidell rose and sat gently on the bed resting a hand on Tristian's forehead easing her into a soft slumber, easing the memories back for a bit to allow the healing peace of sleep.

Tristian woke again to find Selene sitting in the chair next to her. "Mom," she whispered causing Selene's head to jerk towards her.

"Hi, sweetheart. Feeling better?"

Tristian made a so-so hand gesture. Selene nodded as she again fought the tears in her eyes.

"Hey...I'm gonna be fine, what's the tears for."

"I was so scared. Oh, baby, so scared. I could see them, I could feel your pain."

Tristian murmured soothingly, trying to calm her mother but Selene moved away not wanting to aggravate Tristian's injuries. Her stubborn daughter moved to go after her as the door swung open. "Freeze you stubborn warrior." Sidell's normally gentle voice echoed the room in clear command.

Selene realizing what almost happened rushed back to Tristian's side. "Stop that, silly. What did you think you were doing?"

"You ran away...I needed to..." Tristian muttered weakly as her body's pain center flooded with the messages from her injuries.

"Damn it," Sidell muttered again reaching out a hand to Tristian's forehead and easing her back to sleep. She bit her lip to keep from jumping down Selene's throat and merely murmured that Tristian didn't appear to have re-injured anything. Sidell was at the end of her patience with Selene and Aurora as they refused to discuss an obviously important subject. Selene preferred to hide and Aurora's anger was quickly escalating to rage. Sidell really didn't blame Aurora. It seemed that Selene had somehow convinced her that Tristian had died in an accident in the lake. Her body thought to be lost to the swift currents of the season. Aurora had been devastated and then totally heart broken when her mate chose to leave her claiming she couldn't remain knowing she was responsible for her daughter's death. Aurora had pleaded, begged, but Selene was intent on leaving. They'd formally parted and the record of their joining amended to show the parting. To find out thirty years later that her daughter had been alive and well was almost more than Aurora could handle and Selene refused to give her a reason. Insisting that they would be leaving once Tristian was healed and there was no reason to bring up that old pain. Sidell figured if it had been her she'd have slapped the woman by now. They sat in silence as they watched over the sleeping woman. Sidell was content with the silence. She didn't trust herself to speak without demanding an answer.

Selene finally broke the silence. "You think I'm being cruel," she state softly.

Sidell raised her head and watched the woman carefully then nodded. "Yes, I do. You're being unfair to both of them. Your reasons I can't comprehend but I know how I'd feel if I found out thirty years later that my mate had purposely lied, convinced me that my daughter was dead and then left me to raise her." Sidell let her words fall in the empty silence and held Selene's gaze evenly. The woman started crying and Sidell shook her head in disgust.

She turned at the intense feeling of being watched and found herself pinned by a remarkably clear pair of violet eyes.

"Come here," Tristian motioned her over.

Selene started at her daughter's voice and she hoped Tristian had just woken and missed the conversation. Her hopes were dashed at Tristian's next words.

"Explain that conversation to me," she growled never releasing Sidell's gaze.

Sidell looked at her unhappily, "It's not my tale to tell and I'm sorry you heard it like that."

Tristian gripped Sidell's hand and squeezed softly then turned to her mother. "Your turn?"

"I..." Selene faltered, "it's nothing. Nothing to do with you, we were discussing another matter."

"Mother, I've been injured, I'm not dead nor stupid. Tell me."

Selene wrung her hands and, flustered, stood and rapidly walked to the door, chattering about things she needed to see to before taking Tristian home.

Angry Tristian tried to rise but Sidell held her down and she was not yet strong enough to fight her. Tristian's piercing gaze bore into her soul and she considered running herself. She got the stubborn woman settled and mindtouched Aurora asking her to come to the hall.

"Sidell," Tristian rumbled and halted when the woman gave her a dazzling smile.

"I'd made a vow to hear my name on your lips if it was the last thing I did. Getting you angry was not quite what I had in mind." Sidell disclosed in a whisper.

Tristian was momentarily off-balance but she smiled gently and spoke again, "Tell me, Sidell."

"Not me," Sidell responded but soothed the agitated warrior. "Someone, just not me. Be patient, she comes."

Aurora entered quietly, her tall powerful frame outlined by the sun at her back. Tristian studied the stranger with interest. The woman was tall, as tall as she. She was also in good shape and the

body facing her had been kept in good condition. She was broad shouldered and moved gracefully with an economy of motion. Tristian looked up to her face as Aurora approached the bed and was shocked to see her own eyes staring back at her.

Aurora's face masked the ache she felt at seeing her daughter after so many years spent in the heartbreak of missing her, of dreaming of her, of wishing things had been different. Blaming herself for allowing Selene to go alone. All of it for nothing, Tristian was here, alive, hers, and no one could deny that. She reached out slowly and touched the arm of the woman gazing at her in shock. "I am Aurora Mardred, Tristian. Welcome home."

Part 2

Sidell sat quietly holding the trembling hand still in her grasp and squeezing it gently to bring Tristian back to the present. She wanted to be sure Tristian could handle the shock and was loathed to leave her. Aurora eased into the chair and brushed an errant lock back. A gesture of nervousness not missed by her daughter who had the same tendency. Tristian grinned weakly and rasped, "I take it this is a surprise to both of us?"

Aurora nodded, clamping down on the sigh of relief. Her biggest fear was that Tristian would think she'd abandoned her. She had no idea as to what Selene had told the girl and wasn't sure how to proceed. The two women were alike in so many ways and neither of them entered a conversation willingly.

After an eternity of silence Sidell sighed. Two pairs of violet eyes swiveled to her and she shook her head laughing softly. "Alright, let's see. Aurora, why don't you tell Tristian about the last time you saw her?"

Aurora began softly, "You...were two. A bundle of energy and curious as anything, I had to attend a council function and Selene didn't feel like accompanying me. I agreed to attend alone and she planned to take you out for a picnic at the lake. It was a pretty day, the winter had just past and the gentle touch of spring was in the air. I agreed, this is Dyan and there was no reason to assume something would happen to her. She was well known and everyone knew we'd been partnered for several years."

"Were you joined?" Tristian asked curiously.

"Yes. Before your conception before you ask. You are my daughter, Tristian, never doubt that. You are also my only heir." Aurora took a shaky breath and continued her tale. "I went to the meeting. A few hours later Selene came running in hysterical. She..." Aurora's voice broke and she closed her eyes taking a deep breath. Sidell poured her a cup of tea and offered some to Tristian. While the women sipped their drinks Aurora gathered her thoughts.

"She claimed that the two of you were playing in the water. You had struggled in her grasp and she lost her hold. The current ripped you away from her. She searched for hours before she came

to get me and by then," Aurora raised her hands in despair, "The current at that time of year is swift. By the time she came, it was possible your body had been swept out to sea. I drained the lake and the river bed but..." she smiled weakly, "well obviously, I didn't find a body."

Bleakly Aurora finished, "That's the last time I've seen you until two weeks ago when Selene again came to me in hysterics."

Sidell murmured in sympathy suddenly realizing the shock Aurora must have felt. As if reliving a nightmare she'd never gotten rid of.

Aurora glanced at her and nodded. "Yes, that was...let's just say it brought back some memories."

Hesitantly she looked at her daughter, "Did she ever mention...me?"

"No, Aurora, I'm sorry. She merely told me that my Sire had died when I was two and she'd struggled on her own for a while until she met the man I grew up calling father. I knew she wasn't originally from Mhyr but she led me to believe she'd come from Darena. In fact, everyone thought that. It's a bit of a surprise to find things so different from what I've always believed."

Aurora sighed, "It's okay. My biggest fear when I realized you were alive was that she may have told you I was...beating the two of you or something like that. I think I prefer her saying nothing than letting you believe I could be that kind of monster."

"Do...you know why?" Tristian asked, almost timidly.

Aurora shook her head. "No. She refuses to discuss it. Says it's unnecessary since the two of you will be returning to Mhyr as soon as you're well enough. She'd rather leave things as it was. I'm surprised she told you."

"She didn't," Tristian answered wryly. "I'm a very light sleeper when someone isn't drugging me or using magic to put me to sleep." She gave a soft smile to a blushing Sidell, "Mother asked Sidell a question and the answer she received is what gave the story away."

Sidell shrugged sheepishly. "Sorry, I promised I wouldn't go off on her but she asked me a stupid question and I couldn't help myself. I don't think I was too rude." She looked to Tristian hopefully and was rewarded with a squeeze.

"You were honest. She asked, you answered."

Selene refused to discuss the incident at all. She chattered away happily about the plans she had once Tristian was mobile. She thought they should go to Darena for a rest, and she made plans to talk to Staunton about Tristian retaining her position. For her part, Tristian maintained her silence on the matter but spent hours in Aurora's company, the two women quickly forming a bond that Tristian realized she'd missed without ever knowing. Her mother was a...flake...to be

honest and Tristian had always bowed to her wishes since it was so easy to make Selene happy. She thought long and hard on the reasons why she should return to Mhyr and wondered if she could possibly remain in Dyan. She finally got the nerve to ask Sidell. "Sidell, how much trouble would it be for me to ask to relocate here?"

Sidell smiled and clasped Tristian's hand gently, "None," she replied watching the fear leave the other woman's eyes and hearing Tristian release the breath she'd been holding. "The records have been fixed. Aurora took care of that the day we arrived. You are listed as her daughter and her heir. This is your home. All you need to do is claim it."

Sidell grinned, "Actually, Freelock, that's the colony we're in now, is awaiting permission to visit. I've been holding them off. The family can be a bit much to take and they're so excited they'll wear you out in minutes. But just so you know, you've got cousins galore, and more aunts than you'll ever know what to do with."

She laughed gently as Tristian winced. She liked people as much as her Sire and Sidell imagined the two of them would leave the next planned gathering as soon as possible. She reached up and brushed Tristian's hair out her eyes. "You need a haircut, I think."

"I do. It's driving me nuts."

"Well, you'll be happy to know we can let you up tomorrow. Since we use magic to speed the healing, Jax is pleased with the way your bones have knitted and she figures with the exercises we've been doing you shouldn't have much trouble with mobility. You'll still need to take it easy, you've been in that bed for nearly a month so...no running in the halls."

Tristian smirked. She was very pleased with the lightweight wraps Jax used in the final stages of her healing. She could move around but Jax wouldn't let her walk until the bones in her legs were stronger. Now that the time was here, she was antsy with anticipation.

"Quit squiggling," Sidell admonished her, chuckling affectionately. "Anyway. I've a surprise for you tomorrow. I think you've had about enough of this food?"

"Aye."

"I'll port us into my favorite tavern for lunch. It's already arranged and Anya plans to dazzle you with her cooking. I told her about Lucan and she's taken it as a personal challenge."

Tristian laughed in delight. A gentle sound that soothed Sidell's heart and brought a silly grin to her face. "Like that do you?"

"Anything. Just get me out of these four walls." She cocked her head, "Did you invite Aurora?"

"I left the guest list up to you. Think about it and I'll make sure everyone is notified."

"Just Aurora."

"What about your mother?"

"Mother doesn't care to be out in public and she's happier in the home. She hates eating out."

"Alright, I'll ask Aurora. Would you mind if I asked Selene just so she doesn't feel left out?"

"No," Tristian agreed.

Tristian inhaled deeply, the teasing scent of the sea on the air. They were seated on the back patio seat of the Baker's Brew. The back of the building was snuggled up to the woods and Tristian could feel the energy of the land soothing her aching heart. She breathed deep, her ears twitching to catch the little sounds of the woods, her mind easily categorizing the noises. She felt filled with energy and it was all she could do to remember not to bounce around in happy glee. She loved the colony. It was small and nestled into the land as if a part of it rather than destroying the land to claim a part of it. "There are seven of these colonies in Dyan?" she asked curiously.

Sidell nodded, sipping the juice Anya provided. "Six are integrated to the whole. The seventh, well they prefer their independence and since they've caused no trouble, mother has left them be. She visits once a year or so just to be sure they're still there I guess."

"This is neat," Tristian rambled on happily. It's not like Mhyr. Everyone living on top of everyone else."

Sidell smiled, "No, we're all pretty independent people. Having so many of us in a small space could result in a massive accident caused by irritation. We have our problems and our people have their own little prejudices. I guess, since our colonies are smaller, it's not quite as obvious as the separation I saw in Mhyr."

"Even if we were all together, we would not have that problem," Aurora offered, settling herself in an open chair. She grinned at her daughter, "You look happier."

"I am. I'm finally out of that room, close enough to the wilds to feel the energy in the air and surrounded with beautiful women. Why shouldn't I be happy, sire?"

Sidell blushed and Aurora burst into laughter. "Oh Goddess, we'd best warn our people that she's loose. They'll need to round up their daughters."

Tristian winked rakishly and Sidell felt a minor twinge of annoyance. She set it aside, there was time enough for everything else, but today was to be enjoyed. She leaned back and relaxed as Tristian and Aurora began another long debate regarding strategy and weaponry. She smiled inwardly at the rapport the two had developed over the past month.

Sidell had also invited someone she thought Tristian should meet since Selene had declined to join them. She listened to the ongoing conversation and watched curiously as Tristian pulled a dagger from her boot. Nonchalantly, Tristian flipped it once and threw it without warning burying it in the trunk of a tree. Sidell raised a brow but the soft shuffle of leaves showed a woman emerging into the sunlight, Tristian's knife in her hand. She returned it to its owner, "My apologies, young Mardred. It is a habit; I normally scout the surroundings before emerging. I did not mean to startle you and I did not expect to be noticed.

Sidell hid a grin and touched Tristian's hand lightly. "This is Maria Delgado, Tristian. Commander of our scouts. I told you I'd invited her. I forgot to tell her not to lurk."

Tristian sheathed her dagger and relaxed her stance welcoming Maria with a grin. "You're very good. I almost missed you."

Curiously Sidell asked. "So where did the knife land?"

"In my heart if I'd been in front of the tree. I figured it was a warning."

Sidell shook her head and grinned at Aurora's proud smirk. "I asked Maria to stop by since you've been thinking of staying."

Aurora looked up in hesitant pleasure, "You are? Does Selene know?"

"I am and no she doesn't. Until she settles down and talks to me, she won't."

"Ahhhh," Aurora responded in understanding.

"Anyway," Sidell continued, "I thought you'd be interested in the make up of our protective forces and I can tolerate Maria a lot better than I can tolerate Dalton."

Maria chuckled, "Sidell, if that was supposed to make me feel better, it didn't."

Sidell laughed ruefully admitting it wasn't a flattering thing to say. "You know what I meant. Anyway, this here," she pointed at the grinning Maria, "is a scout."

"In Dyan," Maria began while fixing herself a platter. "We have the Scouts and the Warriors. The Warriors handle colony defense. They have a stationed garrison at each colony save one."

"I explained that to her," Sidell inserted.

Maria nodded and continued. "They handle anything that goes wrong inside the colony. The scouts range throughout the Holding, our herdfarms, cropfarms and the occasional family that prefers to be in the wilds, fall to us to protect. We also take care of the animal population, rabid animals and bands of raiders that miss our border postings and try to ply their trade in Dyan." She fell silent letting Tristian absorb the information and ask any questions she might have.

"That's nice," Tristian finally responded. "You don't have to rearrange schedules and pull the warriors out of the colonies when there are external problems."

Maria nodded and grinned.

"Where do the Scouts base out of?"

"Again, each of the colonies. We share barracks space with the warriors. For the most part we work together and get along fairly well."

"For the most part?"

Maria turned to Sidell who indicated she could continue.

"The Warriors lost their Commander to a challenge not long ago. Maybe six months or so, the current Commander wishes to combine the forces under her."

"There is nothing wrong with that," Tristian put in. "It ensures that someone at the top is aware of all activities in the Holding."

"Aye, and we would have probably been all for it except that Dalton, has bigger plans." Maria grinned slightly, "I became the Commander of the Scouts at that time. Before, we really didn't have one and we just worked with the Warriors or our Captains would work out the taskings. Sidell didn't want Dalton rushing in and taking over the Scouts. My position makes us peers and she can't use the Scouts without my approval." Maria shrugged, "It's not the best solution but it works until we can figure out what Dalton is after."

"What is she doing that's so suspicious?"

Maria grimaced. "I'd hoped you wouldn't ask that. See, the truth is nothing. She's done nothing to generate this kind of suspicion but...she makes my hackles rise. She's up to no good but I can't prove it. You've got to meet her to know what I mean."

Surprisingly, Tristian accepted that. Maria smiled in pleasure not realizing that Tristian had staked her life on just those kind of instincts and she was willing to trust Maria's until she could see for herself."

"As you see," Sidell stated dryly, "Not so different from Mhyr. Same games, different names."

"Well, not quite," Tristian said quietly, "the playing field's a bit more level here. There is no one higher up pulling strings and making the rest of us jump through stupid hoops."

Sidell smiled softly in agreement. "We should get back. This is your first day out and Jax will have my hide if I let you over do it."

Tristian chuckled. "I suppose. Can I get a hair cut first?" Her friends laughed at her blowing her

hair out of her eyes.

Sidell relented, "Alright but then, straight back. We can venture out more tomorrow if you aren't to tired."

Tristian smiled in pleasure. "Can we walk? I haven't walked much yet. If I get tired then you can do your magic trick."

Sidell wrestled a look of outrage on her face, "I am a mage of incredible talent. I'll have you know I don't do tricks."

"Yeah, yeah," Tristian teased as she rose gracefully. "C'mon, lets go wonder wizard."

She left Maria and Aurora laughing themselves silly at the stunned look on Sidell's face.

Tristian paused at the door and looked back at Sidell, quirking a brow in question.

Sidell threw her hands up in defeat, "I'm coming already." She joined her laughing softly. The change in Tristian was incredible from the so reserved woman she'd met in Mhyr.

Sidell gripped her arm gently providing minimal support as they strolled slowly down the path. Women stared in appreciation at her taller companion and Sidell reviewed her decision on their having enough time to work everything out. They stopped at some of the displays in the street but made good time to the dwelling of the woman that provided the service to the colony. Within the hour Tristian was back in bed sleeping peacefully. Sidell sat quietly, watching her sleep and musing over her feelings for the dark warrior.

It was two weeks of short walks, long lunches, dinners and friends before Jax declared Tristian strong enough to move out of the Healer's Hall. Aurora had already opened her house to her daughter and Tristian had stopped in to see the home. It was large enough to provide her with her own suite, private entrance and all the privacy she'd need. She had made her decision to remain and could choose between learning her place in Dyan or joining the Scouts or Warriors. She'd also found herself fully enchanted with the Heir of the Holding and was courting Sidell with the single minded focus she used while going after anything else she'd ever wanted. Although, she admitted with a grin, Sidell was more than willing to be courted or to court her if necessary. Life was looking up and Tristian faced her hardest task now. She was looking for her mother.

"Tristian," Selene smiled in pleasure as her daughter entered the tavern. Selene was sitting with several women she'd made friends with and Tristian joined them. "You ready to go home?" Selene asked looking at her daughter with a maternal eye; happy that the injuries she'd suffered appeared to be giving her no trouble. Selene did admit that, if not for Dyan, Tristian would have died or been crippled for life.

"I've been wanting to talk to you about that," Tristian answered calmly.

"Good. I've got everything set up, we can take the next available transport and have it drop us off

in Darena."

Tristian buttered one of the soft rolls on the table and bit it in pleasure. She turned to settle her gaze squarely on her mother. "You know I'm not going. Talk to me."

Selene flushed and continued talking. "Della is looking forward to our visit, I'll go and call her and tell her we'll be arriving tomorrow. I know you've been missing her daughter and they'll be thrilled that we'll stay awhile. Selene rose and Tristian rose with her capturing her hands and placing them against her chest holding her mother tight. She stood quietly as Selene chattered and tried to free herself. Finally she wound down and looked up into eyes that had haunted her for thirty years. "Don't, please. Come with me?"

"Talk to me. I won't promise to leave but you need to talk to me. We can't let this go on and I need to understand." Tristian spoke gently, her voice calm and soft as she continued to hold her mother.

"I..." she looked around frightened and Tristian tightened her grip.

"No more running, talk to me."

Selene's body trembled and Tristian gathered her closer and escorted her out. She led them to the lake that had played such a significant affair in the events that had ripped her out of her home; her life and she wanted to know now.

Selene flinched looking over the calm body of water. Tristian kept her arms around her mother and remained quiet allowing Selene time to gather her thoughts.

"You know I have...visions?" Selene asked softly, expecting the nod she received. "When you were a baby, I had a vision. It showed you being swallowed up by the land, being dragged into it as you struggled to break free. All of my crying and calling for help couldn't save you. I saw you fully merge with the land and I couldn't bear the thought of losing you. I thought...I thought that if I could get you away from here I could change that destiny."

"Are you sure it happened here?"

"In Dyan, yes, I'm sure. I recognized the land. I can't leave you, Tristian, don't you see. I can't lose you."

"Mother, you took me to Mhyr and I almost died there."

"No, I would have seen that vision. I...Tristian, I'm so sorry, so very sorry. Aurora loved you so, she worshipped the ground you crawled on and she was so proud of you. I knew she'd let you face your destiny. She'd raise you the best she could, teach you everything she could and allow you the chance to face your destiny and I could not, dear Goddess." She was sobbing uncontrollably now, "I could not."

"Did you love her?"

"Completely but you...you were a part of me. How could I sacrifice you for our happiness? I couldn't."

Tristian soothed her gently and let her regain her breath. "How did you do it?"

"Della," Selene whispered. "I wrote to Della. She promised to come for you and we planned it for a day I knew Aurora would be busy. Della took you home with her and I covered the tracks of the wagon. Then I made sure the search would stay near the lake and the river itself. I had planned to let Della raise you and remain with Aurora but..." Selene broke down and Tristian waited patiently. "But I couldn't bear to look at her and see her pain. She blamed herself. For taking care of business first and I lived with the guilt of knowing my lie was killing her. I did what I've always done when things got too hard. I ran."

Selene sobbed softly but continued, "the rest you know. I've tried to never lie to you since then. But you see now why you must come?"

"Because it would make everything you've done meaningless. All the hurt, the lies, the pain." Tristian's brutal answer was given gently as if it would help soften the blow she knew she was delivering.

Selene collapsed with a wail and Tristian sat heavily cradling her mother in her arms. She wasn't startled by the footsteps behind her.

Aurora moved in front of her daughter and reached out her arms. "Give her to me, I think it's my turn now."

Tristian nodded and released her precious burden. She turned and buried herself in Sidell's waiting embrace.

They walked the lake as Tristian regained her composure. Stopping Sidell she folded her into a strong full body hug. Tristian's dark head bent and she tasted the soft lips of the golden woman that held her heart. She felt Sidell's breath quicken and she deepened the kiss, demanding entrance and receiving it. A low growl escaped her as she reveled in the silky depths of her lover's mouth. She lowered her lover to the ground and smiled when she felt the blanket Sidell conjured. "Nice to have such talent."

"Uhhmm," Sidell hummed reclaiming the intoxicating lips. She felt the cool breeze and the warmth of the sun on her bare skin. She gasped in pleasure when Tristian claimed her aching breast and pulled her dark lover tighter. She released her and tugged at Tristian's jerkin. Tristian stood and undressed, never letting her gaze leave Sidell's flushed body. "You are exquisite," Tristian murmured, returning to her lover's side. Sidell felt Tristian's hands and lips claiming every inch of her and she signaled her approval by reciprocating the tender touches. The orgasm surprised her in its quickness and intensity. Panting harshly she lay sated and open under her dark lover's body. Her own body accepting the weight of her lover with ease as if it was built just

to hold Tristian like this.

Tristian groaned and shifted to the side laying her length against her lover and kissing her roughly. Sidell felt her desire rise and she moaned softly. Tristian kissed her way down the golden skin to the apex of her lover's center. Gently, she dipped her tongue for a taste drawing a moan from both women. Draping her lover's legs over her broad shoulders, she feasted on the subtle flavor and scent of her lover's arousal driving Sidell higher with the slow delicious torture until she came hard calling out her lover's name in a joyful shout.

The two women played in the lake and made love throughout the afternoon finally returning to the colony when hunger could no longer be ignored.

Emma sat listening in distaste to a sordid tale that Dalton Weir; Commander of the Warriors was spewing at a nearby table. She smiled when silence descended having already noticed what apparently every one was now looking at. Tristian and Sidell made their way down the main thoroughfare, Sidell tucked securely against Tristian's side. Sidell was obviously relating a tale and Tristian's dark head bent to her attentively.

"Who the hell is that?" Dalton snarled from her table. Her tablemates, all having been out to another colony with her for the past month indicated their ignorance. Everyone else ignored her and she rose in anger banging the table for attention. "I asked a question or don't you people care that your Heir is consorting with someone none of us know?"

Anya strolled up and snickered, "Sit down you blithering idiot before I throw you out. That there is young Mardred and most of us know her. We just saw no reason to bother answering you since it's none of your business."

Dalton looked at her in shock, "Mardred? Which Mardred. I've never seen her before in my life."

"Well," Emma responded laconically, "I suppose you could call Tristian a liar. Or," she grinned evilly, "Aurora, since she is Aurora's daughter."

The two women entered the tavern and Sidell smiled brightly at her mother.

Emma grinned, "Well, you two look like you've had fun today."

Sidell blushed and Tristian ran a hand tenderly along her arm squeezing gently. "It's been...an enlightening day, Leader," Tristian offered. They joined her and greeted Anya placing their orders quickly.

"Enlightening? How so?"

"Tristian got Selene to tell her what happened."

Emma's brow rose in surprise. "I see. Well hopefully I'll hear it but," she looked around the silent room and snorted, "not here."

They dug into their meals chatting companionably until a shadow loomed over Tristian. She looked up curiously and Emma drawled lazily. "This is Dalton Weir, Tristian. Commander of the Warriors."

Tristian's nape hairs were standing straight up and she understood Maria's suspicions. She gave a lazy smirk and nodded, "Dalton."

Dalton spoke coolly, "I understand you're just returning home, Mardred?"

Tristian nodded in answer.

"And how do you like our Holding?"

"Just fine," Tristian answered hugging Sidell and watching Dalton's face tighten in anger.

"So I see," she replied in a clipped tone. "Sidell, welcome home to you also. I hear you've been to Mhyr?"

"You've heard correctly, Dalton."

"It would be best, Sidell, if you informed me of your movements. It's difficult to protect you when I don't know where you are."

"My Scouts travel with me when necessary. You know that Dalton. I'd not take the Warriors out of the colony. No need to concern yourself."

"Still,"

"Dalton," Sidell's voice had dropped as an icy tone emerged. "Is there some reason we are still having this conversation? You have my answer, beating a dead horse will not make it any deader."

Dalton recoiled as if slapped, "Very well." She took a breath and managed to speak in a reasonable tone, "I am hoping you'll join me for supper tomorrow. It's been quite a month and we've got a lot to catch up with?"

Sidell's raised brow questioned her statement and she stuttered. "I thought you'd be interested in the findings of the Holding."

"Of course I am. It's the reason we have those silly morning briefings, Dalton. I'll get your full report then. What need is there to discuss it further at supper?"

"Well, I also thought, perhaps a relaxing evening could be had by the two of us."

"I'll be supping with Tristian, Dalton. Don't let me keep you from relaxing."

Dalton's face was a study in rage and Tristian's instincts were screaming for her to destroy the threat. She clamped down on the urge to rise and sat still feeling her muscles quivering with the need for release. "Very well, perhaps another time. Good eve to you all."

"Hey," Sidell gently rubbed Tristian's back. "You okay?"

"I'm gonna kill her," Tristian muttered softly.

"Uhhmm, any reason in particular?" Sidell asked, a bit shocked.

"She makes my hair stand on end." Tristian replied in a growl. "But, I'm gonna challenge her so I can kill her without putting you in an awkward position."

"Ahhh, well..." Sidell's voice trailed off, not sure what to make of this declaration. "Uhhmm, not to cast any doubt on your skills but, she's very, very good. It's how she got the position in the first place."

Tristian shrugged, "We'll see, Sidell, but I'm challenging her tomorrow. Let's hope I'm as good as I think I am."

Tristian returned from her morning run to find Aurora and Selene in the common room of the house preparing to eat breakfast.

Selene turned and eyed her daughter's sweat covered form. "I'd invite you to breakfast but you need to wash first."

Tristian grinned at her and swiped a roll on her way by earning her a smack on the rear. Aurora snorted in amusement.

She washed quickly and checked her weapons before attaching the scabbard to the clips on the back of her jerkin. She settled it comfortably and joined her parents in the common room. That thought brought a silly grin to her face that she couldn't quite wipe off and ended up just going with it.

Selene watched the change in her daughter's normally impassive face to the smiling young woman that fairly bounced into the room. Slowly the clutching fear she held began to ease. Maybe Aurora was right. Tristian had a right to live her life and Selene was only cheating her by trying to protect her.

"So what's got you all excited?" Aurora drawled eyeing her daughter's barely contained exuberance.

Tristian shrugged. "It's a pretty day, I've had a good run, and breakfast is waiting for me. What else can I ask for, sire?" she inquired innocently.

"Uh huh," Selene murmured. "And the reason you're armed is?"

"Mother, I'm a warrior, I'm supposed to be armed."

Selene sniffed delicately, "Something smells, Aurie." She eyed her daughter, "Are you sure you washed?"

Tristian coughed in surprise and shook her head. Grabbing another roll she rose gracefully. "As much as I enjoy being picked on, you two will have to excuse me."

She wandered the colony enjoying the cool breeze blowing off the water. She finally found a reason to get into trouble. Two warriors were fighting with a merchant.

"I'm telling ye idjits, I didn't pocket me own merchandise. I saw you, Talla, saw you lift that little bracelet and I want it back or I'll take this straight to Emma."

Dalton's voice barked sharply, "Take her to lockup until we sort this out."

Tristian's low voice broke in. "I've a better idea, let's search Talla."

Dalton growled, "Stay out of this, Mardred. It's none of your business."

"I beg to differ. This is my Holding and a sister claims that the so-called protectors of the colony are stealing from the colony. That charge needs to be settled before the citizens start to believe it. What do you say, Talla?"

"I say mind your own business. This is the concern of the Warriors and you are not one of us."

Tristian smiled, perfect. "You know. I've been meaning to do something about that."

Talla sneered, "Put in you application so I can deny it, Mardred."

"Oh no, Talla. I hate bureaucracy." She turned to Dalton and pinned her with a cold stare. "I'm planning on taking them over, not serving in them."

Dalton's jaw dropped. "You, do you think your sire will save you? You dare to challenge me and hope she steps in."

"Nah." Tristian smiled, "I dare to challenge you...and win."

"Bitch," Dalton snarled stepping back a pace to draw her blade. "To bad your return was so short, Mardred. May your sire remember you fondly."

Tristian grinned resting her blade on her shoulder and bouncing on the balls of her feet. She could feel the dark energy pulse, her heart pumping loudly as the blood rushed through her system.

Maria saw the challenge and motioned her scouts to surround the women preventing any of Dalton's cronies from interfering if this went as Maria expected.

Tristian laughed at the first clash of steel. She backed off and let Dalton come at her meeting her stroke and powering through it forcing the Commander backwards. Dalton settled on her feet, revising her opinion of her opponent. Obviously she had some skill in the use of a blade. Dalton shook off her doubts. She was the best swordswoman ever trained in Dyan. This upstart would pay.

Tristian met her stroke for stroke, studying Dalton's moves, feinting and testing her opponent. Dalton was very good, no doubt about that but Tristian was better. She closed in having determined the holes in Dalton's defense. The Commander was sweating hard now as Tristian's blows fell with inhuman strength, driving her back, driving her sword into awkward blocks. Tristian kept pushing and Dalton finally realized that not only was she outclassed, she wasn't even in the same training center. Tristian saw the fear, felt the terror, smelled the victory and she pressed her advantage, her blade singing in the wind carving dark designs of death and destruction. Tristian's low laughter caused Dalton to shiver in her boots and she cracked screaming for the warriors to help.

Talla rushed the line but Maria stood in her way and Talla found herself facing a woman that hated her guts. She turned and grabbed a spectator throwing the woman between herself and Maria. Clearing a break in the Scouts, she rushed through intent on running her sword through Tristian's back.

Tristian's blade ripped through Dalton's middle almost severing her in half, her senses warned her of the oncoming attack. Reversing her blade she drove in back through Talla's rushing form and blocked the woman's downward swing with a bracer. She pulled her blade letting Talla's body fall limply to the ground.

Pale glitters of violet survey the surrounding spectators. She caught the gaze of the warriors, "Anyone else? I've no intentions of doing this again so let's get it over with now." The women shuffled their feet until one of them spoke bravely, "Apparently, Commander, you have our full attention."

Tristian caught Maria cuffing the grinning woman and made her decision. "You the speaker for the day?"

The woman shrugged and looked around. "Looks like it."

"Alright, gather them up and have them in the compound ready for practice in an hour. I want to see full drills, and we'll have a full inspection. Anyone not prepared can start looking for another

position. Once you have that settled, I'll put you to work."

The woman looked slightly startled and Tristian smirked at her. "Well?"

"Aye, Commander."

Tristian turned and headed for the tavern glad that none of it interfered with her breakfast plans. She entered the Baker's Brew and found Sidell's golden form chatting with Emma. She made her way across the room aware of the green eyes now fastened on her and she smiled softly.

Sidell eyed her lover's sleek form and noticed the hilt of a sword over her shoulder. "Believe in being prepared, do we?"

Tristian smiled, "I told you, I had things to do."

"Tristian, let's consider this. You're still recovering from your injuries. Maybe you should wait a bit."

"Too late," Anya boomed, setting a plate in front of the hungry woman. "Morning Commander, I hope you're hungry."

"Starving, Anya, thanks,"

Maria entered and joined them.

"Why don't you meet with me this afternoon and let's see how we can best utilize our resources," Tristian suggested as she sat.

Maria grinned and stole a roll, "I've a better idea. Why don't I step down and you can control all the resources."

Sidell looked lost for a bit and finally turned to her lover in consternation. "For Alwyn's sake, Tristian, you challenged her already? It's not even quite past breakfast time."

"She was asking for it," Tristian defended herself. "I couldn't pass up such a perfect opportunity."

Sidell slumped in her seat. "Well," she muttered softly, "at least I don't have to spend the day worrying."

Tristian winked at her and returned to her conversation with Maria. "I don't have a problem with that but you'll still command them."

Maria nodded happily, "Done. If Sidell will send out the notice when we announce your position it will work perfectly."

"Alright, I can live with that. Who is the speaker of the day?"

"Puck. She's a good warrior and has had a lot a trouble because she refused to blindly follow where Dalton dared to lead."

"Good, I need a garrison Commander. Since I don't know anyone here, I suppose she'll do."

Sidell sputtered her drink across the table as Maria and Emma burst into laughter.

"Goddess bless, Tristian," Sidell pleaded, "Can I be there when you tell her, please?"

Tristian eyed her warily, "Is this not a good idea?"

"Oh it's a great idea. It will be even better if you get her to do it. Puck doesn't believe in being in charge and she's pulled some incredible stunts to get out of it."

"All the time?"

"Nah," Maria inserted. "Started when Dalton took over. Mostly because Dalton expected her officers to follow her unconditionally and Puck just couldn't pretend she was that stupid. It's a great choice Tristian and you won't regret it."

Nodding Tristian turned to Emma. "What do you want to do about Mhyr?"

Emma sighed, "About Mhyr in particular I'd prefer to do as little as possible. We do need to take care of that raider problem and Aurora is still hell bent on having Althea brought up on charges of attempted murder."

"Ahhh, there is that. I need to return and get my horses. Depending on what mother is going to do will determine if I need to get anything else. I suppose we could return to the wall I found on my last scouting trip and take it from there."

Emma agreed. "Alright but I'm coming with you and I believe Aurora intends to be with you whenever you're in Mhyr. That being said, when can we go?"

"Tomorrow at the earliest. I need to settle the Warriors and work something out with Puck and Maria."

Sidell nodded. "Alright, I'll send out the telecom announcing you're taking over the Warriors and the Scouts. Maria will return to her status as Captain and be in charge of this squad posted here."

They finalized their plans and separated to conclude their business.

Tristian wandered onto the Warrior's compound, her eyes flicking over the area noticing the lack of maintenance in the buildings and the grounds themselves. She entered the main building and meandered through in silence. Apparently, Puck had taken her at her word and everyone was either out back in the practice fields or gone. She opened the door to what would become her

office and sniffed in disdain at the cluttered mess. Hearing the clash of steel, she ambled out to see what kind of mess she'd gotten herself into this time.

She found a comfortable tree to lean against and watched the controlled chaos-taking place in the field. Puck had the women separated into groups that ranged from clueless to fairly competent. Puck and three women moved throughout the garrison, offering advice and teaching proper stance and grip. A youngster that appeared to have a permanent smile on her face approached the women standing in a circle looking forlornly at their swords. Tristian couldn't help but grin at the youngster's enthusiasm and moved closer to listen.

"Alright, ladies. According to Puck, our new Commander expects proficiency. Question is, do you want to learn or was this merely a lark to get in on Dalton's good side?"

Tristian grinned as a few of the women backed out and were excused. She moved on to check on the trainers.

"It's a sword, you bloody imbecile. If you insist on poking at me with it I'll give ya a damn spear." An aggrieved voice cut across the field.

"Damn it, Riel, I know how to use a sword." the offended woman countered and continued with thrusting at her opponent.

The trainer, Tristian assumed her name to be Riel, sighed in disgust and waited for a lunge. She powered a stroke through the lunge flinging the woman's sword into the air. "Sure you do," Riel snickered, "and if I was willing to stand here and let you poke me with the damn thing you'd be awesome." She shook her head, "Pick it up and go over to Das, maybe she can talk some sense into you...or beat some into you."

Tristian continued through and came upon a group of about fifteen women engaged in a complicated practice pattern. They were very good and she couldn't help the surge of competitive fire that lit within her. Moving up quietly, she waited until they came to a break in the pattern. Puck turned to her and saluted, "Commander."

Tristian nodded and moved into the middle of the group, "Prepare," she barked out.

The women hesitated. In a flickering blur, Tristian pulled her blade and landed a firm swat on Puck's backside, "Now."

Puck scowled but nodded to her team. They formed up around Tristian. Moving in well-practiced pairs, they engaged their Commander in a semi-mock battle. Semi only in the sense that they had no intentions of killing her but their pride had been pricked and they were going to show her that not all Warriors were sloppy fighters.

Tristian felt the fire light in her veins and she moved smoothly into the intricate dance. Her blade so much a part of her that she didn't need to direct it, she merely needed to sense the threat to have the blade move to block. A roundhouse kick threw a particularly ardent attacker into

another woman tangling them both and taking down a few more. Tristian moved into the opening, powering back another strike and countering with a solid left. A well-placed elbow cleared her more space and she kept moving. She could feel the wild laughter bubbling up in her and gave vent to her joy as her opponents fell in stunned awe. The hilt of her sword took out one of the last two and she found herself facing Puck. She pushed the woman to achieve a competence that Puck had never thought herself capable of until a solid stroke flung the sword from her hands. Puck stood panting, her eyes wide in shock as she looked around at her group. Bruised, a bit bloody, a few groans but other than that, they were alive and staring at their Commander with the same look of awe in Puck's eyes.

Tristian grinned, sheathed her blade and gave Puck a slight nod of her head. "Very good, Commander. Very good." She looked around at the grinning women, "I take it these are the best here?"

"They are," Puck answered, wondering how good they really were. A lone woman that had only recently, if stories could be believed, recovered from a severe beating that had broken all four limbs, various ribs and other numerous internal and external injuries had just beaten them. She looked around her again and vowed to corner Maria and get the whole story. "At least, they were." Puck shook her head, "Dalton was the best ever trained in Dyan. Even Dalton could not have taken us all on and won."

Tristian shrugged deprecatingly, "Still, you are all very talented and work well in pairs. I will be training you further," she smiled gently, "you will not thank me for the training, however, you will thank me for your lives." She turned to Puck, "Call in your three trainers, let's see what they've got."

Tristian worked with the trainers learning that they were Das Little, Riel Gessen, and Kelsey Gourd. She also learned that Puck was really Aloyise Willis. She moved through the trainers and then worked with the rest of the small group in sets of threes. She showed them the moves she wanted them to practice and the situations in which they'd be best suited for use. After a few hours on the field she called a halt to their training. "Walk with me, Puck. The rest of you, clean yourselves up. Tomorrow's another day and there is much around here that needs to be cared for."

"As I said," Tristian indicated the women they'd be working with, "I'll be training that group but you'll be in charge of their practice sessions. Let the trainers continue with the rest of this crew, they're too raw to learn what I want to teach and I'm afraid I have no patience for training beginners." She looked up at the first group she witnessed. "What was the purpose of those women?"

Puck sighed, "They wanted adventure." She grinned, "Well, they did but I don't think they wanted this type of adventure. Being a Warrior is a sign of prestige amongst our people..." she hesitated and Tristian chuckled.

"You mean the women tend to flock to the warrior types."

Puck grinned, "Aye. Anyway, that's what they were after. From what I can figure out, Dalton and her cronies would," she snorted, "test out the merchandise and if they were pleased, the women are given minimal duties and provided with uniforms."

Tristian winced. "I have no wish to...test out merchandise and I will not allow anyone under me to do so either."

Now Puck smiled. A full smile that reached her eyes, "Perfect. I wondered what in the world I was suppose to do with them but I didn't want to release them until..." she broke off.

Tristian laughed and clapped her solidly on the shoulder, "Until you were sure of me, eh Puck."

"Aye, Commander," Puck agreed amiably.

"Tristian...call me Tristian. You'll be called Commander and I'd prefer to keep the confusion to a minimum."

"Me?" Puck squeaked.

"Aye, you. I need a garrison Commander. I know no one in the Holding and you've come highly recommended so....you're it."

"But...but..." Puck stammered.

"Yesssss," Tristian teased. "You'd rather be an underling so you can harass the Commander?"

"Well," Puck scowled. Just because that's what she preferred didn't mean she liked it said aloud.

"Ah. You'd rather be an underling so you'd have someone else to blame if things went tits up?"

"No, it's..."

"I'm waiting?" Tristian rumbled, leaving Puck in no doubt that unless the world ended she just didn't have a good enough excuse. She also had a sneaking suspicion that Tristian would throw her out of the Warriors for not accepting the responsibility Tristian deemed her capable of handling. She sighed in defeat, "I'd be honored, Tristian."

Tristian laughed causing several heads to turn their way. "I knew you'd see things my way, Commander. Now, this compound needs to be straightened up. The building is falling apart and my office is a mess. I'd hate to see the rest of the place. You go and ask those women," she indicated the clueless group they'd been discussing earlier, "if they wish to take on that responsibility. If yes, then we'll keep them on for a while. We'll also need people that are competent in taking notes, missives, filing, supplies," she grinned, "you know, those things that you and I both hate doing."

Puck smiled in agreement.

"So, we need to be sure they can be trusted because some of the correspondence we'll be handling will include things that I'd just as soon have kept to ourselves. Your job? Weed them out. Put em to work and work them hard, find the ones that want to stay and are willing to earn their keep. Warriors need not be swordswomen but they must be willing to work for the good of the Holding."

Puck nodded and began planning her strategy.

"Good," Tristian continued. "You're also familiar with the warriors in the other colonies?"

"Aye."

"Then you'll need to compile a list of potential officers. I want Dalton's avid supporters roused out. If they followed her because she was the Commander and they've done no harm to their colonies, they can stay and we'll monitor them. Otherwise, they can find another occupation."

"You don't want to just bust them back in rank?"

"No."

"We'll need to start a recruitment program."

"See to it. The scouts will also be working with us and they've fallen under my command. I'll leave it to you and Maria to come up with a working partnership. I also want them present for practice when they're in the colony. I'll tell Maria but pass it on if you see her."

Puck nodded and Tristian turned to leave but halted as a woman slinked her way over. Puck smirked at the pained expression on her Commander's face.

"Commander Mardred," the woman crooned. "I am Elyse. I'd hoped to speak with you for a moment."

"About?" Tristian inquired.

"This training you're requiring, some of us.." she smiled gently, "well, Commander, I'd prefer to explain it to you in a more private setting?"

"Explain it to Puck," Tristian replied evenly. "She is the garrison Commander and will be in charge of the Warriors on a day-to-day basis."

"But...I mean," Elyse sidled up to her, "Some things, Commander, are best decided by those truly in charge."

"I have made my decision, Elyse. I've decided that Puck is truly in charge. Explain it to her." Tristian stepped away from the woman and turned to Puck, "You've your orders, Commander."

I'll be leaving for Mhyr on the morrow and I don't expect to return for two weeks. See that our preparations are completed."

Puck saluted smartly, "As you command, Tristian."

Sidell watched as Tristian and Aurora approached the transport, their relationship never more obvious than when they stood side by side. The slight gray of her hair and the mature planes of her face the only real difference between mother and daughter. They were the same height, had the same incredible bodies and the same incredible eyes. She smiled at the two women and kissed her lover softly as they boarded and prepared for the flight out to Mhyr. Mhyr had been given no news of Tristian's condition or her current status. Sidell smiled inwardly as she tucked herself against her lover's tall frame and settled into the flight.

Staunton Greir and Vernid Lionae stood at the bottom of the transport ramp waiting to greet the visitors from Dyan. Althea Lionae stood with her guardians ringing the landing pad. Staunton smiled as Emma and Sidell stepped out and moved to join them. Her jaw dropped, as Tristian and Aurora appeared next. "Alwyn bless, they could pass for twins."

Emma eyed her coldly, "Considering Aurora is her Sire it's not surprising, Staunton. I'd suggest you close your mouth and keep your comments to yourself. Aurora is still quite upset that her daughter was almost killed here and she will not be pleased to see Althea."

As she spoke, Aurora's gaze pinned the suddenly terrified Commander. Althea eased away from the landing pad upon seeing Aurora's return and the obvious affection the two women held for each other. She cursed her dead officers, Tristian was supposed to be killed or crippled for life. Instead, she looked none the worse for wear.

"Let's see about your horses," Aurora suggested as the two of them moved down the ramp. "We'll let Emma and Sidell worry about pandering to these fools."

"Aye, Sire. I also need to stop by the house and pick up some of my gear. Until Mother's made a decision, we'll leave everything the way it is." Tristian agreed and turned to Sidell for confirmation.

Sidell grinned gently, "Sounds good to me but don't send the horses off, Aurora. I want to take a look at the wall Tristian found. We can ride out once you two are done."

Emma turned cold gray eyes to Staunton and Vernid. "We'll continue our efforts to contain the raiders, Leader. Once Tristian is done here, she and Sidell will be riding out to take a look at whatever Tristian found. We'll not be back again unless Selene decides to join us and Aurora will probably help her pack and move. I'd suggest, Vernid, you keep your cowardly offspring far away from Aurora and her heir. We of Dyan do not take kindly to attempted murder." She looked around for Althea and snorted, "Although, Mhyr apparently thinks there is nothing wrong with it."

"Emma," Staunton stammered, "We...had no proof. Sidell used magic to force the confession...we have no way of knowing if it was true or not."

Emma halted her daughter's retort and glared at Staunton. "Never call Sidell a liar, Staunton, not if you wish to see the morrow. For now, I've briefed you and I've nothing else to say to you. We'll meet with Tristian and Aurora and be gone before long." Emma stalked away leaving Sidell eyeing Staunton and Vernid as if they were herdbeast droppings. She snorted in disgust and moved to meet up with her lover.

"Wait," Vernid called timidly. "Tristian is the Heir to the House of Mardred? Truly?"

Sidell smiled evilly, "You wish to call Aurora a liar now? Shall I pass that on to her?"

"No," Vernid paled, "It's just...we need to hold a trial."

"For?"

"The attempt on her life," Vernid murmured.

"Why? Because she is a Mardred?"

"Of course. That can't be allowed."

"And if she wasn't would you have bothered?"

"We'd...have looked into it," Vernid muttered.

"Right," Sidell snickered. "Hold whatever trial you wish. We will be gone and we don't really care what happens to Althea or your nobles."

Tristian returned the greetings she received amiably, but couldn't deny the tense tightening of her gut as she walked briskly through the crowded colony. She'd always felt like that and really never knew she could be more relaxed until the time she spent in Dyan. Now she knew...the twisting knot in her gut was her reaction to the crowded Holding and the waves of intolerance, fear, and anger that emanated off the people. "I'll be happy to get home," she murmured softly.

Aurora smiled, catching her daughter's soft words. Home. Yes, she couldn't wait to get Tristian home either. She should have never been in this bigoted colony. Never had to tolerate the hatred and prejudices practiced here. Her anger at Selene flared again and Aurora tamped it down. Spilled milk. Giving vent to her anger would not change anything. She wrapped an arm across her daughter's broad back and grounded herself in the reality of her living, breathing offspring.

Tristian grinned shyly at her and led them into the tiny cottage she and Selene shared.

"Were you happy here, Tristian?" Aurora asked gently. She watched Tristian move through the

little cottage, gathering her clothes and weapons.

Tristian paused in her packing and looked out the window. "I...was not unhappy, Sire. At least, I didn't realize I was as a youngster." She smiled wistfully, "Here, as a commoner, not much was expected of us and we were free to wander and play at our leisure. I helped my dad with his craft and mom insisted on my being educated. I think, that is the primary source of the problems I experienced here. Most of the commoners are," she hesitated, "Not stupid but...not book smart." She looked up at her Sire, "Does that make sense? They learn everything they need to know to work in whatever field was chosen for them but...no more." She chuckled softly, "I, on the other hand, was tutored far in excess of what the nobles are taught and that caused me all kinds of trouble as I got older." She grinned, "But in answer to your question...I suppose I was."

"You say, 'as a youngster'," Aurora pressed further.

Tristian nodded, "As I got older, there was so much more that I wanted to do. So much that I thought could be changed to help the people here live better lives. Knowing that I had no chance to even try and make a difference...that was hard on me. I...was considering leaving when this raider trouble came up."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Thought I'd try Darena or something. The problem was that I like what I do. I like being a warrior and Darena...even Dram and Widden, don't really have a large force of warriors. They've got local authorities but from what I've seen, you pretty much had to be part of the family to get in." Tristian chuckled, "Actually, I was thinking of looking for Dyan. I didn't figure I had much to lose and it would have been an adventure to remember."

Aurora chuckled, "You would have been welcomed."

Tristian looked at her in surprise.

"You would have. Even if no one knew you are my heir, you are a woman, strong, sound and impressive. Where ever you had crossed, they'd have snatched you up and welcomed you with open arms."

Tristian laughed, "I never considered that. I figured they'd haul me before some kind of council and I'd have to plead my case. Being a commoner, I wasn't sure I could find a better place but...by then, anything was better than being here."

"Well..."

A knocking on the door interrupted Aurora's statement. Twin expressions of raised brows caused the two women to laugh at themselves and Tristian sealed the final box. "Let me get that, I'm done if you want to send these off."

Tristian opened the door to Staunton Grier and Vernid Lionae. Her implacable mask fell into

place and she met their inquiring gazes with a cool look of utter boredom.

"Yes..." Lionae purred, "Tristian...uhm...we'd like a word with your sire...and yourself of course."

Aurora heard the grating voice and she turned to the door. She found Tristian looking at her in question. "Tristian, how do you feel about talking to them?"

Tristian considered the question and shrugged, "Given my druthers, Sire, I 'druther not."

Aurora grinned, "Good, then tell them so and send them away. We're due at the stables shortly, Sidell and Emma are probably waiting for us."

Tristian turned to her visitors, "Apologies to both of you but we're in a rush and have no time to chat."

"It's important," Lionae insisted.

"That can't be," Aurora inserted smoothly. She knew that Tristian would need more time to absorb the fact that she was no longer bound to these fools and...if looked at from Mhyr's point of view, Tristian actually out ranked both of them. She was willing to give Tristian all the time she'd need. "That can't be," she repeated. "See, Tristian does not have anything important to say to either of you and neither do I. Since we are the only two people of importance present, your comment is a blatant falsehood."

Tristian bit her lip to keep from snickering and felt Aurora's hand on her back propelling her forward. They exited and Aurora secured the house with a mage shield as Staunton stood quietly while Lionae sputtered.

They took their leave and Tristian snorted in amusement.

Aurora grinned, "Never forget, Tristian. You answer to no one but yourself now. I know it will take awhile, but I want to impress that fact on you."

They made good time and Tristian brought them to a grassy knoll that ended in a clear stream filled pool. The two women worked well together and Tristian was pleased to find that Sidell was not quite the hopeless noble she expected to be escorting. Of course, she suspected that already but it was nice to have her suspicions confirmed. As Sidell built up the fire Tristian returned with a plump rabbit for dinner. With the meal simmering, the women took the time to play in the cool water.

"Yah," Sidell screeched as a wave of water swamped her. Green eyes glinted in competitive fire and she launched herself at her chuckling companion.

Tristian caught her easily without losing her footing and simply wrapped long arms around the smaller woman.

"S'not fair," Sidell complained. "You're bigger than I am."

"And who started the water fight, little imp?"

"Well, I didn't think you could move the whole pond."

Tristian laughed at this massive exaggeration and long fingers tickled the soft skin pressed against her. Sidell squirmed and glared up at her tormentor.

Green eyes swallowed her whole and Tristian forgot about tickling her companion as her head lowered to taste the honey soft lips.

Sidell hummed her approval of the change in activity.

"You are beautiful, m'lady," Tristian murmured, her companion backlit in the fading sunlight was surrounded by a golden glow. Tristian couldn't look away and found herself drawn forward again.

"And you," Sidell murmured, "Are a vision in my shadowed dreams, a taunting flicker of dark fire and danger, a shade that calls to my heart, the other half of my soul. Love me, Tristian. Make love to me, now. "

They were cutting across the land on a direct path to the mountain when Tristian pulled up shortly. They'd been out three days and Sidell couldn't have said when she'd had a better time. Their days were spent in getting to know each other. How they worked together and in Sidell marveling at the ease Tristian fit into the wild. Their nights were spent in passion and a more passionate lover she'd never had. Tristian could be gentle one minute and rough and demanding the next. But never did Sidell feel afraid and she was never harmed. Well, she might have been tender in some places but that was enjoyable for both of them.

Now she watched the feral glare in her lover's eyes as Tristian's nostrils flared to taste the scent on the wind. Her ears pricked forward, reminding Sidell of the wolf she closely associated her lover with, and she stood as still as a tree while her body absorbed the signals of the forest.

"Smoke," Tristian muttered, "I'd say they struck again. Off to the north but I'm not sure how far"

Sidell nodded in easy acceptance of her lover's news. She didn't doubt Tristian but realized they may not be in time to help. "Let's head for the mountain. Maybe we can intercept them."

They rode in silence now. Tristian's every sense focused on identifying possible danger. They had agreed that Sidell would not use her gift until they knew what was happening. No sense in

alerting a mage if one was about. Sidell felt as if she was riding blind and she didn't care for it. Her gift was as natural as sight to her and having to contain it left her feeling particularly vulnerable. Only her trust in her lover kept her from unleashing her gift. Tristian pulled up on the low side of a rising ridge. "They should be on the other side," she whispered helping Sidell down. The two women belly crawled to the top and looked down at the trail below them.

A line of straggling mounted and armed soldiers were strung out along the trail. Cages of people rolled by and the herdstock brought up the rear of the entourage.

They waited until the final soldier passed and Sidell put her hand out to halt Tristian's retreat down the hill. "Wait, watch."

And older woman shuffled along the path, muttering in a singsong voice that was almost but not quite a chant. As the woman moved the telltale signs of passage faded from the ground.

Now the two women moved quickly. Tristian took them farther away from the trail but kept an almost direct path to the mountains they were all headed for. "I think we can beat them. We must hurry but their pace will take them at least the better part of today."

Sidell nodded and exerted her energy in maintaining the pace her lover had set.

They arrived at the entrance and Tristian scouted quickly to ensure no one was there to surprise them. They set the horses back away from the site and found a hidden alcove in the craggy mountainside to hole up in. The first people they saw were two young women. The set of their faces belied the innocence of their youth. One of them moved up to the large rock face and she began a singsong chant.

"Damn," Sidell muttered. "We need to move. Need to get behind them, Tristian. I've got to see what she's doing."

Tristian was not pleased. There weren't many places to hide on the open ground and moving now could be foolhardy. The set look in the green eyes gazing at her made the point moot and she eased down, crawling carefully. Keeping to the hollows in the ground and the small boulders lying about on the ground. She trusted in Sidell to follow and keep her head down. They moved slowly but steadily and the two women appeared to be in some kind of trance.

Sidell had been listening to the chant so that she could repeat enough of it to help her research it on her return to Dyan. She set herself to allow her to watch the rock face. She switched to her mage sight hoping it was passive enough to not cause a stir in the swirling eddies of energy.

Her magesight saw a construct of thinly linked energy lines forming an arch. In the center of the arch was a five-starred emblem. The chant caused the different points of the emblem to flare in pulsing power. Sidell now knew she needed to get the chant right since it appeared to be the key to the gate they were looking at. She concentrated and allowed the chant to flow through her absorbing it as she had so many mage lessons before it was almost instinctive. Her conscious mind would never remember but her gift would and she could coax it out at a later date. She felt

Tristian tense but not a sound came from her as the rock face disappeared and the women looked onto a verdant green plateau. Tristian eased away from Sidell as hoof beats came down the trail. She set herself in a position to defend her lover should it become necessary.

Sidell rose swiftly and moved to confront the two mages, leaving Tristian shaking her head in sad acceptance. "Damn."

A shout from the trail brought Tristian out of hiding and she met the riders head on leaving Sidell to face the mages. A shattering clap of thunder sounded and Tristian found herself surrounded by armed women.

She turned to find Maria at her side.

Maria winked at her, "Pretty neat trick, eh?"

Tristian grinned and turned to the leader thundering down the path. She ran forward and met the leader in a flying leap that took them both over his horse. She landed upright and buried her knee in the back of his neck as they hit hearing the satisfying snap of his neck.

"Yes," Maria cheered her on before turning to find her own opponent.

Tristian couldn't help the grin that came to her face at the looks of admirable approval she received from the scouts. She shook her head and entered the fray.

The soldiers pulled back to regroup after the furious initial clash. Over half of them lay injured or dead. Tristian found a youngster grinning up at her panting softly. "Commander, permission to release the captives?"

Bemused she could only nod. "Take five more with you and what is your name?"

"Werinth, Commander. It shall be done."

The party disappeared into the woods and Maria came up beside her. "I think we can handle this Tristian, you'd best see if you can help Sidell. It would appear she's bit off a bit more than she could chew." Maria grinned, "Again."

Tristian cursed and turned to find the eldest of the women had now joined the first two. The three formed a triangle around Sidell and the energy of the battle was clearly taking its toll.

She looked at Maria briefly and grabbed her bow. "Give me that."

"Aye, Commander," Maria grinned, handing over bow and quiver.

Staying out of direct sight, Tristian notched an arrow. She had no idea if this would work but she hoped the mages were too busy to guard against a physical attack. Sighting quickly, two more arrows at the ready, she aimed and released in three even pulls. Two dropped screaming but the

third turned to her in anger. A ball of flame shot from the mage's hand heading at her. Before she could leap clear, a rush of energy surrounded her and the flames burst harmlessly around her. The mage screamed as she was lifted bodily and smashed down across a nearby boulder. Tristian didn't need to hear the snap to know her back was broken. Another burst of energy came from one of the mages hit by an arrow, it was countered and thrown back, the woman shrieked in agony as the flames engulfed her. Sidell looked tired but okay and she waved Tristian on to the fight behind her while she finished up.

Tristian turned but Maria had everything in hand so she ran down to check on the captives.

"Thomas," an elderly woman cried as she came into sight.

"Adeena," Tristian hurried forward to hug the woman and offer comfort. "Adeena, I'm sorry."

"No...we're fine. You were on time, Thomas. Thank the Mother they let you back out in the field."

"What happened?"

"They came screaming out with the dawn. Had us rounded up and in the cages before we could think to fight back. My husband got his head cracked but other than that we're fine. They burnt everything, Thomas. Everything."

"You live, Adeena. That's what's important."

The woman sniffed in contemplation and sighed. "Aye. At least we can start again." Sons and daughters gathered around ensuring they were all right. Grandkids were hugged and reassured and Tristian set Adeena down on the cart bed.

"Did they say anything?"

"Didn't understand them, Thomas. They talked a lot but I don't know what they were saying. They ended up just poking at us to get us to move."

"Commander?"

Tristian turned to find Maria looking at her expectantly. "Secure the prisoners, Maria. I want to transport them back to Dyan. See to the injured and set a few of your people to take the bars off these carts. Maria, where is Sidell?"

"Coming. She wanted to secure that last mage to send to Aurora."

Tristian nodded. "Send her here when she's done, Maria."

"I'm done, Tristian," Sidell answered softly moving to stand in her lover's embrace.

Tristian hugged her tight. "I should spank you, dammit. What the hell kind of plan was that?"

Maria snorted in amusement and moved off to attend to her orders.

"Plan?" Sidell asked mischievously. "You mean I gotta have a plan?"

Tristian sighed and just buried her face in Sidell's hair, happy enough that her lover was safe.

"Come on, you. Let's help these people home. Did you take care of those mages?"

"Yes. Sent them to Dyan. Aurora will deal with the two still living."

"Alright," Tristian walked up the woman she spoke with earlier. "Adeena, this is Sidell. You can thank her for your freedom."

"I'll thank you both. If you're ever in the area stop by. Whatever we have is yours as you need it."

Sidell smiled and took the woman's hand, "Just be safe, Adeena. You and yours, be safe and happy."

"Commander, the carts are ready."

"Adeena can you get yourselves home?"

Adeena seemed to find this amusing and chuckled. "We can find our way home and with those scum handled, we'll be fine." She moved off to get her family and livestock rounded up. They'd make camp soon but she wanted away from this strange place.

Tristian turned to look at the now solid rock face and back to Sidell.

"Later," her lover promised. "I'll explain it when we get this settled." She looked at the women milling around. "I thought I'd send them and their prisoners back while we continue on through the gate." She eyed her taller companion.

"Send half of them back. Keep Maria and another five of her choice. Since you don't care to plan in advance, I'd rather have them with us when you decide to jump head first into trouble."

Sidell pouted prettily while Maria chortled.

They formed a semi-circle around Sidell as she opened the gate. Again they looked out at a green plateau. Maria moved around and looked into the gate, shifting the angle of her view. "You know...if I'm not mistaken, we're looking at the southern tip of Dyan." She turned back to Sidell who shrugged.

"Well," Tristian sighed, "how about we enter before something comes out to meet us?"

Maria led off, the scouts forming a protective ring around their Heir and Commander. Tristian

growled a low command, backing them off of her and leaving her room to move. Sidell smirked at her.

They stepped onto the plateau and found it empty. A worn path led into a thick copse of trees and beyond they could see a plain full of grass. Sidell turned to check her lover. Tristian stood quietly, but every muscle in her body was tense. Her head was cocked at an angle and she appeared to be listening intently. Sidell moved closer, carefully, and rested a hand on her lover's arm. She could feel the pulsing tension flowing through her lover's powerful frame. "Tristian?"

Before Sidell could decide on further action a shield of unknown power surrounded her lover and threw Sidell back. Maria turned to the path as the sounds of a wagon rushing down towards them drifted towards her on the wind.

Tristian felt the rush of energy and she halted, her head cocked trying to identify the source, she paused her senses fully engaged when suddenly her world exploded. Colors, vivid, unimaginable colors swirled around her, a bountiful feast of beauty that threatened to overload the senses. She couldn't move, couldn't speak, the world spun and pulled her in, she fought and set herself and she felt her aura beginning to scatter. Willpower alone held her being together and she felt the overwhelming pull ease, the spinning stop. She noticed a flickering light darting amongst the colors, coming closer, nearer; she waited patiently and was unsurprised when it stopped at eye level. "Welcome home, BondedOne. Welcome home."

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~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

**By
Tas**

Part 3

Tristian stared in bemusement.

"No harm will come to you now," the light continued, "you've passed the hardest test. You've kept your sense of self here in the mother's womb. It has always been your destiny to bond with the Mother, your role as a mage without peer. The magics of the self and the mother are at your beck and call. You are needed and the danger is great. We are pleased to see you now. Take your time here. Time differs here from normal time, ride the Mother's winds, learn the secrets of your powers, forge your bond."

The light flickered away and Tristian felt a silly grin cross her face at the beauty she saw. With a shout of glee she leapt effortlessly and felt the Mother's winds catch her, lift her, support her. Her being filled with light hearted laughter. She slipped out of the air current and dove into the color slicing cleanly into the deepest reaches of the Mother's womb. A timeless eternity later she floated peacefully, fully charged, completely aware of and in control of her gifts.

The light returned as expected and a soft voice could be heard. "Well done, follow me now and remember...this is how you return. Fare thee well, BondedOne. I will always be here, as your teacher and your guide. Come to me for answers and those that I know I will provide. Return now."

Tristian felt the coiled tension in her limbs and the pulsing energy of the shield around her. She looked around, unsurprised to see Aurora there and a host of others she didn't know. Her instinctive grasp of her powers as one with her now as the feel of her blade, casually, she dropped the shield and caught her lover as Sidell threw herself against her powerful frame.

"It's alright, Sidell. I'm alright." She murmured gently, calming her upset lover.

She held Sidell tight and relaxed slowly, sniffing the air, testing the area. The thrumming of energy had abated but she could now feel the connection with her bond and her lover. She closed her eyes and gathered her normal senses, then met the concerned gaze of her lady. She smiled softly and bent for a kiss. "I'm alright. I'll tell you later."

Sidell nodded, running her hand gently over her lover's strong jaw. She remembered the feeling of helplessness she felt when the shield rose and she couldn't break it. She heard Aurora's frantic mindcall and Fetched her for assistance. The two of them together couldn't make a dent in the shield surrounding Tristian. She'd been terrified but Tristian hadn't moved and didn't seem to be in distress. She merely looked intrigued. Sidell looked up at the women gathering around them as they careened to a halt but the women merely settled in quietly apparently waiting for the outcome.

Tristian squeezed her gently, bringing her back to the present and moved them forward. She smiled at her Sire meeting Aurora's piercing gaze, knowing Aurora could feel the changes.

"Later?" Aurora mindsent.

"Aye, Sire." Tristian returned in kind, not missing the flicker of pride that crossed Aurora's lips. "Best return and calm mother. I think we just encountered her vision."

Aurora nodded, "You did. She was frantic and I spelled her to keep her calm. I'll return and explain you're fine."

Tristian's gaze turned to the eyes of the colony leader as Aurora ported out. The woman studied her intently and then smiled softly. She moved forward and knelt, "Welcome home, BondedOne. We have waited long for your return."

Sidell looked up in confusion but Tristian smiled gently, "It's good to be home, Ariel. Rise now and stop that. We've much to discuss."

"We do, BondedOne. But...there is nothing to discuss regarding our merging with Dyan."

"Good. I'll leave it in your hands?"

"It will be done."

Tristian turned, "This is Maria Delgado, work with her to plan your integration. And Ariel...I want the people from Mhyr, and their property returned. Dyan will sponsor this colony until all is aright."

"As you command, BondedOne. You understand what happened?"

"I do. It has been shown to me. I do not agree but I will not pursue it. You, however, will make restitution to the families whose lives have been disrupted. You will also dismiss the soldiers and return them to where ever it was you found them and collect the two mages in Dyan. The third was killed. It could not be helped."

Ariel bowed in acknowledgement. "You will accompany us? We prepare a feast in your honor?"

"Allow me to provide the food and we'll be happy to."

Ariel smiled and agreed.

Sidell sat in stunned disbelief as her lover walked through a barrage of people exchanging greetings in both old Xandorian and new Xandorian. These women who had never laid eyes on Tristian before today were clearly ecstatic to have her here now. She looked over at Maria who appeared to be a clueless as she was. She started at a touch to her shoulder and nodded as Ariel sat.

"You are confused?"

"No shit," Sidell muttered.

Ariel smiled, "Forgive us, this is a joyous day for us and we're all...a bit overjoyed. I will try to clear things up and Tristian will explain the rest once you two are alone."

Sidell leaned forward waiting for her to begin, Maria moved closer intent on figuring out what exactly was going on."

"In the southern colony is the largest mage node in Riger."

Sidell looked suspicious. She felt nothing.

"The node can only be touched by the Mother's Own. It has been passed through our records that the Mother's Own will return to lead us into the new world. A danger of untold horror would threaten the land and the BondedOne would come to accept the Mother's Gift. All these years we've waited. Many have come but the node has never risen before...until today. The air fairly shimmered with power and reached out to greet Her bondmate. I have no way of knowing what happened after that but something has. The node has settled and Tristian is fairly bristling with the Mother's energy. We are the keepers of the Mother's winds. It is to us that protection of the lands fall, we nurture, repair and cleanse the land as needed. We would not give up this land because of the node. In the wrong hands, the mother's power can be subverted and cause untold damage in the fabric of life itself. So we waited...and now...she has come. I can only assume the bond has taken. She understands the old language and knows us as if we've been friends for decades. She has been accepted by the Mother and as such by us. We will do as she commands, young heir. No more shall our people be separated."

Tristian's hands fell on her shoulders and Sidell felt the rush of power and the jolt of desire. It almost overwhelmed her and she leaned weakly against her lover. "Ariel, you have everything in hand."

"Aye, BondedOne."

"I do not yet know the threat so for the time being, prepare your colony as previously discussed."

"As you say."

"Tomorrow, I will have Aretha Dubear brought here. She is the Lorekeeper. Open your scrolls to her and perhaps she can see what the danger may be. She will have many questions." Tristian warned.

Ariel laughed. "Of course she will, she's a Lorekeeper. We will make her welcome, BondedOne."

"The Leader may be with her."

"All will be well."

"Then I will take my leave, Ariel. There is much I must explain to my lady. I leave you in good hands."

"Aye. Maria has already proven to be of great help. We plan to return the people to Mhyr on the

morrow." Ariel grinned, "At least, those that wish to return."

Tristian smiled and turned to Maria. "I will brief Puck and have a garrison pulled together to be stationed here. I want you on hand when they arrive. They need to blend in with this colony. Ariel, perhaps you have women here that wish to serve in our Warriors?"

Ariel nodded, "Aye, our young ones have been asking. I'd hoped to discuss it with Maria once we settled everything else."

"Discuss it soon. We're accepting new recruits and your people can be included from the beginning. They may have to leave the colony for training," Tristian warned.

"No fear now. With your bonding, the node is safe. We can integrate without much concern and those of us left will continue with our work as we always have. Besides, the Mother's calling is hard to resist. They will return, as will you."

Before Sidell could ask Tristian ported them to a place outside of time, to a place of peace and no confusing swirls of power or emotions. A place for just the two of them and Sidell felt a peace she'd never known. "It's beautiful, love. Where are we? Wait a minute how did we get here?"

Tristian smiled and surprised her by raising a shield around Sidell. Tristian stepped back and dropped all of her shields and Sidell stood in silent awe bathed in the power of the mage known as the Mother's Own, a mage the likes of which had never before been seen in Riger. "Goddess bless."

"Aye, my heart. And she has," the low mindlink caught her by surprise and Tristian's eyes gleamed in mischief. Raising her own shields that would protect Sidell she dropped the one around Sidell and gathered her lover. "It has been given to me that this has always been my destiny. Apparently, mother knew and it terrified her. She ran in a misguided attempt to save me."

"Why?"

"Because there are only two possible outcomes for the test. Either the bond takes or the body dies. She was afraid."

"Wait...you mean to tell me, that stepping onto the plateau started a test?"

"Aye."

"And failure meant death."

"Aye."

"Goddess bless?" Sidell fumed.

Tristian chuckled and soothed her irritated lover. "Had I remained in Dyan as a child, Ariel would have been sent to me to provide training. With all that happened. Ariel didn't know who would be the Mother's Own. With my own mother's actions, the outcome became unstable. Only now, with my return, can the pattern be rewoven."

"Damn." Sidell looked around curiously, "So..we are here, why?"

Tristian smiled. "Because of my bond, I am a danger to you."

"Don't think..." Sidell began in anger and Tristian hushed her.

"No, I'm not leaving but we need to share my bond. I need to acclimate you."

"How?"

"Well," Tristian's eyebrows waggled, "first we need to lower your mage gift, and then, I'll surround you with my own gift for short periods. The reason we are here is, once I break down your own gift, you'll be pretty helpless and I want you safe. No one but me can get here."

Sidell looked at her in confusion. "What happens after that?"

"After you've accepted the mage energies, I raise both gifts to your normal levels. You won't be able to do everything I can because you won't be bonded to the mother but our bond will give you quite a boost to your own gift." Tristian stepped closer, "I won't hurt you, Sidell."

Sidell shuddered. "I know, love. It's just a shock. I've been gifted all my life. It's a bit frightening to learn that my lover can strip my powers from me."

"Never strip. I can but I would never. I thought we'd do this in a manner that we'd both enjoy."

Sidell recognized the seductive lilt of Tristian's voice and she replied in kind, "Did you now?"

"Uhhmm," Tristian replied nibbling her neck.

"And how might that work?"

"Like this," Tristian replied capturing her lips fiercely.

Sidell felt her lover's power rise; felt the swirling eddies of energy so pure the air crackled with it. She felt her own gift rise to protect her, knowing she had no chance. Tristian held her tight as her fear rose and she struggled in mindless fear until she felt the gentle touch on her overtaxed shields and she bowed her head in submission as Tristian's gift soared around her, through her, dissolving her shields as if they never existed. For the first time in her life, Sidell felt completely open, vulnerable, frightened, and then she was surrounded in a warmth of heat and colors, a kaleidoscope of beauty and infused with a timeless sense of love, devotion, passion.

She moaned against her lover's lips and felt her senses soar on unseen winds, her mind shrieked in fear but her bond to her lover held her firm and she surrendered to the power of her mate.

Sidell woke to a soft touch and smiled sleepily.

"Drink, love," Tristian murmured and Sidell's eyes blinked open at the endearment from her lover. She sipped the cool drink and stretched to ease the tightness in her muscles.

Tristian began a slow massage to ease the aches.

Sidell gazed up into her lover's eyes and watched until they darkened with a primal need. She felt the energy rise in the air, felt her own senses respond in welcome and her body flushed and swelled, aching to feel her mate.

For three days they remained as Sidell became accustomed to the power her lover wielded. Until they could join without fear, without weakness but as partners, as equals. Tristian would always be able to do more with her gift but that was due to her bond. Without calling on the mother, the lover's were in truth, equal partners.

"Home, my heart?" Tristian asked softly as they relaxed in the heated pool."

"Do we have another choice?" Sidell asked impishly.

"Not really," Tristian agreed.

"Then take me home, my love. Take me home so I can plan our joining."

"Aye," Tristian agreed, bowing to the only woman who could now command her.

They arrived to a sight Sidell never thought she'd see. Several Mages of Dyan were pummeling Aurora Mardred with mage energy. Selene was held captive by Althea Lionae as a ring of Guardians surrounded the scene. Puck held her Warriors back in fear of harming Selene and her people could not hope to fight the mages.

"You did bring us to Freelock...didn't you?" Sidell asked in shock. She was further stunned when her lover's power surged in rage and several of Dyan's mages stared about them in confusion having found themselves suddenly powerless. Every Guardian found themselves incapable of moving and Staunton Grier looked up to see Tristian enter the ring of paralyzed Guardians. Sidell rushed to free Selene from Althea's limp hands and Tristian stopped to assist Aurora.

"What?" Aurora asked in a daze as she was pulled to her feet.

Tristian held her steady and turned to Puck. "Take them and secure them. Throw them in the cells and they'd best pray I don't decide to hang all of them. Have Riel bring these mages and

Staunton's party to the common hall. Sidell, bring your mother home."

"Selene," Aurora murmured.

Tristian ensured her Sire was steady and moved to take her mother in her arms.

"She's alright," Sidell assured her. "Let's head to Mother's. I told her to meet us there."

"Aye, love. Help Aurora, I don't think she's quite as steady as she thinks she is."

"Tristian.." Staunton called out hesitantly.

Tristian never turned, "Puck, you don't want to explain why these people are still cluttering the road."

Puck shoved Staunton forward and her warriors literally pushed their charges towards the common hall. Tristian waited until they were inside and sealed the hall with a shield. She didn't want another mage helping them.

A laughing Emma du Aulstet ported into her den and sobered quickly. "What the hell? I haven't been gone that long." She took in Aurora's disheveled state, Selene's pale face, Sidell's confusion and the almost overwhelming rage emanating from Tristian. She raised her shields instinctively.

Sidell noticed and turned to her lover, "Sweetheart, fix your shields before you drive my mother and your Sire batty."

Tristian shook herself out of her anger and smiled sheepishly, "Sorry." She reinforced her shields and turned to Aurora. "What happened, Sire? Why is Mhyr here and why were those mages attacking you?"

"I don't have a clue," Aurora growled. "I didn't know Mhyr was here. I didn't know we were in danger until that...bitch grabbed Selene. I couldn't do much without risking Selene's life. Someone obviously told her that she had to be quick. The time it would have taken me to cast she could have slit Selene's throat." Aurora stood and paced angrily, "Once they were sure I wouldn't retaliate, the mages came out. I shielded and they were intent on proving they could handle me without having to threaten Selene. That's when you two showed up." She smiled weakly at her offspring. "Good timing."

Emma took the tale in, confusion evident on her face.

"Do we even know what they want?" Sidell asked gently. She'd moved to Tristian's side and was trying to calm her lover. Leveling Dyan was not an acceptable solution but Tristian was angry enough to do it. Or Mhyr.

Aurora shook her head no.

Sidell sighed and turned to Emma, "We've got the culprits locked up in the common hall, Mother. Why don't we wander over there and see what in the world happened since neither of us has been away longer than three days?"

They made their way to the Hall and the families of the five mages being held accosted Emma. "Emma, what's happened? What have they done?"

Emma looked around and sighed, "I don't want all of you present. Let's have the parents or guardians of each of the mages only."

"But..."

Emma cut the speaker off. "No buts. I've been gone three days and I return to find out that our own people attacked Aurora Mardred. This meeting is limited to those I've identified. If you don't like it...move to another damn holding."

The group moved indoors, Tristian opened the shields enough for their entry, and Emma walked in to find a small group from Mhyr and five mages crying in their chairs. "What are they babbling about?" she asked her daughter.

Sidell indicated she should listen as Erin Dresden fell to her knees crying to her mother. "They...they stole my powers. Mama, they...they stole them."

Talia Dresden stared at her offspring and engaged her magesight, gasping in shock at the truth of the words. "Dear Goddess, how?"

"I...I don't know...mama help me...I don't wanna be like this."

Emma stared at Sidell in wide-eyed amazement but her daughter shook her head and motioned her to her place. Aurora, Selene, and Tristian sat on the council floor, while Sidell and Emma moved to the podium. The others sat in the spectator area, behind their offspring. The group from Mhyr was also on the council floor, separated from the mages.

"Alright," Emma began. "This council is in session. All witnesses will step forward."

Puck moved to the witness box and presented herself. "Two days ago, Leader, permission was granted by the House of Balora for the party from Mhyr to visit. Mhyr arrived with twelve guardians, all women, and their Commander. Their Leader, Staunton Grier, and four of their Noble Houses. The House of Lionae, their scion was given a temporary visitation pass again by the House of Balora, the House of Adair, the House of Fernelli, and the House of Geeves." Puck turned back to Emma, "They were processed through and briefed on our colony guidelines. The House of Balora came forward with the House of Dresden, the House of Pythora, and the House of Welma to vouch for them. The visitors were turned over to them as is our custom."

"Purpose of the visit?" Emma inquired.

"To develop better working relations between the Holdings, Leader." Puck responded.

"So...what happened?"

"That I cannot say, Leader."

"Then continue with what you know, Commander."

"On this day, the party from Mhyr and their Guardian escorts were out and about apparently enjoying our colony. I paid no further attention until a warrior came to get me claiming that there was an emergency. I arrived at the scene to find Althea Lionae's knife firmly pressed against the throat of Selene Chambry. Aurora Mardred was being bombarded with what appeared to be mage strikes. A ring of guardians, yelling encouragement surrounded the scene. I held my warriors back. We could not have freed Selene quickly enough and nothing we did would have helped Mage Mardred. At that time..."Puck hesitated, "At that time I felt...a huge energy surge and then...everything went quiet. Almost immediately, the Heir and the Consort entered the ring and the Consort took command."

"Why didn't the Heir take command?" Vernid Lionae sputtered.

Emma glared at him. "You will have your turn. You can sit quietly or I will quiet you myself." She turned back to Puck.

"We took the guardians to the cells and brought these people here. We then waited for further orders."

Puck stepped out of the box to indicate she was through. Emma nodded, "Retrieve Commander Lionae and sit her with this group."

Emma turned to Aurora and Selene. Selene rose stiffly and reached for Tristian's hand. Tristian stood with her, escorting her to the witness box and stood behind her providing support.

"I...was shopping. Aurie and I planned to meet for lunch at the Baker's Brew. I'd finished up and dropped everything off at the house. As I stepped out of the doorway, I was grabbed and I could feel a knife, or something sharp, pressing against my throat." Selene's hand wandered to the spot on her throat and Tristian squeezed her shoulders in reassurance. They pushed me out to the road. I saw Aurie headed my way and she looked up and smiled. The knife must have glittered or something because she was suddenly angry. Before she could move closer, the woman jabbed the point into my skin harder and Aurie froze. She moved forward carefully asking what did they want. She was trying to reason with who ever held me but the woman never responded. Then...then, Aurie was being attacked." Selene's voice quivered in anger, "by mages," she spat. "Mages from Dyan." She glared at the offenders, "How could you? Aurora has never harmed any of you, how could you?"

Aurora's turn yielded the same results. She'd seen no more than Selene had stated.

Emma turned to the families. "Would the House of Balora come forward?"

A tall lanky woman moved forward and took her place. "I am, Myrrha Balora. We received a missive from the House of Adair. The missive mentioned that the Adairs were jewelsmiths and had heard that we were also. In the interest of furthering relations, they asked if they could visit our colony and we could exchange common smithing techniques. It was also suggested that a trade between our two colonies would be welcomed. I agreed. I received a second missive stating that three other families were interested in the same type of trade but in different fields. I inquired of the families that were best suited to speak with them and we all looked forward to the meeting. They indicated that the Leader would be attending and since they were bringing several of their wares, they would be happiest if we allowed a small contingent of guards." Myrrha looked up at Emma, "Leader, since it's common for me to have guards when I travel, I never thought twice about it. I agreed and the families here discussed the best ways to shelter our guests. I don't know what happened today. They wanted to walk around the colony and since our business was completed and they'd plan to leave on the morrow, we wished them a good time."

"Myrrha, how did your daughter get involved in attacking Aurora?"

"I don't know, Leader. But I will." She turned to Emma, "Their powers?"

"To be discussed later, Myrrha, it is a discussion for mages only."

Myrrha nodded and returned to her seat. The other families confirmed her tale, all being stumped on the activities of their offspring.

Emma watched as Althea Lionae smirked at the witnesses. Emma held her peace; Althea would quit smirking soon enough. "Erin Dresden, take the stand."

Erin looked to her mother but Talia merely motioned her forward. Erin stood and a blue haze enveloped her immediately. Emma grinned internally as Althea Lionae's jaw dropped. "For those of you from Mhyr, this haze represents the use of a truth spell. It is an acceptable questioning technique in Dyan and you," she paused, "are in Dyan."

Erin tried to struggle, knowing it was fruitless but she tried. They'd known the risk of getting caught and had hoped to have accomplished their task and be back in hiding before anyone could pinpoint them. Fools. "They came and the guardians were a lot of fun. We'd go out with them to the taverns and stuff. They started telling us about the Noble classes and the commoners. How it wasn't right for nobles like ourselves to be doing manual labor." Tears fell and she looked up at her mother, "It sounded so nice. Servants to fetch everything we wanted, no more working in that smithy, we could play and have fun all the time."

Emma waited for the girl to compose herself then prodded her gently. "So what happened?"

"Althea had an idea. She figured if we could get Aurora as a hostage, you would do what we wanted and instigate the Caste System here in Dyan. It sounded so easy. She said she'd get Selene and we all knew Aurora would do anything to protect Selene. We..." she looked at her

cohorts, "we figured, with five of us, taking Aurora by surprise would be easy and we wouldn't have hurt her. We just needed one good blow to knock her out and Althea said she'd take care of the rest. If we were fast enough, no one would even know it was us." Erin started crying in earnest, "we couldn't. Even with all of us hitting her with everything we had, we couldn't break her shield. And then...and...now...my powers are gone." She ended in a wail. Her cohorts supported her story and Emma turned to Althea Lionae. "Commander, take the stand."

"I am a noble of Mhyr." Althea said huffily. "I will not be subjected to your barbarian rules."

"And I..." Emma replied gleefully, "Am the rightful leader of Riger. Now take the stand or I'll just hang you without hearing your pathetic defense."

"You can't," Vernid Lionae shouted.

"Which one of you idiots are going to stop me?" Emma asked placidly.

Althea refused.

"Puck," Emma spoke sternly, "take her back to her cell, she can answer to Tristian."

Althea paled and tried to fight her guards. They merely knocked her out and carried her back to the cells.

Emma turned to the rest of the Nobles. "Next?" she smirked. "You already know the penalty for refusal."

"Wait," a woman exclaimed in fright. "We had nothing to do with this."

"Then take the stand and be cleared."

"Leader," the woman spoke softly, "I am Miriam Adair. Is this really necessary? Obviously I," she indicated herself, "Know nothing about this type of intrigue."

Emma sighed, "I am going to ask once more. If no one is on the stand when I'm done, all of you will be placed in a holding cell and I'll leave you to answer to the Warrior's Commander."

"Fine," Vernid snapped. "Mayhap she's got more sense than you do."

Emma merely grinned and nodded for Puck to remove them.

"You'll regret this, du Aulstet," Lionae shouted. "When I'm done, you'll wish you just killed me."

The room fell silent as they left and Emma indicated they should move to a conference room.

Once seated she called for refreshments and studied the five mages in front of her and then turned to Tristian asking, "I assume you're responsible for this?"

Tristian raised a brow. "Well, I'd say they're responsible for this, Leader. But if you mean the end result...yes, I am."

"How?" Talia exclaimed.

Tristian ignored her.

"Alright, is it reversible?"

Tristian scowled. "Perhaps."

"Tristian," Emma scolded. "It either is or it isn't."

"The possibility exists, Leader. The real question is, will I reverse it. The answer to that is...perhaps."

"Perhaps what, Consort?" Myrrha asked quietly.

"They believe the Caste system to be a marvelous ideal. I'll agree to reinstate their powers on one condition."

"That is?"

"They spend a year in Mhyr...as commoners."

"But..." Erin looked bewildered. "But we should be nobles."

Tristian shrugged, "What you wished to instigate would have affected all of the classes, Erin. I want you to know how your decision would have affected those that have no other options. Live the life you'd merrily toss someone else into, Erin. Then come back and tell me how neat it sounded."

"I accept," Talia stated earnestly, shocking her daughter. "What you tried to do, Erin, is called Treason. It is punishable by death."

"No...we weren't...we didn't..." Erin looked stunned. So did her friends.

"You didn't really consider the outcome, did you?" Tristian asked gently. "By Mhyr's caste system, your family would only be in the merchant class."

"That's not what they said," Erin wailed.

"But I can prove what I've said, Erin. Mhyr's caste system dates back to the days of Corinne and Kyla. There were only fifteen original families to the du Aulstet Holding. Twelve of them moved to Mhyr when Corinne refused to instigate the caste system here. The du Aulstets, the Mardreds,

and the Orphanes are the three that remained. Neither marriage nor wealth bequeaths nobility."

"But..."

"Truth, Erin. Speak to the Lorekeeper. Seth is still here and she's been merrily digging through our records. See what she has to say but she'll confirm my tale. She's the one that explained it to me." She looked at them sadly, "Another thing you didn't consider. Althea tried to kill me. She would have killed Aurora and Selene. If that had happened, Erin, nothing in this world would have saved your life."

Silence descended while the five youngsters thought about that.

"Alright," Myrrha spoke again. "Do you know five families that will take them?"

"I believe so. I need to check, I don't want to put them in danger and I've no wish to place them where they'll be mistreated. Leave them free and I'll accept their word that they won't run. Give me a week to make arrangements. They'll be cared for, but they'll work hard. The commoner class leaves no time for mischief although, the love they share is often incredible to see."

Erin looked up tearfully, "You'll return our powers at the end of the year, Consort?"

"My word young Dresden. You may well thank me for this experience."

Erin looked doubtful but Tristian was fairly sure the youngsters would learn more than they thought they would.

The families left in silent contemplation. Emma turned to Tristian who raised a hand to hold her off. "Please, Leader. Let's discuss this civilly. Like over supper. My stomach is becoming much too intimate with my spine."

Emma snorted in amusement. "Alright, but let's eat at my place, I'll have Anya prepare and deliver supper."

Tristian nodded and turned to her parents, "You'll both join us?"

Aurora nodded and the five of them made their way back to Emma's home. They ran into Puck and dragged her along.

"What do you want me to do with the folks from Mhyr?" Puck asked curiously.

"Leave them stew till I've eaten." Tristian replied with a grin. "They'll get over it and I might even be in a better frame of mind, since my folks are fine and we've settled the mages." She thought for a moment and concluded, "And my belly will be full."

"That's important," Sidell snickered.

"Hush you."

Tristian explained the mother's bond and where they'd been for the past three days. She'd told Aurora they'd be out of touch but nothing else.

Emma looked up finishing her meal, "So...what are you going to do with those fools?"

"I'll probably hang the guardians. Including Althea. As for the rest, it depends on what they had planned."

"You'll get that information from them?"

Tristian nodded, "Aye. I can't let them go without knowing and I've no real basis for killing them, except that they made no move to stop the abduction." She shrugged, "I'm sure not gonna let them free without knowing their plans. As for the guardians, they aided and abetted. I also know they are among the worst of Althea's cronies so I've no doubt they were hip deep in her plans. Althea I can have hung just based on her attack on myself. This merely compounds the offense."

Emma sighed. "I'm not arguing with you, Tristian. It's just...not something I relish doing."

"I know. I'm sorry it came to this."

Aurora snorted. "They were fools and deserve it. I'll come with you. They wanted to hurt Selene and I want to know why."

Tristian left Sidell with Emma and Selene. "Puck, let's get the gallows set up. Six across, if it's possible, I want this done tonight."

Puck nodded and broke off leaving Tristian and Aurora to make their way to the holding pens.

"Thomas," a guardian spit. "Let us go, you common bitch. Once the Commander gets here, we'll be set free and I'm gonna gut you myself. I should have done it years ago."

Tristian smirked, "When I was a child, Petras. It's the only time you ever had a chance."

The woman snarled and rushed the bars. Tristian shook her head, "Don't be too excited to get out. Look out the back bars...we're preparing your farewell."

"Goddess bless," another woman uttered softly. "You can't be serious. We should be returned to Mhyr. This isn't right."

"What do you call right, Jeren? Coming to another Holding, inciting the children and attempting to kidnap my mother and Sire. You call that right?"

"But...this...we failed, for Alwyn's sake. You can't hang us for failing."

"I can't let you go to try again. How many times can I count on you failing?" Tristian shook her head, "No, Jeren. This is Dyan's answer for subversion, attempted kidnapping and assisting in attempted murder. Farewell, Jeren. May Alwyn have pity on you."

"Just a damn minute. We're to wait for the Commander's decision."

"Jeren," Tristian answered patiently, "I am the Commander."

They found Althea Lionae stark naked and Tristian's brow rose. She looked to Kelsey who shrugged. "She kept trying to kill herself and I got tired of it."

"Ahhh," Tristian murmured. "Open the cell."

Kelsey let her in. Althea snarled and tried to back away but Tristian was done playing. She held her in a mage grip and merely ripped the thoughts from her mind. She felt Aurora link to her and they stumbled through the Commander's hatred filled, bigoted, disgusting mind. Tristian closed her eyes and broke the link with a shudder. She turned to Aurora and shook her head, "Better I be a commoner than a noble like her."

Aurora agreed. They shut the door releasing the Commander to throw herself against the bars in anger. They crossed through the next door into the holding cells and Tristian looked in at the Nobles of Mhyr.

"Come to gloat, commoner?" Vernid Lionae spat. "Common bitch." He snarled in her face and she held him in a mage clasp, again ripping the thoughts from his head. "Kelsey," Tristian murmured, "Take him."

"Dear Alwyn," Aurora breathed, leaning heavily against the wall. "So much hate, so much anger. Why? They have everything?"

Tristian couldn't answer that. She'd never understood it herself. She returned her gaze to the cell. "Lionae has implicated the Lady Adair only. I will offer the rest of you a chance to stand for the truth spell once more."

"Wait," Miriam Adair squeaked. "I would stand for it. I didn't mean to make such a fuss, I'm just...Tristian you know me...I'm not use to being treated like this."

"You've been implicated, Lady, I will get my information but not with the truth spell. She ignored the lady's sputtering and the other four, including Staunton pushed up to the bars."

"Sire, if you would? I'll take care of the Lady."

Aurora nodded and Tristian let them into the corridor then entered the cell with Miriam Adair.

"What...what are you going to do to me."

"I'm going to enter your mind and sift through you memories." Tristian answered honestly.

"You...that's...how," Miriam sputtered praying for someone to save her.

"By magic, Lady. How else? You should have taken the truth spell, Miriam. It forces you to tell the truth about the event in question. This way, I'll know everything whether it's related to this day or not."

Tristian held her in a mage clasp and initiated the link, she felt Aurora join her and smiled when she realized Aurora had forced the other four into the link.

They relived the Lady's memories, her manipulations. They found answers to question Mhyr had never been able to answer. She'd been responsible for several deaths, ruined several merchants, ruined several marriages. She was the titular power behind the nobles but someone was giving her orders and Tristian could not figure out whom. Apparently, the Lady didn't know and she never cared to find out. Tristian ended the link and Miriam blinked owlily. She saw the looks of horror on her friends' faces and she snorted in disgust. "So...now you know. You know how easily you were led, how easy you are to fool, puppets all of you. But you don't know my master, and you won't until it's too late. He told me to kill you Thomas. He wanted you dead when you were a child. I ignored it as delusional prattling. I could not believe a commoner would be my downfall. How was I supposed to know you were the Heir to the House of Mardred?" She screwed her face up in anger, "He should have told me all of it. I would have killed you if I'd known."

Tristian left the Lady Adair with Kelsey. Puck was finishing with the Guardians and Althea, her father and the Lady Adair were next. "Do you four want to witness?" Tristian offered the women from Mhyr, solemnly.

Staunton nodded, "I should. Goddess knows I don't want to but I should. What did you get from Althea and Vernid?"

"Confirmation of the Lady's activities. The difference being, Althea and Vernid took a more active participation in the removal of certain persons. Vernid used his money to hire killers while Althea used the Guardians. The twelve here with her were her closest confidantes and they were often sent on such errands. Even when Flain was in command."

The other three begged off and Tristian had them returned to the Inn. She left orders for guards to be in place and they were warned that they'd be leaving Dyan on the morning transport. Further contact with Dyan was highly discouraged. Tristian and Staunton waited until the final pyres were put out and she walked her back to the Inn. "Fare thee well, Leader, I've hopes we'll not need to meet anytime soon." Tristian said tiredly. She'd had enough of Mhyr's stupidity and their close-minded bigotry.

"Mayhap we'll learn something from this, Tristian."

"Besides, don't piss off Dyan?"

"Mayhap," Staunton murmured. She turned back to watch the tall woman walk off, saddened that they would probably never see eye to eye on anything. She still believed in the caste system, they just had a few bad apples. Perhaps now, it would be better.

ONE YEAR LATER

Tristian smiled at the scent on the air. She moved cautiously through the brush following the tantalizing scent. Her ears quirked and she carefully moved aside the brush. She grinned at the huge foraging buck. Tristian notched her bow and pulled back, aiming carefully, she released in silence. A fountain of blood exploded when the arrow pierced the jugular. Tristian moved forward. Dressing the kill she strapped her bow on the carcass and settled herself to lift it over her shoulders. "Damn," she muttered, "next time remind me to get a rabbit."

Settling her burden she set off across the land aiming for the large rambling home in the distance.

Erin Dresden sat with her favorite youngster, a little girl about seven that adored her. They were playing Kayla's favorite game, go hunt, and Kayla giggled in glee every time Erin tried to guess what type of animal Kayla had written on her little paper.

"Are you sure?" Erin demanded in mock ferocity.

Kayla laughed, "I don't have a monkey on my paper silly. I don't even know what a monkey is."

Adeena looked out the window at the two and smiled gently. She'd been concerned when Tristian asked for her help but Erin had fit right in, after she'd quit pouting. Now, Adeena couldn't remember a time when the happy youngster wasn't with them. Erin would be in her late teen years and the children adored her. She had the ability to play with all of them, no matter their ages.

"Erin?" Jastyn called out. "Erin, come look."

Erin grinned and lifted Kayla up, "Okay, I give up. What's on your paper?"

"A deer, silly," Kayla smiled and snuggled closer.

"A deer, huh." Erin smiled gently at the dark head resting comfortably against her shoulder. "Well, little deer, let's go see what Jastyn's come up with."

"Okay," Kayla agreed amiably.

Erin was incredibly surprised by Jastyn's ability to create jewelry. The girl was older than Erin

but extremely shy and it took Erin forever to get Jastyn to show her the finished pieces. Erin had asked her to set out her pieces as if she was a merchant and Jastyn was calling her in to see the results. Erin stared in wonder, "Deena, Deena look."

"No," Jastyn murmured, "Erin please?"

"It's okay, Jas. I promise, it's okay. These are beautiful and no one's gonna make fun of you."

Jastyn moved to her side and hid behind her as their mother entered.

"Dear Alwyn," Adeena murmured on seeing the display. "Da...Da, come here."

"Aye...here, what's wrong...dear Goddess," the man murmured. "Who did that?"

"Jastyn," Erin exclaimed proudly. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Jas? These are yours?"

Jastyn nodded shyly.

"They're beautiful, baby. Better than the stuff in the square," her father swore.

Jastyn eased out from behind Erin. "Really? Honest?"

Adeena hugged her, "Lovey, they are. Why did you hide these?"

"I thought...kid stuff," Jastyn muttered.

Erin circled her shoulders with a strong arm. The year here of hard work, good food, and sibling wrestling matches had put muscles on her once slender frame. She'd grown taller and stood proudly. Erin had lost her childish tendencies, the hard work left no time for prancing and preening but the family always had time to sit and talk, to tell stories, to play games and to just laugh at the world. She didn't remember being happier and she loved them all. "Da, maybe you could get a merchant to sell these for a commission."

He looked at her curiously, "They're good, no doubt but...how could I trust a merchant? Maybe I could sell them myself?"

"No," Adeena said, gently. "You know what will happen, they'll accuse you of stealing it and throw you in jail. Erin's way is best. Even if they only give us a little bit, it's more than we have now."

Once again Erin felt a wave of anger at the limitations put on these people. She hated the fact that they couldn't just run out and sell it or find an honest merchant that would help them. A year here had shown her the impossibility of that and she knew Da was right. They'd never get a fair price.

"But anything's better than nothing," Kayla said seriously. "Right, mum?"

"Aye, little one. And this will help through the winter. Game's getting harder to find and we'll need to restock our larder."

Again Erin tried to offer to pay for her boarding but Adeena wouldn't hear of it. "No. You've worked our fields, herded our beasties, and dug our trenches. You've more than earned you keep young Erin and I don't want to hear another word about it."

"That's right, youngster." Da smiled, "Erin, you're like our own, you owe us nothing."

Erin blushed and was thankful for Kayla. "Deer, Erin, deer."

"I know...your paper said deer," Erin grinned hugging the girl.

"NO, there." Kayla pointed out the window.

"Thomas!" Adeena gasped.

"With supper," Da laughed running outside. "Daven, get my knives, fire up the spit. We're having a feast tonight."

Tristian had never been so happy to reach a destination in her life. She bit her lip to keep from groaning as she swung her burden onto the table. Adeena laughed in delight, "Thomas, you don't have to bring your own meal with you. We can manage to feed a guest."

Tristian chuckled, "Now, Adeena. You know I always come with an offering." She winced rolling her shoulders to ease the ache, "though, next time, I'll get a bunch of rabbits."

Da chuckled at her and shooed them off. "Go on with you, gossip or something and let me get supper ready. After walking this beastie home, Thomas, you're probably starving."

"Darn near," Tristian agreed moving off with Adeena.

She laughed as the youngsters poured out and attacked her. They ended up in a pile on the ground, a tickle fight in progress.

"Uncle, uncle," Tristian declared.

Kayla jumped up and raised her hands in victory. Tristian rose and made her greetings with the rest of the clan finally finding Erin staring at her oddly from the door. Adeena noticed and motioned Tristian forward.

"Erin," Tristian greeted the youngster casually.

"Consort," Erin replied.

Tristian smiled gently, "It's only been six months since I was last here, youngster. Have I changed that much?"

Erin looked down and blushed, "No, Consort. I...I think I have, though." She bit her lip, "Do we have to go now?"

"Well, I had hoped to get a piece of that deer I hauled halfway across Mhyr but if you're in a rush, you can go."

"I can?"

"The year's over, Erin. I'm here to return your powers. After that, you're free to go."

Erin stood silently, shuffling her feet.

Tristian could hear the gears spinning.

Erin turned slightly, looking back into the house and then out to the family. "Da, Da..." she hollered and scampered down the stairs past the startled Consort.

Tristian snorted in amusement.

"What's wrong, Erin? What happened?"

Adeena had rushed over to see and Erin's grin could have wrapped around her face.

"We can sell Jastyn's stuff in Dyan. I could sell it, or my family. You won't get ripped off, Da. Deena, see? It's perfect."

"But...how?" Adeena asked.

Erin smiled, "You know it's time for me to return? I want you both to know I really don't want to."

Adeena hugged her but Erin was too excited. "Wait. Listen. Since I can port back and forth, I could take the stuff to Dyan and arrange for the sales. I can also spend time here to work with Jas or play with Kayla or help in the fields." She paused, shyly, "That's if you'd let me?"

"Honey you'll always be welcomed here but...Erin, what about your folks. I know they've missed you."

"I know..and I'll spend time with them, but...I love it here." She paused, "Well, not necessarily Mhyr, but.." she looked around and extended her arms to the open land around them, "here."

"And we could go to Dyan to shop, well three of us."

Da laughed, "Aye, I know the ways of it and I've no problems with it, Erin child. Maybe give the girls more options than just being brood mares eh? Alwyn knows Deena and I aren't getting younger and the brothers will care for them but...it's nice to have options?"

Adeena stared at him in shock.

"What?" he asked in outrage. "Woman you must know I'm not one of those bigoted, women have there place in the world, type of men. You've beaten that out of me good."

Adeena laughed. "Aye that I have. If you've no trouble with it, neither do I. We'll have to save so the girls can get a room when they visit but...if Erin says the goods will sell well, I'm willing to believe her."

"Trust me, Deena, I come from a long line of jewelers. These are good. But, I hope the girls and you will stay with us when you're visiting."

"And subject your mothers to my brood? Oh no, youngster. We'll stay in an Inn." Adeena hesitated, "Erin, do you think you can do this? Really? I don't want to get the girls excited for naught."

"I'm gonna pop on home, now. I'll be right back, I promise. I may have company but Tristian brought enough to feed the Holding so it'll be alright."

"Erin," Adeena hissed, "this place isn't fit for your mothers."

"I love this place, Deena. They love me, it'll be alright."

Erin turned and faced a crying Kayla, "Hey...what's all this. I turn my back and someone's hurt you?"

"You're leaving?"

"Well, yeah but I'm coming right back."

"For good?"

"Ah..." Erin murmured.

Adeena stepped up, "Let me have her, child, I'll explain as best she can understand and you'll be back to catch the tears."

"Erin," Kayla sobbed.

"Right, back, little deer. I promise." Erin turned and darted up the stairs past the now thoroughly

amused Consort. "Jas, Jas?"

"Hey," Jastyn murmured softly.

Erin hugged her, "Don't cry, Jas, please? I'm gonna pop home and I'll be right back. Promise not to put these up?"

"But.."

"No buts...promise? I've got a plan but I gotta check first. I don't wanna say anything till I'm sure so you gotta promise. Please?"

"Okay," Jas whispered, biting her lip to keep her tears inside. Erin hugged her fiercely. "Right back, I promise."

"Okay,"

Erin finally returned to Tristian side. "When you're ready, Consort."

"Of course, young Dresden." Tristian bowed gently.

Erin felt a rush of power and reeled under it, "Whoa," Tristian held her steady until the power stabilized and checked her over.

"Okay, your mothers haven't changed anything. I'm suppose to tell you that. Now visualize and let me check you. I don't want you popping into a wall."

Erin fairly bounced with excitement and she realized none of it had anything to do with regaining her powers.

"Alright, youngster, off with you."

Tristian grinned as Erin disappeared. She ambled over to the elders and sat to talk a bit.

"Mum? Mum?" Erin hollered, careening down the stairwell. She'd ported to her bedroom being intimately familiar with it. "Mum, where are ye?"

Talia's brow rose as she looked at her mate, "Ye?"

Andra returned the look, "Mum?"

They chuckled and rose to find their excited youngster. "Whoa," Andra woofed as she received a chest full of teenage enthusiasm. "Goddess, look at you. You've grown."

"Aye, listen," Erin continued on chatting kissing her mothers' cheeks. "Listen, I've found an incredible jewel smith. You gotta come see, mums, please, you gotta."

Talia burst into laughter. Her daughter was always excitable but the barely restrained glee in her voice was hard to ignore. "Alright, we gotta go. Does this mean you don't want your dinner?"

"Nah, Da's firing up the spit and the Consort's brought a beastie for sup. We'll dine like queens, this day."

The two women exchanged amused looks indicating they had no idea as to what their oh so proper noble daughter just said. "Alright, Erin. Where are we going?"

"Mhyr," Erin answered with a grin. "Gripping her mothers' hands she ported them back to the farm."

"Erin," Kayla squealed and trounced her. "You're back." She kissed both cheeks enthusiastically.

"I said so, didn't I?"

"Aye, ye promised."

"Aye, and here I be, just like I promised."

Kayla snuggled close and Erin saw Jas peeking out the window. "C'mere, Jas. Don't be afraid, they'll not be harming ye."

"Promise," Jastyn mouthed quietly.

"Aye, my word, Jas."

Jastyn eased down the stairs and tucked herself against Erin's solid warmth. Erin's arm wrapped around her and she turned them as she spoke quietly to Jas. She missed the raised brows on her parent's faces. "Jastyn, Kayla, these are me mum's Talia and Andra."

Jastyn curtsy, "Pleased to meet you, ladies."

Kayla stared at them soberly and then grinned and hid her face in Erin's shoulder.

"She's a bit shy but she'll be better, later." Hearing footsteps Erin turned to smile at the elders that had kept her so well the past year. "Da, Deena, me mums."

Adeena smiled the same shy smile that Kayla had, "Ladies, be welcomed."

"Aye, Ladies," Da repeated, "to our home and our hearth, be welcomed."

"Thank you, both of you."

Adeena laughed gently, "I am Adeena and this is Armis."

The women laughed with her thankful they had names to use.

"Can I show them, Deena? Can I?"

"Mayhap they'd like to rest a bit, sprite? Something to drink?"

"Oh," Erin stammered, "Aye, I'll get it. Sorry, mum."

Talia chuckled, "It's alright, Erin. Why don't you get us something wet and let's see what's got you in such a dither?"

"Aye. Right back, then." But Erin was stuck with her two charges. Adeena clucked, "Here, give me this one," Kayla went to her grudgingly. "That one, you'll have to take back inside or you'll never peel her off."

"S'alright, the juice is inside, unless you'd like some ale?"

Andra grinned, "Actually, I would. Ale would hit the spot right about now."

Talia agreed.

"Right, I'll be back, come on Jas, let's get you settled. You kept your promise, eh?"

They lost the rest of the conversation as the women entered the home.

"If'n you ladies don't mind, ye can follow me and I'll get ye both settled with two mugs." Armis offered, leaving Adeena free to settle Kayla.

"Thank you, sir, that sounds wonderful. I thought Tristian was here?"

"Aye, she is. She's out with the lads playing some new fangled game they made up." Armis looked up and pointed in time to watch a horde of youngsters pile onto Tristian.

Andra couldn't control herself and she gave up. She burst into laughter and fell over onto the bench. "Oh Goddess bless, I've imagined this day so many times and it didn't even come close to reality."

Talia joined her mate chuckling, "Aye, my heart. I'd had visions of having to put up with her temper as she stormed around the house getting even with us for leaving her without her powers for a year."

"Well, mums," Erin said softly, "the old Erin probably would have...as well as other numerous nasty stunts."

Talia looked up at her daughter. Erin had her arms resting comfortably crossed atop Adeena's shoulders and she nuzzled Kayla's hair.

"Lucky for all of us, that brat grew up some." Erin finished gently.

"Aye, daughter," Talia agreed soberly, "that she has."

But the somber moment couldn't hold Erin's excitement at bay and she grinned, "Now, Deena? Please?"

Adeena laughed, "Aye, lovey, now is fine. Be sure you bring them back for supper."

"I will. Want me to put Kayla down?"

"Nah. I needs to wake her to sup or she'll be bothering us come midnight, hungry."

"Aye, her stomach's like to wake a sleeping bear."

Erin had taken the time to set the display to make the most of the fading light. She almost dragged her mothers behind her as she strolled up the covered table.

"Dear Goddess, Erin, these are wonderful," Talia breathed reverently.

Andra merely knelt and lifted a small broach moving to the window to better study the designs etched onto it. "Tal, look at the detail. These must have taken months to make. Erin, who? And do they want to sell?"

"Aye, they do," Erin answered softly. Until then, she hadn't realized how nervous she really was. She opened her eyes to see Jastyn peeking at her and she smiled lifting an arm in welcome. Jas eased against her. "See? I told you they were good, me mums think so too." Erin could feel the tension running through the small frame in her arms. "Jastyn? What is it?" She got no answer and gently cupped Jastyn's chin lifting her face. "Jas, you don't have to sell if you don't want to. That was our deal remember? I promised."

"Yes, but we need to sell. The larder's empty and this lets me help. I can't do the outside work. I keep the house but I don't feel like that's enough. You cleared a field all by yourself."

Erin chuckled, "Aye, and did I ever learn a lesson. Pride means nothing when pain is involved."

Jastyn smiled gently, "You were trying to prove something then?"

"Aye. That I had even less sense than I thought." She smiled and tucked Jastyn's head beneath her chin. "Tell you what, we'll take an estimate and sell only what we need to stock the larder and get some dried beef. I'll buy it in Dyan the prices are better. That will leave you some of the pieces so you won't be lonely while you work on others. Eh, now? How's that sound?"

"If we only sell some, can we stock the larder?"

"Yes," Talia answered firmly. She'd already chosen the pieces she wanted to try to sell and had a rough estimate of the prices she'd get. She pointed to five pieces, "I can give you one hundred drachs for these five pieces."

"Dear Alwyn," Adeena breathed from the door. "Jas...that would stock the larder get us dried beef and fix the barn for the beasties."

"Aye," Erin agreed. "We'll get the supplies from Dyan and raise the barn ourselves. Maybe even have enough left for some cream, eh?"

"Ach," Jastyn laughed, "You and your sweet tooth. You'll have none if you're not careful."

"Sweets or teeth?" Erin teased.

"Both," Jastyn murmured.

"Ladies," Adeena murmured. "Are ye sure? I mean, it's a nice thing..."

Andra laughed, "Talia doesn't do nice when it comes to business, Adeena. If anything, she's offering you the low bid and if she sells it for a higher price you'll get the difference. Our commission is always the same no matter the price. The higher it sells, the more we all get."

"She's right, Adeena. It's the low bid because this is the first time on the market. If I'm wrong I can afford the loss but..." she grinned proudly, "I'm rarely wrong and my girl has my eye for jewelry. Take the money, Lady, chances are good, you'll have more than enough for cream and fruit."

Erin's mouth watered. "Oooh, you had to mention fruit."

They agreed on the price and shook on it. Andra ported back to Dyan to drop off the merchandise and retrieve the drachs.

"Jas, come and eat with us. I'll bet ye haven't greeted Thomas, yet."

Jastyn blushed and Erin chuckled. "Come on then, it'll be alright and I won't let you go."

"Alright, I'll eat, greet Thomas and you'll bring me back?"

"I promise."

"Okay."

Adeena hefted the sack and turned to Erin, "Here, sprite. Ye'll be doing the shopping, ye might as

well hold the bag." She eyed the youngster and grinned, "Mind ye, I can count. Don't be coming back here telling me all that stuff d'nae cost more than half, I'll tan your hide for lying."

Jastyn laughed as Erin coughed in surprise. "Okay, Deena, I'll use the money. Here, let me put it in me bag before I forget it and you tan me hide anyways."

Talia almost swallowed her tongue trying to keep from laughing.

"I...ah...need a drink," Andra sputtered as she barreled out the door, her clear laughter ringing in the air.

"Seems awful strange to me that me mums find it funny that me hide's been threatened," Erin growled in mock anger.

Talia lost it; shaking her head she laughed her way out.

Adeena smiled, "They be nice ladies, lass."

"Aye, Deena. I'm sorry I didn't realize it sooner."

"Ye do now...make the most of it."

Erin stood on the balcony of her parents' home gazing out at the stars. Her mind lost in the memories of her leave taking, the laughter of the dinner, Jastyn's quiet tears. Erin took a deep breath and blinked rapidly clearing her eyes. "Damn," she muttered softly. "Damn, damn, damn."

"Was it something I did?" Talia asked in gentle query.

Erin whirled in surprise, "Mum...no, I'm sorry, I d'nae hear ye."

"What's wrong, Erin? I thought you'd be happy this day."

Erin looked at her mother, surprised to find herself taller than Talia. She bit her lip and reached out hugging her gently. "I miss them. I miss Kayla. I miss Jas," she whispered.

Talia held her only daughter, surprised at the contact since Erin had gone through that period of no physical contact with her parents at a very young age. This was the first time Erin had reached out for her mother and Talia held her tight. "You love her?"

Erin pulled back and looked at her queerly, "Well, yeah. I love them all?"

"No, sweetheart, you love Jas. Yes, you love all of them but you really, really, love Jastyn. It shows, Erin. In every move you make with her and she returns it. That's what's making this harder. Yes, you'd have been sad missing the rest of them but you're headed back there

tomorrow. No, my sweet, I think you've grown more than even you have realized. I think that heart in there," Talia poked her daughter's chest playfully, "has grown large enough now to love."

Erin looked shocked so Talia quit speaking and just held her gently.

"Is this a private party or can any mum join in," Andra's voice floated out to them.

Erin grinned weakly, still stunned and extended her arm. She couldn't help it; the only thing she could see was Jastyn, walking towards her. "Yes," she whispered as her mothers' arms closed around her. "Yes, I do."

Part 4

Erin couldn't wait, it was barely dawn and she needed to be with Jas. She left a note in the kitchen, smirking as she realized she'd never ever told her parents where she was going and ported out.

"Ye came," Adeena cried. "Thank Alwyn, ye came."

"What is it? It's Jas isn't it?"

"Aye. She's just lying there crooning. We can't reach her, lass, please, you try. Take her with you, Erin. If you wake her, take her with you, keep the money, we'll get along fine but she...needs you."

"And I her, Deena. Let me pass."

Erin could see that Jas was close to being catatonic and she didn't waste any time. "Deena, I need to take her to a healer. I'm going to Dyan. If you and Kyla want to come, please prepare quickly."

They heard a low voice murmuring and Da entered with Kayla dressed and a small bag. "Deena, get dressed. I've packed a bag for you two when I heard Erin enter. Go with her and take care of Jas." He looked at Erin after Deena and Kayla had left. "Talk to Thomas, Erin. Promise me, once she's settled with a healer, talk to Thomas. Tell her I said, it's time."

Erin nodded absently but Da held her still. "Erin, tis important. Promise me."

Erin met his gaze and read the urgency. She gathered Jas in her arms and nodded, "As soon as she's settled, Da. I swear."

"Don't tell Deena."

She nodded and he ambled out after kissing Jas gently.

Erin ported them directly into the Healer's Hall.

"Erin," Jax boomed. "What the hell? Is this a prank?" Her voice gentled at the look of anguish in Erin's eyes. "No, I can see that it isn't. Bring her and tell me what you know."

"She...was really, really sad, last night, Jax. Maybe...around midnight she fell asleep and I didn't see her again until this morning, she was like this. I don't believe anything happened in between those times." She looked at Adeena and the woman nodded in agreement. "Ah, Deena, this is Jax, our senior healer."

"Okay, let me examine her. I don't want to put her on any medicines until I know what's going on. You three wait outside, please."

"Jax...I need to find Tristian. It's important."

"Try the barracks. If she's not there, Puck will know where she is."

Erin settled Deena and Kayla and told them she had to find Tristian and she'd be right back. She left them looking frightened and sad. Running down the street she stopped suddenly and darted into the Baker's Brew. She almost fainted in relief. "Tristian."

"Erin?" Tristian rose quickly, "What's wrong?"

"I don't know. It's Jas; I brought her to the healers but Da...Da made me promise to see you. To tell you he said it's time. Tristian, what's he talking about?"

"Damn. Come on, I need to stop Jax from giving her anything. I'll tell you, Erin, I swear it but getting there now is more important." Tristian grabbed Erin's arm, a clenched fist saw them in the Healer's hall. She saw Adeena and pushed Erin to her, "stay with them for a minute."

Tristian barged into the room and Jax almost snapped her head off until she saw her. "I should of known you'd be here."

"Have you given her anything?"

"No, I don't know what's wrong and I hate to just drug my patients."

Tristian grinned, "That may just save her life. Go on, leave us and send Erin to me. This is nothing for you to heal, Jax."

"Erin?"

"Mum? What?"

"The Brew's in an uproar, Erin. What happened?"

"I don't know yet. Jas is in there, she's almost catatonic but I don't know anything else."

"Why'd you go for Tristian?"

"Da...Da made me promise. Said I had to do it as soon as Jas was settled."

"Erin?" Jax spoke softly as she entered. She saw the faces fall and she rushed forward, "No...shh, there's been no change but she's still with us. Don't give up hope. Tristian knows what's wrong but she needs Erin to help her. That's all, I'm sorry."

"Geez, Jax, "Talia muttered, "fix that damn beside manner."

"I don't have any to fix." Jax griped.

Erin rose and hugged Adeena and Kayla. "I'll let you know something as soon as I can, okay?"

Adeena nodded, "Go...she needs you."

Erin entered to find Tristian sitting on a stool next to the bed waiting for her. "Come in and close the door." Tristian motioned her over and held out a hand. Erin gripped it and felt a gentle tingle run up her arm, she kept from jumping but Tristian's grip was firm enough to have kept her in place anyway. The feeling stopped and Tristian sighed. "I'd have prefer you to have a bit more experience in mage casting, Erin, but...we've really got no choice here."

"Consort, what is going on?"

"We need to go in after her. Problem is, she'll fight and she won't recognize me as a friend."

"But...she likes you."

"I know, but she can't feel me. She doesn't recognize me instinctively and I could be just a figment of her imagination." Tristian eyed her critically, "You, have a place in her heart and we can only hope that she'll feel you when we find her. What we'll do is go in together. This means you need to trust me completely because I can't fight you and concentrate on not hurting her." Tristian paused, "See why I'd prefer you had more experience?"

Erin did. She'd first thought Tristian was just treating her as a child but...what they were going to do...giving up full control to another mage was terrifying and Erin wasn't sure she could control herself. "I don't know, Consort. Can we strip my powers again?"

Tristian looked at her in surprise. "You'd do that? Again?"

"I'd do anything for her. Also, if you can, it might work in our favor. Jas really never knew me as

a mage. In her mind, my powers may just prove I'm an imposter."

Tristian nodded slowly, "I can, but I can't return them for at least a month, Erin. The shock would be too much for your system and I won't lose you just to save Jas. Not like that."

"It doesn't matter, Tristian. A month, a year, a lifetime, none of it matters if I lose Jas."

"Ahhh," Tristian murmured. "Alright. You're old enough to make this decision. Do you want to talk it over with your mothers?"

"No. It's mine to make and mine to live with. I've made my choice."

Tristian nodded but Erin hesitated, "What happened to her?"

"She was abused, Erin. As a child, men used her continuously. Pigs more like it but men never the less. Jas taught herself to hide deep inside of her mind so they couldn't hurt her anymore. I found her on one of my circuits in Mhyr. I killed every one of them. Hunted them like dogs and killed them." Tristian's voice was low and feral, she forgot she was talking to a young woman and she explained it bluntly. "What ever happened has hurt her again and she's hidden. Armis knows, I had to tell him so he could keep the boys and himself away long enough to let her heal. Adeena was never told but I wouldn't be surprised if she knew."

Erin wiped the tears from her face and nodded. "Da told me not to tell her. I won't, it's Jastyn's tale to tell."

Tristian grunted in acknowledgement. "Ready?"

"Aye."

Erin didn't even marvel at the ease with which Tristian could strip her powers. Her only thoughts were on Jastyn.

"Alright," Tristian had her lying behind Jas holding her gently. Tristian would link to them both through Erin. "Ready? This is gonna feel weird."

"That's okay, at least I can't fight back."

"Okay, try to relax anyway or we'll both have nasty headaches," Tristian smirked, "although yours will be worse than mine."

"Great," Erin muttered and concentrated on relaxing.

She felt the power build, slowly, but the flow was continuous and she soon felt as if she was a dam about to burst. Just as she was ready to scream she felt the power flow through her and heard Tristian's voice whisper softly, "We're in, go...find her, I'll anchor you."

Erin felt like she was swimming against the current of a raging river. She kept pushing onward, calling softly for Jastyn, trying to project her love. Hulking brutes suddenly surrounded her, calling out to her, grabbing at her and she panicked, kicking out...

"Erin...Erin...it's okay, it's Jastyn's memories, they can't hurt you,"

Tristian. Erin felt the gentle flow of the Consort, and warmth like the touch of a lover.

"That's right, relax...now, find Jastyn."

Erin shuddered and moved onward, past visions of rape, horrific visions of rape, men and objects on a slender child that just lay there. A bruised, battered, broken child with dead eyes. Erin could feel the tears falling as she moved through Jastyn's memories, calling out gently, coaxing, loving.

"Erin?" a soft timid voice whispered

"I'm here...I promise." Erin swore, heading towards the voice. "Jas, I'm here."

"Erin...how?"

"Tristian...Tristian came to help. Come with me Jas."

Erin had reached a dark abyss that she couldn't breach so she held herself still. She extended her arm in welcome. "Come home, Jas, please, come home with me."

And Erin felt a rushing warmth headed for her, she held steady and braced herself as Jastyn threw herself in Erin's arms. Tristian had to move fast to keep the two of them from tumbling off the bed since once Jastyn answered and came forward, they were immediately returned to the corporeal world.

Erin's arms squeezed her tight. "I'm here, Jas. Right here."

"Don't leave me."

"Never. Never again, I promise."

Tristian left them with instructions to rest. She'd return later but both of them needed to sleep.

Tristian walked into the waiting area and right into Sidell's arms. "She's fine, Adeena. She'll be fine but she needs to rest." Tristian's arms held Sidell tightly, grounding herself in her lover's presence to banish the horror of Jastyn's memories. "Why don't we put you and Kayla up until they wake?"

"No, Consort." Talia rose gracefully. "Since we're to be in-laws, Adeena, please, allow me to offer my home to the two of you."

"But...lady, it's not..."

Talia grinned, "I refuse to listen to any nonsense regarding caste systems. It gives me a headache and Erin's liable to have an out right temper tantrum."

"It's alright," Tristian muttered, "she's powerless again so she won't hurt much."

"Again?" Talia asked incredulous.

"Aye. She thought it best for what we needed to do and I agreed. She didn't think she needed to discuss it with you."

Talia colored, "No," she muttered. "She doesn't, really."

Sidell touched her arm, "I think, if the circumstances had not been so dire, she would have. She's changed much, Tal, give yourselves time to get reacquainted."

Tal smiled gently, "Actually, she hasn't changed much at all. She's just come home to whom she was. Somewhere in her early teens, I lost her. Now...this is the Erin I remember."

"She's a beautiful woman, Talia," Adeena offered shyly. "You've every right to be proud."

"I had lots of help, including you." Talia grinned mischievously, laughing at Adeena's blush. "Come on, let's go home and fix up the place so your stay here will be comfortable. I'll just put the two of them in Erin's suite. I can put you two in the connecting suite if you like. That will give you a common seating area to meet and play games or stuff in."

"Good," Adeena nodded, "they spend a lot of time together, just talking or laughing or playing. It's good for them. We can stay for a bit, the boys will be fine with Armis and he's the one that sent us."

"Good, I'll even take you shopping since Erin won't be able to pop in and out for a bit."

Adeena smiled at her and they all left the hall in much higher spirits.

Sidell looked up at her mate, "And your plans?"

"I'm gonna go tell Armis that things are looking pretty good. Then, I'm gonna take a nap."

Sidell's brow arched, "A nap? My warrior, napping?"

"Aye, care to join me?"

Sidell grinned, "You're on. I'll meet you there."

Erin smiled gently as Jastyn's laughter gurgled across the sitting room. She and Andra were sharing tales about Erin and Andra had just told a very embarrassing story involving, water, mud, and an irate pig. Jastyn's gentle brown eyes sparkled in mirth as they smiled at her. "You were a terror."

"Were?" Talia chuckled entering with a tray laden with drinks and snacks. "How about is, young Jastyn? Erin can get into more trouble than anyone else we know."

Erin was willing to be called a murdering harlot from the outlands if it would make Jastyn happy. The young woman was so relaxed Erin almost didn't recognize her. It was two weeks since Erin's mad dash to the Healer's Hall and Jastyn was doing fine. Talia and Andra had accepted her completely as the mate to their daughter's heart and all three women loved her although, Erin held her heart. Talia also helped Adeena with the shopping and transporting everything to Mhyr. Erin offered to go and help but Adeena laughed, "Lovey, we've sixteen strapping lads running around the homestead. If'n they can't repair the barn we'll move the beasties into the houses and put the men in the barn."

Jastyn had found that so amusing she had tears flowing as she laughed in glee.

Erin had also noticed that Jastyn was not so hesitant about being in public here. Knowing her history, Erin knew it was due to the fact that Dyan had no men...at all. Jastyn need never be afraid of meeting a male anywhere in Dyan. Adeena had been so pleased when the young woman asked to accompany them to breakfast she'd hugged everyone she could get her hands on. Jastyn still remained as close to Erin as she could but she no longer needed to be fully wrapped in Erin's arms when they were in public. She was slowly inching out of her shell. The only other person Jastyn was just as comfortable with was Tristian. It wasn't unusual to see her sidle up to either of them if she was being overwhelmed. Now Adeena and Kayla were gone. They'd left three days ago and Erin worried that Jastyn would revert to her shy cringing self but she hadn't. They both missed them and Tristian offered to port them there if they wanted until Erin could do it herself. But they appeared to be handling the separation and the bond between the two women continued to deepen as they spent more and more time in each other's company. A pleasant month of laughter, tears, and friendship had put a glow on Jastyn's face that Erin wouldn't trade for all the drachs in Dyan.

Erin had also come to an amazing conclusion about herself and was unsurprised to find herself standing in front of the mage center a day after Tristian had returned her power to her. She entered shyly and made her way back to the Master Instructor's office.

"Aurora?" Erin called out as she tapped on the open door.

Aurora looked up in surprise. "Young Dresden? How may I help you?"

"I needed to apologize, Aurora. Not because anyone told me I had to, but because...I felt I had to. I'm very sorry, Aurora, I was a fool taken in by stories for a fool."

Aurora eyed the youngster critically. She'd seen Erin roaming the Holding with her young companion and had noticed the changes in the young woman. She'd noticed the more mature Erin, and the mischievous imp Erin, but the haughty, I'm better than all of you Erin, was no longer there. She smiled gently, "I forgive you, Erin. The young are entitled to err. It is most promising when they acknowledge that they have and admit they were wrong. There are no hard feelings between us, young mage. I'm glad this worked out so well."

Erin nodded and shuffled her feet awkwardly.

"Something else?"

"Aye. I know that you have begun mage training for those of us that wish to work with the Warriors and Scouts. I'd...I'd like to know more about that, Aurora. I...I need to help. What they're doing in Mhyr is wrong. Deena and Da are wonderful people and they shouldn't be stepped on because of their birth. I...I love working the smithy and helping Jas with her designs and selling the merchandise but...it's not fulfilling?" she mouthed the word cautiously as if tasting its essence. She smiled and looked up at Aurora fully, "Fulfilling. I'm not accomplishing anything that will matter and I...feel the need to do so, Aurora. Would you tell me?"

"Of course I will. Come inside and have a seat." Aurora waited for Erin to get comfortable. "As you know, mages are now being offered a chance to work with the warriors or scouts. Tristian has commanded this; she wishes to give our mages the chance that you yourself are looking for. The difference is, the mages are not required to station with a garrison. They come here and work with me to get the basics. They then train with the scouts. This teaches them the problems with being on a trail. As you know, we can port anywhere we've been. The scouts go everywhere and often, there is not a mage that can port them to the areas they travel. So, the scouts will teach the mage how to travel. Your year mate, Farshe Balora, came in a month ago with the same request." Aurora paused for a moment. "Now that I think about it, all of the youngsters that Tristian punished have come forward. Knowing you'd given up your powers to help Jastyn I didn't expect you but I'm glad you're here."

"Is it dangerous?"

"It may be. You're out in the wilds with no one but yourselves to rely on. The scouts go out in groups of tens and you'd be one of the ten. They work together so that they learn each other's strengths and weaknesses. That lets them work as a team. It's not something mages are used to. We mages tend to be individualistic and we don't care to rely on others."

Erin snorted in acknowledgement of that statement.

"Actually, it's the reason your attack on me failed."

Erin winced and Aurora smiled. "We need to discuss it. Consider it a lesson in a series of many and try not to take it personally. I've not been harmed and it's a good example because you'll be able to understand what I'm explaining rather than having it a theoretical discussion."

Erin nodded slowly and Aurora continued. "The scouts will teach you to work as a team. When the five of you tried a group attack, there was no plan, just brute strength. I was able to adjust my shields to the maximum power level and wait you out. Now, had it been a scout plan, you would have adjusted your levels to keep me guessing, never exposing your full potential until the proper moment. You'd have also included physical attacks because it's difficult to adjust for both at the same time. You could have taken me youngster, you just didn't have the knowledge."

Erin scowled, "Now I feel like I'm gonna learn how to overcome ye..."

Aurora laughed, "Well, you will but not necessarily me. Any mage. There will be those that you can't take down but you can hopefully cause enough of a disturbance to allow help to reach you or allow your team to get away safely. That's another thing you'll learn. Discretion is the better part of valor and retreat is often a better plan than a frontal suicide assault. But still, our world is dangerous and it may harm you. But we'll do our best to make that a small probability." Aurora paused and let Erin think about it. "I've got a small group ready to start in a week or so. I do mean small, we've not got a lot of volunteers yet but Tristian is content to wait. She feels it will do well and word merely needs to spread. If you join us, there will be three of you and you'll all be strangers because the other two are from other colonies. If you're interested, start with them and you'll get a better idea of what I'm teaching them."

"What are you teaching? I thought we'd gone through our instructions."

"General instructions, yes. But, how many of our mages need more. What I'll teach here is the fine control that will make full use of your gift. You will find that power is not often the answer and limited power gets you more than you'd believe possible. You will learn to focus and block out everything else to accomplish your goal. Mostly, you will learn to trust, in yourself, in your powers and in your partners."

Erin rose and smiled shyly, "I'll be here, Mage Mardred."

"Good. I'll see you then. How is young Jastyn?"

"Well. I'm gonna see if me mums need me and if not, I'll take Jas home for a few days and see the folks." Erin confided excitedly.

"I'm sure she'll enjoy that. Adeena and Kayla certainly will."

"Aye. Deena asked if we'd take Kayla on a rotation basis. I...I wanna have me own place before that and...ask Jas to join with me."

"Oh ho, so, my offspring was correct in that." Aurora rose and clasped Erin's hands gently. "Congratulations, young Dresden, you've come a long way."

"Aye. Tristian said I might have something to thank her for after our year of being powerless. I thought she was being facetious." Erin grimaced, "I'm gonna have to thank her soon, and apologize to Selene as well, honored Mage." Erin stepped back and bowed cheekily, "With your

permission?"

Aurora chuckled, "Aye, off with you. Do what you must but don't be late for my classes."

"What the hell is that?" Tristian growled. She was staring at what appeared to have been a rabbit. Its eyes were blood red, razor sharp teeth gnawed at the bars of its cage. Claws like talons extended off of its feet. It was as large as a small dog and it growled, flinging itself at the bars.

"If I knew that, Consort. I'd not have ridden back with the damn thing trying to eat my horse every time I turned around." Maria answered tiredly. "It's getting worse and I don't know what's going on. I've even gone to Southern...excuse me, Southlock, to inquire since they tend to the land and all they can do is murmur that the time is nearing."

Tristian sighed, "I know. I can feel the changes in the land but I can't pinpoint a problem except that it's originating from the east."

"Mhyr?"

"Who knows? I wouldn't doubt it." Tristian reached a hand out to the cage and put the poor tortured animal to rest. "At least it will have peace now. What else have you found?"

"Strange...um...spots." Maria grimaced, "I don't know. We have palm trees, for crying out loud. We're in the far north and we have palm trees. Frozen palm trees, mind you."

Tristian just hung her head. "Alright. I've scoured every inch of this land and I can find no sign of trouble. I need to talk to Emma. Time to head to Mhyr and further east if necessary."

"You want company?"

"Not this time. A formal affair, I think. We'll leave the Scouts here and I'll Fetch you if it becomes necessary."

"You want what?" Sidell muttered in shock. "Honey, are you alright?" she asked gently moving closer to her mate and resting a hand on her strong jaw.

"Believe me, love, it's not a matter of wanting. I need to see the rest of the land. I can just port to Mhyr and ignore them but...this way would be best."

Emma sat leaning back in her chair, a small amused smile twitching on her lips. "Let me see if I have this straight. You want me to send a missive requesting permission for Dyan to visit Mhyr in regards to a possible threat to our land. The missive will state that the Leader, the Heir, the Consort, and the Scion of the House of Mardred will be present."

"Aye," Tristian muttered.

"And if they say no?"

"Then I go in with the scouts and the Noble Houses be damned."

"Ah...so, I could also state that this visit is requested in an effort to maintain relations with Mhyr but denial will not prevent Dyan from protecting Riger as is our role."

Tristian grinned, "Do they have a school? Sidell can do the same thing, be politely rude."

Emma chuckled, "No, I think it's genetics. Don't worry; Aurora couldn't be polite let alone politely rude. You just take after your Sire too much."

Erin was having an enjoyable lunch surrounded by the laughing voices of her adopted family. Jastyn was even sitting outside with them, chatting quietly with Kayla. Adeena couldn't stop beaming in happiness at the glow on the young girl's face.

"Honest, Da, I would nae lie to ye," Beldon swore fiercely. "Erin, tis the truth, I swear. T'was a tree squirrel but it had long teeth, huge claws and it attacked us. Kept after us even though we was hightailing home."

Erin studied him quietly. "I believe you, Bel. Have you seen anything else strange?"

"Aye, the plants be different..and sometimes, the trees, they not be right."

"Can you show me?"

"Aye, I can...Ye wanna go now?"

"Aye, while there's still light."

"Erin..." Jastyn spoke quietly. "No, I'm afraid."

"I can send you home, Jas. You'll be safe there."

"For you, Erin. I'm afraid for you."

Erin held her gently, "I'll be careful, I promise. If it gets too scary, I'll come right back and we'll go get the Consort." Erin smiled, "Is that alright for you? Tristian will come. You know she will. It doesn't matter that this is Mhyr, Tristian will always help."

"Aye," Jastyn answered softly, "She will. You promise me, Erin. The first sign and you bring

yourselves back here at once. Tristian is trained for this and she'll bring her scouts. You...are not."

"Yet, Jas. I'm not trained yet. And I intend to be around a long time so don't you fret. Keep Deena and Kayla company and I'll be back before you can miss me."

"Not," Jastyn proclaimed stealing a shy kiss. "I already miss you."

"There, see, it's like I told ya."

Erin studied the massive oak knowing it was far from its natural habitat that happened to be Dyan. A full circle of them had been...transplanted, into a forest of pine. She'd already seen the strange brush that she couldn't identify. "How's the hunting?"

"Bad, Erin, t'aint hardly no game to be found. With these beastie things, it's no wonder." Beldon snorted in anger. "What's causing this, Erin? Only Dyan has mages, could it be them?"

"Beldon, you know better. Would Thomas do something like this to Mhyr?"

"Nae, but Thomas...I mean...what can she do?"

Erin grinned, "Thomas is third in the Line, Beldon." She chuckled at his wide-eyed surprise. "Aye, tis truth. Only the Leader and the Heir out rank her. Thomas would know if this was from Dyan, Beldon...and she would stop it."

"Third eh? But...she hunts and brings her kill to us. She plays with us. She's just like us, Erin. How can that be?"

"Because it is Dyan, Beldon. And Dyan allows their women to be whatever they want to be."

"To bad they don't take men."

"Aye," Erin agreed softly. "Enough, let's go back so Jas doesn't have a cow. I've seen enough to talk to Tristian and we'll see what she says."

The commotion coming from the homestead put Erin's heart in her throat and she urged her mount on. Realizing she'd never get there in time she ported both of them to the gate and left Beldon sitting in shock as she hurled herself forward. "Dear Goddess," she murmured looking around wildly and calming a bit when she saw Jas safe with Kayla in her arms. The men had surrounded what looked to have been a young boy. Now, he was filthy, naked, and covered in mottled fur. Two-inch long claws extended from his hands and he snarled in anger, charging the line of staves. Erin took a breath and gathered her magic, extending it out towards the...thing. Claspig it gently, she settled a sleep spell and gently urged it to relax. A few minutes later, the child was curled up in a ball fast asleep. Knowing she was out of her depth she did the next best

thing. ::Aurora??:

::Erin?: Aurora replied to her mindcall.

::Aye, I need your...experience. Can you come?:

::Can you fetch me? I've never been and Tristian is on her way to Mhyr::

::I can. I've done it before but you can monitor yes?:

::Aye::

Aurora stared down in horror, "Oh Goddess. It's worse than we thought."

"Ye knew?" Da thundered in outrage.

"We knew something was wrong. We've been getting transplants of trees, brush, and soil. Tristian has already searched Dyan but the cause is not there. She's on her way to Mhyr." Aurora snorted. "Unfortunately, they have to go through all the pomp and ceremony Mhyr expects and will probably not get around to discussing anything important until tomorrow...if then."

"They went through the proper channels?" Erin asked in surprise.

"Aye." Aurora chuckled, "I think Tristian hoped your Leader would deny the visit request. Then she would have come with her scouts and the Nobles be damned. Staunton obviously considered this and the request was accepted immediately. They should be landing within the hour."

"What should we do with...this?" Erin pointed at the child.

"I'm thinking. I'm supposed to attend this fiasco with Tristian but I hate to fly so I'll join them on their landing. I can port into the ship. What I'm trying to decide is whether to take him with me or send him to Jax."

"Our healer," Erin explained at the blank looks.

"Ahhh," the low murmur responded.

Aurora felt a gentle chill down her spine and she smiled. "Well, the point is now moot."

They turned as Tristian entered the yard in her full formal attire. The family fell to their knees.

"Don't," Tristian muttered. "Get up, it's only clothes, for Alwyn's sake. Armis, Deena, get up and get the rest of them up."

Erin moved quickly to settle the family and Tristian turned to Aurora, "Sire, Emma says she's not going to allow you to port to us anymore if you keep losing track of time."

"What? Did I?" Aurora laughed. "Damn, and I was so sure I had another hour."

"Well you don't and what the hell is that?"

"Looks like what happened to that rabbit," Aurora concluded. "I was trying to decide whether to send him to Jax or bring him with us."

"Let's bring him. Maybe we can get out of the pomp and ceremony and it will serve as the emergency Emma concocted to get us out of the formal greetings."

Tristian turned and gestured smiling as the squad of scouts appeared. "Tinder, I want a watch posted on this homestead. At least until I'm through the formal bullshit and then I'll return to see if I can do anything here."

"Aye, Commander. This is Brianna, our mage."

"We've met, come here, Bri."

"Consort?" Brianna greeted as she joined them and looked down at the child. "Oh, Mother, the poor boy."

"Aye. Probably some beasties like that rabbit Maria brought in. Keep an eye out but don't tucker yourself. If it gets too bad, call me and ceremony be damned I'll be here."

"I could help, Tristian," Erin murmured hesitantly. "I've not been trained but two pairs of eyes are better than one and I can spell Brianna until you return. I'd feel better staying here anyway."

"No heroics," Tristian growled. "Not one or I will tan your hide and you'll only wish Adeena was doing it."

"My word, Consort. I'll just use my mage sight and if I see anything I'll tell the scouts or Brianna."

"Done. I'll inform your parents." She turned to Brianna, "Check the buildings and once they're clear have Tinder post the watch. Armis, Deena, forgive me for being so overbearing but..."

"You're in a rush," Armis concluded. "No harm done, Thomas, and we're grateful for what you are doing. We'll care for them."

"I'll arrange for supplies to be sent. Erin, you can fetch those, I'll leave you as the contact point."

"No need," Adeena stammered.

"Nay, Adeena. They are mine to care for and I will, you've enough on your platter with out feeding half of Dyan. The supplies will be sent and should hold all of you while they are here."

This is Tinder, their Squad Leader and Brianna their mage. The rest you'll meet as they wander around. If you see something, get one of them to help you."

Tristian returned to Aurora side to find her now also formally attired. "I take it we're ready?"

"Ready, aye. Willing? Eh.."

The family chuckled as the two women and one wild child disappeared.

Tristian took them to the ship and she secured the child with mage bindings. Sealing the ship the two women strolled through the heart of the colony. Tristian's shields were raised, she really didn't care to know what the people thought and her years in Mhyr were merely a blur compared to the joy she'd found in Dyan. She returned all greetings and stopped to chat with those that were actually friends of hers.

"Look at you, Alwyn, I'd have never believed it," Lucan exclaimed hugging her fiercely. "You were always a fine looking woman, Thomas, but in that outfit, geez..." Lucan's gaze flickered to Aurora and stared in astonishment then flickered back to Tristian in question.

"Mage Mardred, Lucan, my Sire,"

"Sire...I...Young Heir, forgive me," Lucan stammered as she began to kneel. Tristian latched onto her and hauled her back up. "Don't even think it, I don't care about these fools and no friend of mine will ever kneel before me." Tristian growled giving the woman a final hug. "Now, I've got to attend a silly ceremony where I'm sure I won't find anything worth eating. There will be four of us heading your way, probably starving, in a few hours, Lucan. I trust you haven't forgotten how to cook?"

"Nay, nay. I can cook. I'll be ready." She hesitated, "Are you sure?"

Aurora patted her back gently, "Don't even go there. We'll be back, and we'll be hungry."

"Honey?"

"Hmmm,"

"What is this?" Sidell asked curiously holding up a cracker covered with a brownish paste.

"Uhhmm, it's a plant root. It's boiled and pureed to make a paste. They," Tristian indicated the Nobles, "consider it a delicacy."

"I see," Sidell murmured as she discarded the cracker in a nearby tray. "I hope you have plans to feed me after this?"

Tristian grinned, "Lucan has been warned although...she may faint when she finally realizes who you and Emma are."

"As long as we get our food first," Sidell answered agreeably.

Tristian's laughter rang out across the hall and Aurora turned to eye her daughter. "She appears to be happy," Staunton murmured.

"Why shouldn't she be? Sidell adores her, the people love her and she can do whatever she wants in Dyan."

"I meant to ask...what does she do?"

"She commands the Warriors and the Scouts. Although, Tristian has more fun on the trail than she does behind the desk." Aurora shrugged, "It's her choice and as long as she's happy, I'm happy."

"It's dangerous...to have your Heir on the trail, Mardred."

"No shit, Staunton. What would you have me do, lock her in a cage?"

Staunton back off, "I...I don't understand. This is the way it's always been."

"No. Corinne and Kyla denied the Caste System, Staunton. How easy it is that you people forget that. They believed in the people as a whole and we believe the same. They threw out those that wished to impose their will on others just because of their birth. We will never agree, Staunton, you shouldn't bring the subject up."

"I...I don't understand. How do you keep everything running?"

"A lot better than you do here," Aurora replied wryly and excused herself before she knocked her out.

"Calm down, Sire," A gentle voice coaxed as Tristian offered her a glass of sweet ale. "Here, it's not bad. Ours is better but I thought it rude to fetch some."

Aurora snorted her first sip out her nose, "Dammit, stop that."

The gentle strains of a slow waltz filtered through and Tristian smiled, "Excuse me, Sire."

"Of course, try not to make the nobles blush, Tristian, it's much too hilarious."

"Aye," Tristian nodded and moved through the crowd to her lady's side.

"My heart," She murmured extending her hand in invitation.

"My love," Sidell answered accepting.

They glided across the floor as only true lovers can, fully in sync with the movement of their partner's body. A dance of simple pleasure, of gentle teasing, of love.

Aurora was unsurprised to find Emma at her side as they watched in parental pride while their children enchanted the room.

"They are truly a perfect couple," a soft voice murmured. "I am Lady Felice Adair, and I welcome you both to our Holding."

Emma nodded graciously and Aurora merely smiled.

"Thank you, Lady," Emma offered.

"I've been told there are problems with the land?"

"By?"

"No one here, Leader. I'm...to...delicate to be subjected to such atrocities."

"I see."

"I have others that keep an ear out for me. In Mhyr, it is best to be informed, so I'll know when the Guardian's are set to pound on my front door."

"They have reason?" Emma asked curiously.

"They believe they do. In our world, they are correct but...I must follow where my heart leads."

"Lady Adair," a rough voice rasped. "I've told you before, these affairs are too much for one such as you. And what brings Dyan here is certainly something no proper woman should be involved in." The man turned to introduce himself and Emma laughed, "Aurora, I do believe we've been insulted."

"Shhh," Aurora hushed her. "Not so loud or Tristian will have his head."

Felice Adair bit her lip to keep her smile hidden as the man at her side sputtered in horror.

"Nay, Leader, honored Mage. Please, tis my tongue that wags too foolishly. No insult was intended."

"You've been insulted, Sire?" A cold voice crackled and it was all Aurora could do not to guffaw at the man's horrified face.

"No, youngster. Merely a jest, in poor taste, but a jest."

Tristian and Sidell approached and the man hastily made his exit.

"Gee, I didn't even get his name."

"You wanted it," Sidell asked sarcastically.

"Of course. How else will I know whom to avoid?"

"Ahhh," Sidell murmured as Tristian stared at the ceiling.

"Sire," she managed without breaking up, "since we've at least got an agreement for a morning meeting and there's really no one here we're sucking up to, can we leave?"

"Tch, this was your idea, young heir," Emma teased her. "If you want to leave, say so."

"I want to leave. I'm hungry."

"Me too," Sidell agreed.

Emma and Aurora concurred. Emma turned to Felice Adair who was watching them with gentle humor. "Care to join us? I warn you, we've no intentions of eating in a proper establishment."

Felice's brow rose. "Where did you plan to eat?"

"The Broken Blade," Tristian answered.

"Ah..." Felice smiled. "I've always wanted to eat there but...I can't just enter. Everyone else feels so...out of place and I make them uncomfortable." She grinned, "I would like to join you, if I may."

They entered and the room fell to silence. Lucan fluttered nervously about.

"Lucan," Tristian growled gently.

"Aye, Thomas...I mean."

"Lucan..." she repeated, "remember those glorious free for alls we use to have here?"

"Dear Goddess, you wouldn't?"

Tristian leaned over and grabbed the leg of a nearby table, "I seem to be a commoner at heart, Luc, and I would."

"Dammit," Lucan sputtered and slapped her arm, "knock it off or I'll tan your hide, you stubborn mule."

"Ahh," Tristian smiled as the room burst into laughter, "that's much better. Now, we're very hungry."

"Well," Lucan muttered, deciding Tristian was a bit too volatile to ignore and besides, she really liked her, "Your damn table's ready. It's not like I moved it."

She turned to the rest of them and just...went with it, "Come on, then. You're blocking the door and I've people to feed. Inside with the lot of you."

The Broken Blade had always been Tristian's favorite tavern and she was well known there. Everyone greeted her, shyly but the talking increased and their party was mostly ignored. Tristian saw a good friend and walked over to greet her, "Ceil, how've you been?"

"Fair to middling, Thomas," Ceil replied evenly.

Tristian grinned at the cool reception. "That's it?" she asked, picking up the woman's mug and draining it. Ceil's hand clenched in outrage and Tristian could see the muscles jerk in response to wanting to slap her silly. "Ya know," she continued, scooping a large spoonful of the stew up, "you look a mite tense, Ceil," she ate the spoonful and hummed in appreciation. Reaching for Ceil's dessert the woman finally came off the bench, "You little shit, I'm gonna teach you to swipe me damn food,"

"Little," Tristian responded in outrage getting the best of the woman and pinning her on the floor. "Look who's calling whom..." she never finished as the flat of the broom landed on her backside.

"Shit," she muttered hurling herself under a nearby table while Ceil went the other way. Lucan screeched in outrage as she chased the two women across the Tavern. "Gods be damned heathens, this here's an eatery. She finally cornered the two culprits under the back table. "Behave yourselves or you'll leave here hungry."

"Aye, Luc. We promise," Ceil swore.

"Now git out from under there, knowing you two yer peeking under the lass' tunic."

"Am not," Tristian replied in outrage, standing to her full height. "T'aint no need for me to peek. That's Ceil's domain, she can't get any elseways."

"Hey," Ceil rose to argue and Lucan whacked them both. "Sit down ye damn mules."

The two grinned at each other. "Thomas, you damn fool, what the hell was that about?"

"Wanted you to come meet my friends."

"That's an invitation?"

"Hey," Tristian defended herself, "was the best I could do on short notice." She grabbed a chair on the way by, and motioned for Lucan to include Ceil in their party. "Come on, and be nice, they don't do stuffy well."

Ceil looked at her queerly.

Tristian shrugged, "What do I know? They don't."

They approached the table of laughing women. Aurora roared as she took another look at her daughter's rumpled jerkin, "Damn, you didn't tell me there'd be entertainment. I'm like to wet myself."

"Shh," Sidell giggled, "me too. Come on, I know where the damn pot's are. Hurry up,"

Tristian and Ceil sat and Lucan brought out two ales. "This is Emma and you already know the Lady Adair. Emma, this is Ceil. About the best Guardian they've got on the roster."

"And you're gonna leave her here?" Emma asked slyly.

Tristian grinned, "Well the thought had crossed my mind, Leader. We'll have to wrestle it out though and Lucan'll have my hide if I pull anything else tonight."

The noise level in the tavern had risen to normal after Tristian's impromptu wrestling match and the women ate heartily, Lady Adair apparently enjoying herself and having a pleasant time of it.

"Ohh, dear Alwyn," Felice murmured, "it's probably a good thing I can't come in here often. Sidell," She muttered in outrage, "where do you put all that food?"

"Hey, you try keeping up with my lover,"

Tristian and Ceil sputtered their drinks on the table, Sidell blushed and the rest of them howled in glee.

"I didn't mean it like that," Sidell muttered. "Damn gutter minded people I'm sitting with."

"Ah, love. I'm sorry, but...you have to admit," Tristian chuckled as she gathered Sidell in her arms.

"I know...it didn't come out right."

"But it was funny," Ceil offered.

"Oh sure," Sidell rolled her eyes, "Two of you to pick on me. When are you coming to Dyan?"

Ceil's jaw dropped and her eyes widened in shock.

Tristian laughed gently, "My heart, you really have to give a warning when you drop such loaded questions."

Sidell smiled serenely, "Yah, you have to admit, I got her back." She grinned at Ceil, "So? When are you?"

"Uhhh," Ceil murmured, still stunned. Sidell took pity on her and patted her hand gently. "Think about, I know Tristian would love to have you there but I don't know your situation here. But think about it."

"I will, Lady, I will," Ceil promised.

"More ale?" Lucan asked.

"Not for me," Emma answered and the table declined. "I don't suppose you've a few rooms for us?"

"Aye," Lucan shrugged, "I took the liberty of assuming?"

"Wonderful," Emma grinned broadly. She pulled two gold pieces and placed it in the tavernkeep's hand. "That should cover us but if you need more, go bug Tristian."

Tristian chuckled and stood. "I'll escort the Lady home, Emma. Sidell I'll meet you in our room?"

"You'd best. If I have to come find you in jail because you and Ceil started a riot, I'll let Lucan tan your hide."

"Hey," Tristian objected as she helped her mate up. "I'll be right back. I can talk to Ceil on the morrow." Kissing her lover gently Tristian released her and watched the party mount the stairs.

Smiling softly Tristian turned, "Lady?"

"Aye, Consort. I appreciate the offer."

"You didn't think we'd just leave you here?"

"No, that's not what I meant. Don't put noble words in my mouth, Tristian. The rest of the Holding does that just fine."

"Forgive me, Lady. I will try not to assume in the future. A moment please?" Felice nodded and Tristian turned to Ceil. "I'm headed out to Adeena's place after these silly meetings. If you're free I'd like your company."

"I'll be free," Ceil promised. "Meet you in the stables?"

"Aye, make it at the noon break. I'll get out of the afternoon affairs."

Ceil nodded, "We won't make her place in a day."

"Trust me, Ceil. We'll be there a few minutes after you meet me."

Ceil's brow rose but she nodded and excused herself, "Lady. Tomorrow, Thomas."

"Aye."

"Will you tell me what happened with Miriam?" Felice asked as they made their way back through the colony.

"What would you like to know?"

"Staunton says somehow your magic let them see into Miriam's thoughts. They saw everything she did and when it ended, she actually admitted it."

Tristian smiled, "So, what would you like to know?"

"Oh," Felice murmured realizing Tristian's point. "I want to know if you'd do the same to me?"

Tristian stopped. "Why?"

"Because I need your help. At least the help of Dyan and you've no reason to trust me. I figured if you could do that, and if you were sure I couldn't hide anything from you, I'd have your trust and maybe your help."

"To do what, exactly?"

"To remove the nobles hell bent on ruining this Holding," Felice replied with some heat.

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~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

**By
Tas**

Part 5

Felice broke off her explanation at the sound of footsteps.

"Felice," the low voice rasped. "Where have you been, I've searched the Holding several times?"

"I've been with Dyan, Joram, that should be obvious."

"Well, we couldn't find them either. Staunton is worried. Come and I'll escort you to her."

"I'll escort the Lady..." Tristian waited.

"Sorry, Joram Lionae. It's too much trouble for you, young heir, and I'm sure your lady awaits you."

"I promised to see the Lady home, Joram, I keep my promises." Tristian growled.

"Ahhh, of course. Well, I'll tell Staunton."

"No need, it's on the way and we'll stop and tell her the Lady Adair is well." Tristian nodded at him in dismissal, "Thank you, Joram."

"But..."

Tristian left him stuttering and turned them to reach Staunton's home.

"You know that was a lie?"

"Of course. Staunton of all people would have known where we were. She's been there with us before." Tristian chuckled, "Though I must admit, you had a much better time."

Felice smiled, "I can imagine. Staunton does try so hard to be more accepting. She just,"

"Tries to hard," Tristian finished wryly. "Here we are." She raised her hand and knocked firmly on the brass knocker.

"So why are we waking her?"

"I think Staunton should be aware of the fact that she's being used as a scapegoat."

"Ahhh. I didn't think of that."

Tristian shrugged, "Habit."

A servant escorted them inside and a rumpled Staunton rushed out. "Tristian, what is it?"

"Why, Joram Lionae told us you were worried about the Lady Adair's whereabouts. Seems they've searched the Holding and neither she nor the party from Dyan could be found. I thought it best to rush over here and soothe your concerns."

Staunton sat heavily and smiled wanly, "You really need to lose the sarcasm, Tristian, when you're trying to suck up. It tends to lose the effectiveness of the attempt."

Tristian laughed and snorted in amusement. "Emma has decided that it's genetics. I'm about as good at it as my Sire."

"Well, I'm glad to see that the Lady is well and in good hands, Consort. I trust you're escorting her home?"

"Aye."

Staunton smirked, "Then I'll sleep easier knowing she's safe."

"Talk about sarcasm," Tristian muttered as they made their way out amidst Felice's laughter.

They walked on and Tristian's hackles rose. "Hush, Felice. No noise."

She stopped them and extended her senses. This time she sensed the darts and a mage shield of pure heat swallowed them whole. Tristian's fist raised and the ground shook while a flash lit the sky. Thunder screamed and the block illuminated while the assassins stumbled over the moving ground.

Sidell appeared in a flash of blue and shattered the air with a stunning bolt that dropped everyone in their tracks. A murmured spell had them gather in a pile and Sidell's eyes sparkled in rage as the bewildered gaze of Joram Lionae met hers. "You dare? My mate, my love. You dare?"

"NO..please...no harm was meant. We merely wished to speak to the Lady Adair."

"A dart was needed for this, Joram?" Tristian rumbled as Staunton fell out her front door and Aurora and Emma approached angrily.

"You wouldn't release her to me and the dart was only meant to put you to sleep. The Lady's presence is requested. I had no choice," the man wailed.

"The last time a dart in this holding put me to sleep I almost died. You don't really think I believe this time was meant to be different?"

"I...we..."

"Enough," Sidell snapped. "We return to Dyan.."

"Sidell," Tristian murmured.

Sidell's eyes snapped up to meet her lover's. A battle of wills ensued with neither giving ground. Sidell sighed and bowed her head. "Alright, love. Get your fool self killed and I'll never speak to you again."

"Shhh," Tristian crooned, gathering her close. "It's alright."

"Felice? You'll be safe in your home?"

"Yes. I will." They reached her door and she smiled, "come inside, all of you and you'll see why they needed to take me on the street."

Tristian entered first, her senses fully extended and she grinned. "You warded the entire house?"

"Aye. I needed to. It's part of what I want to talk to all of you about." She smiled at Emma, "If you shut the door, no one will hear our conversation."

"And your servants?"

Ceil stepped forward and Tristian smiled. "I see. The Guardians have decided to take a stand?"

"Those of us that we trust. We keep the lady safe allowing her to find the problems in the Holding."

"The Guardians secure the inside of the house. No magic can be performed here from outside and physically, none will challenge those here."

Emma sat in a lounge chair. "What makes you suspect magic? Mhyr has not been known for that."

"I grew up in Dram. I'm afraid I only returned here because I'm the next in line after Miriam. Actually, if I don't mate and bear a child, the Adair line ends with me. As you know, neither marriage nor wealth bequeaths nobility." Felice grinned and settled herself in a chaise. "I became very close to Aretha and I enjoyed helping her. We use to spend hours researching our history. I suspected magic because the Adair line has had mages before. I don't know what happened but when I returned I started getting weird dreams. Dreams of power, of conquest. Visions of ruling Riger and I admit, after several days of this the idea became very attractive. Luckily, Aretha returned to Dram and asked me to come for a visit and go through the piles of notes she'd gotten from Dyan. Once outside of Mhyr, the dreams stopped and my own self emerged. Frankly, conquering anything has never been high on my list of things to accomplish."

The women chuckled and Ceil emerged with several drinks.

"I spoke to Aretha about them and she helped me research dreams. We came up with the idea to try the wards simply because we didn't know what else to do. Dyan had already had trouble with my House and I couldn't see you rushing to embrace me in welcome. We found an old woman in Dram that knew about warding and she helped. Once they were in place, she activated them. I've not had a dream since but...Joram Lionae has become insistent on my attending some inner council that he conducts. I refused and we've been at a standstill since. I rarely go out and only went tonight because I needed to meet you. I need Dyan's help."

Tristian spoke softly, "Felice has asked me to shift through her memories. She wants us to know she's being honest and then let us decide on whether we can help her or not."

"It's your call, Tristian," Emma spoke honestly.

"Aye, Leader. I see no need for it but I also suggest we help."

Felice sat up in surprise, "Without knowing the truth?"

Tristian smiled, "I'm not in the habit of reading the minds of everyone I come in contact with, Felice. Normally I trust my own judgment. I'm willing to help with out reading your mind."

Emma nodded, "So be it."

"That's it?"

Sidell chuckled, "That's it. You were lucky enough to end up talking to the one person that could approve or deny your request."

Felice and Ceil looked confused, "But...alright, I admit it. I don't get it. Emma is the Leader, Sidell is the Heir, and Tristian her Consort. Why would Tristian make this decision?"

"Because Mhyr is not a colony of Dyan," Tristian answered. "Emma and Sidell are responsible for Dyan. They can, and they have, accepted the responsibility for Riger but it is always on a larger scale. For now, the problem is in Mhyr. I approve this assistance because I command the Warriors. The help you will receive will come from the Scouts, a smaller contingent off of the Warriors of Dyan."

"Geez, Thomas," Ceil murmured, "Did ya have to just take over everything?"

"Hey, I'm willing to share," Tristian argued. "Alright, at this moment, I've a squad already in Mhyr. Once I relieve them, I can assign them to you. This particular crew has a mage; a very talented one and that will come in handy. If I'm needed, Brianna can call for me immediately."

"How do you plan to handle it?"

"Honestly, I think," Tristian answered. "We saw what just happened. It would not be out of place for Felice to ask for help. We'll grant it and the Scouts will be placed as such. Scouts of Dyan with Dyan's full backing to act."

"Good. I'd rather them safe than skulking about with no authority."

"Not here, Leader. Without proof of their identity they'd be considered indigents and put to work as slave labor." Tristian turned to Ceil, "Can you cover her for a few more days? We're headed out to where my Scouts are tomorrow and I can have them in place shortly after that."

"Aye. We're set to go. It's just been worse and the Lady can barely leave the house."

"That should improve with Brianna. Sire, see if you've another candidate available, I think two mages on site will work better."

"I do, Megan is working out well. You just need to get her away from Maria."

"No problem, I'll have Sidell do it,"

"Chicken," her lover teased her.

"Shall we adjourn?" Tristian asked. "We've that silly meeting and Ceil and I will be headed out at mid-day."

"Is that your way of warning us that you won't play anymore?" Sidell smiled gently.

"Aye, my heart. I've too much to do to waste time patting fools on the butts."

The lover's stood and the rest of the room rose with them as they made their goodbyes.

Ceil sat in wonder on her mount, staring at the homestead in front of her. Tristian grinned, "Coming?"

"Aye. What the hell happened? One minute we're in the barn, the next we're here?"

"It's a mage trick. Makes traveling much easier."

"I guess," Ceil muttered. Then dismounted quickly as the homestead erupted in excited voices pouring out.

After the greetings Tristian settled with the Elders and her people. "Tinder?"

"Aye, Commander. We've not had anymore trouble although a loud group of...Guardians is what we were told, came through and thought to help themselves to some of the supplies."

"They were dissuaded, I trust?"

"Aye. They cussed us up one side and back but they left. I had the youngest backtrack them. I'm a suspicious sort. They stopped off at a produce farm a ways out. They weren't so lucky. Deena and Armis put a wagon together for them and loaded it with stuff they could afford and we took it over there."

"Good," She turned to Erin, "Replace the supplies,"

"Already done, Tristian."

Tristian grinned at Adeena's sputter of outrage. "Good."

"Alright, anything else?"

"Aye," Brianna spoke up. "This land is funny, Consort."

"Funny?"

"Aye, it's got a sickly feel. You know? Like it's being drained or something."

"Any sense of where from?"

"No. Not here that's all I can tell."

Tristian nodded. "I need you to stay a few more days, Ceil and I will be riding the circuit and I want to check out the land and your observations, Bri. I'm hoping I can come up with some kind of temporary respite until we find the real problem."

"Want a couple of us along, Commander?" Tinder asked gently.

"No. I want these folks safe. Ceil's guarded my back more times than I can count, Tinder. I'm sure she'll manage again."

Tinder eyed Ceil kindly, "And we'll thank you for it Guardian. You bring her back in one piece, Riger may not survive if we lose her now."

Ceil laughed softly, "I'll bring her back...she's offering me a job. I need her in one piece to get it."

"Aye, and we'll welcome you then too."

They rode out. Tristian was node hunting. She'd already found and sealed all the nodes in Dyan to her and they responded to no one else. She'd not planned on doing the same to the rest of the

land but with Maria's findings on the fringe borders and the troubles in Mhyr she didn't think she had a choice. She aimed them back in the direction of Dyan following a faint glimmer of power. She only hoped the node was close enough to one in Dyan so she could bond them together. That would continue her control on them and hopefully stop the major incidents in Dyan. She'd have to look for the smaller ones later.

"What happened at the meeting?" Ceil asked during their ride. "What did they say about that child you found?"

"What we expected. Half of them think the world is ending, the other half thinks it's a plot for Dyan to take control."

"Uhhmm, not to put a fine point on it but...what would stop Dyan from taking control?"

Tristian laughed, "Beats me. It wasn't my idea?"

"Ahhh, typical stupid Nobles."

"Aye."

She stopped and smiled. Looking out to the west, Tristian called her bondmate and felt the Mother's power answer. Dyan could feel her and she was welcomed. "Alright, mage stuff. You'll be bored and I'm sorry but I hope it won't take long."

"No problem," Ceil shrugged, "it's what we do, you know that."

Tristian nodded and felt for the node, she dove and saw the sickly red glow. Pulling on her bond she fed the lone node with the cleansing power of the Mother, filling it, healing it until it glowed a burnished silver hue, then she sealed it in her bond and set it free allowing the node to feed its new strength back into the land. Sealed as such, anything trying to manipulate it would catch Tristian's attention and she could then check on it. She held still for an eternity letting the power wash through her, reveling in the sheer energy of being the Mother's own.

Ceil watched in awe as Tristian took on a shimmering glow, shining bright enough to rival the sun. She gasped as the withering brush spruced up, the trees seemed to straighten and the grass took on the color of the spring green.

Tristian waited for her guide and was not disappointed.

"Very good, BondedOne. Well done. You know which way to go next?"

"Aye,"

"Then return, this land will heal in time, enough for now."

Ceil jumped as Tristian happy laughter floated on the wind and she looked up at the smiling

woman.

"Come on, lazy, we've miles to go and no time to spare."

Ceil chuckled and mounted. Tristian continued her path following the call of the nodes.

It took them three days but she'd found the major nodes that surrounded the northern quarter of Mhyr. With her bond in place, the land would heal and the game would return. There was still the occasional changed beast that would find its way in but that was better than having them grown in your front yard. Adeena had a three day buffer in either direction and it was the best Tristian could do for now. She returned as tired as she'd ever been.

Joram Lionae quaked in his boots. His master was furious and Joram didn't know why. He assumed it was because he'd failed at getting Felice Adair and now...with those bitches from Dyan in place, he doubted he'd ever get her. He did notice that his master seemed less solid in form. He just didn't know what that meant.

"Hey you," Sidell murmured as her lover trudge into the bedroom. She got up and reached for the woman sitting her down. Kneeling she pulled off boots, socks, and after shifting Tristian a bit, trousers. The jerkin was next and she just shook her head and tumbled her lover into the bed. "Sleep love, we'll settle this later." Sidell was beginning to worry; Tristian was pushing herself a little too hard. Since their return from Mhyr, Tristian had left to ride the land often returning weeks later, exhausted. Enough was enough and Sidell had had enough.

Tristian woke fuzzily, her eyes blurry and her mind confused. A gentle touch soothed her and she smiled. "Hey you."

"Hey yourself. How are you feeling?"

"Okay, a little tired but okay. Why?"

"Sweetheart, you haven't left this bed in three days. I couldn't even wake you."

"Ahh," Tristian murmured, "Sorry, love. I know you were worried."

"Yes, and angry. But, we need to get you well before I'll indulge in my whim to yell at you."

Tristian groaned in a sickly manner.

"Can it, warrior. I already know you feel better."

That brought a smile to her lover's face and Tristian eyes finally blinked clear. "I'm alright, love."

Better yet, I'm done for now."

"Thank, Alwyn, I wasn't looking forward to tying you to the bed,"

Tristian's brow rose in interest. "Ohhh?"

"Bah," Sidell chuckled and sat beside her. Ruffling her lover's hair she leaned forward and kissed her gently.

Tristian had more than gently on her mind and Sidell found herself pinned to the bed and covered with an ardent warrior.

"You need to rest,"

"I need you," Tristian growled.

Joram Lionae was running scared. He couldn't please his master and now, his master had ordered him to leave those bitches from Dyan alone. That couldn't be right. They had to pay. That commoner had dared to lay a hand on him. On him! No...he would have his revenge. The Master would just have to understand.

Ceil grinned as Tinder entered the room. "I hear you had some excitement?"

"Aye. I don't know about these nobles of yours Ceil. They seem to think they can just demand and their requests will be answered."

"Because normally, it's true." Ceil chided. "They've been catered to since they were born. Being told no is a unique experience."

"Well, he'll have to get over it. I wasn't about to let him just carry the Lady Adair off without doing something."

"Decking him was probably not the best way," Ceil laughed, "But Goddess I wish I'd seen it."

Tinder rose smoothly, "Well, I'm for dinner and the crew's in the Blade if you plan on joining us later."

"Aye. I should be there shortly. Once I'm sure the Lady is staying in and the rest of us are in place I'll head on over."

Tristian lay comfortably pampered on a chaise, sipping a light ale. Sidell lay nestled against her and had drifted off into a light doze. Tristian loved these moments in her life. When it was just

the two of them, no troubles, no worries, no interruptions. She set her glass down and snuggled closer to her lover letting the peace of the moment fill her soul.

Both were rudely awakened by a frantic call from Megan.

A murmured word saw them dressed, a clenched fist had them in Mhyr.

"Consort, Tinder is missing. We think...we think it's Lionae."

"Damn that house," Tristian growled. "I should do us a favor and remove them all."

"Consort, we can't find her."

"Alright," Tristian replied moving outside.

"What now, love?"

"There is a node here, it's tainted and I'd hoped to wait until I was stronger before tackling it. It's a powerful node, probably equal to that in Southlock. You know I've been wandering the land bonding the nodes to me." Sidell nodded. "Well, the only opening between the nodes is due east. I think we've got...an essence driving all of this and I think this node is its base."

"That means you'll have to fight it and seal the node."

"Aye. It's why I wanted to wait but I won't sacrifice Tinder."

"Sweetheart," Sidell began and turned to drown in eyes lit from an internal fire. She shuddered knowing she would do the same thing. How could she ask Tristian not to make the attempt? "I'm here. I'm not letting go. You need help, I'm right here."

Tristian stopped them in the center of the colony and wrapped Sidell in her arms. "Hold tight, love."

Tristian called. The nodes surrounding the colony answered their bondmate. In turn they called their brethren. From Mhyr to Dyan the nodes answered, feeding their bondmate, responding to the call of the Mother's Own. But Tristian didn't stop and the call continued until the master node in Southlock answered. Tristian burned incandescently as her bond strengthened and she was no longer aware of her surroundings, her entire being focused on the bond of the Mother. At Southlock's response she dove, into the Mother's bosom, trusting in her lover to anchor her, to hold her, to bring her back when it was over.

He felt her...NOOO...felt the power, the power that should have been his. She comes...WHY...why now? He wasn't ready. He raised a shield and she laughed, laughed...at him. NOOO...another and again she smashed it, getting closer. To his prize, his possession, to the power that he gave his soul for. It should have been his. And now he felt the drain...she dared to drain his power. NOOOO, he struck and felt the drain ease. He struck again but she was ready for him this time

and a mage clasp held him. The drain increased. NOOOO...he struggled and struck another blow loosening the clasp, slipping free but she responded and his world turned upside down. And still, still, the drain. He righted himself and now fighting was no longer on his mind. Must hide, must rest, must get away. She would pay but he had to survive first. Another blast tossed him and his essence shivered...NOOOO. Wait, there...an opening. A trap? Another blast, no choice. Go, hide, and go to the dark, yes, to the open, to heal, to rest.

Tristian felt the final release of the tainted node and now she fed it. With the will of the Mother's bond, the call summoning the power, she filled the node until it shone the burnished blue silver of her touch. A final seal and it was hers. And now, the node reached out, and touched its bondmate. Setting off a chain reaction of pure energy that flowed directly into its mate in Southlock. Tristian was no longer conscious of her Self. She was the Mother's Own; this was her land, her power, and her right. Nothing would take this away from her.

And then...a soft touch, a gentle warmth, a breath of spring, a piercing cry and her heart tore as Sidell's cry pierced her soul. Home, and the beat of a heart, bound to hers tighter than the Mother's bond called her home.

"Sidell," was all she managed as she collapsed in her lover's arms. "The stable, Tinder..tell..."

"Shhh, they've gone now, my heart, my love. You came back. I...I felt you leave."

"Home...I promised...love.."

Sidell cradled her gently letting the paralyzing fear of losing her lover fade. A storm raged above her and she didn't notice. The storm loosed by the tremendous energy expelled at the joining of the two master nodes that now pulsed in tangent. One in Mhyr, the other in Southlock and the Mother sighed in pleasure.

Sidell felt her mother's hands brush through her hair. "Let's go home, dear heart."

Sidell looked up to see Ceil.

"We'll care for Tinder. She's been abused but they haven't had her long and...for the most part, it's minor." Ceil nodded towards Brianna who stared at Sidell and Tristian in awe. "If Tinder needs more help, we'll wake Bri up and send them off to Dyan."

Sidell nodded and Emma gathered the two of them and ported them home.

Tristian smiled as her lover joined her and lay back against her chest. "Comfortable?"

Adeena snorted, "I'd say yes to that, Consort."

They were in Mhyr enjoying the day with their friends. Jastyn dropped down beside them and

offered a piece of the cake she'd brought with her. "Here, best have some before Erin eats the whole thing."

Sidell chuckled, "Figured she'd out grow that sweet tooth by now."

"Hummph, I think it's growing." Jas looked out at her lover. The work with the scouts had Erin a tanned bronze. She stood tall and proud, her features planed down to the firm lines of maturity having finally outgrown the baby fat. She was sleek and strong and Jastyn loved her dearly.

"She looks good," Sidell commented seeing where Jastyn's attention was held.

"That she does" the woman agreed.

"So do you," Sidell smiled at her.

Jas blushed and stammered a thank you. She jumped up and with a wink ran over to jump on her mate's back bringing Erin down to the applause of the youngsters.

Tristian chuckled, "I'm very glad for the change in Jas."

Adeena smiled at her, "As am I. And Kayla? Can you believe that was our little hellion?"

Tristian laughed outright. Kayla was spending half the year with Erin and Jas and she was turning into a proper lady. She had a mischievous streak a mile wide and could still tussle with the boys but in Dyan, she was a little sweetheart and the colony loved her.

Erin came over to join them.

"How's the outriding?" Tristian asked.

"Quiet. The last two weeks we were out we ran into a few thieves and such but, for the most part, things are quiet. The land seems to be back to normal and we've not had any sightings of monsters lately."

It had been two months since the battle in Mhyr and since Mhyr would not support their outlands adequately, Tristian had the scouts riding the width of the land. Mhyr was left to patrol their Holding proper but the outskirts were now handled by Dyan. The nobles argued but Tristian ignored them and Mhyr's outlying farms were beginning to do well. Tristian had established a trade agreement relieving the burden of Dyan's farms. She kept the supply and demand even and had even open trade to Dram, Widden and Darena. Dyan provided the transport and the trade seemed to be bringing prosperity to the families that had always suffered the most. Off course, Mhyr was now forced to purchase supplies at competitive prices and the majority of the nobles were suffering. Tristian refused to interfere in their Holding and left it for their leader. The scouts roaming the land ensured that the outlying farms were not being threatened.

As she envisioned, mage enrollment had increased as well as enrollment in the scouts and the

warriors. The scouts now rode out with twelve women of which two were always mages.

The Lady Adair had finally tested her ability to sleep without the wards. As suspected the node and the entity abusing it was the cause. She was now actively pursuing a seat on the council, hell bent on bringing her people up to the level of the rest of Riger. Joram Lionae had been removed from the council although he was allowed to remain in Mhyr. Apparently, nothing a noble did would have them banished. There wasn't enough of them Tristian guessed. She was fully rested and preparing to seal the remaining nodes in the land. She also knew that entity was still out there but...for now...there was nothing to do about that. Tristian had also found that the larger nodes could be used to find the lesser nodes and she'd successfully sealed all of Dyan and most of Mhyr to her bond.

The scouts had been finding little villages cropping up across the land. The villages vowed themselves to Dyan and Emma was shocked when she received the annual taxes. The villages had found out from Aretha Dubear Dyan's tax base and incorporated it into their tax structure. They figured it would help keep the scouts out in the land. Tristian had merely grinned and told Emma to use it for the Scouts since the warriors were still based only in Dyan. Being the foresighted Leader that she was, she did just that and the Scout forces continued to grow. The villagers then worked with the scouts to set up overnight lodging so that any squad nearby could stop in and be comfortable. When Tristian heard that she dropped their taxes by the difference it would cost to maintain the lodging. A happy balance was met and the scouts rode the land in near luxury. Trade roads started appearing and Tristian was waiting to see what Dyan would do when someone built a village complete with trade roads on their borders. Sidell merely laughed and told her it would be her problem anyway. She was roused from her somnolent repose by the call of supper.

Sidell bounced into her lover's office giggling.

Tristian eyed her warily. "What?"

"Guess who's on our border?"

"I give up."

"Now, now. You have to guess."

"Erin?"

Sidell scowled.

"Babe, there are a lot of people in Riger."

Sidell sighed, "Alright. Ceil."

"Is she coming in or is she just gonna hang out on the border?"

"Apparently, love, Ceil has decided that she wants to run a tavern. The majority of her guardians also had plans of their own."

Tristian chuckled, "I get it. We're gonna have a village on our border."

"Aye. But the best news is that Ceil entered Dyan and found the outlying farms and asked their permission to establish a village. She's worked out some kind of trade with them and in turn they'll have a closer place to go for a night out."

"So...not only is she on the border but the people nearest to her are happy to see her?"

"Aye."

Tristian grinned, "Awesome. Come on, let's take a ride."

"I knew you'd say that. We're all saddled, packed and just waiting on you my heart."

They spent three leisurely days riding out and Sidell realized the news she'd received was a bit old. Seems the village had been there for at least a month and traders were already pulling in. "Some scouts we've got," she chided. "They missed a village on our own borders."

Tristian chuckled, "I'll have to update the routes. They never come out here; there was never anything out here to check on. Maybe they'd swing by every three months or so."

"A likely story," she teased.

"Hey you two," Ceil greeted them happily.

"How are you running a tavern out here?" Tristian asked as Ceil strolled down the street towards them.

"What? Me? Oh no, not me?" Ceil denied. She grinned and turned them to the tavern. "Hungry?"

"Aye."

They stepped in and Tristian laughed, "Lucan, what in the hell?"

"Thomas, damn you look better every time I see you." She pointed around her and indicated the people filling her tavern, "Not too shabby eh?"

"Hell, if I'd known you were here I'd have been here sooner."

"Why do you think we didn't tell you," a droll voice asked as Maria Delgado entered. "You're supposed to be resting not riding around the damn land."

Sidell snickered and Tristian just shook her head following Lucan to a table. "Now, you all sit and we'll have the food out in no time."

"What brings you way out here?" Tristian asked digging in to her meal with relish.

Ceil quirked a brow at Maria.

Maria shrugged, "It's all in my reports, they're just on the bottom of the pile and she hasn't gotten to them yet."

"What?"

"Remember the villages?"

"Aye."

"Well, they pretty much make a straight road to here."

Tristian choked on her stew. "Shit, you're kidding me."

"Nope. From east to west we've got a trade road that pretty much lines up and leads right to our borders."

"Okay, so maybe way out here is not what I meant. What brings you out here at all?"

"Ahh, now that's a different story," Ceil chuckled in reply. "Seems since the living in the country was safer than living in the colony, the people of Mhyr have been ... relocating. Granted we've got families from all the Holdings but most of Mhyr occupies the villages and Dyan protects them. We're all pretty happy."

Tristian shook her head and grinned. "Damn, I never really wondered where the people were coming from."

"Right, so, since the Guardians were pretty much just harassing those left I decided I'd had enough and had planned to come out and take you up on that job. Lucan had other ideas. Since we all just gossip in the Blade, she pretty much knew what we all wanted to do and one night when just the right people were present, she made her offer, We'd pool our resources and build our own village." Ceil grinned, "Now that idea caught on quick and a few of us took off to find a viable setting. I found this one and fell in love with it."

Tristian admitted it was a beautiful area; the woods were thick and full of game. A large river ran nearby to provide water for the village and apparently they'd found a well to be used for the village.

"Well, you're right. It is. In fact, if you head up that range for about a half a day, you'll find the

best hot springs in the area."

"Ohhhh," Sidell murmured. "You never took me there."

"Sweetheart, it's a three almost four day ride for us and we have a hot tub."

Sidell grimaced but agreed it was a bit out of the way.

Ceil laughed and made a note to check it out. "Anyway, I crossed your borders and spoke to your outlying farmers. Apparently, Hilltop?" She looked around and Maria nodded. "Hilltop is almost a two day ride south for them. They'd gotten used to not bothering. We, on the other hand, are within a days ride. They liked it and we arranged trade for meat, produce and fruit. Goddess you people have some incredible fruit. We've got some farmers coming in but I don't know about herdfarming. I'd hate to ruin the land like that. Anyway we talked and we're limiting the farming to produce. We can hunt for supper and Lucan trades with Dyan for her stuff."

Sidell laughed at Ceil's excitement.

"So, we've been here for about a month and we passed word back that Lucan was moving here and," Ceil looked around in contentment, "we've been a hit ever since."

"So, let me guess," Tristian sighed and leaned back in pleasure, "You would be the town magistrate."

"Got it. I keep the peace in the village, the scouts take care of the outskirts, we pay our taxes and life has been good."

"Well, it's been a long trip and I'm sleepy," Tristian complained.

Lucan came with a room for them and refused to take any more money. "Na ah, you still have a tab."

Sidell laughed, "Lucan, you've just built a new tavern, don't turn down money."

"No. A deal's a deal and you still have credit. Off with you both."

The sound of hoof beats pounding in the dirt drew their attention. From the direction, these were coming from Dyan. Tristian looked to Maria who shrugged.

They moved out into the fading light and watched as a squad of warriors barreled into the village. "Maria," Tristian muttered softly, "tell me you know who's in the lead?"

"I do. Puck's been having trouble with her but unless Puck moved to Hilltop, it was difficult to keep an eye on her."

Tristian watched Ceil move to the street. "What seems to be the problem, Warrior?"

"We don't want you here, is the problem."

"We're not on your land, Warrior, this is free land."

"This is our border and you are not welcomed here." The woman glared around. "I suggest you people leave or I'll bring my garrison here and burn it down."

"Now wait a minute," Ceil replied heatedly.

"Shut up. You've heard my ultimatum. You have three days."

"On whose orders?" Tristian asked from the shadows.

"I don't need to answer to you, whoever you are but the Leader of Dyan wants you gone."

"Funny," Sidell murmured stepping into the light. "I don't recall hearing that. In fact," she continued, "Mother thought it was pretty funny. Perhaps I misunderstood, Commander Weiss?"

"Lady du Aulstet," the woman murmured. "It's possible that you misunderstood. Our Leader may not have wanted to upset you by showing you the side of her that needs to be strong for our benefit."

"Funny," Tristian drawled, stepping out beside her lover, "I don't recall it either. Nor do I recall the Leader commanding the Warriors. What part don't I understand?"

"Who are you?" Commander Weiss growled.

The woman behind her dismounted smartly and saluted. "Commander Mardred."

Tristian grinned, "What brings you here, Kel?"

"Puck needed proof and our orders were to allow Commander Weiss enough rope to hang herself provided she harmed no one."

"Very good. I'll commend Puck myself. Now, arrest this idiot and remove her from my sight." Tristian paused, "Kelsey?"

"Aye, Consort?"

"Do we need to worry about the rest of this crowd?"

"Nay, Consort. Half are with me and the rest are merely following orders."

"Need I worry about the Garrison?"

"Not once Puck is done with them and I'll send my report this eve, Consort."

"Well done. Carry on." She halted again, "Wait." She turned to Ceil, "Magistrate, my apologies, this is your territory, would you like her?"

"Yeah, I would but I've nothing on her. Smarting off to the magistrate is not a hanging offense. Maybe I'll change the rules." Ceil snickered, "Nay, Commander, I'll trust that you'll take care of this and my people are satisfied that Dyan has no trouble with us being here."

"So be it." She turned to Kelsey, "You'll be acting until Puck settles this. I will be in Hilltop in four days, and I would be pleased to see the final results."

"Aye, Consort."

"Wait...Sidell," Commander Weiss pleaded. "I...only want what's best for Dyan."

"As do we all Weiss but Mother makes that call and you had no authority to terrorize these people. Can you defend or do you believe you know more than our Leader."

"I..only want what's best."

Sidell turned away and Tristian glared at them until they were back on their way.

"Seems I've been a bit too involved in outland business," Tristian muttered.

Sidell soothed her, "There is only one of you, sweetheart, and you've done an incredible job for just single you. We'll handle Dyan now, you've not fully recovered and I don't want to be that frightened ever again."

They rode into Hilltop. Kelsey saw them but Tristian nodded her off. She wanted to see what happened to visitors. They were greeted politely and found a decent Inn with a Tavern.

"Honey?" Sidell murmured softly, "Can we port home?"

Tristian chuckled. We'll we can but I'd hoped to make my way south and stop off at the rest of the colonies before we reached Freelock again."

"Goddess bless," Sidell grumbled. "I do love a warrior."

Tristian squeezed her hand gently, "That you do, my heart."

The innkeeper strolled up. "Ten drachs for a room and supper."

Tristian reached for her pouch but Sidell jumped up in surprise. "Are you out of you mind? Ten

drachs for that? Keep your room, and your food."

The woman sighed, "Lady, you'll not find a better price. The council has set the rates and we all have to charge what they say or they close us down."

"What? What council? The council of Hilltop?" Sidell asked in disbelief.

"Aye, the Elders Council."

"Where might one find this council at this time of day?"

"Ahhh, Lady, you don't wanna do that. They get nasty."

"Where?"

The woman fretted but muttered, "Try the Council Tap. It's the large Tavern on the end but I doubt they'll let you in."

"Why is that?"

"It's private, has a membership and everything."

"Thank you. Here," Sidell handed the woman the price she asked for, "keep our room and our meals warm, we'll be back."

"Most likely be in jail," the woman muttered as they left the building. "I tried."

Tristian tried to keep a straight face but Sidell was just too cute when she was angry.

"No smirking," Sidell growled

Tristian chuckled and bit her lip to keep from smirking. They approached the doorway and a large woman moved to block it.

"Passes?"

Sidell grinned and turned to her lover, "Passes, sweetheart?"

"Of course, my heart."

The woman never saw the left that laid her out cold. Tristian propped her up and opened the door for her partner.

They looked around the smoke filled room and Tristian winced as her eyes watered. "Damn, somebody should open a window."

Sidell complied raising the first chair she came to and throwing it through the nearest window. "How's that?" she smirked.

"Ahh, much better," Tristian muttered. "Maybe a cross breeze would help." She picked up the woman obviously sent to remove them and threw her through the opposite side window. The smoke cleared sluggishly. "Well it's working, slowly."

Another woman attacked from the rear and Tristian buried her elbow into her gut. Having run out of windows, Tristian threw her through the door. The smoke moved briskly. "Ahh, that was it."

"You're so talented," Sidell praised her.

The patrons were getting the hint and had started to squeeze out the broken door further clearing the air.

"What do you want?" the quaking bartender asked.

"Oh. The Elders Council, might they be here?"

"Aye," he pointed to the hallway. "Left, last door."

"Thank you," Sidell replied politely. She turned and straightened her lover's jerkin and hair.

Tristian grinned, "You're enjoying this aren't you?"

"It's not often I have the greatest warrior at my side in a fight."

"You aren't supposed to be in a fight," Tristian argued.

"See? My point exactly."

Admitting defeat Tristian led them forward. Looking both ways the only visible guards were to the left. "Must be it."

"That's my scout," Sidell teased, patting her back.

Tristian shook her head and padded down the hall.

"Passes?" The bored woman on Tristian's left asked. Tristian took out the one on the right with a front kick that broke her jaw and the one on the left with an elbow. "These aren't guards," she complained.

"No whining, warrior. It's so unbecoming."

They opened the door to another smoke filled room. A slender woman glided up to them. "Yes?"

May I help you?"

Sidell spotted her quarry and shook her head. "No thanks, I see them."

The woman snapped her fingers impatiently and a large man moved up and grabbed Sidell's arm. Tristian broke his arm in three places before she released him. "Never touch. Lay there and be a good boy before I turn you into a girl."

"Just a minute," the woman sputtered seeing her outer guards indisposed.

Sidell smiled, "Really, we're fine."

The five members of the council sat in shock as the Heir to Dyan approached the table. "Council, how wonderful to see you."

"Sidell? What..brings you here?"

"Here as in Hilltop or here as in this disgusting place?" Sidell asked amiably.

Tristian put her back against the wall as the Warriors burst into the hall.

"It's about damn time," the woman snapped. "Arrest these women."

Puck entered the room and nodded. "You heard her, arrest them."

The warriors picked up the fallen guards and dragged them out the hall. "Oh, and take this...male, also."

"What are you doing?" the woman hissed. "Your Commander and I have an agreement now I don't know who you are but,"

"I'm the Commander, madam. Commander Weiss is no longer with us."

A large bang at the end of the hall showed Kelsey breaking open a closed door. Her curses carried clearly back to them. The warriors opened all the doors and low male cursing could be heard along with quiet sobbing.

Puck's face froze into a mask of rage and she grabbed the woman securing her arms. "I think you need to come along also."

"Puck, hold."

Tristian pushed off the wall and made her way up the hall. She peered in and saw her worst fears confirmed. Children were being used for sexual pleasures. Tristian's gaze raked the offenders and she barked, "Take them into the back room. Kelsey, I want this place searched from top to bottom and it better be clean."

"Aye, Consort."

The men and women that had paid for the pleasures of defiling the children were thrown into a huddled mass in the room. "Put her with them, Puck."

"Wait.."

"And shut her up."

As Sidell listened to the council's babbling the warriors searched. Tristian extended her senses and found a cellar room. Ordering it clear they found twelve beaten and starved children. Tristian had them carried out as the council watched. When she was sure all was clear she pointed to the council. "Join your friends,"

"But..."

Tristian had no more patience and a simple wave had them huddled on the floor. "Clear this room."

Sidell eased herself against her lover and leaned back against her. Tristian's hand glowed and she pointed igniting the huddled mass of people now screaming on the floor. Sidell closed her eyes and turned her face into Tristian's chest. Tristian remained until the final screams and a brilliant flare scattered ashes as she ported them out igniting the rest of the building. She stood outside monitoring the blaze, ensuring it didn't get out of hand. Sidell curled tightly against her.

"Sidell?"

Sidell looked up slowly and smiled weakly, "I'm here, love. I'm here."

"I want to go to the jail."

"Alright, let's go."

Tristian found Commander Weiss and the unknown male. The guards she merely told Puck to handle. She glared at the Commander and the male. "You two will hang in the morning."

Weiss' jaw dropped, "What..you can't I...but."

Tristian turned and left her babbling. "Puck, arrange the gallows."

Puck looked at Weiss coldly, "You know. There is some humor to this."

"What, I'm gonna die?"

"Well, besides that. I find that pretty humorous also. But, this all happened because you had a

wild hair and tried to run off that new village. They really weren't slated to come this way yet." Puck grinned mirthlessly, "So thank you, Weiss. Saved me the trouble of having to make this call myself."

Tristian took Sidell to their private place between worlds. They talked, loved and moved on, they needed to return quickly but the private time allowed Sidell the time to reacquaint herself with her lover and forget the raging warrior that appeared when there was a need.

They returned to find Emma staring at the charred remains of the Council Tap. "Stay with Emma, my heart. This won't take long."

Sidell nodded and Emma's arm circled her gently.

Tristian entered the compound and nodded for Puck to begin. The two prisoners raged and pleaded but the sight of the children had driven all mercy from Tristian. She nodded again and the two dropped quickly their necks snapping audibly.

Tristian turned and rejoined her mate.

A shaken Aurora joined them in the tavern. "Dear Goddess how long has that been going on?"

"We don't know." Tristian answered. "Puck is rounding up the information and we're trying to trace the children's family's."

"They remind you of Jas," Aurora guessed accurately.

Tristian nodded slowly, "Aye. I found her. This...brought it all back."

"Oh Alwyn," Sidell breathed, "not Jastyn."

"She's not to know that you know, my heart. She's doing well and the last thing she needs is to be reminded by pity."

"Call a colony meeting," Emma murmured. "Let's get them all together and see what happens."

Tristian nodded. "I'd still like Puck to continue, some won't talk in public."

Emma agreed and they moved off to their tasks. The innkeeper approached the table where Sidell had remained.

Sidell smiled gently, "Join me."

"I...overheard. I...we all knew."

"Why?" Sidell cried softly, "How?"

"Scared." The innkeeper replied in disgust. "Frightened like children. We let them walk all over us as they kept piling laws upon laws upon laws. The warriors were helping and we didn't have the guts to go to the Leader." She broke into tears, "We had no excuse, m'lady. None and Alwyn help me those children are ours."

"Nooo," Sidell breathed, "Dear Alwyn no."

"Yes. My sister is one of them. I...let them take her rather than give up my inn. I can still see her eyes, her loving, trusting eyes, begging me to help."

Sidell didn't know what to feel, her insides were crawling and the horror ate away at her. She felt shame, pain, anger and rage. "Nooooo, please..."

Emma saw Tristian tearing across the street. "What now?"

Tristian tore the door off the hinge in her rush and almost flew across the room landing on Sidell and pulling her to the floor. "Easy...easy...love."

"NOOOOOOO," Sidell screamed in anguish.

Tristian raised a shield around them as she laid on her back cradling her lover on her. "I've got you, let go, my heart, let go."

And Sidell did, letting her rage free and trusting in her lover to protect them. She railed in anger and screamed her outrage. Tristian held her gently, letting her ease the horror in her soul, murmuring softly, "I'm here, right here and I love you. Let go, my heart. I'm here."

Aurora approached the innkeeper and touched her gently. "What did you tell her?"

"The truth, Mage Mardred. I told her the truth. May Alwyn damn my soul."

Sidell was calming and Tristian rolled up into a sitting position then rose fluidly, her mate in her arms. Sidell whispered, "Tristian, the children are theirs. The colony's."

Tristian's eyes closed as they stood there trying to gain strength from the love between them. She turned and strode out the door.

Tristian took them to the colony hall and found a quiet corner in the back. She sat and placed Sidell on her lap. Snuggling, they awaited the colony meeting.

Emma called the session in order. "We've...found that a ring of ...dear Alwyn I can't even say it." She took a breath. "Child molestation has been operating in this colony. The obvious culprit's are no longer with us. What I want to know is how long...how was it allowed to operate...and where did the children come from?" Emma sat and looked out sadly, "Come forward, ladies, the children depend on you."

A small woman stood, crying she gasped, "One...one of them is...mmmy, daughter."

Slowly the women stood and claimed the horrors that would live with them forever.

Emma arranged for Jax and a full complement of healers to station in the colony. She didn't want a rash of suicides on her hands and the children still needed help.

She found Tristian and Sidell in the Elder's office. "Tristian, please forgive me for saying this but I have to say something. Why didn't you destroy this colony?" Emma broke and Sidell moved to comfort her mother. Tristian squeezed her shoulder and let herself out.

"Puck, I want riders out. Include the scouts; find me families to take these children. I want strong, loving families Puck and I'll be checking on them monthly."

Puck saluted and left to carry out her orders. Tristian ported to Southlock. Ariel found her curled up over the master node.

"Bonded, what hurts you so?"

Tristian met this woman's gaze and felt the warmth of the mother. She told her.

"Oh Mother. Bring them here, Bonded. Let the Mother heal them."

"Ariel, there are twenty-five children."

"It doesn't matter, we will heal them, raise them, love them." She watched Tristian closely, "You know you're always welcomed. You can check them as often as you wish. With the node here, we couldn't hide anything from you, Bonded. That's why we trust you so much. This node bonds us all."

Tristian sat for a bit, "Leave me. Let me walk Her winds, Ariel. I will answer on my return."

Tristian felt gentle fingers brush through her hair and she dove, releasing her anger, her rage, her shame of womankind, and the Mother embraced her, loving her, healing her.

Hours later Tristian walked into Southlock. Ariel smiled and Tristian returned to Hilltop.

"Puck, recall the riders. I'm taking them to Southlock."

"Aye, Consort."

Tristian went to find Emma and Sidell. "Hey you."

Sidell smiled weakly and Tristian gathered her close. Sidell could feel the healing touch of the Mother on her lover's aura and she allowed it to soothe her soul. "You're taking them to Southlock." Not a question.

"Aye."

"Good," was all Sidell said as the warmth of the Mother's love filled her.

Emma nodded in agreement. "I'll put this colony back together. This is something I should have caught,"

Her rantings were cut off as Tristian squeezed her hand, "Don't. As my lady reminded me, there is only one of each of us. We've done the best we can."

Emma's grasp tightened and she bowed her head in acceptance of her own limitations. "Where...where are you two off to next?"

"The next colony," Sidell responded. "Westlock."

They ported the children and their mounts to Southlock staying long enough to assist in building a common shelter for the children. Four adults would always be present. They watched as Ariel braided the Mother's power and laid it gently across the children. They watched the huddled postures ease.

Part 6

The next morning saw them riding across the land for Westlock.

"Consort?"

"Hey Tinder, how are you?"

"All better. It wasn't bad," Tinder grinned. "How is the Lady?"

"Fine last I heard. Still fighting for Mhyr but at the rate they're going, Mhyr won't be there much longer."

Tinder chuckled. "Would you two join us? We've just made camp."

Sidell grinned, "If you cook. I'm tired of mine and afraid of Tristian's."

"Find anything?" Tristian asked as the sat around the small camp.

"Nah. It's been quiet," Tinder responded. "We're heading for the eastern border and then north and home."

"Ahh. Stop by the new village on the border," Sidell suggested.

"Yeah?" another scout queried. "A new village, cool."

"Aye, you'll see some old friends."

Tinder laughed, "You're a tease, Sidell."

"True, but think of the excitement I've given you. Something to look forward to for the boring ride."

A week later they found Westlock.

They entered the colony and were greeted courteously by the guards. The sound of laughing children brought a happy sigh to Sidell's lips. Tristian smiled and helped her dismount. Sidell entered the large Inn and Tristian put up the mounts.

Sidell looked up as a shadow fell over her.

"Evening," the woman greeted her and sat down. "You're new here."

"I'm also tired, let's not play games tonight, alright?"

The woman chuckled. "No games, I'm the garrison Commander and I always greet our visitors. Makes for less confusion down the road."

"Ahh, my apologies," Sidell offered.

"Nay, Lady, none is need. I admit I tend to come across like that but," she shrugged and indicated her large frame, "there's not much I can do about this."

Sidell grinned, "No I guess not." She watched Tristian sit at the bar and casually turn to watch them.

"Can I ask if you're just visiting or passing through?" the Commander queried.

"Both actually. I'm visiting for a few days and then heading on northward."

"You're not selling anything, my guards didn't report a wagon, you can ask your tall friend to join us, save me having to corner her also."

Sidell chuckled and beckoned Tristian over, "The garrison Commander."

"Ahhh, Commander Leach."

"Aye," the woman agreed. She eyed them carefully but hesitated to ask. "Not much to the rules here, ladies. Don't do nothing to someone that you wouldn't want done to you. We've got some fair shopping and the merchants will haggle until your leg falls off but it's normally in fun. If you have trouble with a merchant come to the warriors first, I'd prefer our visitors not slash their way

through our citizens." She grinned at Tristian with that and Tristian nodded in return. "Else ladies, enjoy your visit. Alwyn knows the innkeeper will be happy. Oh...the beach...be careful if'n you're gonna swim. Some times the current is a might rough especially if you're not use to it. I tell you this honestly cause sure as I'm Leach you're gonna see our youngsters out there having a grand time and you're gonna think it's a snap. Tisn't and our younguns were raised here. I'd hate to have to pull either of you out of the sea."

"Have a pleasant evening, ladies," the woman concluded standing.

"Thank you, Commander, we appreciate the greeting."

Leach shrugged, "Makes my job easier."

"What do you think?" Sidell asked.

Tristian yawned, "I think I'm gonna enjoy my vacation unless or until something goes wrong."

"Tch, look at you, lazy."

"Told you, I love being on the trail. Puts me in a great mood and with the colonies being so small I don't feel so overwhelmed when I enter them."

They had a large room with an indoor tub. Tristian grinned at the water heating for them and hurriedly filled the tub. Sidell found the large window looked out over the sea and she pushed the panels open. A gentle breeze fluttered through the room. Sighing softly she joined her mate.

Tristian woke at dawn and snuggled into her lover for a bit. She kissed her blonde head and dressed for her morning run.

She'd just left the colony perimeter when she realized she had a shadow. Grinning wildly she picked up her pace, dashing over the packed sand easily. She'd been running in Freelock for over a year and the sand there was softer. This was nothing. She chuckled halfway through her run as her shadow fell off. Tristian circled the colony taking the time to confirm that the nodes knew her. The gentle sharing with her bondmate only increased her energy and she ran faster not slowing until she approached the colony gates. The guards grinned widely at her and greeted her enthusiastically, "Morning, great day for a run, eh?"

"Aye," Tristian responded in amusement. "The scenery's not bad either. This is some beautiful country."

"Aye, that it is." The woman stuck out a hand, "Freeda, this here's Jillan."

"Tristian, nice to meet you."

"You too. Mayhap, if you're in the tavern this eve, we can down a mug or two."

"Sounds good to me. Any tavern in particular?"

"Nah, the one you're in is the best and we're normally always in there." She smiled, "Actually, was surprised you didn't stay in the Dove, they're a bit more uppity."

Tristian snorted, "Don't do uppity. Liable to get in trouble with your Commander happen I go in there."

Freedra chuckled, "Aye, that's why we don't. Ol Leach has got a nasty right cross. Doesn't pay to get on her bad side."

Tristian smiled, "I've no intentions of finding out but I'll mind the warning if'n I have to."

The women shared a laugh and Tristian moseyed back to the inn. She found Sidell sitting with a woman that appeared to be soaked in sweat and catching her breath.

"Morning, love," Sidell greeted her.

Tristian grinned and kissed her softly, "Morning. Let me go wipe off the sweat."

"I'll have your breakfast ready." Sidell promised.

"She could pretend she was tired," Tristian heard the other woman growl and she chuckled softly.

She returned quickly and dove into the large platter in front of her. Sidell fussed with her hair and Tristian smiled softly at her allowing her to straighten a stubborn lock. "Better?"

"Aye, love. This is Shauna. Apparently, she was trying to follow you."

"What for?"

Shauna shrugged. "Seemed odd that someone on vacation would go for a run." She lifted a hand, "Hey, they pay me to be suspicious, shoot Puck if you want someone to holler at." Shauna had apparently caught her breath and was sucking on her juice.

Sidell chuckled, "Anyway, she wants to know what I feed you."

Tristian's brow quirked and Sidell laughed, "Aye, I told her same as everyone else but she didn't believe me so I invited her to join us."

"Ahhh," Tristian murmured, polishing off her meal. "Good, Anya would be jealous."

"That she would," Sidell agreed. "What are you up to today?"

"I'm gonna have Shadow and Summer's shoes replaced if I can find a good smithy. Also need my sword banged out."

"From what?"

"Beats me, I just want the nicks taken out, the blade's a might ragged."

"Hmmm," Sidell teased, "to much fun for me, love."

"You're going shopping and don't try to fool me. You always go shopping. What on Riger could you possibly need?"

"It's the thrill of the hunt, the haggle, the successful bargain."

Tristian smirked and kissed her softly. "Don't run them out of merchandise."

"Look you, be nice or I'm gonna hurt you."

"I'm worried," Tristian smarted off leaving Shauna breathless again from laughing.

"Brat," Sidell muttered.

Tristian was chatting happily with the blacksmith as they reshod the horses when they heard the calls for help. The woman looked up and barked, "The beach."

Tristian didn't wait for anymore and she tore out towards the voices. A woman stood in the water pointing out at a struggling body. Tristian headed out the natural jetty pouring on the speed trying to beat the hapless swimmer.

"Shit," Leach muttered. "That's an undertow. I hope the hell the tall one can swim."

Leach hurried down to the beach as Tristian dove off the jetty.

A minute later Leach felt the hum of power and stopped in shock as Tristian appeared on the beach, the child cradled carefully in her arms.

"C'mon youngster," Tristian coaxed turning the child face down and pressing her back gently. "C'mon,"

The young girl coughed and water spewed out. "Good girl," Tristian praised her, "good girl. Can you breath alright?"

The girl shuddered and coughed again taking huge gulps of air. Tristian smiled and lifted her upright. "There ya go, where's your mum, huh?"

"Here, thank you. I don't know how to thank you."

Tristian shrugged, "Glad I was here, Lady, her breathing's thanks enough." She left mother and child sobbing happily as they turned up the beach.

Turning she found Sidell with a linen. "Come here you, I swear I can't leave you for a minute."

"Wasn't my fault," Tristian protested.

"Yeah, that's what you always say." Sidell stopped and caressed her face gently, "She's alright?"

"Aye, love, a bit of a scare and a sore throat. Healer can fix that and she'll be fine."

Sidell smiled and looked at her soaking wet lover, "Come on, let's get you changed before you get a cold. You're a lousy patient."

Tristian grinned and hugged her tight soaking her tunic.

"Ahhh, Tristian, I swear I'm gonna hurt you."

"Gotta catch me first," Tristian taunted heading up the beach with Sidell hot on her trail. Neither noticed Leach's musing look.

They came down the stairs laughing happily and settled for lunch. An overdressed pinch faced woman joined them. "May I?"

Tristian shrugged and kept eating.

"Please," Sidell offered. "How may we help you?" She saw Leach walk in and was surprised when the woman stopped with a scowl and moved to the bar.

"I believe I can help you. I've taken the liberty of telling the innkeeper to move your belongings to the Floating Dove."

"You what?" Tristian thundered stopping all noise in the Inn.

"I've taken," the woman began.

"I heard you dammit, I want to know why and who the hell do you think you are?"

Tristian saw a young girl descending with their bags and snapped out. "Return those youngster."

"But..." the young girl began.

"It's alright, sweetheart," Sidell assured her rising. "Come on, I'll give you a hand."

The innkeeper looked up guiltily as the woman glared at her. She cleared her throat. "Lady..."

Sidell stopped and looked at her, "Trust me, innkeeper, if you plan on telling me you've rented the room out from under us, don't. Believe me, you don't want to go there."

"Aye, Lady," the innkeeper responded faintly.

Tristian rose and picked the woman up throwing her out the door. "Best find your manners happen you plan on speaking to us again." She returned to her seat and shook herself vigorously, "Ahhh, better."

Leach joined her and she grinned, "Hey, I didn't slash anybody."

Leach laughed, "Uhhmm no you didn't but...you sure did irritate the mages."

Tristian shrugged, "They'll get over it.." she paused, "or not."

"So, Commander," Sidell began as she reclaimed her seat. "What was that?"

"Well, Lady, at least one of you is a mage."

Sidell giggled, "No..."

Leach scowled. "You don't hum."

Tristian looked at her. "What?"

"Well, you did on the beach but you don't any other time so I didn't know you were a mage."

"What difference does it make?"

Leach shrugged, "I'm not sure but they like to be separated from us. They don't cause us trouble so we leave them alone. I think this is the first time they didn't know a mage entered the colony. Normally, they'd have met you at the gate and shuttled you off to the Dove."

"Freedra says the Dove is uppity." Tristian put in.

"Who is Freedra?" Sidell asked curiously.

"The guard at the gate. We were talking this morning. They apparently found it funny that Shauna came back tired."

"You brat," Sidell smacked her, "you knew she was there."

"Course I did but she didn't want to be sociable and I didn't want a shadow. I'd have run with her if she'd have just come out." Tristian frowned at her, "Where was I?"

"Freeda, Dove, uppity," Sidell supplied.

"Oh, yeah. Anyway, that's what she said and I don't do uppity." She grinned at Leach, "So we can't stay there. You won't let me slash your citizens and Freeda says you've got a mean right hook. I'm scared of you so we're staying here."

Leach looked to Sidell plaintively, "She always like this?"

Sidell laughed and brushed Tristian's hair off her ear, "Yah, she's a brat."

"I can't help it, it's genetic," Tristian supplied innocently.

"Ohhh, I'm gonna remember that one,"

They chuckled and Tristian sighed as a woman entered with ferret face, as Tristian had dubbed her. The woman's power crackled and there was a noticeable hum in the air.

"May we? I'm Teela Doane and this is Ferra Yemin."

"Fix your shield first," Tristian directed.

"Pardon?"

"Your shield, fix it. I know first year students that can control their power better. You'll give me a headache and I don't like headaches so either fix your shield or leave."

"Do you know who I am?" the woman replied in annoyance.

Tristian scratched her ear, "Let me guess, you're Teela Doane."

Sidell gurgled in mirth as Teela rose to her full height.

"I don't know who you are but I'd watched my step if I were you."

"I would too, if I were you. With all that energy crackling I'm surprised you can see in front of you."

"Goddess you need a lesson," Teela muttered in anger.

"Oh no," Sidell moaned. "Tell me she's not that stupid?" She looked pleadingly at Leach who had backed off the table. Leach shrugged.

Tristian continued eating, "So, what's it gonna be?"

"I...I.." Teela was now so angry she could barely think straight. She turned to Ferra and Tristian

felt the power build. Sidell shook her head, "She is. I don't believe this."

Together the woman struck intending to show this upstart her place. Tristian continued eating and the room turned around furtively. The humming could no longer be felt and Teela was looking at her hands in shock. Ferra was also upset and the two women stared at Tristian.

"You know," Tristian spoke evenly. "I don't like you two. I don't like bullies and I don't like people that think they're better than others. But mostly, I don't like people that insist on interrupting my meal, so run along ladies before you get yourselves into even more trouble."

"But...our powers?"

Tristian shrugged, "Hey, you couldn't control them anyway. You can't possibly miss them." She pointed meaningfully at the door and the two stumbled out in horror.

"You are so bad," Sidell murmured softly, kissing her cheek.

"I thought I was being nice. Besides, Leach would have decked me if I'd slashed them."

Sidell chuckled, "Well I suppose you now want to talk to Leach?"

"Aye, love."

"Then I'm going back to my shopping."

Tristian grinned and stood helping her lady up. She turned to Leach, "Come on, Commander, I'll introduce myself in the compound."

As they entered the compound they passed a squad of scouts. The leader came to attention and saluted, "Consort, welcome to Westlock."

"Thanks, Trey," Tristian responded, "How's it looking?"

"Good. The land's settled again and we're not finding clawed bunnies or some such."

Tristian grinned, "You just coming in?"

"Aye,"

"Got a minute?"

"For you? The day if you wish."

"An hour, no more, I promise. Come on, bring the Commander, she seems to be glued to the ground."

Trey chuckled, "You really need to start introducing yourself, Tristian."

"Then I wouldn't find out half the stuff I've been finding."

Trey sighed, "The mages?"

"Aye, come on."

"So, why wasn't the status of the mages reported to Emma?" Tristian asked when they managed to bring Leach around.

Leach groaned, "They really don't normally cause problems and we like having them. They help us out,"

Trey snorted, "For a fee, Gilly. That's not right. We've argued this before."

"I know but the council likes having them and I'm bound to what they want as long as the mages do no harm."

"You know," Tristian mused aloud, "I'm about sick of councils."

Trey looked at her warily.

"Long story. Commander, call a council session, the Heir will be attending."

Trey grinned, "Sidell's here then?"

"Aye, shopping."

"Cool," Trey bounced in her chair.

Tristian laughed, "Go on and find her, tell her I've called a council session in an hour and I want her present."

"Aye, Consort," Trey jumped up, "Best get to it, Gilly, Tristian hates to be kept waiting."

Leach looked at Tristian plaintively, "It's not fair, you two can't just go popping in looking like common travelers."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," Leach admitted. "It just doesn't seem right. There should be guards, whistles, horns, you know, pomp and ceremony?"

Tristian rolled her eyes and Leach chuckled, shaking her head she headed out to round up the council.

They entered the council room to find both Teela and Ferra on the council. Tristian snorted and Sidell hushed her.

"Lady du Aulstet, Mage Mardred, welcome to Westlock."

Sidell smiled gently, "Hello, Elder Reed, how have you been?"

"I can't complain, things could be worse."

"Please, Elder, sit. I've questions regarding the mages."

"Of course, Lady. What can we help you with?"

"It's been brought to our attention that the mages have separated themselves from the populace and are charging fees for extending their help. Why?" Sidell laid the question out bluntly and watched Elder Reed wince.

"You never were one to pull your punches."

Sidell grinned. "I don't like this. Now, why?"

"Well," another began.

"Your name, Elder?"

"Sorry, Lady, I'm Elder Wiggins this is Elder Prog, Elder Doane and Elder Yemin."

"We've met," Tristian supplied wryly.

"Ahh, well then. Elder Doane approached us several years back with a proposition. Since the mages natural energies were too much for our populace, and it really was bothering a lot of people, they would retire to a more secluded facility and keep themselves occupied. We were asked to fund the facility and from then on pay an annual fee for their assistance."

"And you've called on them how often?" Sidell continued her questioning.

"Well, twice this year. When the land started acting strange we asked for assistance."

"And they did what?"

"Well, they looked at it and after several studies explained that it wasn't magic and that the land was merely going through a growth period."

"I see. But you've been paying them faithfully?"

"Oh, aye, Lady," Elder Reed responded earnestly, "a deal's a deal and they were available at any time."

"How many mages are housed in the facility, excluding these two?"

"Only four more, Lady. We've had some come through looking to settle but they moved on."

"So...let me sum up." Sidell turned to Doane, "The mages segregated themselves because they were too incompetent to control their power or...they allowed the power to leak knowing it would make the populace uncomfortable."

"Nay, Lady," Elder Wiggins protested. "They explained it all, mages cannot help themselves when they are so powerful."

"Elder, you are sitting at a table with two of the most powerful mages in Dyan, point them out?"

"I...I don't feel anything," the Elder peered curiously at Doane and Yemin. "And nothing from you two."

"Tristian, if you would?"

Tristian lowered her shields until the air fairly reeked of power and then reshielded.

"Dear Alwyn," Elder Reed breathed. "That's what happens when you drop your shields, Consort."

"Nay. I never drop my shields, I could level this colony if I'm not careful."

She nodded to Sidell.

Sidell did the same demonstration and the Elders were shocked.

"So...the question remains. Incompetence or fraud, which is it, Doane?"

"I don't..." she found herself surrounded in a blue haze, the truth spell.

"Again," Sidell barked.

"I shielded the way I was taught. The best that I knew how."

"Yemin?" Again the truth spell and again the same answer.

"Incredible, who was your trainer?"

"Mage Prader,"

Sidell shook her head and Elder Reed smiled, "Before your time, young Heir."

"Let me guess, all of the mages here were trained in the same manner?"

"We were all in the same class," Elder Doane responded in a huff.

Tristian sighed. "I'll call Aurora and see what she says. If she thinks they can learn I'll restore their powers but they'll have to wait a month to allow their systems to settle. Any sooner and they'll be harmed."

"If Aurora says no?" Sidell asked.

"She would only say no if they absolutely could not learn, my heart. In that case, this holding would be better off with them powerless."

"But, Consort, they did help."

"No, they didn't. The problems were caused by magic, Emma sent a missive out explaining that and asking the colonies to report any problems. The scouts were sent out to keep the worst of the problems away from the colonies until I had a chance to repair the problem. As mages, they should have contacted Emma and reported it. By not doing so, it was only the diligence of the scouts that kept this colony safe."

"We've gotten pretty comfortable having a mage or two, Consort. Couldn't we..."

"The scouts are now running two mages per squad," Tristian inserted wryly.

"What? But..." the Elder turned to them, "why didn't you know?"

"Same reason they didn't know about us, Elder," Sidell explained. "They only identified us as mages when Tristian was forced to use her power to save a young girl. If not for that, we'd have come and gone and they would have been content in their belief that no mages had entered their colony."

Sidell's gaze settled on Elder Reed, "Now, Emma du Aulstet is the Leader of this Holding. She doesn't expect her council's to run to her with every little problem but she does expect a certain degree of competence. Problems will be reported, Elder. The people are at risk when you insist on working in the dark. What happens across Dyan is sent in the missives and concerns that you're unsure of should be brought up in the monthly telecom sessions. I trust this won't happen again?"

"Nay, young Heir. I think we've been taken for fools long enough." Elder Wiggins responded sadly.

"Don't feel too bad, Elder. You at least had the safety of the colony as your goal. Just remember, Dyan is a Holding of seven colonies. None of us has to stand alone."

The three non-mages nodded and Sidell dismissed the council. Elder Doane and Elder Yemin remained. "You can't leave us like this. I need my powers."

"A month, Elders. That was not a joke and it is important. I'll return in a month if Aurora agrees and we'll have you reinstated. For the time being, I suggest you learn to integrate with the people because the payments will stop and that facility will be opened to the public. I don't like segregating the populace, it leads to all kinds of problems and I will not tolerate it," Tristian replied heatedly.

"I'll call the Leader on this," Doane threatened.

Sidell smirked, "Good, at least I'll know that you do know how to reach her."

Emma and Aurora arrived the next day and were immediately pounced on by the mages.

Tristian lounged comfortably on the beach letting the waves wash over her body, enjoying the cool breeze. "Sire," she greeted Aurora absently.

"I never knew Prader," Aurora mused. "Good thing, I'd have killed her."

"Tch, and Sidell says I'm bloodthirsty."

"Ahhh, Tristian, their training is so screwed up I'm just happy they're mediocre mages. Someone would have gotten hurt a long time ago if they weren't."

"Hmmm," Tristian murmured encouragingly.

"I'm not sure what to do. I need to re-teach them the basics but they refuse to believe they're doing anything wrong."

"Truth?"

"Aye, I spelled them out of sheer frustration."

"Well then, use the truth."

"And that is?"

"Either they learn it your way, or they won't have any powers left to worry about."

Aurora laughed for the first time in that frustrating day. Amazingly enough, the lessons

progressed at a faster pace.

They topped the slopping hillside at noon and stared down into the crescent shaped colony that nestled snugly up against the sea. Helene looked like a typical colony, the sound of merchants hawking their wares, children playing in the distance, and multitude of colors dancing in the sunlight as the women went about their business, their garments lending a gay aura to the serene backdrop of the colony structures.

"Pretty," Tristian commented as they watched the bustling activity.

"Helene is primarily a fishing colony. They supply the seafood to most of the Holding. The mages here do get a percentage for transporting the goods but then they are part of the industry and they work just like the rest of them. If assistance is needed of any other kind, the offer is freely given."

Tristian noticed the faint outline of a large ship on the horizon.

Sidell shrugged after having it pointed out, "Probably returning to port after a couple of days haul."

They watched as two columns of women made their way cautiously through the heart of the colony, mounting up once in the open. After several verbal exchanges, the group split up and started an easy canter across the ground headed for the distant horizons.

Sidell grinned as she watched her lover's eyes spark in interest. "You're not thinking of following them are you?" Knowing the women were the Scouts detailed to the colony.

"Maybe," Tristian teased. "See what they're up to, get a reading on the colony." She laughed and smiled sheepishly, "You mind?"

"No, love. I'm just giving you a hard time. I'll go on in and wander around. I'm not sure I've personally met anyone from here. We speak often with the Council but there's never been a need for me to come here in person. Mother does that usually. It could be fun, I'll just be a traveling nobody."

Tristian kissed her softly, "Just keep your traveling self out of trouble. I should be in on the morrow. I'll trail them for a bit and see if they're any good. Probably camp the night with which ever group I catch up to and start back in the morning."

"All right. You keep yourself out of trouble, warrior. You're still suppose to be taking it easy."

Tristian laughed, "I'm trailing scouts, how hard can that be?"

"Ohhh, you wait till I tell Maria."

Sidell waited until her lover disappeared into the forest. Shaking her head at the woman's ability to blend in with her surrounding, Sidell pointed Summer towards the colony. "Come on, girl. Let's find you a treat. Maybe some sweet oats?"

Summer whickered agreeably and they ambled down the gentle slope.

They passed through the colony entrance garnering interested stares but no one moved to stop them. Sidell dismounted as she reached the congested heart of the colony and soothed Summer leading her carefully to the common stables. She was just finishing Summer's brushing when a smooth voice interrupted her musings.

"She's beautiful, Lady. Well trained from the looks of her, too. Was that your doing?"

Sidell laughed gently, turning to face the woman speaking to her. She saw a tall, wiry woman with short bristled hair dressed in leather trousers and a soft jerkin. The woman gave the impression of whipcord strength. "Nay, Lady. I do well to ride her, luckily she takes good care of me and we manage well together."

"Veril, Lady. I did not mean to intrude but I noticed your entrance and the mare caught my eye. She is a beauty. May I?"

"Sidell then," she responded politely. "And I wouldn't recommend approaching her, Veril. She's not very sociable and I'd just as soon not see you harmed."

Veril of course immediately stepped forward to stroke Summer's broad forehead.

Summer snorted and tossed her head in warning.

"Now, now," Veril crooned, "I'm not gonna hurt you." She continued moving forward and Summer's ears flattened as she stomped and snorted. Her eyes rolled and Sidell moved forward.

Veril ignored Sidell's warning and stepped into Summer's stall.

The mare reared. Holding her upright position she hopped forward, striking out with her front hooves.

Veril dove to the side and hastily backed out of the stall.

Summer dropped and eyed her suspiciously.

Sidell frowned at the woman on the ground and shook her head. She set the saddle on the stall beams and the spare pack in the stall itself. Summer nuzzled her and Sidell soothed her for a bit. Finally, she closed the stall gate and turned looking at Veril. "Did you think I was lying?"

"Ah, well, not lying. Perhaps I doubted you. I normally have a way with horses, Sidell, and I'm

surprised she attacked. Are you sure she's safe to house here?"

"Don't even go there, Veril. Summer is perfectly fine so long as no one enters her stall. That shouldn't be a problem since no one should be in there anyway."

Veril shrugged doubtfully, "As you say, Lady." She smiled at Sidell, "Since it's obvious that you're a visitor, mayhap I could show you around?"

"I'd like that," Sidell agreed. "Let me get a room arranged and then I'd be pleased if you could point out a tavern. I'm a bit hungry."

"Aye," Veril replied, "I can do that. Allow me," she offered, neatly lifting Sidell's bag and hefting it over her shoulders. "This way, m'lady. The Flying Fin would probably suit you for both the tavern and the inn."

"Perfect," Sidell agreed following the woman as Veril headed outside. Sidell was a bit concerned about Veril's stubborn display with Summer but soon shook it off in the sheer pleasure of enjoying the colony.

Tristian rode quietly through the woods keeping to a winding path that paralleled the squad of scouts she was trailing. So far she was pleased with her scouts. They kept a cautious eye about them, didn't indulge in horseplay and appeared to work well together. She also realized that one of their mages seemed to be sensing her presence since the woman kept darting glances her way. Tristian felt the subtle mage probe pass over her and she smiled in approval. Very good, she thought, the mage had a light touch and anyone else trailing them would have had to have been aware of subtle shifts in energy to have known they were being probed. Tristian's own shields were a carefully woven combination of her own mage gift and the powers blessed to her as the Mother's Own. A mage probe would pass over her identifying her as a natural part of the energies of the land. The mage, however, was not convinced. Very good, Tristian approved.

"What's up, Jen? You keep glaring at the woods,"

Jenel sighed and turned to her trail partner. "I'm not sure Addy. My mage senses are screaming but I can't for the life of me find anything to worry about."

Adain's eyes flicked to the woods and she turned back to the frustrated mage. "I've not the gift but I assume you probed?"

"Aye, and probed again. I don't want to tell the Captain in case I'm wrong but I can't shake the feeling that we're being followed."

Adain nodded and spoke softly. "Tell, the Captain, lass. Let her make the call. You've been through all the schooling anyone can give you...tis time you trusted your instincts."

Jenel hesitated but then slowly made her way forward. Keeping a steady but slow pace she tried to reach the Captain without alerting the possibly watching forms she felt shadowing them.

"Captain?"

"Aye, Jen?"

"Pardon, Captain, but I've a feeling we're being trailed?"

"Long?"

"Couldn't say. Just started picking up warning signs about an hour back but now, my mage senses are really screaming."

"Couldn't find anything for sure?"

"Nay, Captain. I could be wrong but I wanted to tell you just in case."

"Good job, Jen. What we'll do is keep on for a bit and I'll start splitting the squad out in pairs. It will look as if they're headed out to scout ahead and I'll have them double back."

Tristian smiled gently as the young mage moved up the column and she knew the game was up. It was not her intent to have the scouts haring off all over the land searching for her even though she was fairly sure she could give them the slip. As the two women in front began to speak, she moved Shadow up through the deep woods heading for an opening in the tree line that would bring her out in the open a short distance in front of the patrol.

"Captain," another scout interrupted the ongoing planning.

"What?" Captain Beyden snorted.

"Rider ahead. Just come out of the woods there."

The women looked ahead at the rider now sitting her mount in the middle of the trail they were on, obviously waiting on them.

"Tis the watcher, Captain," Jenel murmured. "Even here, where I can see her, my mage sense cannot find her and all I get is a gentle touch of a somewhat foreign energy."

Beyden considered that quietly and made a mental note to speak to Aurora about that. Perhaps the honored mage could explain it.

They halted and fanned out in a semi-circle around the mounted stranger.

Tristian's eyes gleamed in amusement and fastened on the youngster. "Well done, young mage. I

see that I need to compliment my Sire on her training abilities or should I compliment you on your skills?"

Jenel flushed in pleasure and smiled shyly, "Nay, young heir, tis your Sire's training that stood me in good stead. Seems she might have suspected her offspring to pull such stunts."

"Spoilsport, just wait till I get home," Tristian muttered in mock annoyance. "What did she say?" Tristian asked then turned to Beyden, "Captain, with your permission I'd like to travel with you for a bit?"

"Of course, Commander," Beyden replied in surprise, "we'd be honored."

Tristian fell in beside Jenel and looked to her in inquiry.

"Ahhh, Mage Mardred was trying to teach us to not only read the obvious signs our mage sense provided but also the subtle clues that are difficult to unravel and yet there to see." Jenel grimace realizing that explanation had been just about as clear as mud. "For example, you, Consort, read the same as the natural energies on the land...mostly. Besides that reading, there is a constantly running current that seems to ebb and flow about you. It's subtle and for the first hour or so after I felt it, I really thought I was imagining it."

"What made you sure?"

"Once I'd sifted through my senses and managed to lock onto this subtle current, I realized that it, whatever it was, was keeping a parallel course with us. Didn't matter which direction we were traveling in, the feeling never faltered, never deviated, never left. Now the one thing Aurora drummed into us was that anything out of the ordinary, no matter how big or how small, was always worth monitoring simply because it was out of the ordinary. You, Commander, or rather, the aura you project to my mage sight, qualifies as out of the ordinary. I admit though, if not for Aurora's teachings, your sign is so minimal I would have brushed it off as a mere current in the land's energies and put it from my mind. Had I done that, I suspect I would have never found you again."

Tristian grinned in delight, "Well, I'm impressed and you do yourself a disservice. True, my Sire's training showed you what to look for but you, young one, trusted yourself and your gift enough to follow your instincts. That is always the hardest lesson, so, compliments to you also, young mage."

"Jenel, Consort. I am Jenel Riser, our Captain is Lea Beyden and we're based out of Helene."

"Aye, Jenel, I know. I followed you from there." Tristian remarked impishly.

Lea Beyden sighed in mock annoyance, "Scouts," she snorted eyeing the group around her in disgust, "the best in the land, feh, we've been trailed since we left home and nary a peep from my diligent trackers."

The women looked around sheepishly but they patted Jenel in pride as they fell back into position. Tristian laughed in delight and Jenel beamed.

Tristian clasped her shoulder companionably and turned to join the Captain. "Nice day," she remarked drolly, her humor high and her spirits soaring at the beauty around her.

"That it is, Commander. Can I ask what brings you out?"

"Here, with you? Nothing really. Sidell and I were just approaching Helene when the two squads pulled out. I felt the need to..." she smiled gently and looked around her, "enjoy the day and decided to follow one of the squads. Yours just happened to have turned in the direction I was closest to."

"Ahhh," Lea murmured in complete understanding. There really was nothing to compare the feeling of being out on the land with. It was just something you had to have inside of you to understand. "I know that feeling, Consort. Not much compares to being surrounded by the beauty of the Mother."

Tristian grinned and the two shared a moment of silence at their surroundings. "Now, as to what brings us about in general. Long story. Seems our colonies have begun to take advantage of our Leader's busy schedule. We've found a few problems in both Hilltop and Westlock. One truly horrific, the other," she shrugged, "not that bad but the potential was there for great harm. I thought it time to visit the rest and Helene just happened to be the colony closest to Westlock."

Beyden considered that for a moment and commented, "Perhaps you'll figure out what it is that sends us out of the colony on several false leads. Especially since it happens regularly."

"Really?"

"Aye. Every three moons or close enough to it. The Warrior's Commander gets some kind of plea for help out in the back of beyond. We can't just ignore it so we end up trekking out for two or three weeks only to find that no one there knows what we're talking about. Gets old but we all enjoy being out and about so it's no fuss really. The colony itself doesn't appear changed so...it's hard to decide if I'm just a suspicious old goat or if something's really up."

"Might this be one of those times?"

"Aye. We're headed out for what will take approximately three weeks. Dillon's squad will be gone a little over a month."

Tristian sighed, "I should have known. Trust Sidell to find trouble without having to look for it."

Lea laughed, "I could be mistaken," she offered.

"Aye. I'll mind that but...I doubt it." She shook it off, "Never the less, she doesn't expect me until the morrow and she's perfectly capable of keeping herself in one piece until I get there. Let's

enjoy the ride, Captain and you can brief me on whether we've had anymore trouble with the land going awry or the beasts changing into strange creatures."

Sidell casually wandered through the colony enjoying the brisk no-nonsense manner of the merchants. She stopped at several shops and haggled for a full candle mark over the price of a scarf. The final offer and acceptance caused the two women to burst into laughter and instigated a round of applause from the gathered spectators.

"Ah, Sidell," the merchant chuckled, "Tis a good thing for me you're just passing through. I'd lose my shirt to you in the bargaining."

"Really, Estelle," Sidell protested with a grin, "I'm not that bad. I'd leave you your shirt...maybe."

The merchant's smile lit her soft honey brown eyes, "Tell you what. I'll forgive you for skimming me profits if you buy supper."

"Done," Sidell laughingly agreed. "Name the tavern and don't suggest the Flying Fin."

Estelle snorted in disgust, "As if. I like my meals hot and hearty. Nay, my friend, we'll meet at the Crow's Nest. My eldest will be here in about two hours and I'll start thataway." She pointed out the distant building.

Sidell agreed and they parted amiably with Sidell turning to amble curiously along the docks.

She found a warm sun baked bench and sat enjoying the stiffening breeze of the oncoming eve. The water lapped gently against the pier and she squinted to watch the ship they'd seen that morn settle into the docks.

The raucous bark of orders saw women scurrying around the ship and piling down the ramps looking like a busy ant hive. Sidell chuckled softly at the ensuing chaos and she leaned back comfortably as the ship was slowly unloaded. Her interest sparked suddenly when two rows of shackled women were herded to the pier. Sidell watched astounded, as the populace didn't appear to notice. It wasn't that the people ignored them; it was more as if the people didn't see them. Curious, Sidell went in search of her merchant friend. "Estelle, tell me what you see over there," she asked casually pointing at the group shuffling past.

"What?" Estelle peeked over, "Them? That be the crew from the Lady Luck."

"Crew?" Sidell nibbled her lip in thought. "What, exactly, are they wearing?"

"Tunics and trousers," Estelle answered gruffly, "What does it look like to you?"

"I..." Sidell hesitated and then grinned sheepishly. Wiping her eyes she muttered, "Maybe I just had too much sun?"

Estelle patted her arm chuckling. "Well we'd best get you inside. Me girl's here now so how bout that supper?"

"Aye," Sidell agreed absently as she watched the shackled women in filthy shifts struggle up the path. "They've a place set aside for them then?"

Estelle turned back to what she saw as a well-dressed and decently behaved crew. "Aye," she answered. Elder Vars owns the Lady and she's set up housing for the crew. Barracks type, like the warriors and scouts use, ya know? It's up the path there behind her property."

"Ah," Sidell mused quietly, "She owns the large building at the top then?"

"Aye," Estelle nodded, "and she claims the plateau it sits on."

"Hmmm," Sidell responded softly as she entered the tavern. Her stomach growled anxiously at the tantalizing aromas filling the air.

The morning sun found Sidell strolling along the top of the plateau. She eyed the home warily but continued to walk boldly as if she had every right to be there. She didn't appear to have attracted any attention and she found an open pasture further back full of prancing horses. Grinning, she moved closer and caught sight of one of the prisoners repairing the fence. The woman was now clean and so was the dark brown shift she wore.

The woman looked up eyeing her suspiciously but Sidell ignored the look and moved up to stand beside her leaning casually on the upper rail. "So, what exactly did you do to rate this special treatment?"

She heard a surprised gasp.

"You see me?" an incredulous voice asked.

"I'm not talking to the pole," Sidell replied wryly.

"No," the woman growled in agitation, "I mean me, the real me. Do you see me?"

Sidell turned to her slightly, "Let's see, dark hair shoulder length, dark shift, definitely not tailored, strong build, possibly several years older than I. Oh and wearing an interesting set of bracelets."

"Alwyn bless," the woman breathed, "you do see me."

"Aye," Sidell agreed complacently, "so what did you do?"

"Made the mistake of bringing a string of mounts here to sell."

Sidell merely raised a brow in query.

"I'm a horse trainer, Lady. A damn good one but I'm alone so I run a small operation. I needed cash and I had six of me own ladies trained up good. That cleaned out my stable but I'd worked a deal with a mate of mine. We'd go halves and start a real farm and training place." The woman scowled. "I came here first and got some good bids at the fair. Was feeling pretty happy with life in general when this tall lean horse idjit showed up wanting to prove she had a way with horses. She started to crowd my lasses and they don't like that much. They got a bit rambunctious. Upshot was, the Elder here declared them dangerous and offered me twenty drachs a piece for them."

"See, Lady, me lasses start the low bid at 100 drachs. Was an insult and I told her no thanks. Before I could finish packing and leave to try elsewhere I found myself in a mocked up trial accused and convicted of maiming that fool woman what crowded my lassies. They said she'd been hurt bad when the girls started to fuss. I say bull, the woman walked away easily. They made up some penalty, shipped me out to this place and I've been providing free labor ever since." She paused for a bit and muttered, "It got real strange after a bit. When we went into the colony, it's like the people didn't see the real us. They'd wave all friendly like as if we'd known each other for years."

Sidell murmured, "They see the crew of the ship. Dressed properly in tunics and trousers. There's no reason for them not to be friendly."

"Magics?"

"Aye."

"Doesn't seem to affect you?" She stammered, "Ah, pardon, that was none of my business. I'm Ches Annon, lady, and I'm just glad to talk to someone that can see me."

"No offense taken Ches," She eyed the woman curiously. "You wouldn't happen to know a Ceil Annon, would you?"

"Aye," Ches smiled sadly, "me younger sib. I've not seen her in years now, Lady. Do you know her? Is she well? Is she here?"

Sidell laughed gently at the barrage of questions. "Let's see. Yes, yes, not quite."

Ches scowled and Sidell chuckled softly.

"Sorry, Ches, I couldn't resist. I'll tell you all about her when we get out of here. The rest of the prisoners? Are any of them dangerous?"

"Nay, lady. From what we've all traded talk on, same story for them just different merchandise."

Seems this colony keeps whatever catches its eye. With or without the owner's blessing."

"Not the colony. The Elders." Sidell frowned, "I'm getting sick of the Elder council." She grinned wickedly as her eye caught three warriors storming their way. "Oh goody, I'm about to be caught."

"Lady, take off. I can distract them. Go for help instead, Lady. Please?"

"Not to worry, Ches. We'll have more help than we'll need and the council more trouble than they've ever dreamed of. You protect yourself, Ches. Blame everything on me, it's okay, I can manage well enough."

The warriors didn't appear to be concerned about their prisoner. The apparent leader of the group stared intimidatingly, "You," she barked out at Sidell, "what's your name?"

"Sidell," she answered with a gentle smile.

"You came here on that honey coated mare?"

"I did."

"Well she's injured a citizen. You're under arrest."

"Let me get this straight," Sidell replied with a frown. "My mare, the one locked in her stall, opened the gate, walked into the street and injured one citizen?" Her voice raised an octave, her tone clearly incredulous.

The leader's face darkened in anger, "Don't smart mouth me. You'll only make this worse. Come along quietly, the Elders have convened a trial and we're to escort you there. We've been searching for you all morning."

Sidell's head cocked in gentle amusement, "The warriors of Dyan answer to a simple Elder of Helene?"

The woman cursed but Sidell's attention had turned from her and she watched Summer being led into the pasture. Two ropes secured around her to make her behave. They led her inside the fence and released her. Summer snorted and charged the fence.

Sidell released two sharp whistles calming her angry mount. She didn't want Summer harmed. She'd grown to love the mare and she was certain Tristian would turn the plateau into a smoking hole in the ground.

Two warriors grabbed her roughly and shackled her wrists together.

"Now," the leader snarled, "If ye don't shut up, I'll gag ye."

Sidell's eyes glinted in amused anger and she watched the leader's posturing turn wary. The woman stepped back and motioned her accomplices forward. "Bring her."

They escorted her back down to the colony where the hastily convened trial was being held. They entered the colony common hall and her escorts placed her in the center of the half-moon shaped floor space obviously used as a place to be judged or tested. Sidell eased herself back on the hard, high back chair, crossed her ankles and stared firmly at the Elder in the foremost seat.

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~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

**By
Tas**

Part 7

The Elder rose and spoke in a clear dulcet voice, "I am Elder Vars of the Elder's Council of Helene. You are here on charges of maiming a citizen of Helene by bringing in a rogue mare. Citizen Veril warned you of the danger. She felt the need to see to the safety of our people since you refused to do so. In trying to minimize the damage she was injured. How plead you?"

"How did she get injured?" Sidell asked curiously.

"The mare struck her with her hooves." The Elder replied.

"Was this after the mare let herself out of the stall?"

"What do you mean?" the woman asked unwillingly.

"Summer, the mare in question here, was locked in her stall. The stable keep had been instructed to allow no one in there with her. Since no one entered the stall, how did Summer get out?"

"Lady," a stout woman rose to the consternation of the Elder. She remained standing until the council recognized her.

"Speak then, Taks," Elder Var bit out sharply.

Taks grinned wickedly, "T'was Veril again, just like the last time with the horse trader, Lady," Taks explained to Sidell. "Veril insists on claiming some kind of charm over horses. I told her time and again to stay away from the lass. I returned to my chores and next thing I know Veril's opened the gate and had the mare backed up against the wall. I could see the lassie was upset as all get out and rushed over to pull Veril out of there when the lassie reared. She tossed Veril into the wall of her stall. She stomped and snorted a bit, Lady, but I swear she didn't lay a hoof on the woman. I eased in talking the mare down and she settled nicely seeing as how I wasn't after her. I pulled the idjit out and shut the gate. Veril woke and stomped off. I guess she complained cause a couple of them bully warriors came in with ropes and took your lassie off. T'was glad I was she knew what a rope meant and she went off with them, unwilling but not fighting the rope."

Sidell smiled her thanks and turned to see what the Elder had to say. She didn't have to wait long and heard the expected reaction.

"It matters not," Elder Vars growled. "Tis obvious to me your mare is a danger to the people. What if it had been someone else?"

"No one else is that stupid," Taks spat in anger.

"Be seated, you've had your say but Veril's story proves you lie. She says she never entered the stall and I truth spelled her. It's obvious that you, stable keep, are lying to me."

"Spell me, Elder. And redo the spell on Veril in front of witnesses."

"Sit down, woman, or I'll have you removed." She turned back to Sidell. "As for you, I'll pay you twenty drachs as fair payment for your loss and allow you to leave our colony. Refuse me and you'll work in the penal squad until you've made full restitution for our citizen's injuries."

Gee, Sidell chuckled silently. This sounds so familiar. She cleared her throat and responded in a voice that carried gently throughout the room, "I request a higher review of the trial. It's my right as a citizen of Dyan, Elder, will you send the request?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Elder Var sputtered, "our Leader has more important things to tend to than to be summoned to review a case that has been proven to the Council's satisfaction."

"That is not your call to make, Vars," Estelle spoke up. The people murmured in agreement. "You've not the right to deny the lass her request. Once made, only the Leader can deny it."

Vars stared out at the crowd angrily. "So be it, I'll mindspeak our Leader and return with her answer."

"That makes me feel so much better, Elder." Sidell drawled lazily.

"Be still woman, it will only take a minute."

While the Elder went off into a trance, Sidell had never seen that much effort put into a mindcall before, she herself summoned her mother. She also took the time to check on her lover who happened to be riding into the colony.

Tristian had left the Scouts before daybreak having decided that she'd best be prepared for the trouble Sidell was bound to find.

Returning her attention to Elder Vars, she smiled as she felt her mother port in at the rear of the hall and her lover approach the hall entering silently. Elder Vars was apparently having a difficult time of it, her face squished in anguish, her eyes squeezed shut, sweat beaded on her forehead. All in all, Sidell admitted it was a remarkable performance. The woman sagged suddenly and the four other members of the council rushed to support her.

"Forgive me," Elder Vars stated weakly, "The mindlink is taxing." She took a sip of water and gazed at Sidell steadily. "It is as I suspected. I spoke with the Leader and she is too busy. I've been instructed to carry on as I see fit. Now, you've heard my terms, your answer?"

"Why don't we hear what Mother really has to say," Sidell asked impishly.

"Your mother?" Vars asked in minor confusion, "What does your mother have to do with anything?"

"Well, Elder, you claim to have spoken to our Leader. Since our Leader is my mother, I thought I'd ask her what was keeping her so busy."

Emma had strolled up the walkway as Sidell spoke and the council looked at her in some discomfort.

"So, Vars. Still pulling the 'I've spoke with the Leader' bit are you? I thought we'd cleared that several years ago?"

"Emma," Vars stuttered. "It's...I...didn't see a need to bother you. It appeared to be a clear cut case."

"Hah," the people shouted in laughter. "Clear as mud to us, Vars." Estelle chortled.

Emma turned to her daughter, "Is there some reason you're still wearing those things," she asked looking pointedly at the shackles.

"Well, taking them off would have given the game away, Mother." Sidell grinned warmly as the shackles dropped to the tabletop. "Before we go further, there is some kind of spell working that I cannot place. The Elder here has about a dozen unpaid laborers at her residence." Sidell paused

as the crowd murmured in shock.

"That can't be, Sidell," Estelle stammered. "All the prisoners were released after making full restitution. We saw them leave. One by one over time but they all left. We'd have never allowed that to happen."

"Aye, Estelle. I figured that. It's probably why the spell was set." She turned to Estelle, "You know the crew I asked you about?"

Estelle nodded in confusion.

"I didn't see the same thing you did, Estelle. I saw twelve tired and filthy women in shifts. You saw a well dressed crew."

Emma's brow rose and she turned to Vars. "Leader...I don't know what she means. I've no idea..."

"Vars," Sidell muttered impatiently, "be realistic for a moment. We're headed up to your place after we're done here. Mother will see them. Your trick doesn't fool mages, Vars. That's why I saw them as they truly were. Mother will see them also. Just tell us what the spell is and what in all of Riger do you need all of those horses for?"

"It's not her, my heart," a warm mocking voice wafted across the room. "Oh, I've no doubt she instigated the whole thing but she truly does not understand the spell. Seems we've got a bit of an earth mage here and she's been tinkering with a small node."

"Can you find her?"

"Tch, what kind of question is that?" Tristian asked reasonably moving forward to join her mate. She winked and extended her hand to the floor in front of them. A hum of power filled the air and a thoroughly shocked Veril stood there, her eyes darting wildly. "Ah, ah," Tristian chided holding the woman motionless with a gentle murmur. "Behave, my lady has questions."

Sidell shook her head and grinned at her lover, "Show off."

Tristian bowed gallantly, "For you, my heart."

"Will a truth spell work on her?"

"Aye, there's not much difference in her magic. She can just coax the node to support her; I'll check it and reseal the node. It's possible she's got it shielded and since I called the smaller nodes remotely, I didn't realize I'd missed one. I'll take care of it now."

"Okay, mother and I can handle this. Why don't you go on up to the plateau and release those women. You also need to settle the Warriors since they've been answering to Vars. I've yet to find their garrison Commander." Sidell turned to Estelle.

"The Commander spends most of her time at Vars' place, Lady du Aulstet. The Consort will most likely find her there."

"Thank you, Estelle, and please, the name is Sidell." She shoed Tristian off, "Hey, you probably know one of the women there." She grinned mischievously and shoed her curious lover out of the hall.

Ches saw the approach of the tall dark warrior on the dark horse as she topped the plateau rim. Curious, Ches cautiously made her way across the pasture to see who'd come now. Six of the largest and meanest warriors strode out and surrounded the woman obviously trying to intimidate her. She saw one of them drop bonelessly to the ground never seeing the mounted woman's foot strike her. Then the warrior was on the ground and the sound of muffled blows and the distinct crack of bones filled the air. By the time Ches reached the side of the pasture closest to the action the dark warrior stood alone and looked her way.

Tristian stared at the woman curiously; she looked slightly familiar but the shift and the hair made her unsure. She turned and approached the woman slowly, hoping she wouldn't try to run with the leg irons on. When she could finally get a good look she broke into a wide grin and ran forward quickly. "Ches? Goddess bless it is you?" Tristian hugged the older woman carefully and dropped her back to the ground. "Here, let's get rid of these things." She breathed a command and the shackles broke open. "There now, give a hug."

Ches gripped her hard, "Thomas? Thomas what's going on? What are you doing here and how did you just set me free?"

Tristian laughed, "Ahhh, questions as usual, eh Ches." She looked around as three women stepped out. "What do we have here?"

"The Commander and her two cronies," Ches muttered. "Watch em, they're damn nasty. Made some of our guardians look like angels."

"That bad?"

"Aye. Watched em strip the skin off one of the youngsters for sport."

Tristian's anger rose darkly, "Stay here."

The Commander glared at her, "Abetting a prisoner is an offense punishable with incarceration."

"Abusing a prisoner is punishable by the same punishment administered, Commander. However, you're lucky. Abusing the trust of the citizens and myself is punishable by death." Tristian growled and drew her blade.

The three women armed themselves quickly but the fight itself was obviously nothing but a lark for Tristian. In less time than it took Ches to worry, two were down and the Commander was trying to hold her innards inside.

Eyes filled with shock looked up at her, "Who..." she whispered.

"I am Commander Mardred." Tristian told her quietly. It was the last thing she heard and Tristian didn't even know her name.

Ches froze as cold violet eyes turned to her but she relaxed as the gaze warmed and Tristian's head cock impishly. "Love the duds, Ches. It's soooo you. Wait till I tell Ceil."

Ches looked down in disgust, "Well it's all I've got. They worked me till my clothes fell off and threw this at me. It's all they let us wear."

"Well, in an effort to keep your dignity in tack, allow me." Tristian gestured and Ches found herself clothed in comfortable trousers and the soft jerkin she preferred to wear. "Thomas, you've got a lot of explaining to do."

"Aye, my friend, and I will. But let's clean this place up and release the rest of your mates. Then we'll head down to the colony and see what's going on."

"If you say so. I'd just as soon collect my lassies and head on out." Ches laughed softly, "But I'll stay, I'm too nosey and as I recall you always could find the damndest trouble to get into."

"Me?" Tristian protested, "Wait till you meet Sidell. Then you'll see trouble." She laughed harder as Summer galloped up and bumped her imperiously. The mare had jumped the fence having spotted her mother and her favorite human. "Hey, girl. Sidell got you in trouble too?"

Summer pushed against her chest and Tristian scratched her lovingly.

"She's beautiful. Well trained from what I've seen."

"Aye. I've had them since both were colts. This one," She patted Shadows proud neck, "is her momma. This is Shadow and Summer."

They rounded up the rest of the women and ensured the house was empty of further occupants. "Do you know what the scam was?" she asked Ches curiously.

"Aye. Seems they've found another land cross the sea. Took us over when ever they went over to trade. This land's called Baylon and they needed horse flesh. They'd trade those pleasure drugs and silver. There's probably quite a stash down in the cellars."

"Not for long," Tristian crooned heading down the stairwell. Tristian destroyed the drugs and ported the roomful of silver down to the colony square. She chuckled imagining the scene below. She located and sealed the node then did a final check around the area. The horses were allocated to the women in compensation and each received a hefty sack of silver as thanks and apologies from Dyan. Tristian waited for Ches to say her goodbyes. None of the others cared to see Helene again and they were going to see if they could salvage anything left in their lives. Tristian

advised them to contact her if they needed anything in the future. Then she clapped her friend companionably, collected their mounts and rode back to the colony.

Tristian grinned as Sidell stood in the center of the square, hands on her hips, glaring at her lover.

"What?" Tristian asked innocently.

"What? There appears to be silver appearing in thin air. Vars is apoplectic, the women are abasing themselves and thanking Alwyn loud enough that even Mhyr should be able to hear them, the colony's in uproar and the warriors are trying to find their Commander. Don't sit there and ask me... 'what'!"

Emma walked out of the Hall, "Consort," she greeted Tristian with a chuckle as Ches' eyes widened even further. "It would appear that you've a tale to tell."

"Nay, Leader. My friend here knows it best. Can we do this over lunch? I missed breakfast seeing as how I needed to get back earlier than I'd planned." She dismounted and hugged her lover gently smiling softly as Sidell relaxed in her arms. "Hello, my heart."

Sidell kissed her gently. "So, I was right? You do know Ches?"

"Aye. But when did you meet her?"

"She's the one I was talking to when they took me prisoner. Although, I don't think I introduced myself properly."

"Let's take care of that over something cool and filling. She looked around at the women and scowled. A clenched fist and thunder shattered the air, causing silence around them to descend. "That's better. Listen up, just divide this up evenly between all of you and clear the square. And somebody find me a tavernkeep, dammit, I'm hungry."

A round friendly face approached, "Alright, Consort. I'm coming; I'll have a meal ready for you shortly. Let me get my girls and ask Estelle if she'll take care of grabbing my share."

"No need," Tristian offered, "I'll handle that seeing as how you're feeding me."

The woman smiled her thanks, grabbed her three helpers and they bustled off.

"Uhhmm, Consort, not to be a pain but..." Estelle pointed to the silver and the colony folks. Tristian frowned and turned to Sidell who sighed. "Oh sure, it's your idea and I'm suppose to divide the loot?"

Tristian pouted, Ches burst into laughter.

"Alright," Sidell closed her eyes and scoured the colony with her magesight. Counting the

citizens, she neatly stacked the coins into appropriate shares. The odd leftovers went to Dyan's common fund. She turned to Estelle, "Can you take it from there?"

"Aye, young heir." Estelle turned shouting orders and a ragged line formed. She handed Tristian the shares for the women at the tavern and turned to passing out the rest.

They exchanged stories over lunch and turned to settling the colony.

"I'll take care of the Council, their replacements, and that mage," Emma muttered.

"Alright," Tristian spied a warrior and ordered an immediate gathering in the common hall. "I'll settle the Warriors but Puck owes me big time. I'm doing all her work."

Emma snorted in amusement and Tristian eyed Ches. "I don't suppose you'd like a job?"

"Nope. I was gonna start a farm when I got held up here. Now," she hefted her share of the silver, "I don't need a partner and I'm gonna do it anyway. I just need to find a good spot."

Sidell smiled, "Why don't you ride out east to the border? Three maybe four days out of Hilltop you'll find a village just outside our borderline. See the magistrate there. You could set your training farm on either side of the line. I think you'll be pleased."

"I could do that, Sidell. Take me about two weeks to cross the colony."

"If Tristian were polite she'd take you there."

Tristian grinned. "Sure, I'd love to but you'll have to wait until I get the Warriors settled."

Ches shrugged, "I'm full, free, and I've money to spend. I can wait."

They left at dusk and Tristian returned to Sidell's side after watching the tearful reunion of siblings long separated.

The last two colonies were closer to Freelock. They were well run and quite happy. Tristian had Puck check on Helene and Emma made plans to visit the land called Baylon in the near future but had forbidden trade with the land until that time. Veril was given a reprimand to stop her tricks or risk losing all of her powers and the Elder Council was replaced with women more interested in the welfare of the Colony. Estelle and Taks were two prominent members. Vars was sent to Freelock and would provide public service for her abuse of her position and the prisoners.

It was a beautiful day in Freelock and Tristian increased her speed as she took the final turn that would return her to the colony. The run had been especially pleasant this morning since the breeze was crisp and the scent of autumn filled the air. She planned to finish sealing the land and would leave in a week. Sidell would remain and assist Puck in settling the warriors. The scouts

had blossomed into a force large enough to equal the Warriors and Tristian was faced with splitting them completely or joining them as a single unit. She hadn't decided and both Puck and Maria had arguments both pro and con. Tristian decided it would hold until her return.

She slowed as she entered the colony proper and smiled in greeting to the women already awake and bustling about their business. She loved this colony. Loved the Holding. She'd never been so happy and sometimes she just knew she'd burst a vessel with the excitement and joy that would overtake her. To make everything even better, Sidell was pregnant. Five months and Tristian was as anxious as any parent could be. Alternating between cosseting her lover to brooding that she wouldn't make a good parent. Thankfully, Sidell had more than enough patience for the two of them. She'd tolerate Tristian's solicitous attitude for a small period before gently diverting her lover's attentions elsewhere and coax her out of her dark moods with loving touches and tender passion.

Tristian entered the Baker's Brew having washed and changed to join her lover for breakfast. She was surprised to find Staunton and Felice Adair seated at their table.

"Don't frown, my heart. Come over here and join us," Sidell teased her with a grin. "Staunton has managed to keep from scowling or fainting amongst all this common stock.

Tristian chuckled and kissed her lightly, "You are so bad."

"I hear congratulations are in order, Consort." Felice Adair offered with a gentle smile. She truly liked the two women and was glad to see they were doing so well. She'd never known Tristian as a youngster but was well aware of the hatred she'd grown up in. Felice was pleased the tall woman managed to put it behind her and embrace the life she lived.

Once she was settled and eating happily Emma picked up the discussion. "Tristian, Mhyr is having serious trouble with the Guardians. Seems they've taken to abusing all of the citizens of Mhyr rather than just the commoners. Staunton has been sent to ask us for assistance and has a signed petition from the nobles to support us in any manner we wish if we would tender assistance. I've considered it but I'm still of the opinion that since Mhyr is a Holding in its own right, it is not a matter that I want the du Aulstet's involved in. I did say I'd ask if you'd consider helping.

Tristian considered the information she had on Riger. With Mhyr's people leaving the Holding, the land between Dyan and Darena, the next Holding after Mhyr, was populated with villages ranging from small homesteads like Adeena's to villages resembling the colonies in Dyan. The village of Wet Springs, the one located on Dyan's border was the largest and many of Dyan's women had moved their farms closer to the border. Ches' business venture had bloomed with Ceil there to assist her and the traveling merchants frequented her stables for mounts. Women from as far away as Dram came to her for mounts. All in all, the land was pretty much under Dyan's control. While the Warriors did not interfere with Holding affairs, any lawbreakers caught in the free lands were treated to justice administered by Dyan. Would be rapists were given swift notice of the change of the guard when a pack of them were caught in the act after having stopped and killed a small family. The three women were horribly abused. Maria herself

castrated the five men responsible and watched them bleed to death. She left their naked bodies staked upright as a warning to all. Non-consensual sex was not permitted and the penalty obvious to any who dared to look. With the people prospering across the land, it was time to settle Mhyr but... "They'd support us in any manner, Leader?" Tristian finally gave voice to her thoughts.

Emma shrugged.

"Yes, Tristian," Staunton assured her.

"I want the Caste System revoked."

Staunton choked but Felice merely smiled in acknowledgement.

"You can't be serious?"

Tristian shrugged.

"Who would take care managing the Holding?"

"Who's doing it now?" Tristian asked reasonably.

"Why, the nobles of course."

"And a fine job they're doing, Staunton. That being the case, I see no need for Dyan to interfere."

"But..." Staunton stuttered incredulously as Tristian rose.

"I've things to do, Staunton, and no time for political nonsense." She kissed her lady, winked at Emma and made her way to the door.

"Well," Sidell said with a grin, "that answers that."

"Emma, please?"

"Staunton, what exactly, do you want us to do? Remove the Guardians from the Holding?"

"Yes, no, I...We need a Commander and perhaps some reinforcements until things can get straightened out."

"We don't have a noble to give you, Staunton. How will you resolve that problem?"

"The nobles have agreed to put a commoner in place unless Tristian is willing to take the position."

Sidell glared at her, "I live in Dyan, Staunton. Why on Riger would my mate move to Mhyr?"

"You could come with her. It would be perfect."

Emma chortled in glee. "Ahhh, I see it now. Mhyr wishes to move the Royal House to Mhyr thus extending Dyan's control there. A fine plan, Staunton, to bad no one here wants to play."

Emma rose, "I've council matters to attend to and Sidell needs to meet the Warrior's Commander, excuse us. We've much to do."

"Emma," Felice rose also. "May I accompany you?"

"Not if it's your intent to badger me." Emma replied easily.

"It's not. Staunton and I disagree but I'm a minority in the vote. I merely came because I wished to see Dyan."

Emma smiled and offered her arm, "Then it is my pleasure although, council meetings are notoriously boring."

"Not half as boring as ours I'd gather," Felice laughed gently as the two left the tavern.

Sidell eyed Staunton still unsure on how she managed to get stuck with the woman. "Well, I suppose you could come and listen to our common Commander, Staunton. Knowing my lover, she'll be hiding from you for the rest of the day. Else you could watch Aurora's training class."

"I'd prefer to accompany you. Mages I know nothing about but seeing how the Warriors are managed may be helpful to me."

"So be it," Sidell rose stepping out ahead of Staunton.

"Puck," Sidell smiled easily.

"Sidell," Puck returned in greeting looking casually at her companion. "This is Staunton Grier from Mhyr. You remember her I trust?"

"I do." Puck responded making no further effort to extend a welcome to the stuffy woman that preferred to ignore her.

"Be nice," Sidell warned. "Staunton is curious on how it is that the Warriors are so professional compared to the Guardians."

Puck snorted, "From what the Scouts tell me, the Guardians are merely following the examples set forth in the Holding. Take care of yourselves first and it matters not who suffers."

"That is not true," Staunton growled.

"Isn't it, Leader?" Puck challenged, "Tell me then, how does forcing the populace to live in near

poverty conditions, limit the say that they have on the daily control of their lives, and allow the so call protectors of the Holding to abuse them with no recourse on their part, viewed as having a care for what is best for the people."

"It is not like that. We have full say in our daily affairs. We can change anything we want, whenever we want. I don't know where you people are getting your ideas from but they are wrong."

"So, you say that the women that keep the lanterns lit in the Holding may decide that they'd rather be merchants. That they could, in fact, begin making jewelry and set up a cart to sell them?"

"Of course not," Staunton stuttered.

"You just said you have full say in your daily affairs."

"We do, but they...they're commoners."

"I see, so when you say 'We' you mean the nobles."

"Yes," Staunton seethed.

"And what of the rest of the people? There are not that many nobles in Mhyr, Staunton. The majority of the population is commoners or merchants. What of them?"

"What of them?" Staunton shouted, "We know what's best for them. They need to be kept in their place else they start putting on airs and who knows what will happen?"

Puck shook her head. "Right, I'm sure that Mhyr is a wonderful place to live, Staunton. No doubt that's why all of those villages have appeared through out the land."

"It's a phase," Staunton replied, evenly, drawing an amused snort from Puck and sheer astonishment from Sidell.

"A phase?" Sidell squeaked.

"Of course. They're commoners, the villages will fail shortly because they can't possibly manage the affairs of something so complex."

"Staunton, define shortly. Several of those villages are almost a year old and all of them are growing."

"We expect them back any time now, ready to return to their places and allow those that know best to take care of the major decisions."

"Goddess bless," Sidell fumed, "I have never in my life meet such blind, pigheaded, stubbornly

ignorant people." Fully exasperated she turned her attention to Puck and ignored the irritated Leader of Mhyr.

"So, what's up?"

"Maria and I have been talking," Puck returned as they entered the compound and moved over to watch the training sessions. "I'm going to recommend combining the forces. With the small compounds we've established throughout the land we could actually garrison smaller companies about the land." She grinned as Maria joined them still sweaty from her last match.

"Aye, Sidell. We figure a force of twenty-five women at each compound. There are 12 of them in existence now and we could handle that. We may have to recruit again."

"I've a better idea," Sidell murmured, eyeing the two carefully. "Open the warriors to the populace in general."

They looked at her guiltily and shuffled their feet.

"It's been suggested," Sidell asked in amusement.

"Aye, we thought it was the silliest thing we'd ever heard."

"And now?"

"We still think it's pretty silly but...with you and Tristian proposing it...it's possible our own bigotry is causing us to ignore the potential such a union would bring."

Sidell was proud of them. It took a lot to acknowledge that. "What you could do is ask for volunteers from Dyan to see what the interest is in entering a world with men. Once you know that, I'd take a ride and talk to Ceil. If Wet Springs agrees, I will fund the building of a full training center outside of our borders."

"Aye," Maria nodded, "that would solve the training problems since I'd rather not have men running around rampant in Dyan."

Sidell nodded and she'd no intention of changing the rule. "Right. We can move our trainers out there to initially train trainers." She smirked, "boy did that sound weird."

The two laughed gently. "Yea," Puck agreed, "Ceil may even assist since it's not as if she needs to be sitting on the walk all day long. And with the troops there, her need will actually diminish."

"Then extend the offer, if they are willing and ask if she'd like to take on as a permanent trainer for the warriors."

"Shall we change the name of the troops?"

"No. They will answer to Dyan therefore, they will represent Dyan."

Staunton couldn't hold her questions back any longer, "I don't understand. You are the Heir, why are these women questioning your decision."

"Cause she's never led a military effort, Staunton." Maria snapped. "Sidell has never even held a blade, devised a strategy, or assembled troop movements. She can't possibly know what she's asking and is willing to allow those of us trained to do things like that the right to tell her she's daft or she's got a good plan and we need to look it over more. That's why. It's the reason we are so organized. Our Commander's are qualified and no one...no one, can tell us to do anything that would be detrimental for the Holding. Unlike others I'm aware of."

Sidell grinned, "She's right. It's your biggest problem in Mhyr. You insist that your nobles know better. How can they, Staunton? They've never been in the position to learn what it takes to do any kind of work. How can they know better?"

"Because they are nobles." Staunton argued stubbornly.

"Must be osmosis," Maria smirked. "They absorb it from thin air."

"That's about how effective it is too." Sidell agreed.

"Alright," Puck agreed. "Let us go over what we've got, take the time to talk to Ceil, get a feel for how many of our people want to be out there. I'll suggest it to Tristian at our briefing this afternoon and we'll see how it plays out."

"Good," Sidell smiled. "And don't forget it's just a phase. The villages will probably all be empty by the time we're ready having moved back to Mhyr because the nobles know best."

Puck chuckled and Maria snorted in amused disgust.

Sidell merely smiled, "I think it's time we brought Riger together."

"Ignoring Mhyr, will not accomplish that," Staunton pounced.

"Mhyr cannot integrate with the Caste System. No one else in the land subscribes to it and the only place it means anything is in Mhyr. What would you have me do? Any outsider allowed into your Holding will ignore the system, get themselves thrown in your jails and be subjected to slave labor. I will not allow that and the people all know this. They stay away from Mhyr unless they wish to bow to the will of the nobles."

Emma smiled as her daughter entered the office. "Should I apologize?"

"Yes," Sidell exclaimed in mock annoyance. "I don't know how you stuck me with her."

"Did you stick her in a ditch?"

"No," she huffed and smiled at Felice. "She went off to hold a telecom with Mhyr. Alwyn only knows what they'll come up with next."

"I see, and your mate is...hiding?"

"Of course. She's locked herself up with her Sire. They've modified the mage training course and Tristian is providing more extensive training. The same as she's doing with the fighters. Once they reach the highest levels our trainers can provide, she takes over." Sidell grinned, "She was pretty excited though, seems Erin is in this class."

Emma smiled, "Now there was an outcome I was happy to see. I was truly afraid we'd lost those youngsters."

Sidell grinned, "Maybe we could keep Mhyr as a training ground. It worked."

"I don't understand," Felice asked curiously.

Sidell explained the five youngsters Tristian had sent to Mhyr to live as commoners for a year.

"And it worked?"

"Aye, they all came back with an understanding of how it felt to be held down merely because of who your parents were and all of them have joined the scouts. But Erin, she really matured. She found her own heartmate, they've established a booming business, and she participates in the scouting of the land to keep the people safe. Jastyn, that's her mate, still sends half her earnings home to help the family but I think her mother has started putting it aside as savings. They're doing very well and the money is no longer necessary but it makes Jas feel better and Erin loves her too much to deny her anything. Erin and Tristian have become very good friends. I think a lot of that has to do with the family Erin joined into are like a second family to Tristian herself so she makes an extra effort with Erin. But Erin adores her so I'm glad that all worked out so well."

"So, what next?" Emma asked casually.

"I am going to take a nap," Sidell answered and yawned. "I'm a bit sleepy."

Emma kissed her forehead. "You do that, take care of yourself. I can't wait to bounce my grandbaby."

Sidell woke in the early evening surprised to find herself surrounded in the soft warmth of her lover. "Hey," she murmured softly waiting for those glorious eyes to open. "You okay?"

"Uhhmm." Tristian murmured. "I guess I fell asleep." She grinned, "You looked so adorable I had to snuggle after my bath...I guess," she shrugged sheepishly.

"S'okay, I don't mind waking in your arms."

Tristian held her tenderly and they lay there soaking in the warmth of their bond. "Puck tells me you've convinced them and they've recommended we open the warriors to outsiders."

Sidell smiled softly, "No. They just decided to review their decision after we both made the same recommendation."

Tristian chuckled, "I didn't want to push the issue. I'm much more comfortable with the male gender so it's not a big deal to me. But I wouldn't have forced it...too many chances for accidents and misunderstandings if this merging is not accepted openly."

"I figured. Knew it had to be something like that. It was a very good idea and I was surprised you hadn't just initiated it. Then I thought about it some more and came up with that conclusion."

"Hmmm, Maria is taking her squad out tomorrow and headed to Wet Springs." Tristian paused, "You know, Maria has been spending an awful lot of time in Wet Springs."

Sidell chuckled, "Imagine that. It wouldn't have something to do with a certain tall, dark, ex-guardian would it?"

"I don't know. Lot's of people there now but...maybe." Tristian fell silent and then, "If we put this together, I'm gonna wanna train the first couple of squads. I want to be sure they can interact with each other as equals, set the tone for the rest of the program and show that the House of du Aulstet supports the inclusion of those normally considered to be outsiders."

"I figured. No big deal. Wet Springs has grown so much it's almost like being home. Perhaps you should look at building us a residence there. We can let Puck or Maria use it when they're in town and we aren't."

"Hmmm, I like that. There is a particularly nice spot just on this side of the border. I'll check into it."

"Good. Now, we need to get up. Mother is calling another damn meeting involving Mhyr."

"I know, Jardin was sent out there again. I wonder who she brought back with her."

"Don't know, my heart, but I'm sure well find out soon enough. They're waiting at Mother's, we'll talk over supper."

"Good, I'm hungry."

"You two are just in time. Anya had dinner sent and they're preparing to serve."

"Perfect, Tristian is hungry. I don't suppose she brought some sweets."

"For you?" The woman in question boomed, "Of course I did. Your favorite."

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to be sure everything was right. Tis a new recipe I'm trying and..."

"You're nervous," Tristian supplied.

"A bit," Anya agreed happily. "But, here we go."

Tristian sniffed the air suspiciously and she turned to Anya watching the woman's large smile. Tristian grinned, "You've been trading with Lucan."

A full-throated laugh echoed. "Of course. I've been hearing for months now how wonderful, how talented, how excellent the woman's food was. You didn't think I could let that go unchallenged did you?"

"So what's the surprise?" Sidell asked curiously. The aromas were mouth watering but she couldn't place them.

"Lucan makes an absolutely incredible seafood dish. It's got a bit of everything in it, a thick broth and it's..." Tristian groaned, "exquisite. It wasn't often we'd get it because Mhyr is so far from the sea but occasionally she'd arrange to have Dram fly in some of their catch. With transportation being so easy here I'm assuming she sent word through the scouts to work a trade arrangement with Helene if she's parting with her secret recipes."

"Aye, Consort. That she did and business for her is booming. However the trade came about because she wanted one of Inna's specialties and that was the cost of the trade."

"Then it was an even trade. You and Inna are the closest competition she'll ever have."

Anya returned to the kitchen and Emma urged them into the formal dining room. "Come on, we've got more company and I'm not sure yet why I haven't thrown them out."

"Because it is within you to attempt to help," Tristian answered wryly. "Don't doubt me saying this, it is a commendable trait for a Leader to have. Mayhap we can find some agreement to assist."

Emma just chuckled and opened the door. "Joram Lionae, Charlen Vost and Richert Merdan. Apparently the three leading Houses in Mhyr."

The two men and single woman carefully eyed the Heir and Consort as they entered. Tristian refrained from scowling, barely, but she did. Sidell smiled softly in welcome. "Welcome to Dyan, I trust your trip was pleasant?"

"It might have been if refreshments or small snacks had been provided."

"It's a transport," Emma snapped, "not a luxury craft. We could have let you come on foot, Merdan."

"Forgive me, Leader. I'm just...it's been stressful. I'm not used to having to do so much and my servants were not allowed to attend me."

"Well I hope you can eat by yourself cause nobody here is gonna feed you," Aurora snorted in disgust.

Sidell's eyes rolled, it was going to be a long night.

Felice snickered and turned to Sidell, "What's in the kitchen? My mouth has been watering since I stepped through the doors."

"A new recipe," Sidell explained. "Tristian's the only one that's ever had it before and she's about ready to storm in there and just commandeer a pot."

Tristian grinned sheepishly but Anya's people bustled in and began serving.

Tristian dug in eagerly and her eyes closed in blissful delight, "Anya, you do her justice you do. I'll have to tell her so when I'm there next."

Anya beamed. "Tis good then, not to much with the spices?"

"It's perfect," the happy Consort affirmed.

"I'll be on my way then, Emma. Everything's set and the girls know what to do. I just wanted to be sure this was right and now that I've got Tristian's blessings I'm satisfied."

Emma waved her out, her mouth full with the delicious treat. She noticed the nobles had no trouble digesting common food. She laughed internally, smacking herself for such uncharitable thoughts.

Conversations had begun as Tristian polished off her third helping. Sidell merely smiled at her indulgently. Two women brought out two trays and Sidell hummed in approval as the trays were set on the table and lit with a flame for several seconds. The nobles stared in amazement. With the flames doused they began serving and Sidell groaned in anticipation as her mouth watered.

"Sidell," Felice laughed gently, "I still want to know where you put your food."

"Oh no, I fell for that last time," Sidell answered between bites and gently slapped her chuckling mate. "Hush, you."

The table was cleared quickly, the desert plates collected and everything cleared and cleaned up. Emma thanked the women graciously and they left to head back and report a successful evening to Anya.

"I'm surprised," Richert spoke gruffly. "The common fare was almost equal to our noble establishments."

Felice chortled in amusement. "Don't be an ass. The noble establishments have yet to figure out what to cook let alone how to cook. It's just that their clientele have such low standards they assume they are proficient. If they were here, they'd be out of business within a week."

"Really, Felice," Joram chided, "that's not quite true."

"Alright," Felice agreed, "make that a day." She laughed loudly at the scowling nobles. "Let's be realistic, Sidell would not step foot in one since she found it disgusting. How do you think others here would feel?"

They ignored her and turned to Emma, "Leader, Staunton has told us that there is a problem with Dyan answering our request. May I ask what it is?"

Emma quirked her lips, "Didn't she tell you that also?"

"Well, it's best to hear it from the source, sometimes, the translation leaves a lot to be desired."

"Right," she answered sarcastically. "Alright, Mhyr is a Holding of its own. A fully separate entity from Dyan and I have no true jurisdiction in it. Also, having Dyan step in to oversee another Holding sends a message across the land that I am not prepared to send. While I will and do take responsibility for Riger as a whole, I will not arbitrarily dictate laws in another's Holding." She smiled, "Was that clear enough?"

"I see," he murmured. "Staunton has also stated that perhaps an arrangement could be made that would make use of your Warriors rather than having your House become actively involved. Is there a problem with that?"

"Tristian will have to answer that question, Richert. My answer may not be accurate in the translation."

"Yes. Staunton did mention something like that but, I don't understand, you are the Leader. A simple command would suffice."

Emma grinned, "No, it wouldn't. The Warriors do not answer to me, Merdan. I could not order them to do anything and they would ignore any order I give."

"But...that...how do you control them?"

"I don't. That should be obvious. I never have, the Warriors are an entity to Dyan and they have never answered to a Leader in their entire existence."

"That's unreasonable," Charlen exclaimed.

"No. It ensures that the Leading House does not exploit the power that commanding the Warriors can bring. The Commander doesn't answer to me and ensures that I don't take advantage of them. At the same time, I provide a counterpoint to the Commander and if abuse is taking place I may act with the unanimous agreement of the full council." Emma smiled, "Keeps any one person from having too much power."

"I see," Reichert said softly. "So, young Mardred, your reason for not assisting us?"

"I offered, with one condition. My condition was not met and I will not put my people in a situation that is fraught with danger knowing the Noble Houses will only attempt to take advantage of them. No. I will not."

"Surely we can compromise."

Tristian scowled but Emma reminded her gently, "You agreed to try, Consort. Perhaps we can."

"What is your fear, love?"

"The Commander I put in place would be bound to answer to any silly ass complaint these idiots could dream up. Rather than keeping the populace safe, which is my concern, she will find herself enmeshed in trying to make the life of the Nobles easier. Up to and including providing escort services to and from their dwellings whether the distance is across the street or across the Holding."

"What's wrong with that?" Joram demanded. "It's our right to be able to feel safe in our own Holding."

"It's the right of the populace. My concern is that none of you give a damn about the populace and the only reason you're now asking for assistance is because they've started to harass the Nobles. Why didn't you ask when they were harming the rest of the people?"

"You can't speak to us like that," Charlen whined.

"On the contrary," Aurora Mardred inserted, "by your own standards, daring to argue with Tristian is a punishable offence. She is my Heir, people, let us not forget that."

Silence fell as the three squirmed under Aurora's cool gaze.

"A compromise," Sidell spoke softly, her hand resting casually on her lover's taut arm. "We send

help but...the Commander and the warriors accompanying her answer only to Dyan. They will ignore any order given to them by any person in Mhyr. They will conduct themselves as they would here and the good of the populace comes first in Dyan."

"That's ridiculous," Merdan slammed his hand on the table. "She could not possibly know what is an important matter and what is frivolous."

"Then counter the offer," Sidell challenged gently.

"She answers to Staunton."

"No," Tristian replied icily. "Staunton is a well trained lap dog and well used to carrying out the bidding of the Nobles while hiding the truth behind the guise of doing what's best for the Holding. I will not agree to that."

Staunton considered being offended but finally just shut up. She was out of her league and the supposed commoner was more than a match for the Nobles of Mhyr.

"You're being unreasonable."

"I don't see it," Emma put in. "You've come to us asking for help for your people. But the suggestion that would best protect your people you deny. Who, exactly are you trying to protect and what, exactly do you want?"

"We want Mhyr back the way it use to be," Joram replied in exasperation.

Sidell smiled gently, "Have any of you stopped to consider exactly when it was that things began falling apart?"

They looked at her in confusion.

"I'd lay odds it was shortly after Flain Martin was killed and Tristian removed from the Guardians. It got worse when Tristian left Mhyr. The only thing I see in common is that your Nobles are now running the Guardians." She smiled softly, "Merely an observation."

"That's not true. Althea kept them in control."

"No...she kept them from bothering the nobles. Tristian kept them from bothering the populace. With both of them gone, you've still got a noble in command. What's the problem?"

"I...we don't know. The Commander cannot control the Guardians and we aren't sure why."

Felice clucked, "Tch. She can't control them because she can't figure out which way she's suppose to hold that sword. They laugh at her when she tries to reprimand them. The fact remains that we have incompetent people in charge. Nothing will change until that is fixed."

"We're trying, dammit," Reichert growled.

"No. You're trying to fix the Guardians but..." Felice smiled wickedly, "the Guardians aren't in charge."

"You go to far, Adair," Charlen warned.

"And you're going to do what? Whine?"

"This is getting us nowhere," Reichert barked.

"I'm still waiting for an acceptable counter," Sidell reminded them.

"Commander Mardred could take control of the Guardians." Reichert threw out.

Tristian laughed, "Oh yes, I'm just dying to rush back to Mhyr. My lady is here, my life is here, and neither my mate nor our child will live in a Holding that practices bigotry and hatred. That's damn funny, Merdan, damn funny."

"You would be treated to the finest Mhyr has to offer? You would be honored as the royal couple, why not?" Reichert entreated.

Sidell shook her head, "We have that. And more. Here we have friends, loved ones, family. What can you offer to compare to that? Prestige means nothing to us. Having people fawning over us is embarrassing not to mention irritating. Sorry, as I told Staunton, I will not move to Mhyr. Why should my lover choose to move there?"

Reichert growled in frustration, "So, our options so far. Revoke the Caste System or have a Commander that answers to no one in the Holding."

"That about sums it up," Tristian answered, moving to the bar.

"We've got that new batch of wine in from Southlock, Ariel said you'd probably love it." Emma offered.

"Did she? Well then, I'll have to try it." She looked up at her lover, "My heart."

"A small glass, please." Sidell answered rising to join her. "Anyone else?"

"Don't you have servants?"

Aurora sighed and rose to collect her own drink motioning the two of them to reseal themselves.

Tristian swirled the wine gently inhaling the fragrant bouquet. She sipped and swirled it about her mouth letting the fruity taste burst over her tongue. Smiling she nodded to Emma, "She was correct as usual. She should sell this batch, it's a good press."

Felice finally rose and served the three nobles since no one in Dyan planned to help them. She sat shaking her head in disgust.

"This is excellent," Charlen murmured. "Perhaps we could trade for some of it?"

"We have no trade agreement with Mhyr. We would have to consider it." Emma replied cautiously.

"You have trade agreements with others?" Reichert asked suspiciously.

"As a matter of fact, we do. The other three holdings and several of the larger villages."

"But it did not occur to you to establish one with us?"

"Be careful, Reichert. There is much that I will accept, being reprimanded in my own Holding is not one of them."

"I...apologize."

"As for why none was established, you have nothing to offer us." Emma spoke bluntly now having run out of patience.

"That may be true but we could use some help in getting enough food. A trade agreement would assist that."

"Reichert, if that's your need, you are supposed to initiate the offer. Not hope we come to you begging you to buy things from us," Emma snorted in amusement. "What kind of idiot are you?"

"We do not normally ask for things, Leader. Surely you can see our position. The other Holdings come to us and offer."

"Well, sit on your ass long enough and anything might happen." Aurora muttered her attention turning to Sidell and Tristian who were murmuring softly. "Everything alright?"

Tristian looked up. "Aye, she's tired though and I'm gonna take her home."

"You'll be back?"

Tristian's brow rose in amusement.

"Silly question," Aurora admitted. "Must be the environment."

"But..." Joram sputtered, "we haven't reached an agreement."

Tristian shrugged, "There's always tomorrow. Perhaps you can come up with another offer. So

far, I will only agree to the one I made or the one Sidell made." She grinned nodding at Felice and turned, "Emma, Sire, good eve to you both."

"Get some rest you two. I'll see you at breakfast."

Sidell smiled at them and they returned to their home in relief.

Part 8

Sidell smiled in welcome as her lover entered the tavern to join them for breakfast. "There appears to have been a concession made over night."

"Was there?" Tristian asked in surprise. "And that is?"

"They agree that the Commander, and the warriors, answer only to Dyan."

"But," Tristian replied sensing the hesitation.

"They want Puck."

"No."

Reichert sputtered his punch over his tunic. "NO! We are attempting to come to an agreement and you're being stubborn."

Tristian smiled as Anya delivered her meal. "I'm not being stubborn, Merdan, but I have other obligations besides a Holding that cannot control their own Guardian force." She grinned at Emma, "We're opening a training center over the border in Wet Springs."

"We are?" Emma responded in surprise.

"Aye. We're gonna combine the warriors and scouts and then, open enlistment outside of the Holding."

"Damn..." Emma murmured in surprise. "I don't believe it. Really?"

"Aye. Dyan will remain a Holding of women but I'm accepting applications for postings throughout the land. I plan to garrison a small group of no more than twenty-five warriors at the compounds the villages have built. There are twelve of them so...we need to recruit. Maria's gone to ask Wet Springs if they mind having the training center as part of their village but I don't foresee any concerns."

Emma sat silently, slightly stunned. "Let me see. We...Dyan...will be posting warriors across the land? Outside of our borders?"

"Aye," Tristian answered with a glint of amusement.

"I'll be damned. And we're accepting men?"

"Aye, but they won't be posted in Dyan." Tristian grinned, "Since this is a major step, as you can tell by the shock on our Leader's face, I cannot release Puck or Maria until this initiative is fully off the ground. I expect that to take a year or more."

Aurora entered with Selene and the three nobles stiffened as Aurora pulled a chair out for her.

"Be careful, Noble," Tristian purred dangerously, "slight my mother and I will rip your throat out."

"Tristian behave yourself," Selene scolded. "No throat ripping at breakfast."

Tristian relaxed slowly and chuckled softly. "Forgive me. I'll try to remember that from now on."

Aurora merely snorted, "As if."

"Hey," Tristian objected. "I said I'd try." She turned back to Selene, "You enjoyed your visit to Dram?"

"Aye. Della sends her regards and wants to know how come you can wave your hand and make things appear and disappear but you can't find Dram."

Tristian chuckled. "I deserve that, I suppose. I'll see if I can't stop off there after I leave Mhyr."

"You're going back to Mhyr? What for?" Selene asked in surprise.

Tristian could just see the sarcastic comment hovering on Joram's lips and she waited patiently for him to make a fool of himself. Unfortunately, Reichert also saw it and he silenced the man with a glare. "Apparently they need some assistance. I've agreed and will be placing a small force there for a small period."

"How small?" Sidell asked curiously.

"What, the force or the period."

"Yes," she agreed with a giggle.

Tristian chuckled, "I figure twenty-four women, it's easy enough done, I'm gonna pull two scout squads. That way I don't have to move the entire holding around to keep the warriors force balanced."

"Ahhh," Sidell beamed at her proudly, "I had wondered how you planned to do that."

Tristian nodded at the compliment. "I'm also pulling Das as their Commander. I'll be going with

them for a week or so to make sure their role is completely understood and to help them settle the worst of the offenders. After that, Das will handle things easily. I will be removing them in three months so I'd suggest Nobles that you come up with another plan. Once the worst offenders have been removed and the rest of the Guardians take notice that the rules have changed it would be a simple matter to put in a competent Commander and have the same effect. I'd offer to train one but Das will be considered a commoner and none of your nobles would benefit from her training so...I leave that in your hands. Keep in mind I do mean three months from the day we arrive."

"Can we meet this woman?"

Tristian turned to a rowdy table in the back, "Das? C'mere."

"Aye, Consort," Das replied standing at Tristian's elbow.

"Say hello," she performed the introductions and Das nodded in acknowledgement. "I'll tell you why you met them at the morning brief."

"Aye, Consort." she answered returning to her tablemates.

"She seems...young," Reichert offered.

"The position is non-negotiable. Only whether or not we would help was an option." Tristian answered firmly. She kissed Sidell and bid them all a good morning.

Sidell turned to Emma, "I'm off to Southlock. I want to check on the children and I've offered to assist Ariel in some of the Holding policies that she's a bit confused on."

Emma laughed, "Why? They've never abided by them before."

Sidell shrugged, "She wants to teach them to the youngsters. She feels, since the integration, that having the next generation fully conversant of our policies will be beneficial to all."

Emma grinned and warned her to not overstrain herself.

The Warriors arrived in Mhyr on a sunny morning. After a briefing given by Staunton, the Guardian's Commander was relieved of her position and Das put in her place. She called a full briefing ordering every Guardian present to attend.

Das snickered as she entered the compound and noticed that although most were present, it was obvious that many had chosen to ignore the command. She sat and waited knowing her people were out in the colony and the rest of them would be rounded up and present shortly.

She pulled a chair onto the podium and sat quietly studying the group in front of her.

"Are we waiting for something in particular, Commander?"

"Aye, the rest of the crew."

"Begging the Commander's pardon but...most of them are nobles and it's doubtful they'll come."

"Oh, they'll come. It remains to be seen if they stay." Das replied honestly. "But, we could chat, if you like. What kind of Guardians do we have here?"

"I'd say fairly honest, very over worked, extremely frustrated, and pretty much fed up," a woman answered wryly.

"And you are?"

"Sergeant Beale Sleit, Commander."

"Alright, I'm Das and it's my preference to be called as such. How are all of you with weapons?"

"Lieutenant Mikal Vost, Commander," an older man spoke softly. "Most of us are pretty good, we can hold up our end of a fight. We've some new ones amongst us just getting the hang of it..."

The door opening interrupted him and a large group of women entered, belligerent, loud, and pushing others out of the way.

"Brianna," Das called out, "settle these idiots."

Bri smiled and threw the group of them up against a wall holding them there with no effort at all.

Das smiled in approval and noticed Tristian easing in to sit in the back of the room. The rest of the Guardians entered quietly and seated themselves with a minimum of fuss.

"Hey...you," a loud voice rasped out. "You can't do this to us."

"Don't be silly, I already am." Das replied humorously. "Choice, settle down and work or get out. Leave my meeting and you'll be stripped of your rank and position. Those are your choices for the time being. Later, if you stay, you'll have more."

She waited for comments but the women merely glared at her. She nodded to Bri who let them down. Half of them bolted out the door laughing.

"You marked them, Bri?"

"Aye."

"Take five of the warriors, find their quarters and throw everything out into the streets." She

turned to the room, "As of now, they are no longer part of the Guardians. Anyone allowing them onto the compound or into the barracks will join them." She paused, "Questions?"

"Their folks won't like it."

Das shrugged, "Tough." She continued when no further replies were offered, "Alright, I want the current schedules and postings, I'll be reviewing them and changing them as necessary. All of you out to the training yard, let's see what we've got to work with."

The Guardians filed out and Das sent the warriors into the colony to keep the peace. Tristian had already disappeared and Das knew the departing group would soon have more trouble than they'd know what to do with.

Das had the women square off against each other, she monitored them and soon had them separated in groups that were equal in abilities.

"Alright," she turned to a younger private, "name?"

"Private Meryl Leita,"

"Step up here." She turned to the group, "Alright, Meryl here will be training you. I expect each of you on this field daily and practicing what she's gonna teach you." She turned to the surprised youngster, "What?"

"Uhhh, nothing, Commander. I mean Das. You really want me to train them?"

Das scowled, "Of course I do, did you think I was speaking for my health?"

"I guess not."

"Alright, you've got the basic moves down and that's what they need to learn. Start at the beginning exercises and work them up until they're proficient. You will train with the next group." Das did the same thing with the next group introducing them to their trainer. The final group she called together, "The rest of you will train with either myself or one of my people." She started them all and worked them for the better part of the morning breaking for the noon meal. "Come back here in an hour and we'll get to work."

"Geez," a woman muttered. "I thought we were working."

Another snickered, "If'n you haven't noticed, our new Commander ain't broke a sweat yet."

Tristian meanwhile had found the worst offenders pushing rudely through the merchant's square.

"Damn common bitches," Rafe Lionae snarled, "who do they think they are. Get the hell out of

my way, old woman." He pushed her over and had time to recognize a fist aiming for his favorite nose. Two more came to his rescue with no more success and they lay groaning on the ground. Tristian eyed the other six and grinned, "Next?"

"Oh no, Thomas. Not me. What do you want?"

"This shit stopped. Leave the people alone."

They muttered sullenly but pulled their friends up and moved off quietly.

"That won't last," Tinder muttered from her side.

"No, it won't but they're afraid of me. You guys will have to settle them yourselves but the notice has been given so, have at it."

Tinder smiled, "With pleasure, Consort."

The same routine continued for the first three days with Rafe flying into a rage when he found out no one could reinstate him to the guardians. Tinder broke three of his ribs before he stayed down. But the difference in the Holding was beginning to show and the people began smiling and greeting their protectors.

"Excuse me?"

Trey looked up to the speaker on the top of the stairs, "Lady?"

"Could you escort me to the market?"

Trey turned to look at the market a half a street away. "It's right there, Lady, have at it."

"I want an escort," the woman demanded.

"Sorry, Lady. I've my rounds to make. You'll need to attend the market yourself or find a friend to accompany you, I've not the time." An ex-guardian pocketing a bauble from a merchant caught Trey's attention. A well-placed sword hilt saw the man on the ground and the bauble back in the merchant's possession. "Shera, take this imbecile to lock-up."

The warrior grinned and dragged the imbecile away.

"See," The woman on the stairs wailed. "See? That's exactly why I need an escort."

"It's exactly why I can't escort you," Trey replied in exasperation. "I need to be free to keep the scum from harming everyone and the market is as safe as it's ever been."

"Escort me now, or I'll report you to the Leader."

Trey shook her head and wished her well continuing on with her rounds.

After day three, Das posted the new schedule posting several guardians with a warrior. This took the strain off of the warriors and gave the guardians some idea of how things were being handled under the new regime.

"You want me to what?" Meryl whispered anxiously.

Tinder scowled, "I want you to go up there and bop that idjit harassing the poor woman."

"But he's a noble."

"He's an idjit," Tinder replied heatedly before accomplishing the task herself.

Meryl stared at her in stunned silence as Tinder dragged the unconscious woman to lockup.

Tristian grinned at the cell full of disgruntled citizens. Staunton, Reichert, Joram and Charlen stood beside her. "So, Staunton. What do you think I should do with these nobles?"

"Me?"

"Well, I know what I'd like to do with them but I'm giving you four the first option."

"Perhaps you should let them go," Charlen said in exasperation.

"And what shall I do if they end up back here again?"

"They won't, they're nobles. Our nobles are never in trouble."

"Wrong answer. Second offense will require them to assist in repairing the barracks and the compound."

"What!" Joram screeched. "That's unacceptable."

"Look. These people are the ones that have been stealing from the merchants, beating up the citizens, yes including the nobles and ripping off homes. That's what you wanted stopped, isn't it?"

Reichert snorted, "I don't believe it. They've obviously been set up."

Tristian shrugged, "Then we'll leave them here and see if it happens again."

"You're joking?"

"No. I'm not. I'm also not going to waste my people's time or effort. If you refuse to face reality than feel free to live in your fantasy and I'll take my people home."

"Perhaps we should call a council and see if there has been that much of a change," Staunton suggested.

"Good idea." Merdan agreed haughtily, "I'm sure we'll hear that nothing has changed since it's obvious to me the culprits aren't here."

The merchants, however, were effusive in their praise, even those that worked in the Noble Square. The Nobles complained that the warriors were rude, insolent, and bad mannered but all agreed that the worst of the thefts and beatings had dropped markedly. Staunton looked extremely upset and the other three disgruntled.

They still demanded the nobles be released but agreed to Tristian's demand that they assist in repairing the barracks on a second offense.

Within two days most were back and disgusted to find themselves working like common laborers. Within three weeks Tristian was comfortable enough to leave. The guardians were fully assisting the warriors now. The nobles had come to understand that all prisoners, regardless of their station, were treated the same way. The barracks shone and the compound had been restored to pristine condition. Current prisoners were starting on the stables.

Tinder and Trey grinned at her. "What should we do with them next?"

"Start on the square. A lot of the merchants could use a hand in fixing their stalls, then houses and so forth. Don't forget, there is always ditches, sewage holes and trenches to dig."

They both smiled in delight as the Consort ported out.

"When's Tristian coming home?" Emma asked over breakfast.

"She's gone out to finish sealing the nodes," Sidell mumbled. "I'm gonna meet up with her in Dram."

"You are," Emma looked up anxiously. "Will that be safe?"

Sidell hesitated, "I don't know and she doesn't know I'm coming but...I need to be there." They still hadn't fully explained the happenings in Mhyr when Tristian sealed the two master nodes. Tristian never bothered because no one else could understand. Sidell knew she had to try. Her mother was gonna have a cow but at least she'd know why her daughter was placing herself at risk. "In Mhyr, with the assassins and everything..." she turned to Aurora and Emma. They nodded and she continued. "Tristian also found a large node and some...entity controlling it. She had to fight it to clean the node and this entity escaped to the part of the land she's clearing now."

I expect she'll find a third node and the final battle between them will take place there."

"All the more reason for you to stay home, Sidell." Emma added reasonably.

Sidell nibbled her lip and spoke gently, "I almost lost her the first time. When the two master nodes bonded...the power was incredible and Tristian...lost her sense of Self. She didn't remember being anything but the Mother's Own and would have remained in her embrace if I hadn't been there to remind her." She paused and looked evenly into her mother's concerned eyes. "I won't lose her, mother. Not for anything in this world. I need to be there and I will be there. If it takes everything I have to bring her back to me...then so be it."

Tristian sat Shadow quietly as she gazed out over the barren field. She could feel the raging anger emanating from the final node, the sickly taint to the mother's womb. She burned to repair the damage but wanted to consider the options. She'd drained the node last time but between fighting the entity, clearing the taint and feeding the node, she'd almost lost her own sense of Self. She couldn't do that again. Her senses prickled and swamped with the warmth of her lover's presence and she sighed, having known Sidell would come and dreading having her here.

"Live with it, warrior." Sidell murmured gently, laying a hand on Tristian's tensed thigh.

Tristian smiled and dismounted. "Seems I've little choice."

"You've got that right," Sidell agreed settling herself comfortably against her lover's tall frame.

Tristian was unsurprised to see Aurora and Emma bracketing them protectively.

"So, what's the plan," Sidell asked quietly.

"That's what I was working on," her lover retorted. "Unlike others I could name, I try to have one."

"Hah," Sidell giggled.

Tristian sobered, "I think I'm gonna try this differently. I tried the normal, drain and replenish but...I don't think I need to do that and it's more taxing. I'm gonna feed it."

"Is that dangerous?"

"I don't think so. For a brief period, whatever that thing will have a lot of power but it won't be familiar enough with it to launch a full attack. My plan should completely obliterate its consciousness and return it to the mother's embrace."

"And yourself?" Sidell asked in concern.

"It's why you're here, my heart. And I do thank you for that though I'd prefer you were somewhere safe."

Sidell pulled Tristian's arms tighter around her gently swollen abdomen. "There is no where outside of these arms that I can be safe, my love. Remember that and come back to me."

Tristian hugged her tight and kissed her softly, "I will, my heart."

Setting herself she sent the call for her bondmate back across the nodes that were now sealed to her. She felt the power grow, felt the air crackle but she held steady with Sidell secure in her embrace. Shadow danced off to find some shelter, Aurora and Emma soon followed, unable to withstand the pulsing energies swirling around the two women.

The node in Mhyr answered its bondmate and the Consort took on a burnished sheen of silver, the aura around her expanding rapidly, the air fairly oozed power and the taut heightened sense of waiting vanished in an explosion of gold cascading across the field, followed by a shattering clap of thunder, Dyan had answered its bondmate's call.

Tristian felt the wild call of her bond and set the power free, free to feed the node beneath her feet.

The entity screeched in rage, and then...excitement as pure power pored into its very essence. "YES, feed me, give me what's mine...yes."

Still the power grew and it knew it needed to find a way to release some of it but...the power was too wild, too raw and wouldn't bend to its will. And still the power grew. Concern touched its thoughts...but soon vanished as it gloated in the energies filling it. The node weakly pulsed a sickly red but the burnished silver sheen gilded the edges of the stone and little veins of silver-blue began appearing.

"ENOUGH," it cried, feeling itself overwhelmed by the power feed. "ENOUGH, I say...I COMMAND you to stop," it screeched in agony now.

The node glowed brighter and as the last pulsing red streaks vanished, a wail of anger could be heard that was suddenly silenced as the node responded to the power of the Mother's Own.

Feeling the node respond to the bond, Tristian called and it rose in answer. The entity screamed its last conscious thought as its essence was torn apart and absorbed in the warmth of the mother's womb, returned to its rightful place, it finally found peace.

The final node in the triad answered the call of the Mother's Own completing the union of the land called Riger to its bondmate. Tristian stood fully encased in a shimmering wall of silver-blue, her eyes closed, her being at one with the Mother but...her heart was held safely in her lover's hand.

As the light display flickered the sky cleared and the horizon sparkled in a final flash of gold.

Sidell turned to face her lover and gently coaxed, "Come home, my heart. Come home to us."

Sidell's head sagged against her lover's chest as Tristian's arms moved to gather her gently and soft lips kissed her head. "Thank you...dear Alwyn thank you."

Tristian smiled, holding the woman that meant more to her than all the power in the world. The Mother sighed in pleasure as the triad of nodes pulsed in synchrony and Riger settled.

Emma and Aurora approached carefully once the silver hue dissipated. Tristian's tall frame trembled with exhaustion and Sidell was fairly holding her lover upright.

Sidell turned to her mother. "Take us home, please. I think we're done."

A month later Emma again called a meeting to discuss issues with Mhyr. The leading families were again in Dyan and Staunton Grier was also present. Sidell sat awkwardly, uncomfortable in her seventh month and Tristian entered looking frazzled and irritated. "What now," she barked without preamble moving quickly to Sidell's side and lifting her lover into a more cradled embrace that was infinitely more comfortable for Sidell.

Emma's lips twitched in amusement as the Nobles looked to her in question for allowing such a rude display. "Well," she drawled lazily, "you heard the Consort."

Reichert Merdan sniffed in disapproval but he spoke in a low even tone. "We have some concerns."

Tristian merely glared at him to hurry along.

"Our commoners have begun to trade with the surrounding villagers. This is unacceptable to us but your Commander will not prohibit these actions."

"What is so unacceptable about it," Emma asked reasonably. "Your commoners are trading with other commoners and none are harassing or forcing themselves upon the nobles."

"This makes it difficult for our merchants to purchase things that they need to provide us with our comforts."

Emma's brow furrowed in confusion. She didn't get it. Trade was brisk and since the warriors were in place the prosperity of the Holding had actually risen a high degree.

Tristian snorted. "Emma, the merchants that normally service the nobles would often force the common market to sell at a loss, a very large loss. With trade open to others, the common market no longer needs to accept whatever bauble is given to them. I'd say the merchants in question are griping because they are getting nothing for the price of nothing. This in turn raises their cost to the nobles who are now bitching because they are being forced to purchase goods at a cost equal

to fair market value."

Emma looked at her oddly and murmured, "You're joking."

"No, I'm not. You underestimate the scope of the caste system, Leader. The sole purpose of Mhyr is to provide for the nobles. Anything else is unimportant and ignored."

"That's slavery," Emma muttered.

"Not according to Mhyr, it's their right."

Emma rose and paced to the windows staring out at her colony. The warm hues of color soothing her, the shouted laughter and high spirits of the people wafting up on the breeze. Merchant's bartered loudly and the women argued heatedly over prices but it was all in fun and often ended with smiles and chuckles when the victor emerged. "Come here," she commanded the nobles never turning from her view. She felt the four of them sidle up beside her and she nodded out the open window. "What do you four see?"

"Commoners," Joram spat. "Arguing and fighting as usual. It's no wonder they are, there is no real management in this Holding."

"I see women happy, proud in their heritage, strong in their convictions, unafraid to stand up for their rights. I see children laughing because they can be sure that tomorrow will be just as wonderful as today. Why can't you see that?" Emma asked earnestly. "Why can't you see what's plain as day in front of you?"

"You call this happy?" Richert asked in amazement.

"They're laughing, smiling, joking with each other. What do you call it?"

"Chaos." Charlen murmured. "Utter chaos, how can anyone be expected to shop and just change the prices when ever they feel like it."

"You expect yours to sell to you for almost nothing."

"It's all that the products are worth," Richert sniffed in disdain. "How could they possibly know different? They're commoners."

Emma sighed in defeat. "You'll never understand. Never know the thrill it is to truly live and for that...I pity you." She turned to her heirs, "Tristian, send word out through the warriors that we will be leaving Mhyr in a week. Have word passed that any and all who wishes to leave with us will be sponsored by Dyan until they are settled. The people may go where they wish and we'll make it happen."

"Wait a minute," Richert blustered. "You can't do that, you're interfering."

"Yes," Emma nodded. "I am. I'd hoped you would be able to interface with Riger but I can see I was wrong. My duty now is to the people of Riger and that I duty I accept willingly."

Tristian stood casually, Sidell beside her looking at Emma with compassion.

"Make it so, Consort. Have it done within the shortest timeframe you can manage."

"So be it, Leader," Tristian acknowledged.

"Wait," Charlen gasped. "Please, wait. What will we do?"

"I no longer care," Emma answered honestly. "You claim it is your role to be guardians for the people but that stewardship extends to prostituting them for the prestige of your Houses. For the whims of the so-called Nobles. Live as you wish, I will neither interfere again nor assist again. This will be the last meeting held here at your request. Remove yourselves from my Holding, I'm tired of your petty wants, your selfish concerns and your complete disregard for the welfare of those in your care." She turned to Tristian but was halted again.

"No," Joram managed, "we'll die without our servants, without the people to serve us."

"So be it," Emma murmured. "Tristian,"

Tristian nodded and the four nobles found themselves back in their Holding.

"NOOOOOOOOOO," Charlen screamed in anguish.

"Consort," Das greeted her with a wide smile. "Tis a good day for relocating."

Tristian grinned and looked up at the overcast sky, "Aye, Das. A good day."

Men and women called to her in amiable greetings as the two garrisons Tristian brought with her fell into helping them pack and load wagons. Tristian and Das wandered through the colony with Das explaining. "Many of them like the structure of living in a holding and the villages scare them. Dram, Widden and Darena have already sent word that they would be accepted as equal citizens. It helped that Dyan is sponsoring the move. None of the Holdings would have been able to integrate such a large group of what would have been indigent people."

Tristian nodded, "That was Emma's concern thus the sponsorship. It will also help the villages because we'll defray the taxes of those that help these people relocate successfully."

"Many of the families of women are headed for Wet Springs," Das continued. "Some are considering crossing Dyan's borders to establish settlements on our side as sister colonies. I've warned Puck and she's moved the warriors there to assist them in building and setting up a working colony. Someone will be on hand to explain the laws of Dyan."

"Good, we've a lot of open land and they'll be welcomed." Tristian concurred.

"Tristian?"

She halted and turned to find a bubbling Lady Adair dressed in scruffy trousers and a worn shift, "Aye, Lady?"

"How are you? And Sidell?" Felice chattered happily.

"Well, it's almost time and I'm as tense as a boar's back."

"I imagine you are, young Mardred," another voice responded in amusement.

"Aretha? Hey, what brings you here?"

"We," Aretha pointed to Felice, herself and a young woman coming out of the home buried in a stack of boxes. A warrior rushed to assist her and they laughed as they uncovered the overburdened woman.

"Seth?"

Aretha grinned. "Aye, the three of us decided it was too good a chance to pass up and we're moving to Dyan."

"Oh Goddess, the Lorekeepers in Dyan. Emma will have a field day. Where are your things?"

Aretha smiled. "I've already made arrangements, Tristian. I did not need the same assistance these poor folk did so my stuff is already on its way. Seth and I stopped to pick up Felice. She also is sponsoring her own move but it's nice to have company."

"That it is. Sidell wants a residence out near the area you all will be settling. Mayhap I'll place it in the new colony."

"Really," Felice asked curiously, "why?"

"The new training center. I've been spending a lot of time there because I want the program started off right. So, she wants to be nearby."

"Cool," Seth proclaimed causing the older women to laugh.

Tristian and Das continued their rounds and the briefing Das was giving. "The guardians wish to come with us, Consort. I will personally vouch for their competence and their loyalty."

Tristian smiled, "I'd hoped it would be so, Das. Most of them were doing the best they could but without guidance and backing they had no real chance."

"That is how I found it to be. Once we rid ourselves of the nobles, the guardians fell right into place and working with them has been no different for me than working with the warriors." She paused and grinned, "Well some of them are a bit more hairy." She turned to the taller woman. "I've asked them to gather in the compound's hall. "Would you speak to them?"

"Of course. When?"

"Now, would be good. Once the warriors arrived, I released them to tend to their own arrangements and they should be forming up as we speak."

They found the hall full of anxious men and women. All hoping they would be acceptable to Dyan. Das could not really give them an answer and she told them that so everyone waited with bated breath to hear the outcome.

"I am Tristian Mardred, Commander of the Warriors of Dyan." Tristian spoke in a low-moderated voice designed to carry across fields of battle. "It's been brought to my attention that you all wish to join with the Warriors in light of the events set in motion by our Leader. If there is a nay to this motion please stand to the side."

Not a soul moved. Tristian smiled gently. "Normally we accept applications and conduct interviews to determine an applicant's suitability. In this case, all of you have been vouched for by your acting Commander."

The hall gasped in surprise and eyes swiveled to Das standing quietly to the side of the podium.

"She seems to have been impressed with your performance and will answer for any problems you may cause. I personally wouldn't feel too pleased with that since eventually, she'd come after the guilty party herself."

Soft chuckles sounded. Many here had already felt the wrath of their acting Commander. Das was fair to all but Alwyn help you if you cross her or show a high degree of incompetence.

Tristian waited for the hall to quiet. "This being the case, allow me to welcome you to the ranks of the warriors. All ranks will remain in place and promotions will be handled in the same manner as our warriors are done now."

Tristian gazed out at the stunned crowd. The people were so shocked at the ease in which it had happened that they were silenced by the loud thumping of their hearts.

"Say thank you, you damn fools," Das growled. "I swear I can't take any of you anywhere."

The crowd roared their thanks and the sounds of ripping cloth filled the air as the guardian insignias were torn off and fluttered to the ground.

"Let's move out," Das barked. "People need help, I've set your squads and you know what to do."

Tristian wants this done quickly and sitting around with our jaws on the ground ain't getting a damn thing accomplished."

They filed out in an orderly manner quickly forming up into their own squads and heading out across the colony to the areas they'd been assigned to help. The warriors greeted them eagerly and the populace was soon beginning to trickle out of the holding gates.

Guardians and warriors had been assigned escort duties with the ex-guardians being sent with those relocating to places that needed assistance. They were given a letter of introduction from Tristian and told to report to the on-site Commander for further orders. All would be required to cycle through the training center just so that Tristian was sure they were aware of their responsibilities and fully trained.

It took three weeks to fully move the populace. Tristian and Das circled the now almost abandoned Holding. Approximately three hundred nobles and their supporters remained, a far cry from the fifteen hundred that had originally populated the Holding. They were waiting for the two women in the center of what was once the merchant's square.

"What are we suppose to do now, Mardred," Richert spat in anger.

"Pissing me off is not something I'd recommend," Tristian replied evenly. "You're the nobles, you know what's best, make a decision and get on with it. What you do now is no concern of mine save this. Make a move to harm the populace and I will destroy you." Her aura glittered in anger cowering the blustering nobles into silence. "You will never believe this but the truth is, you brought this upon yourselves. If any of you had bothered to read the Lore of Xandor, you'd have known that the final outcome in Xandor was the populace leaving the nobles to their own machinations. History repeats itself, ladies and gentlemen. Mayhap you'll learn something from this but...I have my doubts." She paused before leaving. "I've been asked to leave a message with you."

They looked at her warily.

"Sidell has stated that if and when you're willing to discuss things in a manner acceptable to the current clime of Riger, call for her. She will hear your pleas."

"Not the Leader?" another noble asked fearfully.

"Emma has washed her hands of you. Between the three Houses sent to represent you, I can't blame her."

Eyes turned angrily to the three pointed out and glared at them. "What have you imbeciles done?"

"Enough," Tristian barked. "This is no longer my affair, fare thee well, nobles."

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~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

**By
Tas**

Part 9

Six months passed quickly and Tristian couldn't remember being busier. The move had not been without problems but the warriors were on site and things finally began to settle down. There had been no word from Mhyr and Tristian put them out of her mind. The newest colony of Dyan, called Haven, was a joy to behold, the women of various backgrounds combining their individual tastes into a colony rich with lush bold colors, subtle pastels, wide sweeping windows and a colony house designed as never before seen in Riger. Seth had dug up the design from one of the old scrolls. She had help in updating it for current material and construction standards. The building nestled in the rear of the colony, muted in its splendor and elegant in its setting.

Tristian and Sidell had built a second residence in Haven grabbing a secluded site nestled into the surrounding woods. They were there now and Tristian smiled as she heard a soft cry from the nursery.

Rising she set off to see what her daughter was up to. "Hey you," she cooed softly, checking the linen wrap. "I swear you've got a leak. Every time I turn around you're wet."

Taledyn du Aulstet gurgled happily at her large playmate and waved her arms and feet in the air. "I know...up." Tristian smiled lifting her daughter carefully and taking her into the small washroom. "Here, lets get you washed and changed. Good thing you're up. Momma's out with the latest herdfarmers reviewing the crop planning and I'm bored." Tristian continued talking to her daughter as she wiped her down and dressed her comfortably. "So, we're gonna go play with Ceil once we get you fed."

A small leather pouch design along the lines of a wineskin served as the feeding container and Tal happily consumed the offered goat's milk. They were weaning her off of Sidell and the goat's

milk and soft foods now made up most of her diet. At bedtime she was treated to her mother's breast and would happily suckle until she fell asleep. Tristian loved those times and she'd hold her two precious charges against her reveling in the happiness being with them gave her. She was probably as sad as both Tal and Sidell that those times would soon come to an end.

Tal gurgled she was done. Tristian burped her, wiped her up again and placed her in the carrypack the leathersmith had made as a gift. Tal laughed in delight since she loved to go out.

"Ready?" Tristian queried and her daughter chortled gleefully tugging on her hair. "Guess so," Tristian answered herself with a smile, stepping out into the sunshine. "Bright out here," she chatted with her offspring who cooed and gurgled in answer.

The women of the Holding adored the couple and they couldn't help but smile when Tristian strode by with Tal strapped securely to her back. Tristian happily made her way across the border entering Wet Springs and heading for the training center.

"Eh la," Ceil greeted them. "Tal, how's my favorite girl?"

Taledyn smiled and grabbed the finger extended to her laughing as Ceil shook it gently.

She eyed Tristian with a smile, "Bored, Consort?"

"Yep," Tristian agreed honestly. "What's up here?"

"We've got a new crew in. Not quite new but they're from the guardians and this will be the first time they've entered the training facility."

"Ah...so, we get to see if Das was right?"

"Aye although the others that have been through have not been bad and the warriors stationed with them have been briefing them on Dyan's policies. I don't expect any difference with this lot but..."she drawled off teasingly. "We've a couple of youngsters here that would probably love to hold Tal if you want to spar some."

"Perfect," Tristian smiled taking Tal over to Nina.

"Hey, big girl. Gonna keep me company?" Nina smiled as Taledyn squealed in delight.

"Watch her, she crawls about as fast as most youngsters walk. She'll get away from you if you're not paying attention." Tristian warned gently.

"I'll mind it. It's no wonder considering her parents. I'm always surprised she's not walking and talking yet."

"A few more months, please," Tristian entreated. "I'm not ready to be running myself ragged trying to keep up with my offspring."

"Soon enough, Consort," Nina advised her with a grin. The offspring in a large family, Nina was quite familiar with babies and their ability to grow like magic.

Sidell walked into the center to find her mate and the Center's senior trainer engaged in a dance of intricate danger. The swords themselves were mere blurs of silver as the two women faced off in patterns so ingrained thought was no longer necessary. The speed of the strikes so quick, thinking about anything was a sure way to get them hurt. Both were now fully into that mindset where reflexes were in control and their minds were busy sorting the information received and sifting through to find the weak points in their opponent's guard.

Sidell could see that Tristian was picking up the pace and that forced Ceil into the position of trying to maintain her guard and keep up with the now fully powered blows. Ceil's guards were slow and awkward and Tristian pushed her harder until she powered through a final block sending Ceil's sword spinning off into the dirt.

"Damn," Ceil swore in admiration. "I thought I'd been keeping up with my practicing."

Tristian grinned in amiable acceptance of the faint praise. "Hey, it's the best work out I've had in a long time."

The new warriors had gathered around the salle during the match eyes wide in amazement as the women sparred. "Geez," one whispered softly, "I hope they don't expect us to be that good."

Another chuckled, "Well this is a training center. Hopefully they plan to train us and maybe, one day, we will be that good."

A delighted gurgle caught Sidell's attention and she turned with a smile to see her daughter squiggling in Nina's arms.

"Alright already," Nina complained, laughing. "Here, here, I guess I know where I stand with you." She kissed Tal's cheek and placed her in her mother's arms. Tal cooed wrapped her short arms round Sidell's neck and kissed her happily.

"Hello, sweetheart. You and your sire having fun?"

"Hey you," Tristian murmured softly gathering the two of them close.

"Hey yourself, bad news I'm afraid."

"What now?"

"There's a ship off the horizon of Helene. They know it's not one of theirs so..."

"Ah. Did you tell Emma? She should probably be on hand to greet them."

"Aye, she's muttering about uninvited guests but plans to be there this eve. Estelle doesn't expect the ship to hit port until tomorrow so we'll meet with the council tonight and see what's up."

"Well, let me use the facilities here to wash off and then we'll grab some lunch at Luc's?"

"Sounds good to me. Taledyn loves those smashed taters and gravy she makes for her."

Tristian smirked, "Aye, loves to play with them."

After lunch they took Taledyn to Selene.

"Oooh, I get to spoil her rotten," Selene laughed at her daughter's expression.

"Mother, that was not the intent."

"Bah, off with you, it's a granmama's prerogative to spoil her first granbaby." Selene paused, "and second, and third."

Tristian hustled a laughing Sidell out the door. "Come on before we find out wishful thinking does work."

"She wants a houseful huh?"

"Aye. You'd think she could have said something sooner."

"What difference would that have made?"

"I'd have suggested she have more kids."

"Is Aurora coming?" Sidell asked curiously.

"No." Tristian grunted. "Seems there's a young one she wants to get to know better. We may have to kidnap her to get her back."

Sidell chew her lip. "Honey, can I be honest?"

"Of course, my heart," Tristian stopped suddenly turning Sidell to her.

"I'm glad Aurora's staying. What if...what if Selene has another vision?"

Tristian sighed, "I know. I've thought about that. It would mean that I'd truth spell her and I'd hate to do that to my own mother but...I wouldn't believe her anyway else. Unfortunately, if she was innocent, it would shatter the fragile relationship the three of us have managed to form."

"I know, I'm sorry I brought it up but...I wanted you to know how I felt."

"Shh, never be sorry for that. I need to know how you feel."

They held each other for a minute more and left for Helene.

Emma, Sidell and Tristian stood on the docks as the ship tied off, a company of Warriors arranged in formation. The ramp was lowered and Tristian moved to the bottom of it waiting for the owners to show themselves.

A large man sneered at her, "Clear the way, the master wishes to disembark."

Tristian crossed her arms and waited. The man strode down arrogantly, "Are you deaf? Clear the way."

He reached for her harshly and she grabbed his arm spinning him about feeling the satisfying pop of his shoulder dislocating. "Try again," she growled dangerously.

The warriors secured him and moved him to the side groaning in pain.

"Here now, what's all this? No need for that, lass. He's just a bit of talk."

Tristian blocked the man's descent and eyed him coldly. "State your business,"

"Well...but...I mean...couldn't we do this in comfort."

"No. State your business."

The man's eyes narrowed in anger. "I'd prefer to discuss this with your men. No sense in my having to repeat myself."

"You've got a long wait, then," Tristian growled.

"Raole, what is happening?" A hesitant voice echoed down.

"Lady du Aulstet, forgive me. I have no idea what the trouble is. I asked to be taken to their men so that we might begin trading but...this woman...refuses to give way."

Tristian's face was impassive and she never moved nor showed surprise at the identity of the tall woman on board the ship.

The woman's gaze flickered across the colony resting occasionally on small groups gathered about. "Perhaps they do things differently? Perhaps the women here are in charge?"

"What? That's preposterous, Lady. You know women have no sense for business but this place is obviously prosperous. I'm sure the men are busy in meetings allowing the women folk time to do

their gossiping."

"My love?" Sidell called out in amusement. Watching Raole's eyes dart around looking for her mate.

"My heart," Tristian responded tenderly. Raole's jaw dropped in astonishment and disbelief.

"Shut him up," Sidell spoke evenly.

"Aye, love." A simple nod served its purpose and Raole was dragged off with the other unfortunate male.

Tristian's piercing gaze rose to the top of the ramp and she waited.

"I am Gisele du Aulstet, daughter of the ruling house of Baylon. May I enter?"

"Alone, Lady, or if you've women with you, they are also welcomed. Men are not allowed here without proper invitation and considering their comments, none will be forthcoming."

Gisele smiled, "Of course. There are five of us, the rest of the shipmates are men."

Tristian nodded and she beckoned the others forward. Tristian stepped down allowing them to gather on the docks. She turned to her Warriors, "Put them back on the ship." Once done, a simple shield ensured none of the men would be able to leave their ship. She turned to find the women watching her curiously and she gestured towards Emma. They turned to face her.

Emma eyed the woman critically but made no conclusions. "I am Emma du Aulstet, daughter of the ruling house of Xandor and now, Leader of Dyan. Welcome to our Holding Gisele."

Gisele's eyes widened in surprise and she smiled hesitantly, "We...are related?"

"That is something we can discuss. First things first, Tristian, removed that eyesore from my harbor and settle the colony."

Tristian nodded and set the ship out off the far coast. They were held in a mage spell and would not drift nor could the men leave. The warriors moved off quickly and the colony women ambled back to their activities.

Emma moved to Sidell's side, "My Heir, Sidell. Tristian is her Consort and the Heir to the House of Mardred."

The women sputtered in surprise, "But...the House of Mardred died out decades ago." Gisele murmured softly.

Tristian smirked, "Then my Sire is gonna be truly irritated." She turned to Emma, "The hall is prepared if you're ready, Leader."

"Aye. I suppose." Emma muttered as Sidell and Tristian led the way through the colony.

They settled in the common hall, the women quiet as they considered the events that had just unfolded. "It would be nice to find distant relatives," Gisele offered hesitantly.

"I've one concern," Sidell spoke gently. "You are not a mage."

"Of course not," Gisele looked at her strangely. "Why would I be?"

"The du Aulstets breed mages, Gisele," Emma answered. "From time began it has always been so. I am curious to know that branch that does not. More, I'm curious to know why a member of the royal family was removed from the Holdings of the du Aulstets."

"I...this," Gisele turned to her left, "is Luan, our lorekeeper. Perhaps she can shed some light on the subject?"

Luan's brow wrinkle in confusion and she settled deeper into the chair. "I have never seen scrolls of the time before Baylon, Lady du Aulstet. We have none and our records all begin with the founding of Baylon. I could not possibly guess where the branch split off except to say that Baylon was founded by a du Aulstet."

"Which one?"

"A Giles du Aulstet, Lady."

Emma turned to Tristian who nodded and left to contact Aretha Dubear. "We are contacting our lorekeeper. She should be here by the noon meal and we'll see if she has any more information. Since that subject is on hold, perhaps you'd care to tell me what brings you to our shores, Gisele."

Gisele nodded. "Over a year ago we had been trading with a ship from a place called Helene. They brought us the most marvelous beasts and father was so excited. Well we've not seen them for several moons and father wanted to find out where this land was and establish something a bit more reliable."

"Beasts?"

"Aye, the women called them horses."

Sidell's brow rose in amusement but she held her comments.

"From the tone of your men, Gisele," Sidell entered the conversation, "I'm surprised the women were allowed to do business."

"Well, they weren't treated well and I think they got a bad deal but they seemed pleased to

receive those medicines we use. We thought that perhaps they were less civilized and didn't have such medicines available."

"What did you use them for?"

"Oh, to keep our ladies calm and relaxed. Occasionally, we women are prone to fainting spells and hysterics so the medicines come in handy."

Sidell's nails dug into her palm and she only relaxed when Tristian pried her fingers open and took her hand gently. She couldn't believe the words coming out of the woman's mouth...worse; she couldn't believe the woman meant it.

"Gisele," Tristian's low voice caught everyone's attention and eyes pinned to her, "are you on medication now?"

"Oh, yes. Raole says it's necessary lest I become ill. I don't know what I'll do if I can't get more soon."

"Wonderful," Emma muttered looking at the women in aggravation. "Tell you what, let's get the lot of you settled into rooms, get you fed and if you like we'll show you around our colony. Tomorrow will be soon enough to discuss your reasons for being here and look into the du Aulstet family line."

"That sounds excellent," Gisele smiled. Emma noticed her eyes were slightly off focus. She rose to speak to the tavernkeep and make arrangements.

Leaving the women in Emma's care Tristian took a few guardians out to the ship to retrieve their belongings.

Raole stared at the party in fear but his anger quickly took control. "How dare you. I am the First Minister to the King and I will report this insolence to his majesty upon our return."

Tristian smirked, "If I allow your return, you mean."

His face blanched at the open threat. "You...we've done nothing...nothing I say."

"You've entered our land uninvited, order me around as if I were a pet, assumed we needed oversight by...men, and offended my Lady. That doesn't sound like nothing to me." Tristian growled slowly. "Are you in the habit of visiting foreign soil and expecting them to bow to your uncivilized demands?"

"I...but...most greet us willingly. But as I said, most have been men. This is obviously the problem."

"Obviously," Tristian agreed, "I've often found them to be simpleminded, easily led, and overly concerned with the member dangling between their legs."

Raole sputtered in embarrassment and anger. "How dare you?"

"Raole, shut up. You're petty views mean nothing to me. Your bigotry offends me and frankly, I'm sick of the stench."

"Consort," a warrior called, "we are ready."

"Very good, Mardi. Let us return. I feel the need for fresh air and intelligent company." With that, the women were gone.

At the docks she had the luggage searched. "I want the drugs burned. Make sure those bags are clean before you return them to their owners."

"Sidell, it's true there are no men in the land?"

"In our part of the land, it's true. We call our part Dyan and it is known as a Holding. In our Holding men are not allowed without prior approval."

"How is this possible? How do you keep them out?" Gisele asked softly.

Sidell considered the question. She found Gisele to be a meek and mild individual and was occasionally frustrated that the woman claimed to be from her line. Sidell knew this was arrogant of her but every now and then she just wanted to reach up and smack the girl back into reality.

"Well, we defend our borders, we've well trained women that are the martial forces of Dyan. They are known as the Warriors of Dyan and they travel the breadth of the Holding assisting those that need help, protecting us from raiders, keeping peace among the populace."

"Your women fight?" Gisele asked in astonishment. "I mean, really fight, with weapons and things."

Sidell smirked, "Tristian wears a sword on her back. Did you think it decoration?"

"I...didn't think about it at all," Gisele admitted. "I was so confused this morn I really didn't notice much of anything except the lack of men."

"How do you feel now?"

"Much better. The lunch was delicious and I'm not so fuzzy now. I don't know why that happens," she replied sadly.

"It's the medicine," Sidell answered succinctly.

"The medicine? Surely not! Father says it's only to keep me calm not for anything else," Gisele

questioned hesitantly.

"It does keep you calm, Gisele, it makes your head fuzzy. It's difficult to get upset about anything when you can't concentrate on it."

"I..." her voice faltered at the thought and the two women continued their journey through the colony in silence for a bit.

"This is a truly beautiful place," Gisele finally spoke. Her eyes lit in delight at the muted colors and the laughing arguments taking place around them. "And everyone just seems so...happy."

"They are, for the most part. Occasionally there are problems. People argue and fight. It's a fact of life but they talk about it and the Council intervenes if it gets to out of hand. Mother is the final authority if the problem ever goes that high which...in regards to internal troubles, it never has. By the time the Leader is called in the women have normally forgotten what started the whole mess and are friends again." Sidell chuckled softly at that. Sometimes she wondered about the women in the Holding. "But, if you think this is beautiful, you should see Haven. That is a truly magnificent colony."

"Haven? As in a safe place to be?"

Sidell considered this with a smile. "I think that's what prompted the name. The women that established Haven all came from another land that refused to see them as thinking and feeling individuals. They were given no choices, offered no recourse and spent their days slaving away merely to put food on the table. They look upon Haven as their new start in life and have thrown themselves into making it the place where everyone has a right to the same things in life."

Gisele's eyes drifted as she contemplated that thought. "It would be something to live in a place like that." She eyed her ...kinswoman and spoke softly, "In Baylon, the men rule with ultimate authority. I am the King's daughter but my word has no more meaning than that of my maid."

Sidell sighed, always there were people that needed to control things so badly that others suffered for their selfishness. "Could you change things? Would the people support a change?"

"Why?" Gisele answered honestly, "the men rule with authority but they are wise enough to ensure their women are happy."

"Happy or drugged?"

Gisele hesitated then shrugged, "Matters not in the long run. The fact remains that no one feels the need for change therefore, why bother."

Sidell nodded in understanding. "And you? How do you feel?"

"Occasionally I get angry but then...it just goes away."

Sidell felt a slow burn; obviously the men of Baylon knew the purpose behind the drug and used it willingly to keep their women in line. She shook off the anger as having no purpose here and looked up to see her lover standing tall and proud on the docks, Tristian's gaze focused out towards the horizon. Sidell smiled and pulled Gisele along with her.

Tristian was lost in thought when she felt the warm arms of her mate circle her gently. "My heart," she greeted with a smile.

"My love." Sidell responded turning her lover to face her. "You're deep in thought."

"Aye," Tristian murmured leaning down for a welcoming kiss. "Touring the colony?" she asked when they separated.

"Hmmm," Sidell murmured still savoring the taste of her lover's warm mouth. "Uhhmm," she blushed at Tristian's grin. "Yes, I thought I'd show Gisele around." They turned to the woman to find her staring at them in wide-eyed wonder. Tristian checked her laces to be sure she was covered properly. She looked up and quirked an eyebrow. "Yessss?" she purred cockily.

"Behave," Sidell scolded her. "You'll frighten her back to Baylon with out the ship."

Tristian laughed and hugged her gently, "As you wish, my heart."

"You..." Gisele began, "you really are...together."

"Together? What do you mean, together?"

"You know, a couple, a pair, lovers?"

"Ahhh, yes. We've been joined for two years now and our daughter is about seven months old."

"Daughter? How is this done?" Gisele asked curiously.

Tristian blushed which brought a chuckle to Sidell's lips. Her mate was rarely flustered and absolutely adorable during the few times it happened.

"How it usually, happens," Sidell answered. "You know, the Goddesses gift from the time of the catalysts?"

Gisele looked blankly at them and Sidell sighed, "Dearheart, is Aretha here yet?"

"Aye, she, Emma and Felice are holed up in the common hall digging through the tons of boxes Aretha dragged along with her."

"Felice is here?"

"She and Aretha appear to be quite fond of each other," Tristian answered laconically.

"Imagine that," Sidell muttered in surprise. She turned to Gisele, "Shall we go and dig into our history?" Gisele agreed but Tristian begged off and decided to return to Freelock and save Tal from being totally spoiled.

"Alright, love, but your mother is going to be upset with you for taking her granbaby away so early.

Tristian shrugged, "She's my daughter and I miss her."

Sidell kissed her gently, "I know you do, and I'm sure she misses you. Go on, meet me here for supper?"

"Aye."

Sidell spotted Luan chatting amiably with a merchant and asked her to join them. When the lorekeeper found out they'd be meeting other keepers of lore she agreed happily.

"There you are," Emma greeted her offspring with a smile.

"Where is tall, dark and gorgeous," Aretha asked with a grin.

"She went home to get small, tanned and adorable. She misses her daughter." Sidell answered with a laugh. "They adore each other."

"Jealous?" Felice asked gently.

Sidell considered that and grinned sheepishly, "Occasionally. But when I think about it, I'm never sure if I'm jealous because Tal's with her sire or because her sire is not with me."

Emma laughed, "You are so whipped."

Sidell blushed.

"So the Mardred line died off decades ago?" Aurora asked in amusement, her eyes crinkled in laughter as her granddaughter tried to climb up her Sire's leg.

"So they claim," Tristian answered from the chair she was sprawled in reaching down to pick up her struggling offspring. Tal curled up happily in her Sire's lap playing with the laces of Tristian's jerkin.

"And what do you think of these people, sweetheart" Selene asked comfortably, bringing out drinks for the two dark women sprawled in the sitting room.

"Thanks, mum," Tristian offered taking her glass and fighting off a suddenly interested child. "Hey, now. Just a minute or we'll both be wearing it." She let Tal noisily slurp the sweet fruit drink smiling indulgently.

"Hasn't quite got that drinking thing down yet, huh?"

"No," Tristian replied with a smile. "In her little flask she's pretty competent but these glasses still confuse her. She's getting there."

Once Tal settled again Tristian turned to Selene, "What do I think of them?" She sighed, "I think I'm still angry about Mhyr and it's carrying over to this new land called Baylon."

"Why so?"

"I over reacted," Tristian admitted softly. "I have no patience to listen to intolerant prattling and told the fool to shut up. I even left him with the threat that he could possibly report me to his King...if I allowed him to return."

Selene hesitated and then said softly, "There is much about Mhyr that you have to be angry about, sweetheart. Not the least of which is why you were there to begin with."

Tristian sighed heavily, "I can't go back and change things mom, neither of us can. It will do me no good to harbor feelings like that and truthfully, I don't want to."

"Was it difficult to leave Tal with me today?" Selene asked fearfully bringing wide-eyed astonishment to the faces of the two women sitting with her.

"Uhhh," Tristian hesitated, "Yes and no."

Selene watched her carefully and Tristian ran her hand through her hair in absentminded nervousness. "Yes, because of the way you react to stress. No, because there is no place in this world you could move Tal and not have me find her. That's unfair to you, I realize that, but it's truth and I won't lie to you."

Aurora stood to silently excuse herself but Selene caught her hand in a gentle clasp. While she had remained in Dyan and was living in Aurora's home, the two had not regained their closeness nor attempted to renew their relationship. They were friends only and Aurora felt she had no business sitting in on this conversation. "Stay, please." Selene asked her softly. "It involves you as much as the two of us."

"It scared me to have her with me," Selene offered hesitantly. "I was glad Aurora stayed with us."

"Scared you how?" Tristian murmured as she settled Tal more comfortably now that the energetic youngster had fallen asleep."

"I worried that I'd have a vision and that I wouldn't be strong enough to tell you. That I'd do something stupid because I seem to do it so well." She stopped Tristian's denial. "No, hear me out. Do you really think I didn't know what being in Mhyr was doing to you? That I didn't spend every day hating myself for it knowing that in Dyan you would have the world laid at your feet. See how you are with Taledyn?" Tristian nodded.

"That's how Aurora was with you. Everything that you'd wish your daughter to have, Tristian, Aurora would have given you and every day in Mhyr when I watched them deny you the simplest pleasures, I hated myself."

"Why didn't you leave, Selene?" Aurora asked gently. "You could have gone to Dram or any of the other Holdings. Why Mhyr?"

"Because of who she was. Because I knew that she'd face any challenge, fight any wrong doing, defend anyone that needed it." Selene finished softly leaving her daughter confused but Aurora's agile mind sifted through the words and she sat back in shock.

"Dear Alwyn," she murmured.

"What," Tristian asked in annoyance.

Selene answered saving Aurora from having to put the thought into words. "Only in Mhyr would they have prevented you from ever being in a position to do any of that. That's why we lived in Mhyr."

Tristian felt the shock of the answer as she hovered on the verge of outright rage. Planned, all of it. She had been kept in Mhyr specifically to be broken, to have the will sapped from her and leave her a shell of what she was, content to muddle through the days of her life never, ever striving to achieve anything of worth. A cold, calculated plan on Selene's part driven by a selfish need to protect her...and love. And that was the only thing that kept Tristian calm. Everything that Selene had done was truly done for love and how could she hate her mother for that. Her tongue felt thick with distaste but she acknowledged the truth. Wrong or not, her mother loved her blindly. "You did what you thought was for the best," she mumbled tiredly, "I cannot find it within me to hate you for that." She looked over at her mother's tear streaked face and felt the anger in her heart crumble in a final healing. Setting Taledyn down on the chaise, she rose to embrace the woman that had given her life and almost taken it away again. "Shhhh," she crooned gently, "It's over and we're home now. Shh, you'll make yourself sick."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, so sorry."

"I know," Tristian replied softly, tears burning her eyes. "I do know."

She held her mother until Selene calmed and then looked at her tenderly, "Here now, why don't you go and lay down for a bit? You'll feel better."

Selene nodded jerkily and then faced Aurora, "I know you can never forgive me and I would

never ask for it. I've no right to your forgiveness, Aurie, but I am truly sorry for taking her from you."

She stumbled and Tristian picked her up carrying her upstairs to her bedroom.

Tristian returned to find Aurora staring blindly at the ceiling.

"She's wrong you know," Aurora spoke quietly. "I could forgive her anything."

"She doesn't believe she deserves it, Sire."

"I know. I'd hoped...foolishly I suppose but I had hoped we...could be a family again. I've missed her, missed you both so much. But...she keeps me away and I...won't force her into anything." Aurora sighed tiredly, "So much hurt, so much pain."

The two sat in companionable silence for a time and Aurora murmured, "Don't suppose you'd like to have a drink with me?"

"Let's go to Wet Springs. Nina can watch Tal and we'll shut down the damn tavern or pass out trying," Tristian answered with a cocky grin.

Aurora laughed, "Aye, daughter, let's."

"I thought Tristian would be joining us?" Gisele asked curiously. They'd spent the noon meal and the hours after searching through the records. Supper was here now and they decided a break was in order.

"That makes two of us," Sidell responded having no idea where her lover might be. "She's normally good at letting me know if she's been delayed but I've not heard from her this eve."

"Should we worry?" Emma asked gently.

Sidell chuckled, "No, if something were truly wrong I would know. I can only assume she got caught up in something or other; you know how that can be. If I've not heard from her by morning I'll worry."

"Alright, I want Aurora here for this so let me call her." Emma frowned for a minute and then quirked her brow in amusement.

"Something funny?" Sidell asked.

"I've just been told that the current occupant is unavailable for consultation and to try back later, perhaps in the morning."

Sidell sputtered her drink on the table, "In a mindcall, you got a message in a mindcall?"

"Uhm, yeah, I did," Emma replied with a hesitant laugh. "I...don't quite know how to take that."

"I take it it's highly unusual," Felice asked, intrigued.

"Never happened in all the years I've known her," Emma answered. "Ever and I've called her at some inopportune moments. This," she looked out the window at the sunset..."hell it's only supper time."

The two du Aulstet's exchanged exasperated glances. Sidell finally caved in, "I can't take it. Do you know where she is?"

"Wet Springs, can you take us there? I've not been yet."

"You bet. All or just us?"

"All," Aretha stated firmly. Felice nodded and Gisele looked excited. "We are going elsewhere? How will we do this?"

"Magic," Sidell answered succinctly and ported them to Wet Springs.

The people felt the hum of mage energy and stopped to see who was visiting now. They smiled at the Heir and bowed differentially to the Leader. Sidell turned to a slightly beleaguered Gisele.

"I'll take her, Sidell," Felice chuckled softly placing a hand on the young woman's arm and tugging her along.

Emma surveyed the village in appreciation and then turned to the raucous noise coming from a nearby tavern.

"Lucan's new place," Sidell explained.

"Hell, let's go say hello."

They entered carefully to a rousing chorus of boos. They stood in the back of a room full of men and women cheerfully guzzling large mugs of...something but couldn't see what the commotion was all about. Emma turned to Sidell who merely shook her head and started to push her way forward. They eased a path clear and finally found the cause of the noise. Aurora Mardred stood swaying as she gripped the hilt of what looked to be Tristian's favorite dagger. Aurora's arm extended in front of her, apparently to help her aim. Her knife arm cocked back and flew forward in a blur to watch the knife bury itself in the rafter of the tavern's ceiling. A good six feet above the painted pig target on the tavern's back wall.

"Shit," Aurora cursed, "your damn knife's not balanced."

Tristian rose laughing and staggered over to climb on the table and retrieve her dagger.

"Poppycock," she slurred amiably, returning to Aurora's side. She faced the target and buried the dagger in the pig's eye. "Shee, it's fine. Your arm's not balanced, Sire."

"Alright," Aurora grinned pushing her away, "let me try that again. "She retrieved the dagger and carefully made her way back to the throw line. Turning she squinted causing Tristian to chortle and stumble crashing over a chair and landing on her ass.

"Hah, s'what you get for laughing at your Sire." Aurora's arm cocked and the dagger slipped from her fingers landing point down in the floor behind her. She threw and peered at the wall crookedly, "Where the hell did it go?"

Tristian was lying out on the floor laughing so hard tears fell, next to her, Ceil crumpled into a pile in a similar state. Aurora tottered forward a bit when Sidell's voice stopped her. "Aurora?"

She turned and smiled winningly, "There it is," causing the tavern to break out into more laughter. She peered suspiciously at Sidell, "You didn't come here to help her did you? Just cause I'm kicking her butt don't mean you gotta help."

Sidell bit her lip and shook her head no. "I swear you just dropped it."

"Ah," Aurora muttered retrieving the missing dagger. "Where was I?"

"Trying to find the pig, sire. It's running across the back wall," Tristian warned her helpfully.

"Aye, it is. Damn pig's the fastest I've ever seen," Aurora threw again and this time managed to place the dagger in the pig's body.

Applause sounded around the room as Tristian pushed herself off the floor. "Well done, Sire. But it's a damn good think you don't hunt for our dinner."

"Hush you," Aurora chided. "What's next...this is fun."

Tristian had yet to realize Sidell was present and her lover was keeping a low profile. Tristian eyed her Sire evenly. "You want to know what comes next?"

"What I said, dammit, you daft now?"

"Tristian..." Ceil growled in warning and moved forward. "Tristian don't you dare..."

Her sentence was cut off as Tristian nailed her with a solid right cross. The tavern erupted into a melee with Tristian urging her Sire on. "There's one, swing."

Sidell and party made their way out unmolested to find a chuckling Lucan seated on the porch bench. "Luc, what is going on?"

"Ahh, lass, they're just letting off steam. Tis alright and it's been awhile since we've had a good shake out of the tavern."

"How long have they been here?"

Lucan considered that, "Right after the noon meal as I recall."

"Goddess bless,"

A body came flying out the window, bounced off the porch and landed in the dirt. The young man rose groggily and stood in time to block the fall of another body. The two crumpled and laid still.

"Sidell," Aretha asked in concern. "Where is Taledyn?"

"With Nina. Tristian leaves her with Nina whenever she needs to while she's in Wet Springs. Since both of them are in the tavern and Tristian doesn't want Tal in a tavern yet, I'd say our young heir is napping at her caretaker's place right about now. The door exploded outward as Ches Annon flew through it to land face down in the dirt. "Goddess be damned hellion. She punches like a mule." Ches caught her sister as Ceil came out backwards.

Ceil wiped her lip and tasted blood. "I'm gonna beat her ass, I don't care if she is the damn Consort or Commander or mage or..." the words were lost as she headed back into the fray. Ches saw Sidell and winked before following her sibling.

Lucan rose and stretched as the noise died down in the tavern. She peeked in through the now open doorframe and snorted in tolerant amusement. Tristian sat casually in a chair, Aurora beside her leaning on her daughter's tall form. Ceil and Chess were rising stiffly groaning and cursing Tristian's upbringing and parentage.

"Hey," Aurora protested vehemently, "I resemble that last remark."

Ches made it to her feet and collapsed in the nearest seat. She held her hands up in surrender, "Apologies, honored mage, don't hit me no more."

Tristian snorted in amusement and turned to eye her Sire's darkening eye. "What'd you walk into that fist for?"

"Is that what that was?" Aurora muttered darkly, "Felt like a mule's kick to me."

"Nah," Tristian denied, "Was just Ceil. Although, she's been compared to a mule before."

"Shut up, Mardred," Ceil groaned into a chair. She leaned back and chuckled, "Damn, that was fun." Looking around they surveyed the damage, pleased with the resultant pile of bodies scattered around the tavern."

"Yeah, it was." Tristian agreed amiably. "And I need a drink," she rose shakily and staggered over to the keg. Pouring four mugs she returned to her companions, "Ladies, to good booze, good food, and good friends,"

"Aye," her companions responded downing the contents of the mugs as the people around them started to pick themselves up.

Tristian felt the warm arms circling her and she leaned her head back against Sidell's stomach. "Hey, love. What brings you out here? You looking for me?"

"Not really," Sidell responded. "We were looking for Aurora, you just happened to be here also."

"Ah," Tristian peered at Aurora, "They're looking for you, Sire. You in trouble?"

"Told'em to try back in the morning. Damn stubborn women."

Tristian laughed and nodded her thanks as Lucan refilled her mug. Lucan's girls came out to put the tavern back together and Sidell watched in amusement as the people leaving casually dropped off money in a jar at the last table. Lucan saw her watching and explained. "They pays for their fun so I don't mind too much. It only happens occasionally so..."she shrugged and laughed. "I suppose if it were every night I'd be a bit more upset but...it goes with the territory."

Emma looked down at Aurora's nodding head and snorted, "I guess she really meant for us to wait till morning. Tristian, can you get your Sire home or shall I put her up here."

"Nay," she waved Emma off. "I'll take her."

Tristian stood carefully and placed five gold pieces in Lucan's palm.

"For Alwyn's sake, Tristian, I'm not building another tavern." she looked at the money and back up at the Consort in surprise.

"Then start a tab, I'm sure we'll be back, Luc." Tristian answered and lifted the now sleeping Aurora into her powerful arms. "You wanna get Tal or shall I come back for her?"

"I'll get her," Sidell said with a smile. "I'll meet you at home?"

Tristian turned to the three women accompanying them. "And what about them?"

"I'll take them back to Helene," Emma responded. "I'll see you three in the morning."

"Maybe," Tristian muttered, kissing Sidell gently and leaving them to finish up.

"Tristian what happened," Selene asked in worry as her daughter walked in with Aurora in her arms.

"Nothing much, had a few drinks, a few fights. Was a good night." Tristian answered climbing the stairs to Aurora's suite. She turned as Selene entered.

Shaking her head she looked down at the sleeping woman. "Go on with you, I'll get her settled."

"Okay," Tristian replied easily then she paused. "Mum, you were wrong you know."

Selene looked to her in confusion.

"This afternoon. You were wrong, the only person that hasn't forgiven you...is you. Aurora's been waiting a long time for her family to come home. Don't you think it's time that happened?"

"But...she can't...after all I've done..."

Tristian hushed her and kissed her cheek. "She can, she does, and she's still waiting. Trust me on this one. Let the past go."

Selene sat gently on the bed beside the woman that held her heart all these years and a gentle ray of hope began to pulse. She took a breath and went to get some linen and water to clean Aurora up with.

Sidell opened the hot tub after putting Tal to bed. Luckily, Nina had kept her entertained so the youngster was tuckered enough to happily snuggle down and sleep. She heard Tristian enter and went out to meet her in the bedroom. Smiling she moved closer and reached up to pull the dark head down for a kiss. "Hmmm, Lucan makes good ale," she murmured tasting the tang of fruit on Tristian lips.

"Aye," her lover responded as her hands moved softly across Sidell's back.

"Let's get you in the tub. I think a nice soak will help you more than what's on your mind."

"Maybe," Tristian agreed, "but I won't enjoy it half as much as this," she murmured teasingly running her hands up Sidell's side and softly brushing the underside of a breast.

"Me either," Sidell whispered as thoughts of a bath slowly faded away.

Tristian grinned as Aurora entered the Hall proudly wearing a blackened eye. "You could have asked Jax to take care of that, Sire."

"Don't be silly. It's a memento of my first tavern fight."

Tristian stared at her in amazement, "First? You're joking?"

"I am not. First. And I enjoyed it."

Emma merely shook her head and sighed, "Children, ya can't live with em and ya can't live with out em,"

"Hey," Tristian protested in outrage.

"I wasn't talking about you," Emma remarked pointedly.

Aurora merely sniffed delicately and raised a brow. "Something you wanted, Leader?"

"Well," Emma answered sarcastically, "Seeing as how you did manage to make it here before noon."

Aurora grinned as she remembered her morning. Selene had been solicitous and attentive. Aurora noticed a small change in the woman, particularly Selene's seemingly casual touches. Until now, Selene had been sure to keep physical contact between the two of them to a minimum but this morning. Aurora smiled, this morning she'd gotten a kiss on the cheek and told to behave.

"Riger to Aurora," she heard suddenly and scowled in aggravation. "Have you always been this irritating?" she snapped. Tristian gurgled in mirth as Emma's jaw hung open.

"What is going on?" Emma growled at the now laughing Mardreds.

"Where?" Aurora asked innocently, peering around the room. "I don't see anything going on, Leader."

"Mother," Sidell inserted gently. "Perhaps we could begin and they'll join us when they are ready."

Emma sighed, "Alright. Gisele, let's first answer the trade question. I will not allow trade between us and a colony that believes women have no rights and no sense. I just can't see it happening. Now, if your father would like to discuss a more realistic approach to these trade arrangements, I would be willing to meet him at a bargaining table."

Gisele nodded in agreement having expected no less.

"As for our relationship. Aretha has found some talk of an island about a month's sail from our coast. It's not named but it does show that Giles du Aulstet set forth to claim it. We have no further records on the success or failure of that venture."

Gisele asked shyly, "And the mage link?"

"Apparently, he was a mage but...it's not clear and either his power was very weak or he had really bad instructors. I can't really tell. I suppose if it was the former, after so many generations it might have just vanished from the line. So, based on those facts and what you've told me, I'm willing to believe that we are related and welcome you to the family home."

"Would my father be welcomed here?"

"Only as a guest and only temporarily. There's not been a male in the du Aulstet line for so long that I don't remember a time when we had one. I do know that I will not change the make up of Dyan, for any reason. We've fought too long and too hard to surrender our free will and listen to the prattling of fools that would have us believe we know so little."

Again Gisele nodded. She faced Emma squarely and asked her final question, "Would I be welcomed here?"

Emma nodded, "Aye, you'd be expected to contribute to the Holding like the rest of us. Also, we don't believe in servants, maids, or any of that. This is a land of fiercely independent women and having someone do for us what we can do ourselves is frowned upon. However, there are other Holdings here and you and your family may be welcomed there. That is something you can look into on your next visit if you like."

Gisele smiled sweetly, "I do. I'll tell father what you said. If he wishes to meet, where would you like to have that set up?"

"Baylon, I'm thinking," Emma stated firmly. "Let us see the measure of a man that knows so much more than women."

Gisele chuckled, "That will be quite an interesting meeting Emma. I look forward to it."

Emma looked around the table, "Are we agreed?" she asked eyeing Tristian and Aurora who were deep in conversation.

Aurora looked up blankly, "Right, what she said." and returned to her conversation.

Emma sighed. "So be it. Sidell, if you can pull your lover away, see if she'll fetch that ship back so Gisele can begin her journey home."

Sidell chuckled and stood. Walking over to Tristian she leaned over, kissed her cheek and pulled up on her jerkin. "Come on, my love, time to go to work."

Tristian smiled in apology to her Sire and followed her lover out the door.

Seven months later, a buck-naked Taledyn ran haltingly across the deck of the Lady Luck squealing happily, her Sire hot on her heels. "C'mere, you little monster," Tristian chastised her

gently swinging her up into her arms as the crew laughed at the little nymph. "I don't know why you hate to wear your clothes so much."

"It's not that, sweetheart," Sidell laughingly supplied holding out the tunic for their daughter. "It's the game she likes so much. If you'd quit chasing her it would probably stop sooner."

"Tian," Tal mumbled as Tristian wrapped her securely. "Tian," she called again impatiently.

"What?" Tristian answered with a laugh.

"Down," Tal demanded.

"No. Nap,"

"NO, DOWN,"

Sidell covered her face with a hand to hide her grin. Tristian scowled at her, "You could help."

"And interrupt this intelligent conversation, not on your life, warrior."

"Tian, down, now...please?"

Tristian sighed, she hated that please. "For a little while Tal and then nap. Promise?"

Tal pouted.

"Promise or you nap now." Tristian warned.

"Kay, p'mise. Down now...please."

Tristian release her daughter and smiled indulgently as she scrambled over to Aurora. Tristian gave her a half an hour and then collected her for her nap. Tal went quietly but not necessarily willingly. Aurora chuckled as they made their way down the stairs to the lower decks. "She's gonna be rotten."

"Hah," Sidell exclaimed. "What do you mean gonna be, she already is. She's got Tristian so wrapped around her little finger the girl could murder someone and her Sire would smile proudly."

Aurora laughed and Sidell joined her. "I suppose that's not quite true and she's really not that bad but Goddess Aurora, did I ever have that much energy?"

"No. Not really. Her sire, now that's another question. Tristian's idea of a nap was to close her eyes when I picked her up and be wide awake by the time I got her into the bed."

"Ooooh," Sidell groaned. "This must be payback."

Tristian returned and stretched out beside Sidell her head resting in her lover's lap. "Damn, I need a nap now."

The women chuckled as Emma walked up to them. "Land ahead. The Captain tells me we should be in Port by supper."

They were met at the docks by a large collection of liveried guards. Raole sneered at Tristian, "Let's see how you like the shoe being on the other foot."

Tristian grinned and snapped her fingers. The guards vanished. "You were saying?"

"You know," Emma muttered, approaching the two of them, "I've met some stupid people in my life but...you knew she was a mage. What, did you think it only works in Dyan?"

Raole scowled as Tristian chuckled at Emma's jibe. "Go away, little man. I'm sure we can find your King and as soon as we're settled we'll get around to it."

He tried to bluster but an evil grin from Tristian stopped his rant and he turned to stomp off the pier, his guards finally making their way back and following his barked commands.

They found a decent looking tavern with rooms and entered. The tavernkeep smiled, "Welcome, have a seat and as soon as your gentlemen arrive I'll get things set up."

Tristian picked him up by his collar letting him dangle in the air with no noticeable strain on her part. "There won't be any men arriving, gentle or otherwise. Now can we get fed and I need three rooms?" She pulled a gold piece and watched his eyes flare with greed. "Three nice, clean rooms, a hot bath daily and three meals, for a week. What's it to be tavernkeep, shall we keep looking?"

"Nay, Lady," the man almost whined. "Forgive my impertinence, you're more than welcomed here. The foods good and hot and everything else will be cared for."

"Thank you," she replied placing the piece in his hand.

"You have to admit," Sidell remarked into the quiet, "She does have style."

Aretha snorted in amusement as they moved to a table in the rear of the establishment. The people eyed them curiously but no overt hostility was detected.

Their meals came out shortly and Tristian sniffed the air raising her hand to stop the others from eating. Her head cocked as she concentrated, breathing in the aroma and letting out a growl. Picking her plate up she approached a now thoroughly terrified tavernkeep. "Lady...nay...it's the rule...I'm sorry. I'll have new plates made up and we'll add nothing to your meals again I swear."

"Eat this," Tristian growled. "All of it. Call your cook out here."

Tristian berated the cook ensuring it would never happen again as the tavernkeep swallowed the bowl of laced stew. The servers rushed to replace the platters stopping to allow Tristian to check the food once again. She nodded in approval and turned to the now smiling and mellow tavernkeep. "Like that?"

He nodded absently.

"Good, if it happens again, I'll take it out of your hide."

They were relaxing, enjoying a glass of fresh ale when a guard captain approached them cautiously. "Ladies, my King extends his apologies and opens his home to you for the duration of your stay. If you'll follow me?"

Emma laughed softly as the fellow turned and retraced his steps to the door not realizing until then that he was alone. He scowled and returned. "Is there a problem?"

"Aye," Emma answered. "We're comfortable, we've our rooms ready, our things are already in place and we've no intentions of moving. Mayhap we'll change our minds after the meeting in the morning."

"But...my King."

"Aye, he's your King not mine. We're here at his request not because we need anything and I don't care for his policies. Relay my apologies, lad. Have a pleasant eve."

A young girl stepped up to the table, "Ladies, ye baths be ready."

They thanked her and tipped her leaving her round-eyed in pleasant surprise. Tristian glared around the room, "I trust the lass will be allowed to keep her earnings?"

"Oh, aye Lady, of course," the tavernkeep simpered.

"Tian," Tal demanded from Sidell's arms. "Tian, up."

Sidell smirked as Tristian lifted her daughter and cuddled her gently.

Tristian rose at daybreak, slipping out quietly for her morning run opting to leave Tal with her mother in case some idiot wanted to make an issue of her doing so.

She ambled down to the beach stretching and warming up then headed out at a fast pace across the packed sandy beach. She felt the air flow past her and inhaled the sharp scent of salt in the air. Opening her senses she felt the quiescent hum of a large node, curiously she felt for her

bondmate and grinned ferally as the Mother answered. Laughing, Tristian touched the node in Baylon and was pleased to see the power leap up to greet her. She linked it in her bond and felt the welcome of her bondmate to the new link, the now sealed node was then released to feed the land and bind itself closer to the Mother's Own. Tristian's senses raced after it, finding the smaller nodes and sealing them also. She found Baylon to be only a third of the size of Dyan and the forming of the bond was relatively simple since no one had ever touched the power of the nodes. Baylon welcomed her as the Mother's Own and Riger rejoiced in the bonding. Power exploded through her being and she glowed burnished silver as she raced the oncoming sun.

Part 10

Returning to the tavern at a jog she nodded absently at the people now beginning to fill the streets seeing both concern, hesitant welcome, and outright outrage on the faces peering at her.

"Morning, my heart," Tristian greeted her lover with a smile. Her lips quirked in a grin when she saw Tal curled up in her mother's arms asleep.

"She's mad at you," Sidell warned.

"I figured she would be," Tristian replied wiping the sweat off her body and dressing for the day. "She enjoys our runs but I wanted to be free to answer any challenges these fools felt like giving me."

"Any?" Sidell queried gently.

"Nay, either they're all late risers or they've decided to wait for further developments." She picked up a grumpy Tal and whispered her apologies as she washed the sleep from her daughter's face. Tal hugged her tight, forgiving her Sire for abandoning her.

"Breakfast?" Tristian offered.

They heard the others entering the hall and turned to join them.

"I thought the three of us," Emma indicated herself, Aurora and Aretha, "would make the first overtures and you three can wander about and see what this place is like."

"Sounds like a plan," Sidell agreed watching Tal feed her tall lover. "Sweetheart, you're supposed to be feeding her." Sidell scolded with a chuckle.

"Don't blame me, she's the one that thinks I need help."

They looked up as another liveried guard entered asking if they were ready to meet with the King.

Emma sighed but rose and the three women followed the tall lanky soldier out the door.

"Tian, down." Tal demanded squiggling happily as Tristian released her.

"Shall we walk, love," Sidell murmured, "Let her run off some energy?"

"Aye." Tristian agreed.

They ambled down the wide street, Sidell's hand tucked in the crook of her lover's arm smiling indulgently at their offspring who was darting about chasing who knows what.

"Tal, come here and wait with me while momma shops,"

"Kay, Tian. Momma buy Tal present?"

Tristian grinned at the merchants display, "Ah, not this time, Tal. Maybe next stop."

"Kay. Tian buy Tal present?"

"Hey, getting greedy are you?" Tristian laughed swinging her daughter up and tickling her gently.

"Ahhhhh," Tal squealed bringing a raised brow from Sidell.

"Shhh, they're gonna think I'm killing you."

"Not," Tal proclaimed soundly kissing her Sire. "Wuv Tian," she pronounced happily.

"Hmmm, well guess what? I love you, too."

"She's adorable," Gisele spoke softly approaching the pair. "I didn't get to meet her on my last visit.

Tristian greeted her pleasantly and turned a now serious face Tal to the stranger, "Taledyn, this is Gisele."

Tal stared solemnly at the woman and tugged on Tristian's laces sucking one absently.

Gisele squirmed under the even regard. "I see she has her Sire's eyes." Tal's violet eyes were deep pools of concentration and Gisele's feet shuffled.

"Hey," Tristian murmured, nipping her daughter's ear.

Tal smiled and ducked her head breaking the gaze she held Gisele in. "No staring," Tristian reminded her.

Tal looked to her Sire and nodded solemnly, "Lady sick, Tian?"

"No, Tal. Lady not sick."

"Lady funny, fuzzy, like smoke,"

"I know, it's alright. Gisele will be fine."

Tal gazed at her sire trustingly and nodded in agreement, "Kay. Tian, down please?"

"Don't go far,"

"Kay."

"What was that about?" Sidell asked in concern.

"Tal sees Gisele's aura. The medication leaves her feeling weak and disconnected with reality, her aura plainly shows that."

Gisele looked confused. "But...wouldn't all the women look like that?"

"They do," Tristian confirmed. "But she's young and has to concentrate to see it clearly so she normally doesn't bother. My introducing you made her aware that she needed to recognize you and so she saw what was there."

"I see," Gisele murmured. "I don't take the medicine anymore but nothing's changed. I don't know what that means."

"It's in the food they serve the women," Sidell supplied. "Tristian had a deep discussion with our tavernkeep and cook last eve about it. She's threatened his hide if it happens again."

Gisele sighed and slowly ambled along with them.

The three of them casually wandered the market place as Tal dashed about in glee. Tristian found a booth that sold meat sticks and noticed two lines formed, one for women and one for men. The men's line was long. She grinned and stepped up to the women's side moving to order next. "I'll take four of them," she said placing the payment on the counter. The merchant nodded reaching for four of the sticks when Tristian's voice stopped him. "No, I'll take four from that fire," she indicated the cook fire in front of the men's line where several delicious smells were wafting off."

"You'll take what I give, ye," the merchant growled reaching across to hand her the order.

She grabbed his arm and hauled him up onto the smoldering flame.

His eyes widened in shock and he screeched in fear. Tristian held him for a minute, scaring him but not harming him. She let him loose and raised a hand. The four sticks of meat she had her eye set on appeared. "Next time, say yes Lady," Tristian growled at the cowering merchant. She

turned to lift her now hungry daughter and smiled as Sidell's hand returned to her arm. Handing out their booty, the four continued their stroll.

"Hot," Tal announced, fanning her Sire's mouth.

Tristian laughed. "Not to me, silly. Here, let me see." Tristian blew on the meat to cool it down some and handed it back watching Tal gnaw on it with pleasure. "Better?"

"Good," Tal answered, chewing her prize.

"This is good," Gisele stated in surprise. "They normally taste bitter."

"Probably the medicine," Tristian commented. "These aren't cooked with any so the real flavor of the meat comes through."

Sidell opted to get the drinks. Again there were two lines. She stood and waited patiently then ordered. Unlike her lover, she merely paid and fetched four unlaced mugs.

"Hey," the merchant objected, "ye can't do that."

Tristian's low growl from behind her brought a quirky grin to her face, "She can do anything she wants, clear."

The merchant backed off sweating... "Aye, I d'nae know she's with you. Aye, lady, enjoy."

"Lady du Aulstet," a soldier huffed as he arrived at a run. Sidell and Gisele turned to him. Sidell's brow rose as she answered also, "Yes?"

The soldier hesitated, peering at the two of them. "Uhhh, I meant, Lady Gisele, m'lady."

"Ahh," Sidell smiled sweetly.

"Yes," Gisele asked again.

"Your father sends for you. He wishes to have you join our guests for the noon meal."

Sidell interrupted. "Tell him I've requested Gisele's presence...in the interest of better relations between our Holdings."

The soldier hesitated.

"Now, boy. Don't make her repeat herself," Tristian barked. The voice of a Commander used to immediate obedience and it showed as the soldier's back straightened, his shoulders squared and he came close to saluting. "Aye, Commander," he replied crisply and turned on his heel to report.

Sidell shook her head in amusement, "Ah, love, the training does show, huh?"

"Aye. Once a soldier, always a soldier," Tristian answered with a grin. "So, Gisele, join us for mid-day?"

"I'd love to, Consort. Perhaps I'll finally see why the men rush to eat in the city."

"Well, the foods good, no doubt about that. If the castle food is that bad though, we're gonna hear about it when Emma and them get back."

"Gee, I hope they remember about the drugs," Sidell mused.

"I'm sure they will, my heart. Their safest bet would be to swipe a plate out from under a male's nose. Knowing my Sire, I'd suspect that's what they'll do."

"Knowing my mother, she'll swipe the king's plate," Sidell put in laughing.

"Lady du Aulstet, welcome to my kingdom," the smooth voice wafted across the viewing chamber. "I am King Roland du Aulstet, Majesty of this realm."

Emma looked around her noticing the simpering acolytes that were prevalent when ever the person in power placed themselves in the position of homage. "Nice place, Roland. Must be a bitch to clean."

Aurora muffled a snort while Aretha bit her lip to keep from smiling.

"Are we here to talk or did you want us to stand in awe of your jewelry?"

Raole came forward pompously, "You will address his majesty properly or I will have you put in the dungeons."

"You know," Emma muttered darkly, "I've had about as much of you as I plan to take. Choice, First Minister, keep your lip shut or I'll remove your ability to flap it."

"Your trained pet is not here. Beware," Raole threatened, "My patience grows thin."

Aurora's eyes rolled. "Tell me, Emma, do you think stupidity is hereditary?"

"Guards," Raole snapped. It was the last command he would give for the duration. His mouth gaped in astonishment.

Roland chuckled and waved his guards back, "Stand down. I don't need a pack of silent imbeciles."

He turned to Emma and grinned warmly, "Come, you three. Let us leave this simpering hall and

convene in my private meeting room."

Emma's brow rose in surprise but she responded in kind. "Let's."

The four seated themselves and Roland turned to eye them. "Raole tells me that you live in a land of barbarians, that you keep you men penned up, and that you probably eat raw meat for meals." He grinned mischievously, "Tell me, is this all true?"

"Oh, absolutely," Emma replied with a snort. "Couldn't figure out what else to do with them and they seem to be trainable." She continued, deadpanned.

Roland howled in glee, "Oh, Goddess, I've not had a laugh that good in a long time."

"So, why do you put up with it?" Emma threw out. "And why in Alwyn's name do you keep the women drugged?"

"What?" Roland replied in anger. "What are you saying, I've drugged no one?"

Aurora studied him steadily and leaned back in her chair. "You know, with out using a truth spell, I'd say he's telling the truth."

"Of course I am," Roland snapped in anger. "What gave you that idea?"

"Gisele says you expect her to take her medicine to keep her calm."

"I do. Our royal healer diagnosed Gisele as having a fragile system and untold excitement could cause her to fall ill. Possibly fatally ill, but I do that for her safety. There is no decree to have women take this drug in my land."

Emma pondered this for a minute, "Then you're being used. There is nothing wrong with Gisele. Our own healers checked the five women that first came to us over thoroughly. We took the drugs away from all of them and had them monitored in case they experienced withdrawals but health wise; there was nothing wrong with any of them. Also, your city serves its woman food laced with the drug. This I know for a fact because they tried to sneak some to us. We, however, are not quite as compliant as the rest of the women here."

Roland regarded them in surprise and not a little suspicion. "Why?"

Emma shrugged, "From what Gisele tells me, it's to keep the women compliant and the men in charge. Seems Baylon does not like to deal with women."

"Nonsense," Roland sputtered. "None have ever come here before."

"Not true," Aurora put in. "Over a year ago our women first found your shores. They are the ones that have been providing you with the horses." Now it was her turn for suspicion. "How would you not know this?"

Roland shook his head. "By the time I was aware of these marvelous beasts, the traders were gone and Raole merely stated that a reasonable agreement had been met. I saw no reason to question him. He's been with the family for years and served my father in a similar regard."

He fell silent and then, "If not for the fact that our other trade neighbor is needing more...horses, I probably would have never gotten involved. But we'd not heard from them in a while and I sent Gisele as my representative."

"You should talk to your daughter more, Roland. Gisele is under the impression that her opinion counts as much or as little as her maid's. It did not occur to her that she was your representative and Raole would have handled the transaction had we allowed him to land."

"He did say you didn't allow that."

"No. Men are not allowed in Dyan without prior approval. Other parts of our lands have both men and women but by the Goddesses own words Dyan was created as a harbor for women. A place they could live and not be persecuted for being women. Or being women that love women."

"So, that part, at least, is true?"

Emma laughed, "I figured he'd remember that. Yes, it is true."

"But...how then do you procreate?"

Emma turned to the woman beside her. "This is Aretha Dubear, the lorekeeper."

Roland smiled gently, "Please, lady Dubear, I must know."

"At the time of the catalyst, that time when Xandor was lost to the world, the mages of Xandor rose to stand with the Goddess and free her lands of the evil that was brought by a foreign mage. The final battle separated the land and Alwyn came to the women that survived, thanking them for their assistance. Of these women stood Corrine du Aulstet and Kyla Mardred. They were lovers of the heart and of the flesh, the ruling House of Xandor and the Second House of the Land. Alwyn blessed their union and passed to them the power to unite and to mate. From that day on, passed through the generations of our ancestors, our women can bring children into the world without the need of a man."

"Oh my," Roland murmured. "That...is quite a shock. You did say Mardred?"

"I did, Roland. Kyla Mardred's line lives on, still strong and growing stronger as the years pass." She turned and motioned to Aurora, "This is Aurora Mardred, Scion of the House of Mardred and Sire to the Heir and Consort, Tristian Mardred, Commander of the Warriors of Dyan."

The four chatted companionably discussing the splitting of the line, the exodus to Baylon and the

building of Baylon. The noon meal arrived.

Emma stared cautiously at her plate and grinned. "Tell you what, Roland," she replied loudly. "I'll eat this if...we trade plates."

"Of course, Emma. Here, let me have that."

"Majesty," a servant moved forward smoothly. "Majesty that would not be appropriate."

"Why not?"

"Well, the meal has been prepared as is the custom and...you shouldn't trade plates with a woman."

"Tabor, I'm going to eat from Emma's plate. If anything is wrong with the food, or I'm affected in anyway, you will die."

"Wait," the man sweated, "wait. I will have new dishes brought out. A moment please."

His hands clapped preemptively and a servant darted in. "Remove these and have the plates brought out that are fit for his majesty's palate."

"All of them, sir?"

"Aye, you dolt. Now."

Roland hung on to the one in front of them. "Come here, Tabor. Sit and join us."

"But..."

"Now."

The man slumped over and shuddered as Roland pushed the tainted plate in front of him. "Eat, Tabor, eat all of it."

Roland kept an eye on the man as he and his guests enjoyed the new platters. He noticed the slightly dazed eyes, the inability to focus or concentrate and the silly smile plastered across the man's face. "Dear Alwyn, this is what I do to my Gisele?"

A knock sounded and he called for them to enter, "Majesty, the Lady du Aulstet," the soldier hesitated, "not the Lady Gisele," he waited for the king's nod of understanding, "sends word that the princess cannot join you and will be partaking the noon meal with their party."

"I did not send for her. I'd asked her to meet with them and show them around the city," Roland responded in surprise.

"But, the First Minister said you wanted her fetched for the mid-day."

Roland's eyes narrowed, "No, I do not. Gisele is fine where she is, now leave us."

"It would seem, Roland, that there is much afoot that you are unaware of."

"I cannot be everywhere at once," Roland snapped sharply.

Emma raised a hand placatingly, "Nay, I did not mean to belittle you. We've had troubles in Dyan. There is only one of each of us and we all do the best we can. In our problem, many children were harmed, badly abused, and the horror of that lives on in my soul. Nay, I merely state the obvious and offer our assistance if you've the need."

"I would recommend starting with your first Minister, Roland." Aretha injected cautiously. "He has Gisele convinced that a woman cannot possibly understand the intricacies of running a business, a Holding, or any manner of things of import. Apparently, only the men are capable of such deep thinking. These were true words out of his mouth and the reason Tristian took an instant dislike to him."

"Also," Emma put in, "It is the reason you were not invited to Dyan. We would know the man who is so well trained that he knows what is best for everyone."

Roland snorted, "Aye, I'm so well trained I can't see the forest for the trees."

"Oft times a jaundiced eye is needed to clarify things. Take heart, it's not impossible, merely tedious to repair."

"Now," Emma put in lightly, "about this trade you wish to enter in."

They concluded most of the agreements by supper and Roland asked if the rest of the party could join them for the meal. "I can promise you unlaced food."

"You will have to or Tristian may have your cook's head roasting on the spit. She's about tired of having to worry about the food, the drinks, you know."

"Aye," Roland muttered. "Shall I send for them?"

"Nay, they'll not come. I'll send word and tell them to come to the gate. You'll have someone meet them there or can Gisele bring them in?"

"I'd normally say she could but now...how would I know?" He sent the same guard that had met them in the square to get them at the gate.

As they waited Roland smiled at the sound of Gisele's gentle laughter floating down the hall. "I've not heard that in some time but...I truly thought she was ill and put it down as something I had to give up for her safety."

The sound of a happy squeal followed and running footsteps could be heard. The guard opened the door quickly and a chortling Taledyn scooted in, Gisele hot on her heels.

"G'ma," Tal shouted in glee throwing herself at Aurora. "G'ma Rie," she patted Aurora's cheek and pointed to Gisele, "bad. G'ma Rie, bad Sele."

"Oh? How was Gisele bad."

"Chase Tal. Bad."

Gisele dropped into a chair, "Goddess bless where does she get the energy?"

A soft chuckle from the door caused Roland to look up and his breath stopped. A golden beauty stood framed in the soft light of the waning sun, her exact opposite stood in shadows at her shoulder. He let out a breath and stood, "Lady du Aulstet, Lady Mardred."

Tristian's brow quirked in amusement and Sidell laughed clasping her lover's arm and bringing them forward. "Please, I am Sidell and my mate is Tristian."

"I am Roland, welcome to my home."

"Tian," Tal called impatiently, "Tian up, drink?"

"If you didn't run through the castle you wouldn't be thirsty."

"Drink, Tian, please."

"I'm getting it, you little slave driver. Just a minute while I check the thing."

Tal was soon drinking happily. She smacked her lips and wiped them with the back of her hand. "Damn," she announced clearly, "good."

Tristian squirmed as her lover eyed her with a scowl.

"Tristian," Sidell growled in warning, "I've told you I won't have her cussing like a soldier before she's even old enough to know what it means."

Tristian ignored the laughter in the room and settled her daughter deciding to explain that 'damn' was not a word to use in momma's presence...later.

Tal looked around happily and found Emma, "G'ma Em, up?"

Emma laughed indulgently picking the youngster off her Sire's lap and sharing her meal with her. Taledyn sat quietly eyeing the strange man at the end of the table occasionally turning to check that her sire was nearby. She'd watched the fuzzy glow around Gisele clear throughout the

day and she was happy her sire was right and Gisele was not sick. She liked Gisele and hoped she could play more later. She scooted deeper into Emma's arms, the long day finally catching up to her and reached for her sire. "Tian, nap."

Tristian smiled, "You gonna nap on granma?"

"Please?"

"It's okay with me," she looked to Emma. "Do you need me to take her?"

"Of course not. She's fine, I'm surprise she's staying."

"She's tired, she was too excited to nap earlier and only got a few minutes." Tristian explained returning to her meal.

Aretha brought them all up to date.

"What do you plan to do with the horses, Roland?" Tristian asked leaning back with a mug of ale. Sidell propped her head against her lover's shoulder as they waited for an answer.

"Does it matter?" Roland asked, merely curious.

"Actually, it does. Where we'll have to get the horses from...the owner there is very particular on where the mounts go. She'd just as soon keep them than have them abused."

"Really?" he asked, the surprise evident. This was obviously a new concept to him. "But, the loss of profit?"

Tristian shrugged, "Ches seems to think it's worth it and since her customers continuously return, I have to agree with her."

Roland nibbled his lip, "Well, to be honest, I don't know." He looked around. "Those first...strings, I believe, that we received. Master Remy took one look at them and offered to purchase the lot. Since we really had no experience with them I agreed and hoped to work out something that would provide us with training. However, Raole kept telling me the merchants weren't interested so...we just passed them on to Master Remy."

They spoke longer and Emma turned a fussy Tal over to her sire. Tal immediately settled into Tristian's arms and returned to sleep."

"Let's take her back to the inn, my love. Time enough for the rest of this on the morrow."

Tristian agreed and they rose, "It's been enjoyable, Roland, thank you for inviting us."

"The pleasure has been mine. Gisele, shall we walk our guests home?"

Gisele looked up in hesitant surprise as she took her father's offered arm, "I'd be delight, Majesty."

Roland chuckled, "Then let us be off."

Raole stood imperiously pointing to his mouth at the front gate of the palace. "Ah..Emma, if you would? There are things I'd like to discuss with my minister. Actually, I'd like to discuss them with you present so I guess the morrow will be soon enough."

Emma chuckled at Raole's expression of surprise and the party passed by, six guards fell in behind the king.

"Gisele?" Roland spoke softly.

"Yes, papa?"

"I want you to stop taking the medicine I gave you."

Gisele ducked her head.

"Gisele?"

"I..already have, papa," she admitted.

Roland smiled, "Good girl. I also want you to have your meals with me from now on, no matter what Raole or anyone else tells you differently, you'll eat with me. We'll be sure your food isn't laced with that drug."

Gisele's smile of pure joy brought tears to her father's eyes. "Ah lass, I am sorry. I should have paid more attention to you. I'll try to do better but you must help."

"I'll try. What can I do?"

"Tell me everything, what you see, what you think. Everything. There's much we need to fix but first...we will stop this drugging of the ladies."

Gisele was so happy she could only hug her father tight and relish in the warmth of the arms around her. "Yes, please," she managed faintly.

Tristian stopped the party's procession and handed Taledyn to Aretha. Her head cocked and Sidell could feel the tension running through her lover's tall frame.

"Ye needs to return home, ye bitches," a rough voice called out from the dark. "Ye'r not natural."

"And you know this, how?" Tristian replied arrogantly stepping forward and taking the attentions of the watchers with her. "Let me guess, Alwyn herself came down and gave you this

information."

"Don't blaspheme the Goddess ye heathens. She needs to strike down the lot of you and we're here to help."

"Our Goddess needs help from cowards? From people too frightened to face me in the light? I don't think so." Low murmurs were heard but no one appeared. "I'm quaking in my boots here guys, let's get on with it."

Still nothing so Tristian lit the sky. A simple murmur and the area flooded with enough light to resemble the evening sun. "Hey there," she mocked, "you boys come here often?"

"My love,"

"My heart?"

"Quit playing. Tal is sleepy."

"Pardon." Tristian turned, "Sorry boys, I can't play tonight. You want to meet me tomorrow or explain to your king here what brings you out this fine eve."

"Retrieve these fools," Roland's voice barked in anger. The men murmured in surprise as the royal guards appeared. "Take them to the dungeons, I'll deal with them in the morning."

"But...Majesty. Sir Raole sent a note, said t'was your wish these...women be punished."

"He lied," Roland uttered clearly. "Take them."

They made their way to the tavern, the people rising hurriedly at the entrance of their King. "Good night, ladies, mayhap we will have a more enjoyable day on the morrow."

"Can't be worse," Emma replied with a laugh.

Roland turned to Tristian, "Consort, my guard captain," he pointed at a tall man behind him, "would like to invite you to spar with him."

Tristian smiled, "I'd enjoy that, thank you."

"Tomorrow then." He turned to the awe struck tavernkeep, "Keep, these women are my friends, you will treat them as you would myself or I will have you visit my dungeons."

"No, Sire, I mean, aye, Sire. Yes, Majesty. They are already treated as such, and it shall continue."

They met again in the morning. Aretha accompanied Tristian and Tal to the guard's compound where the Captain waited patiently for them. "Ladies, welcome. Lady Dubear, we could sit the two of you here on the bench or I could have a chaise brought for you."

Aretha laughed, "Oh no, I'll be asleep in a minute and I'll never live it down."

He turned to Tristian and tipped his head in acknowledgement, "Commander."

"Captain," she acknowledged, "shall we?"

"Aye. Commander, I wish to say, much has been stated and much not understood. I am the Captain of the Royal Guard and where my Liege's interests lie, so to do mine. I'm willing to learn the truth of the rumors."

"So be it," Tristian responded turning to meet him in the center of the salle.

They began slowly, testing each other cautiously neither wishing to do harm if possible. As they became more familiar with the level of proficiency each possessed the blades moved faster. The benches surrounding the salle started to fill.

From the King's council room, several pairs of eyes watched the match below. Roland chuckled, "You could have said something. I'd have just had us all meet out there if I'd known it would be this good."

"They haven't even begun," Sidell murmured. "He'll give her a good match."

"Easy enough," Raole spit out spitefully, "when you've magic on your side."

Sidell eyed him in disdain. "Mage power can be felt," she lowered her shields watching the reactions on his face. "There is none on the field," she finished reshielding. "Tristian has been a warrior all of her life. She's only been a mage for two years. She does not need nor would she use magic in an honorable match."

Roland and Gisele gasped in surprise as the blades moved faster, mere blurs to the naked eye and Tristian laughed. The low, spine chilling laughter that told her lover she was having fun.

Sidell smiled in delight.

Tristian took them to the point where she was taxing the Captain's limits and then backed off, allowing the match to continue, reveling in the feel of her body moving in the intricate dance of the blades. Sheer joy made her laugh, a laugh full of life and awareness of death. She pressed him harder again and backed him around the salle watching as his breath grew labored and sweat poured down his face. A final flurry and he stood unarmed as she rested her blade on her shoulder, barely panting. "Not bad, Captain, you've much to learn but...not bad at all."

"Lady," he breathed. "I would give my life to have you teach me," he murmured reverently.

"Nay, though I would enjoy that, my home calls to me and we will be returning soon. Know that you have my respect, that is far more than many of the men in your land has garnered to date."

"Tian," Tal hollered. "Tian, Tal come now?"

"Aye, little pest. You can come now."

Tal scampered across the ring into her sire's arms and turned to regard the Captain. "Good," she pronounced. "Good blade."

"Ah, not as good as your mum huh?"

"Mum no good. Tian good." She explained patting Tristian's chest.

The Captain looked confused but smiled gently, "Aye, Tristian is very good."

"Aye," Tal drawled. She looked up and pointed, "Mum...see?"

Sidell waved and she chortled as things cleared for the Captain of the Guard. "Forgive me, I thought she was yours. She's always with you."

"She is," Tristian replied lightly. "Notice the resemblance. She's ours and Sidell is her birthmother. Where we come from that makes me her sire but do not doubt, Captain, she is as much my daughter as she is Sidell's."

She turned to her daughter, "How about a swim?"

"Yes" Tal agreed excitedly. "Swim, Tian, now?"

"Aye, now."

Roland turned to the party, "Damn," he breathed. Raole merely scowled.

"So, Roland, tell me about those fools last night." Emma prodded curiously.

Roland's eyes tracked to Raole, "Several men accosted our party last night, supposedly on my orders as relay by you."

"I've no idea what you mean. I've the entire guard contingent to answer my bidding why would I call on the citizens?"

"No one here said they were citizens."

Raole's face tightened but he recovered, "Of course they were citizens, the guards would have never attacked a party the King was in."

Sidell ignored that, it was dark and difficult to tell but soon enough a truth spell would make it clear. For now, it was Roland's problem."

"Guard," Roland bellowed.

"Majesty?"

"Bring up the prisoners."

The guard hesitated, "The guardsmen search but...they escaped in the night."

"How convenient," Roland muttered.

"No fear," Sidell replied, "they'll go after Tristian since she embarrassed them. Problem for you is, since Tal is with her, she'll probably kill them."

"She's a woman," Raole shouted, "Women have no stomach for killing, of course we need to find them before they hurt her. That display was pretty but what happens when push come to shove. She'll choke I tell you, Roland I beseech you, send out the guards."

"No." Roland replied easily. "If they die, so be it. Hopefully she'll get answers before she kills them."

"Oh, that I can promise you," Aurora muttered.

Roland turned to Raole, "Tell me about the drugs and the tripe you've been filling Gisele's head with regarding a woman's proper place."

"My King, I only pass on the teachings of the realm. I do not understand the use of the word, tripe?"

"You're telling me this is what is expected. Prove it."

"It has been passed from father to son since the beginning. The need for the First Minister to assist his King by keeping the populace strong and happy."

"By drugging them?"

"By whatever means necessary."

"And Gisele?"

"It's obvious that she cannot rule. I've arranged a perfect marriage for her. Her issue, hopefully she will provide us with a male, will rule in your place."

"Dear Alwyn," Emma breathed. "That's disgusting."

"How dare you," Raole seethed. "I find your displays disgusting. Pretending you know better, pretending you know more than the men that were put on this world to rule."

"Emma," Aurora stated blandly, "I'm beginning to think we've finally found out why this du Aulstet was forced to leave Xandor."

"Aye. Seems like it. If those where in truth, his policies, the family would have denounced him."

"They may have," Sidell murmured. "His powers may have been stripped and he allowed to live his life out. In disgrace he would have fled and landed here to build the Holding of his dream."

"And took the fanatics with him. Aye, it's possible."

Aretha sat in shock as Tristian stripped bare along side of her giggling daughter and the two of them were in the water splashing and laughing in glee. "Thought we'd stop by for some shifts or something," she muttered. "I'm not baring my ass for this Holding to be looking at."

"Well," Tristian called out from where she now held Tal letting her splash. "You coming?"

"I'm shy," Aretha retorted.

"Pshaw," Tristian snorted. "You've nothing to be ashamed of."

"For Alwyn's sake, does your woman know you're eyeing up the ladies of the Holding?"

"I'm not blind, Aretha." Tristian replied with a snort. "It's not as if our women bury themselves under layers of clothes."

"Still, I would think you'd keep your eyes to yourself."

"That's how warriors get dead," Tristian deadpanned.

"Arrrrrgh," Aretha screeched causing Tal to laugh and copy her.

"Fine," she replied stripping quickly and diving into the oncoming wave.

"Good, you can help us practice."

"Practice what?"

"Swim, Tal," Taledyn explained. "Coming, catch."

Tristian held her daughter even with the top of the water and let go as Tal began to stroke forward. It still reminded her of a little frog swimming but it worked.

"Hey," Aretha praised her, "that's pretty good."

"Aye, pretty good." Tal agreed breathing deeply. "Back?"

They played until Tal tired then splashed in the shallows covering each other in wet sand. "Dammit Tristian, I've got sand where sand doesn't belong."

"Amit, Tian," Tal chuckled happily.

"You're in trouble now," Tristian teased Aretha.

"Am not. I'll just tell Sidell you taught her. She'd buy it in a minute." Aretha laughed at Tristian's scowl. "And you know it."

Aretha watched in fascination as Tristian's whole demeanor changed.

"Oh oh," Tal breathed.

"Stay with Aretha, Tal. Don't come out until I tell you."

"Kay,"

Tristian's nostrils flared and her face tensed. Ears twitched catching the stealthy noise from the woods. She rose in unconscious arrogance, her body strong and supple. The firm muscles of her arms and back defined sharply against her wet skin, she was glorious and Aretha couldn't stop the gasp of surprised delight.

Tristian moved to the beach as the five men from the night before cleared the woods.

"Looky here. You're not so tough now, are ye?" the largest laughed evilly. "Seems you're way over there and your sword's way over here. Even if you did know how to use it."

Tristian considered fetching her sword but the thought of breaking bones was much more satisfying. Besides, Tal was too young yet to witness a blood bath. With her senses set to monitor her offspring, she moved forward to meet them. "Well, shall we see if you're any better in the daylight?" she asked mockingly.

"Bitch, you're gonna hurt."

Two rushed her, a negligent side kick shattered ribs, an elbow cracked a jaw. "Two down." she grinned at them.

The last three had their blades out and they rushed her. She leapt straight up kicking out the first

two, landed, ducked the swing and backhanded the largest feeling the blood splattered her from his nose. She turned to a rising man and a fist put him back on the ground. The biggest tried to run but she grabbed the collar of his shirt. Another man, faking his injury, came at her from behind but her senses were humming, in tune with the world and she dodge aside grabbing him in a headlock and twisting forcefully, grinning wider as his neck snapped. Pale violet eyes pinned the quivering mass of flesh begging for his life.

"I've questions," Tristian said softly. "You will answer."

His head bobbed so hard she was afraid he'd break his own neck.

"Kill him," she heard Raole shout and looked up to see the royal guards charging forward.

"Hold," the Captain shouted and the men froze.

"Kill him, he might hurt her." Raole shouted in anger.

Captain Medellan looked at him and shook his head in disgust. "Commander," he addressed Tristian respectfully, "May we assist?"

Tristian rose and backed off, "I want him alive, Captain. If you can keep him that way, you may. If you've doubts then I'll do it."

"My word, Commander. Those still breathing will remain so." He smiled impishly, "Would you be wanting your sword now, Lady?"

Tristian snorted in amusement. "Nay wasn't worth the effort to retrieve it. Lucky for me, wasn't you after my hide."

Medellan eyed the hide in question silently admitting he'd consider it if she wasn't already spoken for. "Your lady comes, we'll await you at the palace. Have them summon me and I'll take you to interrogate them."

Tristian nodded as the guards moved off, Medellan pushing the minister along.

"Dear Alwyn!"

Tristian smirked at the look of sheepish chagrin and muted delight on Roland face. He flushed, "I, ah, see things are well in hand, Consort. I'll, ah, await your party in the palace." He turned and fled. Gisele followed him laughing softly to herself.

"My love?"

"My heart," Tristian smiled in welcome.

"Treating the natives to a little show?"

"Nay, M'lady, there was no time to dress."

"Ah hah, and, of course, the only way to swim is nude."

"Of course," Tristian answered easily.

Aurora chuckled while Emma stood on the beach trying to hide a smile. "Aretha, you'll have to come out sometime. Trust me, we can stand here longer than you can stay in the water."

Aretha put Tal closer to shore and she scampered out to her sire. "Tian, up, up now."

"Whoa, go to your mother. I need to rinse, I'll be right back."

"Rinse?" Tal mouthed the word strangely.

"Aye, rinse. Get the dirt off."

"Oh." Tal studied her for a bit and commanded, "Tian, rinse."

Tristian grinned and ruffled her hair. "Aye, young Heir, I think I will.

Tristian dove in beside the flustered Aretha. "I'm gonna hurt you, Mardred, just wait."

"What I do?" she asked plaintively.

"Got me out here starkers and them two just waiting for a show."

"So? Give them one."

Aretha lifted her chin proudly and stalked out of the water to the piercing whistles of Emma and Aurora. "Damn, Emma, she's been hiding more under her basket than lore."

Emma almost choked as Aretha nailed her in the gut on the way by.

"Tristian you are so bad," Sidell laughed softly, kissing her mate as she got dressed.

"Uhhmm," Tristian murmured, deepening the kiss neither realizing they were squishing their daughter.

"Amit, Tian, down." Tal protested in outrage.

Aretha snorted in amusement having covered the necessities and flounce off to their tavern.

"Tristian," Sidell warned.

"Sweetheart, Aretha taught her that. Honest. I've been trying to be good."

Sidell turned to Tal, "Who taught you that word?"

"Amit?"

"Yes."

"Eta," Tal announced proudly. "Eta said, amit Tian."

"Well I don't want to hear you saying it any more, young lady. If I do I'm gonna swat your backend."

Tal's brow furrowed in confusion, "Tian too?"

"Yes, and Tristian's too."

"Kay," she agreed happily much to the amusement of her grandparents.

"We're agreed?" Rolan asked solemnly.

"Aye," Tristian responded. "I'll return in two weeks and your buyer should be here to explain what they need the horses for. Too bad we couldn't figure out where that note telling those idiots to threaten us came from."

"At least, not without resorting to magic," Emma agreed. "I'd rather let Roland handle it as he deems best. Dyan is not in the habit of interfering in another's Holding and Baylon is not even attached to Riger."

"Trust me, Emma," Roland vowed solemnly, "If I can't get it resolved or Gisele is in danger, I'll holler loud and long for help."

Emma laughed and smiled cheerfully at Gisele. The difference was as astonishing as it had been in Dyan. Gisele was an honest loving soul and she grieved for her people. If Roland could accomplish it, Baylon would have a wonderful ruler for the next generation.

"But, if you agree to trade, Consort, how soon can we get the horses?"

"Right after I agree, we'll have them ready just in case and bringing them here will be simple to do. You've sent a message that I will be present?"

"Aye. They should receive it in more than enough time. They are not quite as far from us as Dyan is."

Nods at the table indicated all were in agreement.

"So be it," Roland proclaimed. He turned to a still stunned Raole. "Raole, get over it, she killed him. He deserved it."

"She couldn't have. He must have tripped and broke his own neck."

Tristian rose with a snort, "Leave it Roland, for his kind, it's easier to envision incompetent men than it is to believe that competent women exist."

"Well, he's got a steep learning curve or I'll be looking for a new minister. Roland smiled, "actually, that might not be a bad idea. Gisele could take his place that would allow her a chance to better understand the Realm."

Raole looked ready to burst and Emma hurried them out of the room.

Two weeks later found Raole sitting in a dark room in the city. The door opened and he growled in anger. "It's about time. What is going wrong? You're supposed to be the great mage. Why isn't Roland responding to my commands? In fact, no one is anymore. What's happened?"

"Shut up, Raole," a low voice responded. "I've just arrived and have no idea what is going on in your petty little realm. Now start from the beginning and tell me everything."

Tristian woke from the light doze she was in. The tavern below was quiet, she listened intently but no sound caught her attention. Turning inward, she allowed her senses to prod her mind. Ah, someone has tried to touch the node. Tristian smirked. So a subtle mage was visiting. What fun. Tristian new the mage was canny because no signs had been left that the node had been tapped before. Now, no one could touch it without warning her. She closed her eyes and returned to her light doze.

"Damn," a short, bristled hair man growled. "Someone's sealed the node. In a manner I'm not familiar with and it won't answer me."

"What does that mean?" Raole snapped.

"It means the spell I set to control the men that coerced them to listen to you is no longer there. It means, Raole, free will." the shorter man smiled harshly. "I bet that scares you silly."

"Tell me again about these women." His eyes glowed in anger, "And keep your bigotry to yourself. I need to know exactly how talented they are, not how talented you wish they were."

"What are you saying? They are women. They know nothing."

The man sighed, "You can be tedious. I'm surprised they didn't kill you." His hand gripped the

air and Raole felt the power surge, mindlessly he babbled everything he could remember and made up what he couldn't.

Tristian blinked as the hum of power drifted to her through the nodes. She snorted, deciding someone was probably talking to Raole. Alwyn knows he can be irritating enough.

Tristian had arrived in the eve and settled her arrangements with the tavernkeep ensuring he remembered her. She found, however, that Roland had apparently sent out a decree that the food would no longer be laced on penalty of death. Tristian noticed the women enjoying themselves more and laughing cheerfully. She also noticed that many of the men appeared to enjoy it and the looks of disapproval were few and far between. Always hidden lest they be recognized.

Yawning she rose, washed and left for her run. It was time to wake up.

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~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

**By
Tas**

Part 11

Derren Chiles watched the entrance of the tall dark haired warrior and she was a warrior. Of that he had no doubt. The way she moved, the way she held herself, the total control of every aspect of her being told him this was a woman that needed to fight beside him. He sent out a mage probe but received no hint back that the woman before him was a mage. Raole couldn't be that stupid, could he? Raole was positive that this one was the true instigator and possibly the more powerful but Derren could prove nothing. He had no way of knowing if this woman was the reason the nodes no longer answered to him. He'd have to research that when he got home.

"Tristian," Roland began, "Allow me to introduce you to Derren Chiles. He comes from the land known as Altair. Normally, the shipmaster would conduct our business but since you insisted on

knowing what the horses would be used for, Derren came himself. I'm not sure what his rank would be." Roland's voice faltered.

"No matter," Tristian answered easily, "no doubt he doesn't understand our rank either." Tristian grinned as Gisele came in, "Greetings kinsman," Tristian offered with a grin.

"And to you, Consort, how fares your lady, and Taledyn?"

"Well, Gisele, they send their regards."

"Roland," Raole snapped, "really, is this necessary. The women can..." he shrieked and fainted as Tristian's blade carved the table he sat at in half.

"Apologies, Roland. Sometimes my temper gets away from me."

"Well," Roland replied pragmatically, "at least you didn't kill him."

"Pity," Derren replied blandly.

Tristian snorted and resumed her seat.

Medellan entered and winked at Tristian then picked up the unconscious Raole and left telling his people to clear the damage.

Derren turned to study Tristian and he asked, "Roland tells me you wish to know what we use the horses for?"

"I do."

"If my answer is not satisfactory shall I assume you won't sell?" he asked this with mild sarcasm never expecting the answer he received.

"You may."

He waited for her to continue but she merely sat silently returning his regard and conducting her own inspection.

"Well, that is different. What would you consider to be acceptable use?"

She raised a brow and smirked.

He laughed shakily. He had never envisioned one such as she and she made him nervous. "Silly question, I know but, you can't blame me for trying?"

Tristian shrugged as if it made no difference to her.

"My land...is at war. We need mounts to wage a successful defense and hopefully position ourselves for a surprise offense. Does that offend you, warrior?"

"What will these mounts do in this war?"

He blinked in surprise. "I'm trying to mount horse archers, quick strike artists that will sting the enemy but not engage."

"Your riders are trained?"

Her eyes held his compellingly and he found himself answering honestly. "Not many, we've some and they're training the rest but...we lose more than we keep...and their mounts."

Tristian drummed her fingers atop the table grinning wickedly as Raole staggered back in. "Keep your mouth shut, little man, I'm out of patience and my lady is not here to stay my hand."

"Could she?" Roland found himself needing to ask.

"Oh, aye. She could. Not physically, mind you but...if it was her wish, I would stop."

She returned her attention to Derren dismissing Raole. "Where were we? Ah, yes. The mounts I had planned to send out to you will not do."

"But," Derren argued.

"Hold, hear me out. The mounts I had in mind were designed to carry people to and from places on a casual journey. I will not allow them to go to war, they are not trained for it and I might as well just kill them at home. I do have some that have been trained for specifically that purpose."

Derren sat back in shock, "Battle trained horses?"

"Aye. For light armor and artillery. They're light on their feet, quick on the turn, and smart as a dog. But, with out the riders, the horses alone cannot win your war. So give me a plan, Derren Chiles, convince me that my bondsibs should support your effort."

"I...two years ago an army came to Altair. They...raided the cities bringing destruction on the march north. They conscripted the survivors and use mages to force them to serve. The largest part of their army is well trained and has managed to control the entire southern hemisphere.

"We in the north, banded together to try and hold them off. Luckily, the center of our land narrows to a strip of passable land only one hundred horses wide."

Tristian nodded in approval, "You held them there?"

"Aye. But we're in a stale mate and soon, winter comes again. Our lands have been stripped of all able-bodied fighters and the fields left fallow. If we do not end this soon, we will die. And I believe this army will continue to march. The stories we hear talk of world domination. I don't

think it's just us they're after."

"What brought you here?"

"I sent ships out, searching for allies. They found Baylon and the shipmaster arrived with the first shipment of mounts. He made the arrangements," Derren hesitated but...but if the woman would help his people might survive.

"And?"

"Including agreeing to my setting a coercion spell on the land."

"Ahh, that's why I didn't feel it," Tristian murmured. "Who requested it?"

"Raole," Derren replied, "As if you didn't know."

"You bastard," Raole lunged. The two warriors moved and he fumbled to the floor.

"I was desperate," Derren offered, "not a truly worthy answer but I was. He offered to give me the horses if I could do this. Apparently my shipmaster is a bit of a gossip and let on that I was a mage. What he wanted was a spell that would force, subtly, people to listen to his suggestions."

"That's how he controlled the men." Tristian mused, "I did wonder."

"Aye. He hates women and wouldn't interact with them so, he drugged them and the spell worked on the men."

Roland looked to her curiously. "But, the last time you were here he gave several pointed suggestions and we ignored him."

Tristian chuckled, "Ah this is too rich." She turned to Derren, "You powered the spell with the nodes?"

"Aye,"

"I sealed the nodes my first morning here. The spell was no longer valid the minute I returned from my run." Tristian shook her head, amazing how things worked out like that.

"Well," Derren chuckled softly, "that would explain the other note I got. Besides the one you sent Roland. Raole sent one, demanding I re-do the spell, accusing me of backing out of a deal and threatening to turn me in to the King. Now, I've no idea what he planned to tell you Roland but...I'll own up to my mistake. I've no defense save I thought it was best for my people. I did not consider the well being of your people."

He looked to her in despair, "I've no plan, Lady. Just train them, keep training them, and hope for the best."

"What did you hope to accomplish with the light cavalry?"

"Break the hold on the narrows. Push them back a little to give us some breathing room. Right now, unless we are constantly on watch, they sneak over and take out our border troops."

Tristian sat casually looking out the window. This was not Dyan's problem but...they were warned that a great danger comes. She'd spent the last two years securing Dyan. Now, by luck or the design of the Goddess, Baylon was sealed to Dyan. If she went, considering how close they estimated the travel, she'd still be able to reach her bondmate through Baylon and seal the power in Altair. That would take the greater magics out of the battle and even the field. Also, defeat of Altair would put this army on the shores of Dyan and she would not see her soil stained with blood. "Stay the night, Derren. I'll return in the morning. There is much I must discuss with the Leader."

"But.."

"Just wait a day. Allow me to see what I can do."

The discussion with the Leader was easy, convincing the Elders just a tad bit harder, identifying and arranging the movement of troops, took the rest of the day. Parting with Sidell almost broke her heart.

"I know...I do, love," Sidell whispered. "I've always known I love a warrior and you are that. I know you see the true risk and I support you, but my heart hurts because I miss you and I'm so afraid."

Tristian had no way to ease her fear and could only hold her lover, love her, and promise to return.

"Ceil,"

"Commander?" Have them gathered in two weeks, the mounts are already paid for and the volunteers are evenly matched to their specialties.

"We'll be there Tristian, you keep your ass in one piece until then."

"Aye." She turned to Puck, "Forgive me my friend but I need you here. Maria I must have to command the light artillery since that is the scouts forte."

"I know. I don't like it, but I do know. We'll keep Dyan safe for your return. Alwyn help you if you get your fool self killed because Sidell will come after you."

Tristian nodded. She'd said her farewells to her family and would leave from the garrison.

"Tristian," Sidell voiced sliced through the air.

She turned and Sidell threw herself into her arms kissing her deeply, sealing their bond, reminding her that she had a reason to live, to come home.

They separated, slowly and Sidell's finger rested softly on Tristian's lips. Sidell's eyes were dry though the hint of tears was there she kept them in determined to put on a brave front. "I love you, warrior. Come home to me."

"I will, my heart. Always to you."

A tender kiss and Sidell released her. Tristian returned to Baylon and strode up to the castle. She was late but it couldn't be helped.

"Roland," She greeted the monarch.

"Thank Alwyn, Derren was beginning to pace. Have you decided?"

"I have."

They entered the room and Derren stood anxiously, "Your answer?"

"Let's go see Altair, Derren. That's if, you don't mind the company?"

A knock sounded and Roland called for them to enter. Medellan strode in. "Permission to attend the Consort, my liege."

Tristian's jaw dropped, "What?"

Roland ignored her. "Alone?"

"Nay, there's six of us, a small guard but we're damn good. I think we can watch her back better than most."

"Permission granted," Roland allowed with a humble bow. "And it is my pleasure to allow it, Medellan."

"Goddess bless, nursemaids," Tristian muttered.

Derren smiled for what seemed to be the first time in years.

Tristian spent the two weeks on board ship determined to have her guards trained or begging to return. She laughed as Medellan easily parried her blows and returned the same in kind. The fought to a draw and she grinned. "You said you'd give your life to have me train you, Medellan, I didn't think you meant it literally."

"I'll try to keep a hold of my life for a bit longer if is okay with you."

"Aye, let's grab a drink and let the rest of them practice more. They need it."

Derren could barely contain his excitement and regaled them of tales of his home, of the laughter they'd shared before the war. He described his home with an aching longing that could only be felt by those that have seen their homes destroyed, slowly, unstopably. The three were good friends by the time the ship docked. "Come on," he shouted in excitement, "The council would have gathered by now once we were spotted on the horizon." He fairly bounced down the gangplank.

"A might excitable he is," Medellan muttered under his breath.

"Left to me, he'll have many more excitable years."

"Aye, Consort. That he will."

Derren barreled into the council room where the gloom in the air could be seen. "Derren, tell us you've some good news," An elder smiled wanly.

"I do, I found help."

Tristian and Medellan entered and the council looked at each other in confusion. "Well, every body counts and two more will help. Anything else?"

Tristian snorted. "How far is this narrows you're after Derren?"

"Two days ride."

"I need an open field, a large one. And I need your people to stay out of it."

"Done," Derren responded and rushed back out the door.

Medellan snickered as Tristian elbowed him to be quiet.

"Excuse me? Can I ask what is going on?"

"Well, I thought I'd talk with you all but the defeat in the air is thick enough to cut with a knife," Tristian remarked wryly. "Decided I'd raise your spirits some before we started making plans." She headed out after Derren and found the closest node. Finding it clear and unowned, Tristian called, and Riger answered, all three master nodes. The air crackled with power. She turned to the field Derren was now pointing at. The power centered, focused and reached, fetching seven hundred mounted warriors and another hundred spare mounts. She sealed the node and sent it searching for its brethren as Altair rose to the call of the Mother's Own.

"Consort," Ceil saluted smartly. "As you commanded."

"Well done. Have them set up camp, ask the man over there with his jaw on the ground where the best place would be. Send out hunters to get some food. If we don't find any game, have the mages fetch some from the wilds of Riger. Send the Squad leaders to me and have you and Maria present."

"Aye, Consort."

Tristian turned to face a council full of desperate hope and hesitant dreams. "I am Tristian Mardred, Commander of the Warriors of Dyan. We've come to help."

"Dyan?" an elder whispered, "Dyan comes?"

"But, Derren went to Baylon."

Tristian nodded, "To explain what he needed horses for,"

"Aye," the elder agreed.

"He needed to explain that...to me."

"Dyan was in Baylon? How did that happen? Dyan is known to be a closed Holding and outsiders are not welcomed."

Maria stepped up and laid a hand on Tristian's arm, "Allow me, frying the allies is not a good step in forming lasting relations."

Tristian chuckled and relaxed slowly, "Aye, Maria. If you would, I want to check on the troops? You brought Shadow?"

"And Summer."

"For?"

"Sidell insisted. You need two mounts and she wanted them to be the two you trained."

"Ah, well, I won't argue."

"Good. Now let me settle the questions and you handle the troops."

Tristian nodded and set off calling her guards to introduce them. She didn't want them killed by accident.

Maria explained that although Dyan was still a closed Holding, the warriors had branched out and were now posted across the land. Their ranks had swelled although this effort left them severely understaffed but the people swore to help and they'd left it at that, hoping for the best. They could always rebuild. Better than having an army swarming up their backside.

Maps occupied every flat space in the hall the warriors, fully cognizant of Tristian's expectations, sorted through the various maps arriving at several logical plans for defense. They moved on to the southern maps to plan the offensive maneuvers. They stayed with it until Tristian was satisfied with the strategy. She sent them to bed warning on an early morning movement. "I want to make as much time as we can on the morrow. Then we'll break and move closer the following night. I prefer to keep our numbers a secret and I want the vanguards replaced under cover of dark. Maria, you'll handle that. I want fresh troops and I want them pulled back to look as if we're retreating or we're not paying attention."

"You want the enemy to rush the narrows?"

"Aye, let them in. Ceil, I want full a mounted force here," she pointed to the mouth of the narrows, a patch of land that widened and allowed entrance to the open plains. "Two garrisons staggered. Allow no one through, set the mages to block the entrance and hold them. Maria, once they are halfway through, block the narrows and set the rest of the troops loose on those on our side of the border."

She looked around and met each of her leader's gazes. "Questions people, now's the time?" When none came, Tristian concluded the strategy session. "Then see to your people and I'll see you at dawn."

They filed out and Tristian reached over and chucked Medellan's jaw shut. "Catching flies, Captain?"

"Goddess bless, who are you?"

She shook her head in amusement, "Get some rest, Medellan. You've gone addle brained on me."

She stopped and turned to Derren, "We'll need some one to vouch for us on the frontlines."

"I know, I plan to go with you." He expected her to argue. The elders always did.

She eyed him critically, nodded, and turned to find her tent.

They made good time and Tristian placed them a half-day's ride from their destination. She'd sealed the nodes as she passed but was curious that only Riger had those called the master nodes. The ones that accepted and passed the bond from the mother to the mother's own. "Cold camp, no fires, leaders to me. Maria, send your best scouts out I want these maps confirmed and if they're caught I'll kill them myself."

Maria chuckled and went to find Tinder. She passed on Tristian's message and Tinder snorted, "Someday, we're gonna have to explain the concept of incentives to her."

"I don't know," Brianna commented, "that one works for me."

The rest grinned in amusement as Tinder scratched her head. "I guess, it just don't sound right," she complained as they moved out.

"How come you're checking the maps, Consort?" Derren had taken to calling her that since the entire warrior force did.

Tristian looked up in surprise and fell silent for a minute. "C'mere, see these?"

"Aye,"

"They show rivers, dry gulches and the like."

"Aye,"

"They're wrong. The land changes and with the war it's changed faster than your mapmakers can keep up. Now on a day march, that don't matter much but, at night, when I'm counting on a dry gulch to save my life, I expect it to be there."

He soaked it all in. Everything she was willing to explain, he listened to avidly. Learning every trick he could and committing it to memory.

The scouts returned at mid-night, Tristian took their reports and sent them to bed. They would not move out until the following night.

"We found the main force, it's tied up tight at the entrance to the pass. I tell you Consort, it's a damn good think these people ain't fighting you. We'd have been back at their headquarters celebrating while they watched the damn pass."

Tristian snorted having expected nothing less. "You blocked the other trails?"

"As best we could without waking the dead. Once we make our presence known be best to take Bri or Megan back and have it sealed better."

"See to it," Tristian agreed. It was late afternoon and she was finishing up her brief. "Alright. Maria, you know what I want. Ceil, take them down to the main force, and keep the dust down if at all possible. The angle of the sun will help and I don't want these many people stumbling around in the dark."

Ceil saluted and moved out.

"Maria, sucker them in and leave them room to enter quickly. I'll be with Ceil in the first mounted garrison, tell your mage if she needs me."

"I will."

"Maria, bring yourselves back."

"You don't want us to cross?"

"Not tonight. I want to go over in the morning so decide on the scouts to support me. I need a valid count to accurately plan and offense."

"Aye, see you down the trail."

"Alright Derren, get up there with Ceil before your forces try to put arrow holes in mine."

"Aye, Consort," he replied with a salute.

Medellan chuckled as her guards cleared the last site and followed their Commander.

"So, you six plan to be in the front line garrison?" Tristian asked casually.

"Happen that's where some pig-headed Commander I know plans to be I guess the answer is yes," Medellan retorted.

Tristian laughed, "So be it."

"Derren? What's all this," Commander Conner asked, in shock.

"Friends, Conner, they've come to help." Derren peered back at Ceil who held the line. "Can they come in, Tristian doesn't want them sticking out like sore thumbs?"

"Aye, sorry, aye." He turned, "Evan, waved them in, quietly lad, no noise, don't want to give the game away to soon."

It was just dark and the riders were mere shadows as they eased into the camp.

"Ceil Annon, Commander, where would you like us?"

"Ah...settle in the west ridge, Commander Annon."

"Ceil will do, Commander. I plan to move two garrisons tonight so you might want to let your

people know. We're headed up the mouth of the narrows, gonna let some of them's against us bubble across and ease the crunch. Hope to get enough over to give us room to scout the far side in the morn."

Conner stared at her as if she were speaking a foreign language. "Commander? Your people?"

"Aye, Ceil. I'll let them know," he answered faintly.

Conner watched as the last of the riders approached his tent. Six rode point and flank while the center rider sat a mount lazily, as if asleep.

"Consort," Derren popped up as Tristian dismounted. "This is Johan Conner, Commander of our main force. Conner, this is Tristian Mardred, Commander of the Warriors of Dyan."

"Dear Alwyn," Conner breathed. "Commander bless you, bless you all."

"There was need, Conner." Tristian exclaimed honestly, "You've been briefed on my plan?"

"Aye."

"My scouts are out and should be reliving your front lines about now. They should be returning unless they wish to help."

"But...no one has passed us. And, they may end up fighting with our troops."

"Nay, there are many ways pass this entrance, they're just not suitable for large maneuvers. And, I'll lay odds, no one sees my scouts until they're being relieved."

A commotion started at the entrance. "Looks like we're beginning," Tristian hazarded a guess, "Let's go get them settled and I want to move my people in place."

They found tired groups of men and women staggering back towards them.

"What happened?" those closest asked. "Why are you back? Is something wrong?"

"Nay, we were relieved." A tired woman mumbled. "Some ghost put a council sealed missive in my hand. It said return so here we are."

They looked around in concern and saw Conner.

"Commander?"

"It's alright lass, we've got a bit of help and we're gonna have some excitement. Open a path here and let these folks through."

Fifty warriors sat mounted and they eased through the standing crowd moving to the entrance.

"Jenna," Ceil called. "You and Hetene seal this pass, let nothing through once they come."

"Aye, Ceil."

Tristian smirked looking at Medellan, "Come on, boys, it's show time."

"I don't suppose you'll stay to the side?" Medellan asked plaintively

"Looks like they're coming for a look," Maria smiled in the dark. "Thank Alwyn for nosey people."

"Aye. Shall I check with Tristian?"

"Tell her they're sniffing around and we'll let them know when the charge comes."

"Aye," Brianna responded passing the news to Tristian. "Check with Megan, they're going to seal the retreat and we need to seal the narrows."

"With no magic?"

"Well, no obvious magic," Maria hedged.

"Ah," Brianna smiled, "That's more like it."

They sat quietly, the scouts well trained, and waited patiently as the opposing forces searched the area."

"Must have hit them harder than we thought," a rough voice growled, "I knew we'd hurt them. They've probably been gone for hours while we've been hiding like rabbits."

"I love ego's," Brianna whispered.

"Give the signal, we'll break this standoff tonight," the same voice commanded.

Torches flared to life and the sound of hooves could be heard pounding up the path.

"Steady, people," Maria breathed. "Easy now, just hold steady."

The first wave reached them. "Bri, send word."

Medellan looked around the empty path. "How come they get to hide and we're standing out here with targets painted on us?"

Tristian chuckled, "Don't want to scare the poor folks. Keeps them arrogant and surprise is the

best weapon against overwhelming odds."

"I feel so much better."

Tristian could feel the ground shake now and she grinned, "Here we go, boys, no shirking."

The riders turned a final bend and saw a mad woman rushing them, yelling at the top of her lungs as six others paced her. "Kill the fools," A deep voice bellowed and then there were only the sounds of fighting. Tristian cleared three horses with her first strike having met them in the center of the open entrance. She was deadly grace in motion as Shadow showed her true training, kicking and biting at everything within reach.

The front line broke and tried to turn back but their own people were on them now, the sounds of the clash making their blood soar and they answered that dark mistress. The opposing force stalled by the demon in the front lines and as they milled around in confusion, Ceil charged. "Now, to the Consort."

Medellan could barely believe his eyes as blood painted the field in excess. Tristian was merely a blur in motion and her horse, as his mind wandered Shadow kicked one of his attackers over and he settled his mind back on the fight.

Tristian knew she had to get through before they turned and overran her scouts at the rear. She pushed forward feeling the warriors clearing the edges, knowing her people were still with her. Here was the reason she worked them so hard, they wanted to fight beside her, this was her place, in the lead and they had to be good enough. Her blood pumped as the crush grew tighter and she quit Shadow's back, allowing the mare to clear the area while she took down anything near her.

"By the Goddess," a guardsman breathed. Medellan blocked a blow aimed for the stunned guard. "Mind your back or we'll all be dead and she'll be standing cussing us for fools."

It was slow, tiring, Tristian's arms were now acting on their own as her mind watched angles, deflected strikes, dodged horses.

Shadow screamed and stomped, the signal to mount and Tristian was on her in a minute pushing them forward now that the block was clear and then, the scouts.

"Eh lah," she shouted in encouragement to hear it echoed back. Limbs responded as adrenalin kicked in and the final rush saw the path cleared of enemies. The warriors chanted, "Consort, Consort, Consort,"

Tristian grinned and settled them down. "Bri"

"Done, you coming?"

"Aye, on my way."

"Ceil, clear this path and make sure they're dead. Then take them back and get some rest. I'm going ahead, you know my plan for the morning?"

"Aye, Commander. I'll bring another garrison up after breakfast, you should have something by then."

"Aye, see you down trail."

She turned to her guards glad to see they'd made it, "Any of you need a healer?"

They shook their heads amazed but proud of themselves.

"Alright, let's move up, the scouts will have something for these cuts."

Tristian sat shirtless as Megan sewed her up. The scouts didn't notice but her guards weren't as blasé as that and they took some ribbing before they got their eyes settled.

"Didn't anybody teach you to duck," Megan scolded her.

She snorted and accepted the mug of ale from Medellan. He sat beside her having already been poked and prodded. "I'd have ducked if I could have found some place to duck to," Tristian mumbled. "How'd you guys turn them back?"

Megan grinned, "Funny how the smell of a Cat will send a horse into panic. Especially one packed in tight on a trail."

Medellan choked on his drink but Tristian chuckled, "Well done, young mage. Subtle is best."

"Aye. Now, give me that and lay down."

Tristian grinned but leaned back allowing Megan to cover her. I'll wake you before sunrise."

"Aye," Tristian muttered and was asleep before Megan could stand.

"She alright?" Maria asked.

"Aye. Bruised a few deep gashes but I cleaned and stitched them. From the stories I'm hearing she damn near took all of 'em on."

Medellan joined the softly talking women, "I was there lass and I wouldn't deny it. She was...Goddess bless!" He moved off still shaking his head to his beard roll.

Maria rolled her eyes, "Boys and their idols."

"Medellan you're staying here."

"But..."

"No buts. I don't know if you're any good on a trail and I don't care to find out now. I'll come back and we'll make further plans."

He knew she was right...but damn it.

"I'm right, and you know it. Keep the boys with you, this is important. Brianna will kill anything that threatens us, even stubborn do-gooders."

He nodded and went to break the news to the men and Tristian moved off with Maria and the best scouts she had.

Ceil was having a time trying to calm the forces of Altair. "But Commander, we saw. You could help us take back the Southern hemisphere. Lead us, Ceil. Please."

"Conner," Ceil bellowed.

"Aye lass."

"I'm taking one hundred of my people across, we're going to meet up with Tristian who by now will have scouted the area and will be working on plans to press our advantage. Keep your folks here, Conner. We've not enough breathing space yet for stupidity."

"I'll try," he promised.

"Not good enough. You'll succeed or we'll kill the first people across."

"What?" rose up in outrage.

"You heard me. You risk the lives of my sisters and my friends. I will not allow it. That is my command, Conner. Let the results rest on your head."

Medellan stared morosely into his cup. The sun was high and the warriors milled around aimlessly. Ceil and Brianna were talking and he was waiting for some sign. A large hand swiped his cup and he rose with a sputter to find himself looking into pale violet eyes.

"Well, you weren't drinking it," Tristian defended amiably.

He looked around to see the party had returned and looked to his men to ask if they knew how. They also looked confused so he poured him another cup and followed his Commander.

"Alright, we got massive confusion at the base of this trail. They aren't sure what's going on. We've scouted the area and if we can clear the base we'll be clear to the mountain pass. We can move the troops and reoccupy the land there. We'll need more people."

"Altair wants to play. They're about ready to revolt."

Tristian snorted. "Alright bring up two of their and one more of our garrisons. We move in two hours, I want to hit them at dusk. If we leave it for the morning I'm afraid they'll have regrouped."

Ceil saluted and Tristian turned to Medellan. "Ready?"

"Shall I assume we're in front again?"

"Of course."

"Then I'm ready."

Tristian took a nap. Medellan looked down at her and grinned in amusement returning to his men to wait for further orders.

Maria eased up next to him.

"She always sleeps like that?"

"In this kind of campaign, there's no telling when you'll sleep next. Best get it done while there's time."

She moved off to catch a few winks of her own.

Brianna rose to the raucous calls coming from the path. Angrily she moved the lookout and found the Altair forces laughing and joking. A mind voice rang clear stunning all of them. "This is an army. No wonder you people were losing, why not send a damn invitation telling them we're here. SHUT THE HELL UP. One more word and I'll leave all of you mutes."

Ceil just shook her head. She'd told them. She only brought them cause she knew it wouldn't carry and one of the mages would handle it. She found an amused Consort checking the trail.

Tristian raked the offending newcomers with a deadly glare and they cringed in embarrassment.

"Take them across, there's a plateau large enough to stage but they've got to be quiet."

"Hey, I tried. You go tell them."

"I will." She pointed to the path, "five abreast, Bri and Megan will support the trail. It's subtle and shouldn't be noticed. Slow canter no dust and no racket."

Ceil nodded and set the first garrison across. Tristian approached the Altair forces.
"Commander's step forward."

Two rosy cheek youngsters stepped up. "See what they're doing?"

"Yes ma'am!" they chorused.

"Can you fools speak in a tone softer than a shout?" She growled.

They wilted.

"Now, can you do that as quietly as it's being done?" Tristian tried again.

"We can try."

"Not good enough, soldier. Trying gets my people killed. Either you can or you can't."

Two older gents stepped forward. "We'll get it done, Commander. If'n we have to gag and tie the younguns' so be it."

"Then prepare I hear one more argument or joke from this company and I'll throw you off the side of the cliff myself. Clear?"

Nods around. "Good, you learn quick. You may live through this yet."

"Medellan with me, two of you will have to come across with another group."

Medellan pointed and the two men stepped back and moved to Ceil's side for instructions. "Go with the next group."

They nodded and lined up.

"Listen up lads," Aaron murmured to the chastised youths. "What do ye hear?"

They listened and shrugged, "Nothing."

"Aye, we're moving almost four hundred people with no noise."

He waited until that impressive effort got through. "Now ye see what she meant. Never forget."

They nodded and prepared themselves.

Tristian rode through the ranks maintaining quiet. The mages also move through them quietly as they set the plateau waiting for the setting sun. Tinder returned and paced to Tristian's side. "No change, still confusion. Arguments. They haven't figured out who's in charge yet."

She looked up to the mountain ridge that surrounded the valley. Two quick flashes and she nodded. Low murmurs began behind her but Brianna was there first. "This better be good, one of you, tell it."

"Lights, on the mountain," the woman whispered.

"Ours, pass it back but no murmuring."

Quickly the news passed but not a sound was heard. Tristian nodded in approval. She moved to the front, Ceil took the center and pointed out the order of descent, Dyan, Altair, Dyan, Altair,

The riders tensed and Tristian's cry of Dyan shattered the air as the first garrison descended like demons from hell. "Line em up," Ceil bellowed. "Move your ass people you want gods be damned invitations? Go, go," she urged the second garrison on and prayed they wouldn't fall of their horses. Dyan stood next ready for the command, "Now," and the garrison surged forward.

"Move people," Ceil shouted at the last garrison, "now you can't move fast enough? Get your asses up here." She paced the descending garrison. "Go, go,"

Running to her mounts she followed them down. Passing them in the final stretch, "Follow me, you damn jackasses, follow me."

The garrison straightened up and Ceil lead them to the opening turning them back around and facing the retreating forms. "No one leaves, charge."

Tristian's first charge split the forces straight up the middle. The following garrisons flanked left and right. With Ceil covering the retreat the surprise was complete and the warriors owned the valley before the sun fully set.

"Maria, send word. Have your last squads up on the ridges and the mages seal the entrances. Bring the rest to the entrance and hold till morning. We'll bring them across then," Tristian commanded.

With the bodies moved to the gorge, Tristian ordered camp made. The enemy expected a camp here so a camp there would be. "Ceil, set a watch,"

Tristian checked on the forces from Altair and was happy that her mages all had healer training. Many of them were injured. Some were merely sick from the killing. But their spirits were high

and Tristian need to keep them subdued. "You've done well, I'm impressed. But we can't relax and this isn't even the beginning. Keep a lid on the noise and no drinking. Any questions?" None were forthcoming. "Then rest, we'll repair the gear tomorrow and move the rest of the forces down with us. Ceil is setting the guards if you're chosen stay awake. We check and I'd have to slit your throat for falling asleep on duty."

"You think she's joking?" a youngster asked softly.

The older man looked him dead in the eye, "I think she'll do it and not even feel bad."

"How? How can she do that?"

"Because this is more important than one life. It's not about bragging rights, not about keeping score. This is life or death and if killing one person means she brings the rest of us home, she'll do it and be thankful the cost was so low. Think on that, Kenit, think on the responsibility of that decision and think again on how great it would be to be a warrior."

Tristian lay in her bedroll feeling the bond of the land. The nodes were sealing to her just by the first push and the master nodes in Riger controlling them. She wouldn't have to worry about them unless she found one already claimed. She fell asleep dreaming she held Sidell in her arms.

A step brought her awake. Ceil didn't even bother checking, she knew Tristian would be up with someone that close to her. "Riders, about fifty. Might be the command authority to take over this camp."

"Pull a garrison, set them in the shadows. Leave the rest asleep. Brianna, hold them I don't want them rushing for weapons."

They left to see to their chores.

"Hold, state your business." The guard at the entrance challenged the approaching party.

"It's me ye fool, I've brung the Commander."

"Bout time," the warrior muttered and pulled back into the shadows.

They rode in to a well-kept camp. Around a small fire sat several figures watching them curiously. "I didn't realize your command was so well trained. This should be a snap to take the far ridge."

"Aye. We'd have done it a long time ago but that last fool we had..." Truth to tell, the old man was worried. He knew his command and something was wrong. He pulled to the rear cussing at his horse. "I'll catch up, looks like she threw a shoe."

"Who's in charge here?"

Tristian rose silently and waited.

"Well done. I'll be taking command and we're taking that ridge on the morrow. I want you out by morning and find us a way in."

Tristian remained silent and the Commander hesitated.

"Well, are you deaf?"

"No, Commander, I'm not. But I've no intentions of giving up my command."

"Ah...someone with ambition. Commendable but our master says this is my command so stand down or I'll kill you myself."

"You can try."

"Stubborn fool. Kill her,"

The ground erupted and the Commander found himself looking into the palest eyes he'd ever seen, then darkness claimed him."

The attack was complete; the guard stopped the scout that had dropped back. Again the gorge claimed the bodies and Tristian left the camp, a bound Commander over her shoulder.

Ceil took control and brought all of the forces across the narrows. Maria's scouts secured the trails and they waited for Tristian's return. It was near dusk and she was covered in blood and exhausted. Brianna merely led her to her tent, stripped her, checked her for injuries, washed her and left her to sleep.

"Consort," Maria greeted her.

"Morning. We've got about a five-day ride before we hit the next group. A town called Lyheer. Is Derren still with us?"

"Aye,"

"Good, bring him here and pull the maps. We'll need the scouts out wide, I don't want to give them too much warning."

"What about the villages in between?"

"Beaten and cowed, they'll probably think we're just part of the same group."

"Gee, that makes me feel so much better."

Tristian smiled softly but her mind was far away. She'd tortured that man. Unwilling to use her magic she'd carved him slowly until he finally blurted out everything she needed. It had to be done, but it didn't make her feel any better knowing that. Maria clasped her shoulder in support knowing how she would have had to get the information.

"Consort," Derren collapsed beside her, "this is wonderful, we've never gotten this far, ever." He was excited but was keeping to a whisper and Tristian realized he'd obviously been brief. Best to leave it. Once they learned, they'd never forget.

"Show me Lyheer, Derren. What's the best way there and what's the hardest way there?"

Her Commanders gathered around collecting those from Altair. Altair listened intently, learning what they could as the warriors came up with a viable plan."

"How many."

"At least a thousand"

"Shit," a youngster from Altair muttered.

"Best bet?"

"Mid-day."

Ceil considered and then snorted, "Aye most will be out and about, scouts in the land and their raiders out raiding. Good plan."

Tristian smirked. "Thanks."

"Smart ass."

"I'll send Scouts out?" Maria inquired.

"Aye, three squads. Two wide, circle the town get me current information. One up that wash, I want to know if it enters the town or damn near it. How deep is it, how safe is it, and how many people can I get in there safely. I also want a fourth. Out pass the town, the map shows a change in altitude, I want to know how drastic and where can we descend. What's at the bottom and where do we need to go next."

Maria nodded and moved off.

"Can I..." A youngster from Altair began.

"No. The scouts cannot afford a handicap and none of you are trained enough to follow them."

"Not gonna learn sitting on my ass," he persisted and squawked as Tristian had him by his throat dangling in the air. "Little boy, do you want to know what's done to spies? That's what the scouts will be considered if caught."

She dragged him off.

"Oh Goddess," Maria sighed. "I hope he doesn't throw up on her."

They returned an hour later, the young man pale and crying as he dropped into a ball. "Jenna, take him home."

"Aye, Consort."

"No. No, I can do this, I didn't understand but it's my land too, dammit. I'll follow your orders and keep my mouth shut but I won't go home."

Tristian hit him. He bounced up and spit at her, "Bitch," she hit him again. He threw a punch blocked easily and she hit him again. He lay crying and sat up. Taking a breath he made his plea, "Commander, I'm sorry. This is my land and I wish to fight but if you feel I'm a danger to others and insist on my return, then so be it. You have my word." He met her gaze, a young man no more, stripped of his pride, his dignity and his limited view of honor. All he had left was the love of his home.

"Good," was all she said but Jenna unpacked and no one looked set to move him. Maria brought him supper and sat. "You know what you did wrong?"

"Aye, took the third hit to get through my stubborn brain but...aye."

"What was it?" another asked.

"She's the Commander, what I want, what I think, what I plan to do, none of it matters. Not now, not here. Her word is law and like it or not it's the best for all of us." He smiled shakily, "So, I'm a knob head and I've passed on some bit of wisdom. Don't bother learning this lesson again; just take my word for it. Do it her way and skip the lesson, it hurts."

Maria chuckled and moved on.

They were mounted, 1200 strong and she had no idea if they'd be enough. She rode over and looked at the young man that mouthed off to her. "Name boy?"

"Axom, Commander."

"Come with me."

He pushed his mount forward and rode quietly at her side as his people watched in worry and concern.

"Medellan, this is Axom. He'll be riding with us."

"Aye, Consort."

"Move 'em out,"

Her Commanders gave orders and the group slowly entered the southern hemisphere.

On the second day they found bodies on the side, signs of a fight obvious. Tristian walked the site and grinned wickedly. "Axom, come here."

"See this? It's a scout mark. These were people out working for the other side. They ran into Maria's team and she left them here as a warning."

"To whom?"

"To them. Let's them know someone's entered their game."

Axom studied the signs and followed as she returned. She turned and gestured, the troop split in two they moved around the site, not converging for several miles.

"Can I ask a question?" Axom murmured.

"S'long as we're not fighting," Tristian responded.

"How can the scouts let us know there's a problem?"

"Mages."

"Duh," He kidded himself. "Sorry, I'll think more before I ask."

"S'alright, only stupid question is the one not asked. Thing you need to lean in when to ask."

He fell silent thinking about that.

Four days later Maria wandered into camp and the maps were brought out again.

"Okay, the wash looks good, we can get a few hundred in. The rest is bad. Flat land for miles, no way we can hide this many people."

"Didn't plan on hiding them," Tristian muttered. Can you take two hundred to the wash? Lead them through tonight?"

"Aye."

"I need them in place by mid-day."

She nodded.

Tristian turned to her Commanders, "Four groups, split yourselves evenly. I want to surround the town and ride in openly. They'll either panic and attack or they'll shut themselves in."

"That's where we come in?" Maria guessed.

"Yep." They barricade I want in down, even if it's only one side. I'll come in on the wash so if anything get me in and we'll go from there."

"Done, we need to head out."

"Go to it."

She turned to Altair. "This town will have innocents, no rampaging through the streets, no fires, kill anything coming at you but don't be chasing anyone down. We'll head out at mid-night. That should give us enough time to get there. I want a mage with the Altair groups; keep in contact with each other. Nobody gets there ahead of anybody else. Split up people then get some rest."

The town of Lyheer scrambled as the pounding hooves approached.

"Get that barricade up, move damn it." The garrison Commander shouted hopelessly. His best troops were out in the land. He had over a thousand people here but more than half were farmers. "Not like that, damn you heathens," he barked rushing to help raise the spiked wall. He failed to notice the staggered presence of outsiders as they scrambled to assist the villagers. Well-placed nicks on the tie ropes ensured the walls would come down when necessary. "Put the people in the square, hurry up."

Again a group of strangers rushed forward to obey, hustling the villagers in the hut in the square, located in the back of the colony, near the wash.

"Shh, come...hurry." They passed the villagers through the hole in the wall. "Come on, stay down and just keep moving." A line of warriors kept the people calm as the helpful strangers gathered up the villagers and ushered them out of the way. Maria's practiced eye estimated no more than four hundred trained troops occupied the village but many of the men on the walls were farmers forced to fight for their families. She sighed and on hearing Tristian cry for Dyan, threw her

dagger cutting the remaining rope that held the back barricade.

Shadow screamed and kicked in the flimsy outer wall then carried her rider in. Tristian met the first charge allowing the rest of the warriors to open the other four barricades. Horses thundered through but they ignored the cowering men.

As Tristian slashed her way through she saw the Commander fighting with a mount and smiled grimly. He mounted and turned his horse around dashing for an opening. A piercing whistle split the air and Summer stopped on the hoof. The Commander continued onward and the warriors quickly had him secured. Tristian saw Axom, wild from the battle cornering a terrified farmer and she left Shadow's seat tackling the boy and knocking him out. She pushed the farmer behind her and faced the charging horde headed her way. Shadow charged, hooves and teeth flashing as her master carved her own way through the pack. Maria joined her as the fighting ground to a halt and slowly the overwhelmed victors found themselves prisoners.

"Secure them," Tristian commanded, "and fix the outer wall I want this place looking pretty by sun down."

"Wait..." a shaky voice called. "Who?"

"Dyan," Tristian murmured leaving the man stunned. Axom groaned, Tristian grinned pulling him up. "What happened, this farmer kick your ass?"

He snorted. "I think a cart fell out of the sky. Thank you, I...I couldn't stop."

She squeezed his shoulder, "It doesn't get easier, boy. Remember that." she nodded to the work crews, "Go help raise the walls and walk this man over to his family. Don't hit him no more, he might kick your ass again."

They had the village settled well enough to convince anyone not expecting trouble. Only three squads returned and Megan confirmed the other three had run into the scouts. They would not be returning.

Tristian scowled at the prisoners before her. The Commander had proven very helpful once she'd explained his options. "Now, what the hell am I suppose to do with you?"

"We're paid mercs lady. Take us back and they'll kill us for being incompetent."

"So," Tristian grinned, "You saying I should kill you for being incompetent and save myself the ride?"

"No," he blustered. "I'm saying we're mercs. We fight for money. Hire us."

"You're incompetent. What the hell do I want to hire incompetent mercs for?"

Maria snickered, "She does have a point."

The garrison Commander scowled at her. "Well what the hell do you want to do with us, obviously you don't want to just kill us, or we'd be dead? So, what now?"

"If I knew that, I sure wouldn't be standing here asking you." Tristian growled.

Maria giggled. "Let's lock them for the night and take a break. Maybe they'll have a better idea in the morning."

"Fine," Tristian muttered as the warriors moved them to an open room building and shut them in.

"Be good, guys, Tristian's grumpy. No telling what she'll do when she's grumpy."

Tristian sat comfortably at a table. The tavernkeep insisted on feeding them so she sent the scouts out again for some game. The stew smelled wonderful and the women dug in although most had to eat outside. Still the cook had an outside fire going and had whipped together a meal for a thousand or so hungry warriors.

"Uhhmm," Maria groaned in pleasure. "Real food. I think it's the one reason that I could hate being on trail."

"You and me both," Ceil agreed heartily. "Goddess tavernkeep this is wonderful."

Tristian looked up and grinned, "Trey, where've you been."

"Working too hard from the looks of things. Got any more of that?" She smiled as the woman put a plate down for her and her team moved in for theirs.

"Okay, we've got a gradual decline off the base of this here mountain. Problem is, the ground's cracked and dangerous, the paths are shale and the only true path leads down into another well-guarded village. We went further south though since we over heard several conversations discussing their command camp being a few days away. It's four days actually but...we have to get down the damn hill first."

"What's the command site look like?"

"Like mages," Trey answered wryly. "Kind of nasty, the people all look like they're on drugs and just stumble about. I'm surprised it's not like that throughout the land."

"The nodes aren't bound and they can't use them like that. So they have to sit on one and control the people off the power of the node."

"Can you fix that?"

"Aye, but I want to be closer cause once that happens whoever's left is gonna come haring out over the land and I sure don't wanna do this again."

"Aye," the table agreed whole-heartedly.

"Ladies?"

"Aye," Tristian greeted him. He was the man Axom tried to skewer. "I be Jerald ladies and I be hearing your trouble. Ladies, there be a path, through the mountains. Bring you out a days ride west of the village ye be talking bout. We didn't tell them, as that would have let them run back and forth over us. This way, tis a chore to get to and from, ye see?"

"Aye. And you're telling us why?"

"Ye be Dyan. Tis enough for us." His head bobbed around the tavern where the citizens nodded in agreement."

"Maps!"

Derren ran over with the map for the area. "Okay, Jerald, where?"

"Maria, head out in the morning. Trey stick around, your people need a break, good work."

Trey nodded and wandered off to find somewhere to sleep.

"Ceil, settle them down we're staying for a couple of days. Use the barracks and set the guards." Tristian continued, "I want to head out and check out the trail down to the village in the morning, keep them settled."

Everyone nodded and the tavernkeep approached, "I've a room for ye, Commander. Got a bath waiting, come with me."

Part 12

Tristian woke before daybreak and saddled Summer. "Medellan, stay here. Help the villagers since we're waiting for word from Maria. Couple days at best."

He nodded and watched her ride out the sun not even up yet.

Tristian found the village and climbed the hill above it smiling at the loose rocks on the top. She descended carefully and checked the shale-covered trails. Satisfied that the path was truly shale and not just some laid over the top, she sank into the tall grass and crawled her way down to the rear of the village. She made a small entrance and eased her tall frame in, keeping to the shadows she eased around to the commander's quarters knowing she needed to hurry before the sun

cleared the ridge and left her without hiding places.

"I'm telling you he's losing it. Now he wants us to take the damn civilians to him tomorrow. What are we suppose to do with all this land if we're killing off all the people?"

"Don't know, Bella, and I'm sure as hell not gonna ask. Did you see what he did to that last batch we took him?"

"I did. I think we bit the big one on this, Adele. Wish we'd have just run."

"There was no place left to run, you know that. He owns Vostle. Now he's after Altair. What's next?"

"Riger, wherever that is."

"Adele, I can't keep doing this, I can't."

"We here in this crummy village are the only ones left of our entire tribe, Bella. If we fight him, we're gone, no more chances."

"If we don't what do we offer our children?"

"I know," Adel sighed in frustration. "I know but I'm so scared I'm gonna lose you. At least he doesn't care. Where else can we go and love like we do without being ridiculed?"

"That's damn selfish, Adele. I can't believe that came out of your mouth. People are dying and you're worried someone's talking nasty about us?"

"Oh Goddess, Bella, I hurt. I'm tired of hurting. Please make it go away."

"We need to fight him, we need to. I can't turn these people over to him, for Alwyn's sake they think we're their guardians. Please, Adle, please. If we die, we go together."

A small sigh, "You're right, Bella, I don't wanna hurt them anymore. Don't wanna hurt nobody any more."

"Perhaps I can help?" Tristian spoke gently from the shadows. Two swords were pulled and she moved into the light, with her hands extended away from her body, empty. "I can help. You just need to hear me."

"Who the hell are you?"

"I am Tristian Mardred."

"That tells me a lot,"

"Hey," she joked, "you asked." hooking her foot through a chair she pulled one to her and sat comfortably. "I'm from Riger. Altair, asked for help in defeating an army that had invaded their land. We came. We've cleared the land from the north harbor to the village above us, Trestle I believe. This one's next and I'm glad I stopped by first."

"You say you plan to take this village. In case you haven't noticed it's difficult to get here."

"Aye, through the normal paths. But, we've been told of another and we're looking into it. My scouts will have a report on the morrow and we'll move shortly after. The path supposedly comes out a days ride west of here. So let me tell you my plan. There are loose rocks above and a careful slide would cause panic but not much damage. A garrison would descend the path to get everybody's attention but by then, the rest of my people will have this village surrounded."

"If this is true, why tell us?"

"Because you want out. I'm willing to help. I also know a place where you can go and have your love recognized, or celebrated."

"You must think we're daft."

"I wouldn't have stopped if I thought that. Think for a minute. I've been here long enough to hear most of your conversation. There's been no alarm raised, no suspicions; no one knows I'm here. Why would I stop?"

"You could be a spy."

"I'd have turned you in and probably got a reward for it," Tristian smirked cockily.

"You must be daft. We've got the swords and you're laughing at us?"

"No, just your idea. Choose ladies or tell me what would it take to convince you."

"Show us?"

"Show you what?"

"Trestle?" The woman looked at each other and nodded, "show us Trestle."

"Can you leave here without causing an alarm?"

"We're headed out to scout but the people here are ours. All of them. We'll be safe, from them."

"You'll be safe from me. Bring horses and meet me at the top of the ridge just behind the large boulder that blocks the upper path."

"Nice day for a ride," Tristian spoke casually causing the women to jump.

"Alwyn bless, I'm gonna kill you."

"Gotta find me first. Ready?"

"Aye."

Tristian rode straight out not bothering to hide and they reached Trestle within an hour.

Trey met her at the gate eyeing the women appreciatively, "For me? Consort, you shouldn't have."

Tristian grinned, "They're just visiting, see to the mounts?"

"Aye, but if Summer bites me you owe me a keg of summer wine."

"For a bite? Geez, Trey, I didn't know you were that delicate."

Tristian led them to the tavern and bowed them in. Maria sat at her table eyeing the women critically then she sighed. "Let me guess. I rode all night to find this blasted path, checked to see it was clear, left it secured so we could sneak on down and take the village below the hill and you...waltzed in and...what, said pretty please?"

Tristian laughed softly, "You're grumpy, go get some rest but you're almost right. I still want to use the path. A lot of the folks from Altair couldn't sit a horse if we tied them on it."

Maria chuckled tiredly, "Alright but I'm taking your bed. I'm not trying to sleep with those idiots reliving great battles of the day."

"Aye, fine, help yourself. There's a bath if you're interested. Have the Keep heat you some water."

Maria chuckled and kissed her cheek, "You can be sweet at times."

"Hey, watch the rep," Tristian admonished with a smirk.

"Ah..sorry, must be tired." She smiled at the two women, "Night ladies, enjoy your visit."

"Consort," Ceil entered her brow rising in surprise, "something I should know?"

Tristian sighed, "Bella and Adele from the village we're gonna take over tomorrow."

"And you got them...how?"

"I was lucky?"

"Some how, Tristian, I doubt Sidell will agree."

"Very funny. Sit."

Ceil joined them and Tristian gave her the short version of the morning. "Ah, and your plan now is to..."

"I'm gonna pretend we're villagers and enter the command site."

"What?" Bella and Adele chorused.

"Over my dead body," Ceil growled.

"It's a great plan," Tristian sighed.

"It sucks," Ceil muttered.

"How many people were you suppose to send over?"

"About a hundred and thirty." Bella answered

"Perfect."

"It is not perfect."

"Enough," Tristian roared. "Choose one hundred and twenty-four warriors to enter with me. Find out the mix we need from Bella and don't forget the six guards going with me. Have this done and neither you nor Maria will be included in the count."

Ceil bristled and the women glared at each other. Finally Ceil backed off, "Aye, Commander." She rose and turned back, "Get your fool self killed and I'll help Sidell find you just to kill you again."

Tristian grinned and nodded.

"Consort, what are we going to do with the prisoners?"

"Oh hell, I don't know Trey I was hoping they'd escaped by now."

Trey hid a grin at the expressions on Bella and Adele's faces. "Well, we did decide they're incompetent."

"Think you can scare them enough to be good? We know they can't go back but I don't want them harming the free towns."

Trey considered, "Let me talk to Megan. She's a sneak, maybe she can come up with a plan."

"Great, and have them gone by mid-day. We've a lot to plan for."

"You weren't joking?" Bella blurted.

"About which?"

"About all of it? About fighting for these people, about, helping, any of it, all of it."

"Uhhmm, okay, no. I wasn't joking."

"But...why?"

"Because they are Dyan," the tavernkeep replied emphatically placing Tristian's plate down. "Now eat, keep your strength up." She eyed the other two, "I'll have yours out in a bit."

"Dyan," Adele muttered, "that rings a bell."

"Old girl friend?" Tristian teased.

Adele scowled, "Funny girl."

Tristian felt a muted flare of power, quickly dampened and she waited, head cocked testing the air. She relaxed suddenly and sighed, "Damn. I may kill them for this."

"My love,"

"My heart," Tristian murmured rising gracefully and welcoming her lover with a kiss. "Need I ask?"

"Of course not?"

"This is dangerous,"

"I'm aware of that."

"We could be killed,"

"Uh huh,"

"Emma will never forgive us."

"She'll be busy chasing Taledyn."

"I can't dissuade you?"

"Of course you can, change your plan." Sidell smiled at the two gaping women and turned to her lover, "They're staring."

"Let em get their own lover," Tristian murmured kissing her again.

The tavernkeep stepped up and dropped another room key into Tristian's hand. Lifting her lover she nodded to Bella, "Tell Ceil when you're ready to leave if I'm not out by then. She'll see you safe and we'll be by sometime before mid-day."

Ceil, Maria, Bella, Adele and Trey were seated around the table when a flash of silver arced and the women dove to the floor as the table cleaved in two. Tristian stood grinning at them, Sidell tucked against her laughing gently.

Maria sighed, "I was sleeping, if you remember."

"Consorting with the enemy, I'm sure it's a crime somewhere."

Maria smirked, "Ceil is not your enemy and was only looking out for...our, hear that? OUR best interest which was to bring you home in one piece vice many."

"A likely story," Tristian snorted.

Bella and Adele looked concerned as the friends moved tables. The warriors ambled in and picked up the pieces promising the tavernkeep to repair it.

"Alright, let's hear it."

"I've selected one-hundred and twenty-three people with the approximate mix of the village. Bella is fairly sure no one will notice. You've got four mages going in with you."

Tristian shook her head. "With Sidell here that's unnecessary and they'd do you more good than us. Once I find the node Sidell will shield, no one can break the bonded shield so we'll be fine.

"Except that you have the equivalent to the power of the sun roaring through you and I need to hope I can remind you to come back."

"You'll manage," Tristian replied easily. "No the biggest trick will be getting in and breaking the shields already up but that's mage work. I need the warriors keeping the mage or mages too busy to focus on us. Hit them with mage energy and physical attacks to keep them confused. The rest of them will be busy fighting off the forces there and they will have to fight the farmers and such

until I can break the hold on the node. I don't expect him to have a hold on our people since he'd have to bond them to himself and that will take more time than he'll have. What I need is all of you in place before we get there cause once I'm in all hell will break loose."

"That's why you're taking your guards?"

"Aye, until the shield is set and the Mother answers we are relatively unprotected. But after that, we'll be all right.

"Okay," Maria began, "this is what we've got."

They went over it three times and Tristian finally agreed. Head out, you'll be moving more and I need most of you rested. Ceil, take Axom with you. Leave the volunteers and we'll head out in the morning to meet Bella. I'll wait above the ridge for a signal that all is clear before we come in. I don't get the signal, we come in force and assume something happened during the night."

Tristian turned to Bella, "How many of your people are suppose to escort them?"

"Normally twelve."

"Then leave me a squad of Scouts and they'll be our escorts."

"We want to go."

"It will be dangerous and I can't promise you'll be safe."

Bella scowled, "We want to go, we're suppose to be the escorts and can hopefully help protect you two until things get hoping. Then we'll find a large group of warriors and hide."

"Fine," Tristian gave in.

The friends rose. With clasps all around they parted and headed out to finish the trek.

"Bella, you two ready to head back?"

"Actually," Adele began, "We'd rather hear about Dyan and you two."

Tristian sighed and allowed Sidell to tell the tale.

They sat above the village watching the two women make their way back. They were greeted eagerly and the women appeared to be in high spirits. Tristian pulled Sidell onto her saddle and the lovers returned in quiet contemplation and gentle touches filled with love.

"I'm glad you're here," Tristian admitted.

"I know. I also know why you didn't call and I love you anyway."

Tristian grinned and they turned in to prepare for the coming dawn.

The trip to the village was uneventful but they were surprised by the warm welcome they received. "Damn," Trey muttered. "I don't get greeted that well in Dyan."

"Perhaps you're doing something wrong?" Sidell asked sweetly.

Bella chuckled. "You folks need to change, our peasants never looked so good."

Tristian and Sidell eyed each other in amusement. "Somehow, my love," Sidell murmured at the homespun trousers and long tunic tightened with a belt, "that doesn't do you justice."

"It's not suppose to," Bella chuckled wryly, "our peasants are also not so well...proportioned."

"Ahhh. Well, that outfit does hide everything."

Tristian rolled her eyes. They headed out on horseback until a day's ride of the city. Then they donned the shackles and started the last day's march across the plains. At daybreak a tired party stumbled into the city.

Tristian could feel the node pulsing with angry energy. She felt the web of surrounding nodes waiting for the final bond. Shuffling forward she called, feeling Sidell move up against her. They were herded towards the rear of the compound but before they got halfway there Riger answered its bondmate's call. Tristian dropped to her knees and Sidell released the shackles and sent out the mind call to begin the attack. Mage flares blasted through the walls and soldiers rushed them. Her people flew to defend and Tristian's guards covered their back. Sidell tracked the power in her mate and fed the shield around them being sure to not tax her mate.

She staggered under multiple mage hits and felt her own mages, battling those in the village as the warriors breached the walls and added physical attacks. Maria pulled her bow and continued firing at the mages forcing them to divide their attentions between the mages and the physical attacks.

Tristian felt the hate of the node, the pulsing fury of mindless anger and she reached for her bond. The air shimmered and burnished silver rose around the lovers. Tristian opened herself to the master nodes and fed the stone in Altair, filling it with the gift of the Mother's Own. The stone pulsed between red and silver-blue. Still she fed the node and slowly the silver-blue hue began to seep into the buried crevasses of the node. Now she called the Bond of Altair and they responded rushing to meet their bondmate. The final joining seared the air in flames and the mages screamed as their power waned. The farmers dropped their weapons in horror or turned on their enemies pummeling them with cudgels and hands. A solid tower of gold surrounded the Consort and the Heir, as the air grew heated. The smell of burnt hair rose and Ceil bellowed to evacuate the village. "Now, move now."

The warriors hurried the confused populace to the surrounding woods. Bella called for her people to help and get out of the village. "Medellan," Ceil screamed. "Leave them,"

The guards were still surrounding the tower and Ceil ran back in as Maria approached for the other side, they slapped the stunned men and pushed them out the gate. "Run damn your ass, run."

The air crackled and huts burst into flames the mages seemed to explode as the heat boiled their bodies. All around them, blood splattered the body not meant to take such temperatures. The entire village erupted into a fireball spiting flames straight up into the air so high the north ridge saw the flickering flames. A blanket of silver raced across the land converging on the village and a final implosion sucked the air out in a vacuum. The shield vanished.

"Let's go" Ceil commanded, desperately grabbing mounts, hoping against hope that their friends had survived.

Ceil almost fainted as she rounded the corner to find Sidell sitting up cradling Tristian tenderly. Ceil knelt and saw Tristian breathing easily and she placed a hand on Sidell's shoulder in greeting."

"Put out these fires," Maria barked, "You people need damn instructions suddenly. Move your assess." She found Brianna, "Set up camp, probably in the woods. I want a full tent for them."

Brianna nodded and staggered off with Megan beside her the two mages trying to hold each other up. They smiled when Bella and Adele slipped under them. "Thanks,"

"Anytime." the women replied.

As the fires were doused the warriors staggered to the campsite, several of them carrying the overtaxed mages. "Medellan, you still walking straight?"

"Aye," he answered for himself and his men.

"Make a litter, carry Tristian to camp. Don't separate her from Sidell."

"Aye," they replied. Putting a litter together they found it easier to load both women on the litter. Struggling slightly they brought their precious burdens to camp.

"Here," Maria stepped out letting them lay the women on the palette Jenna had managed before passing out. Maria pulled her dagger and cut through both sets of clothes so she could check them both. Finally, finding no physical damage she washed them and covered them letting them heal together.

"Hey, look who's back," Ceil grinned weakly. "Had us worried."

Tristian's mouth was dry and she licked her lips.

"Here," Ceil offered a flask and helped her sip.

"How long?" Tristian croaked.

"Three days but don't worry about it, none of the mages are in any kind of shape to travel."

"We're clear?"

"Aye, that last fire flash took out the town and I didn't have time to pull their army out so...they're gone."

"Mages too?"

"Yeah, once your magic trick kicked in they didn't really have a lot of power and after that we took them easy."

"Before that?"

"Ahh, we lost quite a few. Half a garrison from us, a bit more from Altair."

"Damn."

"Could have been worse, Tristian. We could have lost all of Altair and fought this battle on our home turf."

"Aye," she murmured drifting off again.

Sidell woke to gentle kisses and she smiled stretching from being in one position too long.

"Oooh, that's stiff," she muttered smacking her dry lips."

"Turn over a bit, love, and Maria can help you with the water."

"What fell on me," Sidell managed after wetting her mouth.

"Beats me but I think it got us both."

Sidell groaned as she curled into the seated position. "Ahh, that is not better."

Maria chuckled, "Here, try this."

A bitter powder and water, Sidell stuck her tongue out, Tristian snorted, "I'll take the headache."

"Stick your tongue in silly and drink more water," Maria chuckled.

"Yeah, just wait until you sit up, warrior, I think the biggest part of the cart fell on you."

Tristian closed her eyes trying to ignore the pounding in her head.

"Here, stubborn. This will only taste bad for a little while,"

Tristian gave up and took the powder feeling the throbbing ease almost instantly. "Thank Alwyn," she murmured watching her lover stagger to her feet.

"Where you headed?"

"The pot...in this case, a bush."

"Ah, wait for me."

"Sweetheart, peeing in tangent."

"Don't make me laugh," she grumbled finally making her feet.

Tristian sat comfortably propped against a log, Sidell resting against her. Tristian could feel the clear energies flowing through the land and the pulse of her bondmate, no longer angry. She felt at peace and she gently rubbed Sidell's arm.

"Hmmm?"

"Ready to go home?"

"Nope."

Tristian chuckled, "No? How come?"

"I'll have to be sociable and I'm not up to that yet."

"Ahh," She looked around and realized that the mages hadn't fully recovered either so she leaned back and let herself drift off to sleep. Altair had returned home and she was happy with that, she was tired of being in charge and she was more than ready to have someone else take the helm for a while. Lucky for her, Ceil and Maria were familiar with her and knew that in this state, making a decision was painful.

"Think they'll be okay," Bella asked hesitantly standing at Maria's side.

"Aye, they'll be fine."

"She wouldn't have made it alone would she?"

"It was doubtful, Bella. Very doubtful."

"Why didn't she ask for help? Her lover would have never said no, even I can see that and I barely know them."

"Why?" Maria smiled, "Taledyn, their daughter."

"Oh Goddess. I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. Don't worry about it. I hear you're all coming back with us?"

"If we can. It would be nice to be able to live our lives, free and comfortable."

"I don't see a problem, we'll have to do the intro, teach you our laws and make sure you're sure you want to join us. Once that's done it's pretty easy." Maria chuckled, "Did anybody bother to tell you that Dyan is a women only colony?"

Bella's eyes glowed, "Really," she hesitated, "does that mean it's small?"

"No, it's about as big as Altair and our women are scattered across the Holding."

A week after the battle they were ready. Tristian was sending them home and she and Sidell were headed to Altair to make sure everything was being put back together.

"Consort," Derren hollered as they appeared in the courtyard. "I'm glad to see you."

"Derren, have you met Sidell?"

"No, I saw her but we didn't talk or anything. Hello."

"Hello, Derren."

"We came to see that things were well and the mercs didn't get a wild hair."

"No, they took the first ship out and went back to Vostle."

"Good. We're not staying long, Derren, we're still a bit tired."

"Gosh, that was incredible. I thought for sure you were both gone."

"Derren," a voice called to them, "Bring your guests in."

"They aren't staying."

"What?" the elder asked in surprise. "But, we've yet to thank you properly."

Tristian shook her head, "It's been a long trek, Elder. We're both tired and it's time to go home. Mayhap we'll return but for now, I've a need to see my family. We just wanted to be sure you weren't having problems with us marching south."

"Nay, lass. All is well and we've Dyan to thank for that."

"Then thank Sidell. She is the Heir to Dyan."

"Lady," the elder bowed.

"Sidell. Please. It's been a pleasure but it's time to leave, be well Elder, Derren. I hope to see you again."

"Aye, Lady."

"Did Medellan make it home yet?" Tristian asked curiously.

"Nay, the next ship doesn't leave for another five days."

Run and ask them if they want to leave. If yes, have them fall out now."

"Aye,"

Tristian wasn't surprised to see them tearing out of the barracks. "I think we're not the only ones wishing to go home."

"Consort, you are well?" Medellan greeted her with respect.

"I am and ready to leave. We're dropping you off and heading out."

He smiled sheepishly. 'I know the feeling. I too am ready to leave.'

"So be it."

They entered Emma's house, surprised to find Bella and Adele talking with her.

"They are telling me about Vostle." she stated standing to hug them both. "Thank Alwyn you're

safe. Now, your daughter's more than ready to see you but I know the two of you need some privacy."

"No. Tal is welcomed but we do need to get away from everyone for a day or two. We'll take her with us."

"If you're sure?"

"We are."

"Tian, Tian home. Momma, Tian, " Their daughter crowed as she barreled down the hall. Bella bit her lip as the three of them met in a crushing hug. Tristian ported them straight out.

Sidell smiled at the squeal of happy laughter and she rolled over to gaze at her lover and child splashing in the hot springs. They'd been secluded here for three days, spending time together in laughter and love. She stretched and muffled a groan at the protest from her muscle's extended use. But her body warmed at the thoughts of remembered passion. She slipped out of the bedroll and padded naked down to where her family was frolicking.

"Momma," Tal called. "Momma, Tian splash, wet. Momma."

Sidell chuckled, at nearly two, Tal's vocabulary was impressive but she could never remember the little things, like verbs, pronouns, adjectives, and trying to figure out what she was trying to tell you could give you a headache.

"Tristian splashed you?" Sidell smiled, "Like this?" she giggled as she gently splashed her daughter.

"Ahhhh," Tal shouted erupting into a wild frenzy scattering water everywhere.

Tristian fell back laughing as Tal managed to dunk herself and came up sputtering.

"Bad, mamma," she scolded.

"Oh no, I didn't dunk you. You did that."

Tal grinned her sire's quirky grin. "Wuv momma," she muttered leaping into Sidell's arms.

"Love you to, sweetheart." She cuddled her daughter a moment knowing Tal would start wiggling soon. She released her, making sure her daughter's feet reached the shallow part of the pool. "Done playing?"

"Tal do trick, momma watch, kay?"

Sidell's brow rose, "Okay, lets see."

"Careful now," Tristian warned gently.

"Tian careful, me, kay," she blurted happily and lifted a finger pointing skyward. She closed her eyes in a scrunch and a gentle blue flame ignited, dancing merrily on her fingertip.

"Momma, see, momma, pretty?"

"Yes," Sidell murmured weakly, eyeing her mate for a moment. "Very pretty. Is it hot?"

Tal cocked her head and passed her free hand above the flame. "Aye, hot."

"It's very good, you're not gonna burn anything are you?"

"No...Tian says bad, Tal good, not burn, kay?"

"Okay. Can you put it out?"

"Aye," she replied with a smile and blinked. The flame flickered out.

"Good girl, that was very good." She sat on a submerged rock and gathered Tal to her. "Tian taught you?"

"No...Tal played...made whooosh." She scowled, "Bad...Tian found and put out. Then we played. Tal good now, kay, momma?"

"Of course it's okay. You be careful and it's fine."

Tristian held them both and spoke gently. "I asked Tal if she'd like to spend time with G'ma Rie. G'ma Rie knows lot's of tricks and she could teach her some. She likes that idea."

"Hmmm, so do I," Sidell murmured in clear exasperation.

"Momma, mad?" Tal asked anxiously.

"No, baby, I'm not mad. Surprised but not mad. G'ma Rie and you will have fun."

"Kay...we go now? Play with G'ma Rie? Please?"

"After breakfast, little one. I'm hungry."

Tal laid a hand on her mother's belly and smiled, "Momma baby, yes? Momma baby for Tal?"

Sidell chuckled ruefully, "No surprises in this household," she murmured feeling Tristian's arms tighten around her in a loving squeeze. "Yes, we're having another baby and you can play with

her too."

"Tian, baby, play too?"

"Aye, young heir, we'll both play with her. Now, we're going for breakfast." Tristian rumbled gently.

"Yaaaaa," Tal cheered scrambling out of the pool and over to the packs.

"Really?" Tristian asked hesitantly. "Are you...okay with this?"

"Surprised, love, but okay. Two surprises in one day I should be use to this."

"Why?"

"Well, as you know, Tal's mage gift should not have shown itself until she was eight." Sidell smiled sweetly, "And the du Aulstets are notorious for having a single offspring. Mother may faint."

Tristian's hands gently caressed her still toned abdomen and she snuggled into her lover's neck. "I love you, my heart."

"And I you, my love."

"Tian, mamma, eat, please?"

The adults rose laughing and prepared to face the world once more.

"You're joking?" Aurora stared at her daughter in surprise.

"No. I'm not. If I hadn't been paying attention, she'd have burned the forest down."

"What happened?"

"As near as I can tell, and it's hard cause she's not talking in full sentences yet but...she was watching the sunlight as it shone through the leaves. She reached up to touch and ... I'm lost here; I guess she thought it was so pretty and her gift responded. It lit a flame off the tip of her finger. Not knowing what else to do, she tried to wipe it off."

"Goddess bless."

"Aye, anyway I found her cussing at her finger and little fires were flickering around her. I put them out and then walked her through shutting her gift down. We spent the morning practicing lighting it and putting it out, so she wouldn't be frightened. Can you teach her?"

"Of course I can but...she may be most comfortable with you. She's so young...and she's bonded closer to you than anyone else. I'll tell you what. I'll train her in the basics but you need to make the time to practice with her. I think that would work best."

"I'll do it," Tristian stated firmly. "That's not a problem but I don't know how to explain the gift and I'm glad you're doing it."

"She's my grand daughter, of course I'll do it. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, she is your daughter."

Tristian grinned and laughed. "Aye, now we just need to break the news to Emma that number two is on the way."

"Oh Alwyn, she'll have a heart attack."

"That's what Sidell is afraid of."

Aurora smiled at her daughter and then turned sober, "You remember Adele?"

"Aye, she's will Bella, from Altair."

"Not quite with Bella. Seems she's taken to our colony quite a bit and enjoys the variety offered."

"Oh damn."

"Also seems she's quite an infatuation with a certain Consort."

"Double damn."

"Just a word of caution. She's a bit...obsessive and she's been telling everyone about how brave you were, how selfless, how..."

"Sire, please. Enough."

"Sorry," Aurora smirked not looking sorry enough. "Anyway, that's the deal with her. Bring Tal by this afternoon. Sooner started the less frightened she'll be."

"Aye. Thank you,"

"Bah, off with you oh wondrous one."

"Tristian,"

"Mom, you shopping?"

Selene smiled, "I want to make dinner tonight for Aurora and I. We've been back together for six months and I wanted to celebrate it somehow."

Tristian grinned circling an arm around her mother's waist. "Have I told you how happy I am? And how happy I am for you?"

"You didn't have to," Selene answered softly kissing her cheek. "It shows, everyday it shows. Some times I just want to kick myself for being so stupid."

"Enough," Tristian growled, squeezing her gently, "More than enough."

"Alright. You sound so much like your Sire."

"Hey, get your own woman," Aurora laughingly complained finding them in the middle of the square.

Tristian laughed and hugged them both. "Was telling mom I'm happy for you both."

"Ahhh, funny that, I'm happy for you also."

Tristian shook her head, "Alright, I'm off and you two can finish your shopping. Want me to bring Tal to the center?"

"Please, that way, we won't need to worry if something gets out of hand."

"Right. See you then."

"Hey, you're a pretty girl, huh?" Adele cooed as Tal played quietly in the front of the house. "Look what I've got. Want to share a fruit bar with me?"

Tal shook her head and sat down.

"Come on, it's a nice juicy bar?"

The front door opened and Adele looked up with a smile, "Hello again."

"Adele?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Hi, how have you been?"

"Good, this place is neat and the people have been happy. I saw your little one and couldn't help but stop to chat with her. She's very shy."

"Yes she is, until she knows you."

"I was trying to share my treat with her."

Sidell looked down at the uncommonly quiet Taledyn, "You want some, honey?"

Tal shook her head.

"You okay?"

Tal nibbled her fist and then broke out into a dazzling grin and took off running. "Tian...Tian ...bad lady, Tian...bad."

"Whoa, little one, what's wrong?"

"Bad...lady all black, icky, Tian, scares Tal," her daughter whispered into her chest.

Tristian strode up to her lover and nodded at Adele, "Nice to see you."

"I didn't mean to scare her. I didn't think I would."

"Sometimes Tal sees more than she understands, she'll be alright but you seem to frighten her. Might I ask that you not approach her alone again? I'd rather she not be so frightened in her own home."

"No. I can understand that, I'm very sorry."

"It's alright," Sidell soothed, "she's young and still unsure about much," she finished as Tristian took their daughter in to the house.

"Perhaps after I get to know her better she'll be fine?" Adele asked hopefully.

"Perhaps. You'll excuse me?" Sidell entered to find her daughter securely attached to her sire's neck. "Hey big girl, what happened?"

"Lady dark, funny, scary."

Sidell looked up at her lover's darkened visage, "Honey?"

"It's her aura, there's no light, no colors, just a dark cloud and Tal can't read her. It frightens her."

"Is that normal? I don't see things the way you two do."

"Aye, it's the mother's gift and no, it's not normal. Normal would be colors more vibrant than the eye can see, colors that warm your heart. It's the reason Tal is so in love with the women of Southlock. She can see them, their bond with the mother and she trusts them instinctively. Adele she does not trust and neither do I."

"What do you want to do?"

"For the time being, let's not leave Tal out alone too much. I know she's suppose to be safe here but for the time being."

"Okay, what then?"

"I'm gonna talk to Jax. Ask her to call all the women in from Altair and have them go through a psychological exam. Base it on the terrors they've seen over the past years and use it as an excuse to take a closer look at Adele. It will also do them good. I know several of them still have nightmares."

Tal calmed down and requested to be put down. Tristian released her, "Aurora will begin her training this afternoon but you and I will have to practice with her. She's not as close to anyone else and she's so young Aurora doesn't want to push her."

"Sounds find but you'll be the best candidate. I'll pick up the slack but it's you she'll turn to."

"Aye, Aurora mentioned something like that but I'd like you to work with her also so you can understand her gift as well. If I'm out in the land and something happens she needs to have someone here to turn to."

"I know and I will."

"Tian? Tal go play?"

"Yeah, I'll walk you there, okay?"

"Kay, Tal can go alone."

"Ahh, so you can. Alright, go on with you."

Sidell's brow rose but Tristian shrugged, "I don't want her frightened in her own colony. I'll follow along and pass the word through the warriors. She'll be fine."

Tal skipped happily to the park where the children gathered darting among the vendors and patrons as they laughingly grabbed for her.

"Taledyn?"

"Aye, Metre?"

"Here ya go lass," The burly merchant handed her a treat.

"Tank you," she chortled happily gnawing on the fruit bar.

"Hey there." Tal stopped and darted under the cart wrapping her arms around Mestre's leg.

"Eh? What're you doing?"

"I...just wanted to say hi," Adele stammered innocently.

"Well ye scared he bejebers out of her. Off with you, sneaking up on the young ones like that. Go on," Mestre looked around, "Yo, Puck, c'mere. Take this lass off, she's got Tal so shook up the lass won't let me leg go."

"Does she," Puck growled. "Let's take a walk, Adele, Bella would like to talk to you. Tristian will also have a lot to say to you."

"I was just saying hi, "Adele snarled defiantly.

"Yes, you were. Funny, I swore we just had this discussion." Tristian's low voice burred in her ear and she shivered in fear and desire. "Leave my daughter alone."

"But..."

"No buts, no excuses, no more chances. Scare her again and I'll have you in Vostle so fast your head will spin."

"But..."

"Come on, idiot," Puck grabbed her arm dragging her away.

"Easy, love, I've got you."

"Bad...lady, Tian, bad."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"What are you doing?" Bella cried out in despair. "Why are you doing this? This place is wonderful, they're good people why do you want to mess that up?"

"I don't," Adele argued. "I love it here, I don't want to leave."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I want her. I've told you that, she's everything I've ever wanted and I've got to have her."

"She doesn't want you."

"She will. I just need to make friends with Taledyn. Her sire will come around then. I could make her happy, Bella. I know I could."

"She is happy."

"Not happy enough. Only I can give her that."

Bella hung her head as Adele walked out and she turned to the other women.

Farsi stood, "Bella, we are family. Loyalty is everything. We swore allegiance to this land. We cannot let this go on."

"I can't turn her in, what does that say about my loyalty to my family?"

"I'd say Adele is being disloyal. She's placed us at risk for her own delusions. And trust me, it is a delusion. If you won't...I will."

"She's right," another spoke up. And another. Finally Bella agreed and went to search for Jax.

Adele approached the playground after ensuring Tristian had gone to the compound. She had a large apple and she smiled happily knowing this was her destiny.

"Hold," a cold voice stopped her. "You've business here?"

"It's a playground, Kelsey, nobody has business here."

"It's a playground for children. What brings you here, Adele."

"Oh, I've brought Tal a treat. Do you think she'll like it?"

"No. And I can't let you pass."

"What, I'm her friend for Alwyn's sake. Just ask her."

"Leave, Adele. Now or I'll remove you."

Tal's clear laughter rang out in the air and Adele shoved Kelsey out of the way. The youngster bounded up tackling the woman. Struggling, Adele pulled a wicked dagger and plunged it deep into Kelsey's stomach as a trio of roving warriors rushed to the scene. Puck ran up cursing.

"Clear this area, I don't want the children to see this. Take her to lockup and Kel to Jax."

Brown eyes filled with tears looked at her gently. "No need, Commander. It's too late."

Puck's eyes closed, "Take her anyway. Move people, we're beginning to cause a scene."

"Dear Goddess, what will we do now?" Bella crumpled into a chair.

"I...didn't think she was that far gone, Bel," Farsi murmured. "Didn't think she'd attack someone over this."

Emma entered the holding cell and sat heavily on the bench. "I'm satisfied that none of you were involved. I thank you for bringing it to the attention of my healers."

"Leader, we are so sorry," Bella offered. Refusing to plead for a chance to stay.

"I know, Goddess I do know. None of us are futureseers and...I'm not sure this could have been stopped. Tristian found out about it today and she'd also gone to talk to Jax. She'd put the warriors on alert which is how Kelsey got involved. I guess...Alwyn bless it could have been Tal."

"What now?"

"I'm having you moved. I'm sorry but things are too hot in Freelock and I won't have anyone else hurt because of anger. Out to our eastern border is a Holding of women that are sort of like you. Refugees. They've built a beautiful colony and I thought you'd do well there. The people will accept you and none will know about this incident. I can't stop the rumors in the warriors but they are professionals and people die in the line of duty. Puck will see to them. Is this alright with you?"

"More than we could have hoped for, Leader. Much, much more."

"Good. The transport is ready and I'm having you escorted to gather your things and flying you out." Emma rose, "Puck."

Puck entered and spoke gently, "Know that we hold none of you responsible but today, it's hard and we've lost a sister. Please, come with us and cause no trouble."

The move and flight was accomplished in complete silence. They landed in Haven surprised to find Tristian with the welcoming committee. "Elders, allow me to introduce you to the women that assisted us to overthrow the enemy in Altair. They too have been displaced from their homes by things they had no control over. Welcome them, as sisters and as friends."

The cheering took them by surprise and the Elders stepped forward to greet them warmly.

"Welcome, you must all be exhausted and probably shaken up. Come on, let's get you lot settled."

Tristian stopped Bella, "She chose her path, Bella, let it go."

"She's not coming is she?"

"No. For the death of my warrior, she will pay with her life."

Bella nodded. "Thank you, for this, and for the truth."

Tristian nodded, power hummed, and the Consort disappeared.

Tristian refused to see Adele even on her last request. She had Puck handle the arrangements and the hanging was scheduled for dawn.

Tristian was not present and Adele hung with a small group of warriors as witness. She never had a chance to proclaim her love; no one wanted to give the woman a stage so no one attended. The pyre was lit immediately after and the ashes scattered faster than the memories would.

The only good thing that happened was the children had not seen anything and were still happily playing when Tristian broke free and gathered Tal for her first lesson.

"Tal?"

"Yes, G'ma?"

Aurora switched to mind speech, "Can you hear me?"

Tal cocked her head and poked a finger in her ear. "Here," she explained pointing at her head.

"Good, think here."

"Huh?"

"Don't talk, think. Say Momma in your head."

"Don't talk? Head only? Kay."

"MOMMA!"

Aurora winced. "Not so loud, again."

"Momma?"

Aurora smiled and verbalized, "Very good."

Aurora had decided to just show her since the explanations wouldn't do either of them any good. They used picture cards. Aurora sent pictures and Tal pulled the card. Then they changed places."

She showed Tal how to ask permission to mindspeak and they practice that.

"Enough. You practice with your mum or your Sire. Tal, remember, not everyone can do this so...when you ask permission, if they don't answer you, don't do it. Kay?"

"No is no and no answer is no. Kay."

"Good girl, tomorrow we'll play more."

"Yeaaaaa," Tal cheered and kissed her grandmother before skipping out the door.

Tal found her sire first and asked to mindspeak, Tristian smiled.

"This your new trick?" She Sent and Tal wiggled with excitement.

"YES..TAL TALK..."

"Whoa," Tristian exclaimed aloud. "Softly, love. No need to shout in mindspeech."

"Sorry, Tian," Tal Sent.

"Very good," Tristian replied as they both moved back to the mindspeech arena.

Keeping with the internal powers, Aurora taught her to Fetch. This drove her parents nuts as things kept disappearing. Tristian explained that it wasn't nice to take things that didn't belong to you and Tal would be punished if that happened again.

Finally Aurora was happy with how much they could communicate. "Okay, make a fire."

Tal held her finger up and did so as Aurora monitored.

"Good, see this?" She showed her using mindspeech.

Tal nodded.

"That's how you made the fire." Aurora pointed to the fireplace. "Look there, make a fire."

Tal set the rug on fire. Aurora sat calmly and merely said, "Oooops. Best put it out."

Tal did and smiled proudly.

"Good, try again."

She lit the mantle on fire.

Aurora smiled patiently and waited for her to put it out. She finally got the hang of it and they practiced lighting the fireplace, candles, lanterns, until Tal could put the blaze in a drach.

Then she was sent home to practice.

"You know, I may murder your Sire," Sidell grumbled in irritation. Tal sat penitent waiting for her mother's punishment. "Taledyn, I realize you want to help, sweetheart but there is a time and place for everything. Lighting all the candles in the house in the middle of the day is not necessary and letting them burn down is a waste. Explain yourself."

Tal's bottom lip quivered, "Sorry. Tal just wanted to play."

"I, not Tal, I"

"I just wanted to play. Sorry."

Sidell sighed. "I know, but don't burn everything down in the house, sweetheart. I'll let you light the fires at night. That can be your chore. No more daytime fires. Okay?"

"Kay. Sorry."

"I know, love," Sidell replied kissing her forehead. "Deal? Nighttime? And only those we need, not every one in the house."

"Deal, momma."

"Go and wash your face and you can come shopping with me."

"Kay."

Tal went in search of her sire once her mother released her. "Tian?"

Tristian looked up at the sad face of her daughter. "Hey, come here. It can't be that bad, sweetheart. What's wrong?"

"Momma mad."

"What for?"

"Tal...I lit the candles."

Tristian winced. "All of them?"

Tal nodded.

"Today?"

Tal nodded again.

"You apologized?"

"Yes, and I took her shopping."

"Okay, we'll stop and get a present on the way home."

"Kay. Can I stay with you?"

"If you don't start fires."

"I be good."

"Alright. Here's your new book."

Sidell looked up as the door opened and Tal walked in quietly, hands behind her back. Tal presented her with a dozen roses. "Momma, I sorry. I won't do again."

"Honey," she smiled and gathered her daughter, "I forgave you. But thank you."

Tal snuggled happily as Tristian entered with another dozen.

Kissing her mate she asked shyly, "You ever gonna forgive me?"

"I don't know warrior. Maybe when she's eighteen."

[Continued in Part 13](#)

~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

By
Tas

Part 13

"Tal?"

"Aye?"

"Wanna go swimming," Misha asked with a grin.

"Aye, let me go tell mum and we can go."

"Kay, meet you at the Southgate."

"Mum! Mum?"

"Shhhh, Ardyn's asleep. What's up?"

"Me and Misha's gonna go swim."

"Misha and I."

"Aye, Misha and I are gonna go swim."

Sidell just shook her head, "Alright, love. Be careful."

"Aye, mum. Love you," Tal kissed her mother's cheek and dashed off.

At eleven, Taledyn was truly her Sire's daughter. She was taller than average, her limbs long and gangly for her age but she had the same sure grace of her Sire and the cock sure attitude that she could do anything. Her sister Ardyn, at nine, was Sidell's exact double with the same sweet grace and patience.

"Yo, young hellion!" Aurora hollered as her grand daughter pelted down the path.

"Aye, g'ma?"

"Where you off to in such a rush."

"Swimming."

"Ahhh, be careful."

"Aye."

"Hey, Tal. What's that?"

Taledyn looked up from her study of the rocks and gazed off in the distance. "Don't know. Come on."

Misha, Tal's constant shadow, was only happy to follow her friend. They peered down the short cliff side. "Looks like someone swimming." Misha offered.

"Fully dressed? That's stupid." Tal scoffed.

"Aye, still."

Tal scrambled down the side using her butt as a sled and thumped to the soft sand. It was someone, apparently sleeping. "Lady?" Tal called shaking the woman. "Lady, you okay?" She turned back to her friend, "Misha, she's not waking up, lemme call Tian."

She mindsent for her sire and continued to try to rouse the woman, "C'mon, Lady. Wake up."

"Here, love. Let me see." Tristian rumbled after porting in.

Tal scrambled to the side as Tristian dropped to her knees and turned the woman onto her stomach. She pressed gently on her back and water rushed out of the woman's mouth. Again she pressed and a shuddering breath shook the body beneath her hands. "Easy, easy does it," she murmured when the woman began struggling. "It's alright, you're safe, just breathe for a bit and get your bearings." She turned to her daughter. "I'm taking her to Jax, you coming or you wanna stay here?"

"Wanna come." She turned to her friend. "We're going to the Healers hall."

"Kay," Misha shouted back and turned towards the holding.

Tristian lifted the woman easily and sent a searching glance across the beach. She sent for Puck to have the warriors comb the area looking for clues.

Tal hung on to her leg and the three appeared in the hall. "Jax, here!"

"What the hell? Tristian, you don't have to drown them when they turn you down."

Tristian ignored her. Jax's morbid humor often brought smiles to faces in dire times. "Tal and Misha found her on the beach. I didn't see any ships but I've got the warriors out in search."

"Here, put her down and help me get her undressed."

"She gonna be okay, Tian?"

"Don't know, sweetheart. It's up to her now."

The woman sputtered and heaved as Tristian turned her over the side of the bed. They missed the covers but the floor needed cleaning."

"EEEEyuck," Tal groaned.

Tristian chuckled, "Go on outside. I can tell you all about it tonight."

"Kay, can I go back to the beach? Watch Puck?"

"Aye, but stay out of the way."

"Kay."

Tal darted back out rounding up her friend, "Come on, maybe the warriors will find something cool."

"Aye," Misha replied in excitement and exertion. "Wait, Tal, I did run all the way back here."

"Oh. Sorry, Mish. We can walk."

"For a bit, till I catch my breath."

The warriors combed the length of the beach finding five more women, three still breathing.

"Puck?" Tal hollered over.

"Stay back, Tal. Don't move."

"Can't I see?"

"No. Come any closer and I'll tan your hide, you know I will. Then I'll tell your sire and she finish the job."

Tal sat back but her senses were on edge, curiosity eating at her. Then she noticed the two fully

covered bodies and she turned to Misha finding her friend turning green. "Hey, come on, let's get out of here."

"We can stay, I know you want to."

"Yeah, but Puck won't let me see and there's no sense in us standing here while you get sick."

"Tal," Misha whispered, "What if we'd found one of the dead ones. Ahhhh, that just creeps me out."

"We didn't, come on."

"Puck, we're leaving," Tal reported, helping her friend.

"Alright, Tal. Take Mish home before she gets sick."

"I will."

Tal was quiet, too quiet. Ardyn even tried to get her into an argument but she just ruffled her sister's hair.

"Something wrong, love?"

"Nah, just thinking."

"About?"

"Stuff."

Sidell sighed but she let it go. Tal just couldn't talk to her and she didn't know why.

Tristian returned shortly and found herself wrapped in her daughter's arms. Knowing what they'd found on the beach she picked her up and hugged her. "Okay, hellion?"

"What happened?" Tal asked.

"We aren't sure yet. The lady you two found says they swam, from a ship. But I don't know anything more."

"Two died."

"I know. I'm sorry you were there."

"Didn't see nothing, Puck wouldn't let me. And Mish got sick so we came home." Tal sighed and

rested her head on her Sire's broad shoulders. "Wanna know what happened, Tian?"

"I know, love. How about you take a nap. It's been a pretty exciting day."

"Don't wanna nap," Tal grumbled sleepily.

"Ahhh, wanna just relax then?" Tristian continued in a low soothing voice. "Maybe sit in the hot tub for a bit? Just floating on the surface, it's nice, quiet, peaceful. That sounds good, huh? Bet your mom would like to be there," Tristian continued her monologue carrying her daughter up to her room and tucking her in.

Sidell just grinned, "She wouldn't talk to me. What happened?"

Tristian explained and rose, "I need to go see what Puck found."

"Tristian, why'd you let her go back?"

"I couldn't have kept her away, love. That way, the warriors knew where they'd be. Had I said no, she'd have snuck out anyway and probably saw more than she should have."

"Hello,"

Tal whirled at the voice and found a smiling woman sitting up in the bed.

"Who are you? Not my healer, are you?"

Tal grinned and shook her head.

"Cat got your tongue? I'm Alessan but my friends all call me Alex."

"Taledyn, Tal."

"Surely there's more to do here than sit with a half drowned woman?"

The door opened and Jax clucked at her. "I swear, youngster."

Tal just looked at the floor.

"Well, you're here now, did you at least say hello?"

"Told her my name," Tal answered moving to the bed where Jax was pointing.

"It's a start."

"She told me hers."

"Ah, you two could get married now." Jax murmured in amusement.

Tal scowled as the woman in the bed burst into laughter.

Jax chuckled and turned to the woman, "This here is Taledyn du Aulstet and I am Drea Jax. Most folks just call me Jax; I'm your healer. Tal here saved your life and I suppose she feels a bit protective of you."

"Did you now? Then you have my utmost thanks Taledyn and I am in your debt."

"Nay, lady, there is no debt between friends and my sire had more to do with saving your life than I. I only found you."

"Still and all, young Tal, if you hadn't found her, no one else might have until too late. You did good, be proud of that."

Tal grinned engagingly.

"I see, healer, that we have a heart breaker on our hands."

"That we do, lady."

"Forgive me, I am Alessan Trenor, of Newberg."

Tal's brow scrunched, "Where is Newberg."

"Far to the south, young Tal. Many months on a ship."

"How come you were on the beach, Alex? Did the ship crash?"

"Now...let the lady tell her tale once, not every time someone decides to drop in on her, eh?" Jax scolded her gently, "Go fetch you sire so the lady can get some rest."

"Aye, Jax. Excuse me, Alex."

"She's well spoken for one so young,"

"That she is but she's a hellion to boot so...I guess it evens out in the end." The two chatted for a bit until a low rumble could be heard and Tal's animated voice came down the hall.

The door opened and the woman's eyes widened in surprise.

Tristian's gaze locked with hers and she smiled, "My youngster says you're awake and that you'd like to answer questions so you can get some rest?"

Jax snorted, "Close enough."

Tal eased on the bed not missing her sire's look of amusement. She turned and met her gaze, "I admit I'm nosy but I would like to hear what Alex says."

Tristian laughed, "Alright, young Heir, if your lady friend has no objections, neither do I."

Tal grinned, "Alex, this is my sire, Tristian Mardred. Tian, Alessan Trenor."

"I can see that I'm going to have a lot of questions," Alex replied in amusement. "Possibly as many as you two."

"Mum does questions," Tal answered with a chuckle. "Tian does answers."

She leaned against her sire's arm and two pairs of pale violet turned to Alex with twin-raised brows.

Alex burst into laughter, "Oh dear Gods of my father, this is too much."

The pair turned to each other and grinned.

"Enough," Tristian chuckled. "Your tale, Lady. What brings you to the shores of Dyan."

"Slavers," Alex muttered. "They sailed into port and we welcomed them. They turned on us and took us prisoners. The ship I was on...we got caught in a storm and got lost. I figured this out because of the confusion on deck when the storm released us. They kept pointing at the sky, arguing, pointing at the horizon." She sighed, "We kept sailing and one morning saw land off the port bow. I don't know what we were thinking but I didn't want to be wherever they were taking us. They started running around pointing at the land and shouting, 'Dyan, Dyan', and tried to turn the ship around. We took our chances, if they didn't want to be here, here is where I wanted to be. One of the ladies with us is a...shall I say procurer of specialized artifacts?"

Tal grinned, "A thief, cool. I bet she'd like Mardi."

Tristian snorted in amusement and nodded for Alex to continue.

"Yes, anyway. She picked the locks on the chains and while the ship was in an uproar, we jumped."

"Geez," Tal muttered.

"I don't remember much after swimming for miles, floating, feeling the skin on my face cracking. We thought they'd come after us but they seemed more concerned with getting away from here than retrieving six women that had been nothing but trouble."

"Did you see any insignias, perhaps a flag?"

"Yes, I did. If you have something to write on and write with, I think I can produce a likeness."

"Got it," Tal replied scrambling off in search of Jax.

Tristian paced to the window staring out in silence as she waited for Tal to return.

"She's a good, kid," Alex offered into the silence.

"Aye, that she is. Surprises me most times." Tristian returned with a wry grin.

"Some how I doubt that."

Tal returned triumphantly and handed over the writing implements. "Here ya go."

"Thank you, Taledyn."

They waited patiently while Alex sketched, erased and resketched until she was happy.

"I think this is a good likeness."

Tristian turned the page and stared at it as visions on seeing it on the jerkins of raiders and murderers ran through her head.

"Oh oh," Tal mumbled watching her sire and feeling the wild energies surge up to their bondmate's ire. "Tian," Tal called gently, resting a hand on her sire's arm, "Tian, okay?"

"Hmmmm, just remembering." Tristian's shuttered gaze again lifted to meet Alex's questioning expression. "Tal can show you to your friends if you're able. I'm afraid not all of them made it but three are with us and they regained consciousness this morning. They asked about you and we told them you were with us but not quite here yet. If you need anything tell the healer or her assistants. If Tal's around, tell her." Tristian turned to her daughter, "Don't forget your lessons."

"Aye, Tian, I'll be there."

"Be good," she turned and nodded to the woman, "Lady," then excused herself.

Tal grinned, "Told ya, Tian does answers, not questions."

Tal and Alex found the other three and they laughingly hugged each other happy they'd made it. Alex introduced their new friends and they started exchanging tales.

"Tal, move your butt, the Consort's on her way and you're damn late!"

"Shit!" Tal jumped. "Sorry ladies, excuse me." She turned to her friend, "Thanks, Mish, which way should Idamn," she muttered hanging in mid air.

"Which way should you what?" Tristian questioned in annoyance.

"Uhhmm, Tian, I was just on my way."

"Then why am I looking at you?"

"Cause I can't reach the floor?"

"Move, you'll explain yourself this eve." Tristian eyed Misha who was trying to blend in with the corner. "Well?"

"Aye, Consort, Yes, Consort," Misha mumbled dashing after her friend.

Tristian waited until they were out of sight and leaned back against the doorjamb chuckling softly.

"Shame on you," Jax scolded her. "Misha's probably gonna have to change her drawers before she goes back to class."

"Probably," Tristian agreed cheerfully turning to enter the room. "Ladies, since Jax has proclaimed all of you mobile and since it's near mid-day, would you care to join me for a meal?"

"We'd love to," Alex accepted for all of them. "May I present my friends? This is Trina, Loshe, and Deidre. Guys, this is Tristian Mardred, some one important from what I can put together but I have it on the highest authority that she doesn't do questions."

Tristian grinned, "And who am I to dispute that authority? But, to keep your curiosity at a manageable level, my lady has agreed to join us. So, your questions may be answered yet."

She escorted them to the Baker's Brew and followed them in.

"There you are," Anya boomed. "And here I thought I'd get to pay court to these lovely ladies all by myself."

"As if," Tristian sniffed in disdain. She smiled at her lady and their youngest.

"My love,"

"My heart," Tristian returned with a kiss.

"Tian, eat?"

"Aye, little one. It's time to eat."

"You didn't get Tal?"

"I was on my way to get Tal when I was informed that Tal was not there to be gotten."

"Ooops."

"Uh huh, so once I laid my hands on her I chased her off to class and she can whine later on how she missed the mid-day with her new friends."

"Ouch," Alex grimaced. "You're mean."

"Hey, I reminded her about her lessons. Not my fault she can't keep her mind on where she needs to be."

"My heart, this is Alex, Trina, Loshe and Deidre. Ladies, Sidell du Aulstet."

Sidell grinned, "Welcome to Dyan, my sire should be joining us and yours I believe," she stated turning to Tristian.

"Oh, that will torque Tal really good if Aurora leaves her in class and comes to mid-day."

"I did," an amused voice murmured as Aurora took a seat. "With specific instructions on what I want accomplished and a plate from the kitchen. However, I thought it too cruel to tell her where I was headed in light of her current fascination with our visitors."

"Ah good," another voice drifted over, "I was afraid I'd be late. Got involved in that silly trade agreement with Mhyr again. Sidell, I swear it's time to share more responsibilities with you."

"You mean pawn off the jobs you've no more patience to deal with, don't you, Leader?"

The women chuckled.

"Yep," Emma agreed unrepentantly, "that's what I said."

"I'll look into Mhyr's trade agreements. I should have taken them to begin with since I've done all the rest but no, you needed to poke your nose in there."

"Hmmmmph,"

Sidell grinned and performed the introductions.

"Let me get this straight," Deidre spoke suddenly. "You are the Leader, of...the colony?"

"Dyan, actually. Although for all practical purposes," Sidell answered, "Mother now truly Leads

Riger which is the entire land mass we are sitting on."

"Okay..." Deidre drawled, "And you're her daughter and will take her place when ever that happens?"

"Yep."

She turned to Tristian, "And you?"

"Typical run of the mill warrior," Tristian deadpanned.

Emma choked and they had to firmly slap her back. Sidell frowned at her lover, "Killing my mother will not make me happy, who am I suppose to pawn the work of to?"

"Oh geez," Emma wheezed, "thanks for caring."

Alex grinned, "Deidre, I did warn you that Tristian doesn't do questions and you did ask Tristian."

"Right, forgot about that." She turned to Sidell "Can I ask you instead?"

"Tristian is Heir to the Second House in the land, she's also my mate, and she is the Commander of our Warriors."

"Sounds typical to me," Alex muttered.

Tristian shrugged, "That's me, typical."

Sidell hushed her. "Aurora is her sire, Scion of the House. Together we are the leading families in the land."

"And Taledyn is your Heir?"

Sidell grinned, "Actually, I think Tal will be Tristian's Heir and Ardy mine."

"But...isn't Tal the oldest?"

"Of course, but she's not suited for a Leader. Tal is a doer. She'd never be content to manage and manipulate a country while every one else was out and about getting things done. I would never force that on her. So, no, I doubt seriously that Tal will Lead as Leader."

"And now that you know all about us, who are you?" Tristian put in evenly.

"Okay but can we ask more questions later?" Trina put in.

"Sure, just don't ask me," Tristian answered with a grin.

Tristian looked up to see Puck waiting for her. "Forgive me, love," she murmured excusing herself quickly.

Aurora smiled softly at the look of adoration in Sidell's eyes and turned to the three women. "So, who are you?"

Emma chuckled as Alex took the lead.

"Ships," Puck explained as Tristian joined her on the street. "Lot's of them."

"I was afraid of this. Alex says they recognized the land and fled. I wondered if they fled or headed home to make sure the news got passed on."

"Do we know who they are?"

"Vostle. Or, whoever leads that land now since I killed their last leader."

"They by passed Altair this time."

"Seems like it. The nodes would have warned me." Tristian sighed, "Call a council, all commanders, bring in the ones from the field. How long?"

"Scouts estimate a week if the wind's right, two if not."

"So be it. I'll brief Emma and we'll meet in the council hall this afternoon. Telecom for the council, have the mages port in the commanders."

"Aye!"

"Problems?" Emma asked as Tristian reclaimed her seat.

"Looks like Vostle decided to get even."

"Ships?"

"Aye."

"You called a council?"

"This afternoon, Elders by telecomm, the mages are porting in my Commanders. We'll spread the word by mouth and scroll once we've a plan."

Emma sighed, "I realize that the prudent decision would be to destroy them now, but,"

"I know, Leader," Tristian murmured. "As I've stated, compassion in a Leader is a good trait."

Aurora chuckled, "Well, Tal will be pleased."

Tristian smirked, "No lessons." She turned to Alex, "We need to know everything the three of you remember. I'd really like to know how many on the ship, how many innocents, that kind of thing. Tell Sidell and she'll get word to me." She turned to her lover, "I'm going to do a mage probe, no sense hiding it. If they know this is Dyan, they know we have mages."

A week and a half saw the first landing. Emma and Tristian met them at the beach.

A tall, cadaverous man stood looking at them surrounded by five obvious mages. "I am Commander Lestern, we are here to claim this land for our ruler, King Dronar of Vostle. Lay down your arms and swear allegiance to my Liege or we will destroy this land."

"Well, that was a pleasant greeting," Emma jibed. She looked to the Commander and said distinctly, "NO!"

"So be it," Commander Lestern intoned.

His mages spread out and tranced. Tristian watched, fascinated as they burrowed through the Mother's womb seeking the power sources. She'd have to look into this type of magic. She felt them touch the node and recoil as the Mother's bond repelled them, they moved on searching.

"Is this gonna take long?" Emma asked sarcastically, "Supper's waiting."

"It will take as long as it must." Lestern replied.

"Tristian, if you would?"

Tristian nodded and shattered the ground around them causing the mages to fall losing their concentration.

"They were shielded," the Commander barked hoarsely.

"Do tell." She replied, again attacking, splitting the air around the mages in a thunderous clap. They screamed and covered their heads. "Doesn't look like it to me." A third casting of overwhelming horror had them babbling mindlessly. She stepped back.

"Next," Emma smirked.

"We shall return," he answered tonelessly, gesturing to his crew. They slit the mages throats and climbed back into their boats rowing back out.

"Goddess bless," Emma breathed.

"The price of failure," Tristian explained, torching the bodies. "Brianna, set a watch. Mark them and if they move contact me at once."

"Aye, Consort."

They gathered again in the conference room. Puck had brought word that more ships had been sighted off the southern coast.

"What are they waiting for?" an elder exclaimed.

"Their mages don't have the power to give them the edge they need. What they've gotten used to doing is finding a land and tapping off of the mage nodes in the land. This increases the power of their mages and also allows them to manipulate the people." Tristian answered evenly.

"But...do we have nodes here? That can be used to manipulate us?"

"Yes, quite a few."

"Then...I don't understand."

"The nodes in Riger are already sealed. They've already been tapped."

"By whom? And can this person also use it to manipulate the populace?"

"Yes."

"Consort, please. By whom?"

"By me," Tristian growled. "The nodes have been sealed to me for over ten years, the mages cannot use the power of the nodes because of that."

A sigh of relief went up surprising her. She'd expected fear.

"Goddess bless why didn't you say so. We were worrying ourselves into a tizzy." The Elder breathed out. "So, since you control these nodes, what are they doing?"

"Trying to break the link. They've actually got three fleets around us and they've been linking themselves together for a final push to break the link."

"Can we do something? It's not right that you have to do it all. Anything?"

"None that I can think of. They are not on our coast and besides what I'm telling you, no overt signs of hostility have been given. Neither the Heir nor myself want it to seem as if Dyan started

the war."

"Well at least we've had some good news." The Elder concluded.

"Yes and no," Tristian muttered. "Yes because I control the nodes, no because I control the nodes."

They looked confused.

"If something happens to me?" Tristian explained.

"Ohhh," they understood.

"Then let me help?" Tal walked up proudly.

"NO," Sidell shouted rising. "Return to your seat."

"No!" Tal met her gaze evenly. "Tian is right, the fate of Riger rests in her hands only and that cannot be allowed. Let me help?"

"Taledyn, you will obey me on this," Sidell stood shaking in anger. "Return to your seat at once."

Tal flinched but did not back down. "I've been training since I was two. Ariel came to me at three. How many years, Mother, did Tian have before the burden was rested on her shoulders? How many?"

"I do not answer to you, young Heir!"

"Sidell be seated," Emma roared above the crowd. "One month, Taledyn. Does that answer your question?"

"Aye. I am going on my twelfth year and I've been training for nine of them. Let me help, it is my role and my right?"

"This council is dismissed!" Emma barked. "Return after the noon meal." She glared at the still seated council, "Get out."

Sidell rose and threw herself in her lover's arms "No, Tristian, please, no."

Tristian nodded Tal to her grandmother and settled her mate in her arms letting Sidell babble. "She's a baby, our baby. She can't go to war, for Alwyn's sake. She hasn't even started her blood yet. How can this be happening?"

Tristian held her silently, caressing her tenderly, rocking her gently as the words of a mother's fear spilled out.

"She can't...can she?" Sidell head lifted and she looked into her lover's eyes reading the truth.
"No. Dear Goddess, I can't let her go." She cried out softly but slowly calmed. "Talk to me?"

"It is her right, by rank and by the Mother's choice. We've given her all the training she could ever have; only practice and application will matter now. She's strong in strategy, brilliant in devising defenses and offenses. She's a natural with a bladed edge and a born leader. Only experience will make her better."

"Do you want this?"

"No, dear heart, no. I would give my soul to prevent this but the risk? We could lose everything we hold dear because of this decision."

"Tell me what will happen?"

"She will need to face the mother alone. She's had tons of practice in the Mother's womb but it's always been tied to my bond and she always knew I could call her home. This time, she must stand alone."

"If she succeeds?"

"Then the bond will extend to include her. She will have the same instinctive knowledge that I have. She will become my equal and my Heir in truth as the Mother's Own."

"Your plan?"

"If she succeeds, I plan to raise the bond. All five stones." She waited as Sidell's breath caught and she whimpered then nodded for Tristian to continue. "I wish to do this when these pesky mages are at their most active in trying to break the link. It should overload their mage senses rendering them powerless from then on. At worst, we'll get most of them."

Green eyes locked on violet, "Why haven't you done this yet?"

"I may not survive the bonding and there was no one here to hold the seals."

"And Tal will survive?"

"I will be calling, by then the bond will be separate and the nodes will answer to me."

Sidell took a breath. "Do we have to go to Southlock?"

"It would be best."

"Then...why are we still sitting here?"

Tristian's arms crushed her tight as they consoled each other for the decisions made this day.

They rose and Sidell took her lover's arm approaching the Leader and the Heir. "Come here, Tal," Sidell spoke gently holding out her hand and Taledyn stepped forward, a bundle of nervous anxiety. "You are your sire's child, and I am proud of you. We leave for Southlock at your convenience, young heir, say your farewells."

Tal knelt, a position she had never before assumed but did so proudly at this minute. "As you command, m'lady. I shall return shortly."

Tristian brought them out at the site of the Southern node. Sidell moved to Ariel's side since the woman had come to greet them and Tristian knelt near her daughter.

"I have only one piece of advice to give you Tal, hold it close."

Tal nodded. Now that the time was here she couldn't speak if she tried.

"Remember, Taledyn, remember who you are."

The words floated through her mind as the power rose to greet her. The colors blinded her with vivid intensity, she'd been here many times but never had the Mother's womb seemed so large, so real, and so terrifyingly different. She felt herself being absorbed into the vibrant ebb and flow on the mother's cycles, felt her entire being yearn for the ultimate bonding. She lost herself in the beauty of the mother's womb and she cried in joy at the welcome waiting for her.

'Remember, Taledyn, remember who you are'.

And she screamed in anger. "NEVER...I am Taledyn du Aulstet, Heir to the House of Mardred, offspring of the Mother's Own, this is mine to command, not yours to own. Let me GOOOOO!!"

And the world settled with a blur as Tal blinked to see the womb that was as familiar to her as her bedroom.

"Welcome, young heir," a glowing light greeted her. "The test is passed, you have done well. Your sire's blood is strong in you and the Mother is pleased. Go now, the time here is not the same as the time there. See the world through the eyes of the bonded, strengthen your bond, soar her winds. Go. Call for me when you are ready."

Tal remembered returning and suddenly she was in the air as strong arms surrounded her, cradling her, protecting her. The powerful heartbeat that had always been there for her thudding reassuringly in her ear and she smiled, "Tian," as she drifted off to dream.

"Hey you," Tristian greeted her gently as she blinked in sudden remembrance. She could feel the power of the nodes coursing through her; feel the power that her sire wielded so negligently.

"Time to work on those shields. Shore them up so your mother can come in and say hello."

"Oh, sorry," Tal replied, jumping up easily and quickly, the knowledge now as one with her as it was with her sire coming to her, she shielded. Protecting others around her from the wild, raging energy of the Mother."

"It's always like this,"

Tristian winked, "It gets old after awhile."

Tal chortled in amusement and shook her head. "I love you."

"And I you, young Heir."

"You've always called me that."

Tristian smirked, "You've always been that."

"But you knew, didn't you."

"The Mother called you, there was no choice. But...okay, accuse me of rampant egotism but yes...I've always known you would carry my responsibilities. Ardyn will carry your mom's."

"Then may I suggest, Sire, that you keep yourself in one piece or this land will never survive."

Tristian laughed outright and led her daughter out to her mother's arms.

A week later Tristian sat considering her plan. All was in place. The mages surrounding them were fully linked and battering the Mother's bonds. They appeared to prefer the early morning at daybreak and they never broke their schedule. Tal was as acclimated in her bond as she would ever be without experience. She new the value of less is more and the times when it's all or nothing. Tristian could do no more for her and it was time to take care of these pesky mages. She was unsurprised to feel her lover's arms surround her nor the touch of her children.

"Ardyn, you are you're mothers spirit," Tristian murmured, gently kissing her barely awake daughter and handing her back to Emma. She met Tal's teary gaze. "I love you."

"I know. Come home."

"I'll try. The best I can." She gripped her daughters arm in a warriors clasp, "Be well."

Tal threw her arms around her and hung on for dear life. "You too."

They were in a large open field backstopped to the high reaches mountain range, surrounded by warriors and mages. Just in case things got out of hand.

Tristian stood and turned to her mate as the family waited next to them for Sidell to join them. Tristian looked deep into her lover's eyes and read the truth. She bowed her head in acceptance and Sidell turned, kneeling to kiss Ardyn. She looked up into Tal's panic stricken face and lifted one finger, "She is my role and my right," she reminded her, watching her daughter swallow the lump in her throat and nod in acknowledgement. She hugged Sidell and sniffled, "Then bring you both home,"

"That is my plan. She will not be able to control the nodes for a few days, if we return."

"I understand. I will be here."

"Take care of yourself and Ardy."

"By my life, m'lady."

"So be it."

Sidell rose and watched her family walk to the fringes of the warriors and turned to fit herself in her lover's arm. The only place in the world that she called home.

"Almost time," Tristian's low rumble reverberated in her ear.

"I'm not going anywhere," she swore.

"So be it." Tristian called, a gentle call to the southern node as she monitored the mages, they picked up on the energy and tried to tap in, she called the node in Mhyr and it answered, as more mages flocked to the temptation of power, the eastern shore rose to her bidding, and now, the mages were caught in the grip of the energy paths, Tristian reached for Baylon and felt it link and finally, Altair. The nodes hovered gently, enough power to sweeten the trap and she felt the circle of mages complete their link. Tristian called for the final bond and power rose, faster than the mages could control, it exploded through the Mother's womb, racing to the call of their bondmate, answering the joining. The circle of mages was now caught in its wake and the weaker mages felt their heads burst as the overflow of power rushed through them. In Dyan the air shimmered in gold and a towering inferno of the sun's hue powered up from the mother's womb incasing the couple, and hiding them from sight.

Ceil caught Tal in strong arms and held on for dear life as the girl screamed for her parents.

The air heated, and the mid-power mages burst into flames, the ships crews rushing to douse the infernos suddenly in their midst, and still the air heated until it blistered the ground igniting the minimal grass but that was the reason this site was chosen. The wall of the high reaches mountain range burst into flame. Rocks burned.

The more powerful mages collapsed as their bodies succumbed the taxing effort needed to maintain breathing. Several ships on the sea went up in flames and the mages that survived the final bond were left mindless babbling husks. The sky took on a silver-blue sheen and the air seem to gather and hold its breath, as the colors of the bond froze and then returned in a kaleidoscope of hues, leaving a vacuum in its place that filled with a resounding crack as the energy dissipated.

Ceil dropped Tal on to her feet and slapped her. "Your duty, young heir, now or this was for naught."

Tal glared at her, her eyes filled with tears but she reached out and called, soothing the bond, settling the nodes. She soared the winds, greeting each in thanks as they returned to their quiescent state, from the Eastern shore to Altair; Tal secured the bonds and ensured the seals held. She returned, unable to face the horrifying truth that she knew awaited her.

"Hey," Ceil shook her roughly.

"What, dammit? I did it already."

Ceil grinned, "Well I'm glad to hear that but I thought you'd like to go check on your parents before we put them to bed."

Tal flew across the field dropping to her knees beside the unconscious women but they were breathing, dear Alwyn they were, and they appeared to be unharmed. The warriors lifted the prepared litter and she grabbed pole closest to her sire grinning for the entire world to see as tears flowed freely down her face.

"Mages," Puck hollered. "Take your places. Get your people in position, they come you damn fools, quit scratching your asses and move."

"Nice one," Maria complimented her before Megan ported them to the beach. All around Dyan, garrisons of troops appeared on the beach as the opposing forces gave up on their mages and stormed the land.

The people rushed to aid, preparing meals, setting up healing tents as the healers were taxed with the more serious injuries. Midwives came, farmers came, all the people in Riger pooled together to support their warriors. Hunters hunted for food, fire pits remained stoked so that none went hungry. In the center of the land, they gathered the children, the elderly, the disabled, and they waited for the outcome. The battle raged on as the opposing force attacked mindlessly, never hesitating as they were slaughtered.

"Why?" Tal whispered from the only vantage point Ceil would allow her to be in. "Why?"

"Because the price of failure is death," a beloved voice answered and Tal threw herself into her

sire's arms. "Shhh, I'm here now. It's alright, love, I'm here."

She held her sobbing daughter as her pale eyes took in the horror on the beach. Not a free strip of sand remained and the sea ran red with blood. And Tristian grew angry, her sense of order offended by the mindless destruction and she vowed that King Dronar would pay.

"Hold!" she bellowed and Maria's blade made an impossible stop.

The Commander was then rendered unconscious and the warriors looked around them. Besides Commander Leach, not a soul from the attacking force lived. They never gave up. Never surrendered, never quit, until they were dead. Across the land, the same scene repeated itself and men and women lost many nights of sleep at the horror they were forced to inflict on other people.

They brought the Commander to Tristian and she gazed unfeelingly at him.

He sneered, "It will never stop, he will kill you all. It is his destiny to rule this world."

Tristian was on him in a minute, letting him scream for the world to hear as she raped his innermost thoughts searching for the only thing she wanted to know. Where was Vostle? And finally, as he dangle limply in her clasp babbling mindlessly, she found her answer. Vostle would pay. She snapped his neck and threw him over the precipice watching him bounce his way down to the beach. She turned to find herself pinned by the gaze of her daughter and waited for judgment. She was wrapped in shaky arms that offered her love, forgiveness and understanding.

The shores of Riger glowed long into the night as pyre after pyre was lit to remove the stench of death from the land of a people who only wished to live in peace. Tristian set each ship aflame, allowing the gentle sea to scatter the remains. Around the land, three masted hulks of floating flame dotted the horizons as far as the eyes could see. Dyan mourned, for the loss of those that gave their lives to save their people.

"Five hundred and fifty!" Puck reported angrily. "For a madman that thinks he's king. Alwyn damn his soul, this cannot continue, Consort. By all that we love, never again will these shores be blackened by such sickening acts."

"She's right," Maria put in. "This...was the work of a madman. We survived, how many lands have fallen because of his deluded dream?"

"Lead us, Consort. Lead us now. To Vostle, to freedom."

The colony hall rang with outraged shouts of freedom. Emma pounded her gavel uselessly and finally resorted to magic, "Sit down, damn your hides. This is a council not a war party. We have never left our shores to begin a war. What is wrong with you people?"

"No more, Emma. He will come again, what then? Five hundred we lost this time, five hundred each time, how many times shall we allow this?" the elder council shouted. "No more. Let's take it to him. To his shores,"

"And how many will we lose then? A thousand? Two." Another voice rang out.

"While we wait he conscripts more, strips the lands bare and attacks others. I say beard him in his den. Stop his hold on the innocents. For everyone we save it's one less we fight. No more, Leader. Never again on our shores and we cannot turn our backs on the world and pray that he ignores us. When he owns the rest of it he'll come again. Stop him now."

Again the chant for freedom began. "ENOUGH!" Emma mindshouted. "You are dismissed. I will take council and return in the morning, get out."

Tristian took the opportunity to disappear clasping her lover's hand and leading her out the door out to a forest path that would take them deep into the woods. She held her hand as they walked casually down the path.

"Any particular reason we're hiding?" Sidell asked amiably.

Tristian grinned, "Can't keep anything from you can I?"

"Oh, like it was so hard to guess. My mother throws the council out and we sneak out the back like kids on a date." Sidell retorted.

Tristian chuckled and settled an arm around Sidell's shoulders.

"Well?"

"Yeah," Tristian replied on a sigh, "This is a decision that must come from the peacekeepers. Taking an entire country to war...for those like me, it's an easy choice. Do it. But I don't always look at the larger picture. I look at the end goal. How many lives will be destroyed because of my single-minded purpose? No love, you, your mother, the council of elders, these are the people that need to chose."

Sidell smirked, "So I'm here because?"

"I wanted you here," Tristian answered sheepishly.

Sidell laughed and wrapped her arms around her lover's waist as the cool of the forest welcomed them.

Taledyn stood out looking across the sea. She sat on a convenient rock that allowed her to lean back and relax, idly tossing pebbles out to the beach.

"Hey,"

Tal smiled having already felt her, "Alex, how are you?"

"Pretty amazed, young Tal. Pretty amazed." Alex joined her young friend tossing rocks. "Is it always this exciting around here?"

Tal snorted, "Actually no, only when we get unexpected visitors. Seems something always comes with them."

"On purpose?"

"Sometimes. Others nah, just happenstance."

"And this time?"

"I believe your story, Alex. That is what you're asking me isn't it?"

"I could forget you're only eleven, young mage. I could forget that easily." Alex conceded gracefully.

Tal grinned, "Well I am. Sometimes I feel like I've gotten a blinding flash of brilliance, others the most severe case of dumb asses ever handed out."

Alex laughed, "I hate to break the news to you, it doesn't stop as you get older."

"Thanks, Alex. I was wondering where I'd find someone that could cheer me right up." But she was grinning and Alex shrugged innocently.

"We want to help."

"Jump right in there. Everyone else is."

"Did that. I mean really help."

Tal turned to gaze at her reading the auras as easily as she read a book. "That's pretty cool, how'd you do that?"

Alex blinked. "What?"

"That wolf thing. It's neat. Not magic, I'd feel that. Or...not the magic I'm familiar with but...how?"

"You see that?"

"Sure. Tian saw it when she first laid eyes on the four of you but...your stories rang true and we've all got secrets. Long as you weren't hurting none of us it didn't matter."

"Shit," she looked up guiltily, "sorry."

"S'okay, not in front of Mum though, she gets all upset."

"Anybody ever tell you you're a pretty cool kid?"

Tal laughed, "Well, not precisely in those words but I've gotten the impression before." She smiled at Alex, "So what can you do for us in your wolf shape?"

"Pretty much anything a wolf can do plus some. We're faster, stronger, and a whole lot smarter."

"Nah, Tian says only human arrogance assumes we are smarter than a beast. A wolf in its own habitat is pretty darn canny. I suppose if you took one of us out of our habitat, we'd look pretty stupid too."

Alex chuckled, "I bow to the wisdom of you and your sire. Shall I say that as a wolf, I retain my normal faculties?"

"Okay. But, what good is four wolves gonna get us?"

"I was thinking, maybe, if we combined my people, with your people we'd have a fair chance."

"Ah, more than four."

"Couple thousand to be precise. We can't fight like you do but in my wolf shape I can kill a man with ease."

"So how'd you get captured?" Tal asked in honest curiosity. This was something they'd not covered since Alex's arrival.

"Darts," Alex answered succinctly. "They came, like they did here but we couldn't stop them from landing. They darted a bunch of us and took us aboard their ship. Thing is, I really think they were just slavers cause they didn't have mages and nowhere near the numbers needed to take over a land."

"Scout troops perhaps." Tal mused on the thought a bit more. "They found us by accident and the need for scouts wasn't necessary here. That would explain that. They must take some of their prisoners back, see how they perform, learn their secrets, and return when they have an almost sure chance of winning."

Alex looked at her in amazement and Tal shrugged. "Tactics, I love em. My best class."

Alex snorted. "Gee, I only learned how to read, write and add."

Tal grinned engagingly.

"Something else you should know."

"Uh huh."

"We're not all wolves. Some are dragons, some horses, some birds."

"Well, if nothing else, it will be an experience to remember." Tal chuckled thinking about it.

"Why'd you come to me?"

"You listen better, your mum hears but she's not a warrior and she doesn't comprehend. Your sire...scares the piss out of me."

Now Tal burst into laughter, "Tian's a teddy bear."

"Yeah with foot long fangs and claws."

"You figure we're going to war?"

"Don't know young heir, but I wanted some one to know if you did, there's a passel of bodies that I can convince to help. A couple more thousand or so couldn't hurt."

"What if they don't wanna take the risk?"

"I'll come either way. You all saved our lives and then, you did what I didn't think anybody could do. I figure, if there's a chance to break this idjit, this is it and I want in."

Tal nodded, "I'll pass the word."

"Thanks, don't stay to long. I think the leader's ready to call in her advisors."

Tal smiled, "S'okay, she's missing two of them and I'm not gonna be around to hear about it."

Emma glared at the two empty chairs beside her for the thousandth time and returned her attention to the elder speaking. "Emma, I don't know if it's because we feel outraged or if it's because we feel it necessary but I believe in this. I...me...the woman that thinks killing animals is abhorrent. I truly believe that if we just turn our backs and hope he goes away, he'll be back but this time, he'll have the world backing him. How many have we removed from his ranks? How soon can he replace them? We have no way of knowing and I don't know if sending an initial scout force is a good plan? Frankly, I'd rather our people be fully supported from day one than have to survive for who knows how long before help comes."

Emma sighed, "I've never believed in killing. You know this. I...I believe that people, people like us, are thinking beings and by Alwyn we should be able to think our way out of sheer mindless slaughter."

"Emma," Aurora's voice cut in, "I think you've nailed it exactly. People like us would. But this madman doesn't think like us. Doesn't think anything along the lines of what we are even vaguely familiar with. He has a dream, and that is the be all and end all goal in his life. We are in the way of his dream. So I ask you, Leader, what about our dreams. Shall we let them die?"

"That's a pretty speech, Aurora," another elder broke in rudely. "But you're talking about sending our children, ours, to get themselves killed. I cannot support this."

"Who in the hell do you think will lead this effort you idiot? Who?" Aurora demanded.

"It's different. You haven't had her all that long. It's not the same," the elder mumbled.

"You're right, it's not. I haven't had her long and I sure as hell don't want to lose her now."

"Then how? How can you...support this?"

"Let me ask you this. In less than thirty years there is a good chance, a very good chance that I won't be here. Many of us won't be here. So, what you propose is to either, leave this decision in their hands and keep the blood off of ours, or, raise them into slavery ruled by a mad king. Which choice would you have me make?"

"I..." the elder stumbled, "I...He might fail, I'm sure someone else will stop him." She looked around hopelessly, "Maybe he'll just go away?"

The others just looked at her in sympathy. She covered her face with her hands sobbing softly.

Emma sighed. "Can I ask for a vote? All in favor please indicate with the toggle up, against down."

She read the final tally. "Please leave. I'll give you my answer at the morning council session. Aurora, please see to it that the full council is in session including all military leaders."

Aurora nodded as the elders filed out silently, leaving the final decision of life or death in the hands of the woman that had led them so well, for so long.

Emma entered her house and stepped into the foyer falling into her daughter's arms. "It will be alright, shhh, it's alright." Sidell crooned gently then allowed her lover to lift her mother up and put her to bed. Sidell joined her holding the sobbing woman until Emma finally calmed down.

"You know?"

"It was the only choice."

"You could have stayed,"

"This was a decision that needed the full support of the council not the coercion of the military. It will be worse before it gets better and there cannot be a time when the council changes its mind and lays the blame on our Warriors."

"Shit," Emma muttered. "After this, I'm stepping down. You're so damn smart you run the place."

Sidell chuckled softly as she gently brushed her fingers through her mother's hair.

"As Leader of this Holding, and Leader of this land, I call on the full council to cast a vote on the following. Shall we, as a military force, take this war that has been forced upon us to the shores of the perpetrators. Council the floor is not open for debate I merely want a tally. Indicate yes by pushing up on the toggle, no push down."

It took twenty minutes for the final tally. Emma's hands shook as she again took the podium. "We appear to have had a miracle happen today. Both the Elder council and the Full council agree. We take it to their shores. As leader it is my right to over rule both councils." She paused and gathered herself, "On this day we, as the people of Riger, unanimously agree to take this war that was forced upon us to the shores of the perpetrator." Emma's calm façade failed her as she whispered the final statement, "So let it be written, so let it be done."

Part 14

As Sidell took her mother in her arms Aurora stepped up to the podium. "This council is convened, return home and see to your families. As plans are finalized you will be informed of events. We, as a land, will support this effort in any way possible. At this time, I call to order the Military Council of Riger."

Tristian took her seat, Aurora on her right, Tal on her left. "If all of the politically correct people have been dismissed, can we get down to it?"

The meeting broke into nervous laughter. "I know where Vostle is and I'm going to attempt an entry. This needs to be accomplished without magic so I propose to port to Altair. From its southern most tip, Vostle is two weeks away. I propose to take a small force with me and the back up plan is to port us back to Altair if shit goes tit's up. Basically, I need to scout the land, particularly the nodes and see how much power this would be king wields. If possible we will do troop reconnaissance but that is not the main objective of the initial landing. I'm open to pros and cons, do not bore me with stupid concerns."

She sat back as Aurora snorted in amusement. She really wished the other councils were run like this. Life was so much easier.

Since no one had anything to say Maria stood up and pulled down their strategy board. "Let's begin with the number twelve and work it from there."

"At least two mages," Puck put in. "If Tristian will be the ultimate target, we will need to ensure the rest of the people can get home."

Maria wrote that down and Aurora was doubly glad the meeting was closed. That comment would have started an all out argument."

"With two mages and the Consort, I think the team should be upped to fifteen," Trey put in. "Three on point, and three on each flank and on rear guard. That leaves the mages fully surrounded while they do what ever it is that mages do."

"Point," Maria agreed and upped the team count.

"I've had an...offer," Tal spoke up hesitantly. They regarded her patiently and she cleared her throat. "We've four women here that can shapechange. into wolves, take them also. That would give you far wandering scouts and while they are not mages, either of the mages involved in this venture would be more than capable of projecting to them. My rationale besides that? They've asked that we include them, all of them, from their homeland in this battle. Trust will be hard to win. This may give them a foot in the door rather than having to earn it while some maniac is trying to bust your skull in."

"Far scouts would be good. The mages could constantly sweep them ensuring that any change is caught."

"No, in their shiftshape," Tristian put in, "their thoughts would carry the scent of the beast. I could easily tap that and it's unlikely that Vostle will know about it."

"They did take captives, Sire," Tal reminded her."

"Aye, but only those with the Mother's gift will be able to see the difference."

"A calculated risk?" Tal queried.

"Very good," Tristian rumbled in approval. "I can tap their thoughts and what ever they project to me I'll pick up. Since they will not be broadcasting, the likely hood of discovery is even smaller."

Tristian looked over her council, "We agree?"

Nods around.

"Tal, go get one of your friends," Tristian turned to her daughter. "If we're gonna risk their lives they oughtta have a say."

"Aye, Sire." Tal responded cheekily, hopping up and hurrying out the door.

"You want me to what?"

"Come to the council," Tal explained patiently. "You wanted to play, I've got you in on the first scouting foray but you've been summoned and Tian does not care to be kept waiting. Come now if this is what you want."

Incredulous, Alex jumped into her trousers and entered the council chamber still buttoning her shirt. Apparently this was expected since no one even batted an eye.

"This is Alex," Tal introduced her. "Alex, the council." She returned to her Sire's side leaving a stunned woman sitting at the table.

"Puck," the woman next to her offered. "That's Ceil, Trey, Mardi. Maria's on the board." Puck continued around the table quickly and then turned to Tristian.

"Review."

Maria returned to her position and recapped.

"Alex," Tristian's low voice drifted the length of the room. "It will be dangerous, are you and your friends sure?"

"Yes. We've talked. I told them that I'd told Taledyn and could only sit and wait. We'll go."

"Good." Tristian regarded the room, "Resume."

"I'd recommend light packs," Mardi put in. "We could also devise something for Alex and...company?"

Alex shrugged.

"I'll look into it," Maria responded. "The lighter the packs the less trail you'll leave. Mounted or not?"

"Mounted," Ceil grunted. "If we gotta run, horses run faster." She turned to Alex, "Ever ride pillion?"

"No. What's a pillion?"

"It's a pad or cushion attached to the rear of the saddle," Tal supplied and grinned impishly. "Normally used for those of us with tender backsides."

The room laughed at her joke before settling back down.

"We'll try it out." Ceil continued, "Wolves are good for long lopes but speed will kill them. We'll practice and if you get the hang of it, good. If not, we'll try something else."

Maria was busy writing down all the things they'd need to check into before leaving.

"Ship?" Tal asked.

"I want Bri to arrange it," Tristian decided. "Tinder, let her know. Have it done quickly and no one needs to know where we are from."

"Trestle would cover us," Trey inserted.

"Good, make it so."

"Purpose for visit?"

"None, we swim."

"Night drop," Maria muttered. "I'll have Bri check the maps, be nice if we could find a sheltered cove. You don't need to be in the city?"

"No. Anywhere but I need to touch the land."

"Pick up if we're successful and avoid detection?"

"Have Bri also check the shipping schedules," Tal suggested. "Best not to mess with the schedule. She can identify three or four ships northward bound and make arrangements. Would be best if she could get the same Captain that dropped off nineteen fool women and fifteen horses."

"Point," Maria agreed and wrote that up.

"Alright, that's good enough. I want to leave within the month. Get me a team and no fighting. I'm tired of taking bruised escorts."

The women snickered.

"Puck, call in the commanders and begin plans for support efforts of the full operation. Find me horses, weapons, armor, and supplies. I want them stockpiled until we're satisfied with the numbers."

They nodded and she turned to Alex. "I would like to test the mindlink with all of you. I'll know if it works, you'll know what it feels like. Also, Tal says your people would like to volunteer. We

can make arrangements to get there if you can envision a clear site. I'd like that settled before we leave that will give them months to argue about it before we'll need their answer."

"Questions?" No one had any, "Dismissed."

Tal walked Alex back while Alex mused in silence. "That was a council?"

"Sure," Tal answered looking up at her curiously, "Why?"

"Nobody argued."

"Ahh, you missed the beginning. Tian opens with something along the lines of 'don't bore me with stupid arguments'," Tal laughed as she related that. "Keeps the stupidity level down. Also, they've worked together for years. Ride a trail with them and you'll swear you're surrounded by mages. They rarely need to talk to get an order passed."

"Come in?" Alex asked as they reached her cottage. "The girls will have tons of questions and the best I've been able to do is tell them I don't know."

"Aye, for a bit."

Tal briefed them the best she could. Unless you worked with Tristian, you could never know Tristian.

"So...we're in?" Deidre asked suspiciously. "Just like that?"

Tal cocked her head and waited. Alex grinned. This was a Tristian mannerism and Tal assumed it well.

"I mean...Alex tells us she told a little kid, no offense, and next thing we know we're in. Maybe we're bait?"

"Maybe," Tal deadpanned.

The women looked at her strangely. "Well, I mean. How can we be sure?"

"You can't. But that works both ways. You four land here and we're damn near overrun by some nut bucket. It's possible you were plants sent here to get the inside scoop. Now you're looking for a way home and volunteering will get you there. You run to your happy little leader, turn our people in, get a nice haunch of lamb for reward. Hey, job well done, next."

Tal fell silent as Alex tried to keep from laughing. She was the only one that would actually seek Tal out and talk to her. Truth was Alex enjoyed her company. Her friends figured Tal for a noble's brat.

"I think," Loshe murmured in amusement, "she just told you off. Big time."

Deidre scowled but her lips twitch with a grin of admiration. "So, it's a test for all of us?"

"Better now than in the middle of fighting for your lives. But then, I'm just a kid and I could be wrong. Perhaps you'd prefer doing it the other way?"

"Loshe," Trina chuckled, "there's no doubt about it. Deidre's just been slammed and so politely too."

"Must be her mum," Deidre muttered but she laughed softly.

Tal relaxed, "Must be, Tian doesn't do polite."

"Tian, doesn't do questions, doesn't do polite, doesn't do long meetings. What exactly does she do?"

"Anything she likes," Tal replied with a laugh. "If that's all ladies, I'll take my leave. Tomorrow will be a long day."

"Morning," Tal greeted the party as they were finishing breakfast. "Tian wants you."

The women followed her willingly and she led them into the forest arriving at an open clearing.

"Ladies," Tristian greeted their arrival. "I thought you'd be more comfortable shifting here than in the middle of the Warrior's compound."

Alex chuckled, "That's true. Didn't think about that."

Tristian turned her back politely and Tal joined her with a final wink at Alex.

"Alex that better not be your nose in my crotch," Tal growled. She turned to find a laughing large wolf with a coat of deep forest reds looking at her. "Funny girl."

"That's Deidre," Tristian said with a smirk. "Alex is the gray wolf over there."

Tal decided it was time to tune into her gift, "Ah, that's better. So Loshe's the black and Trina is a lighter red than Deidre.

"Very good," Tristian praised her. She looked down at the gray wolf and sent, "Can you hear me?"

Alex whined.

"Think your answer,"

"Yesss,"

"Hmmm," Tristian remarked verbally, "I've never heard a mindspeech lisp."

Tal shrugged.

Tristian worked with them for over an hour until she could identify them by their thoughts.

"Okay, need a break?"

No one did.

"I wanna test distance so I need you to head out, stop at a half mile, that's our closest wide rider and work outward at half mile increments. Three miles is the farthest I'll ever have you out. If we connect at three miles, we're done. I'll want to do this once every other day until we're so close you'll feel like you're in my pocket."

Tristian smirk and nodded to Deidre, "Thanks. Alright, head out,"

Tal looked up at her sire, "Did she really say she'd love to be in your pocket?"

"She really did."

"Damn, that bitch theory must be true. They're always in heat."

Tristian laughed as Tal sent this thought to the wolves and Deidre cussed at her.

"I don't believe you said that in front of Tal," Alex muttered after a successful run. "Crimineys, what were you thinking?"

"Me? Hey, she's that one that called me a bitch in heat."

"Was she wrong?"

"Come on, Al, that is one fine looking woman. You can't tell me you haven't drooled."

"Oh yes I can. Tristian scares me so bad if she even thought of making a move on me I'd faint."

"Oh but what a way to go." Deidre hummed.

The next day brought even more excitement as Ceil met them in the glen. "Okay girls, we've had this pillion specifically designed for you all." She put the pad on the ground and explained.

"We've had the sides raised a bit and strengthened the supports. I'm hoping, once you ladies get the hang of it, the sides will provide enough support to keep you up on the pillions when you jump."

Alex and crew eyed her warily but waited to see the outcome.

"Today," Ceil continued, "I want the four of you to get use to hitting the pillion dead center. I'll keep raising the height and you'll jump onto it. We'll see how things go." Ceil smirked, "Once we place the pillion on the horse, it would be in your best interest to not scratch the horse. She's liable to kick you into next week."

They started at a height that was mid-way between ground level and the back of a horse. Alex went first and was surprised that the padded cushion and reinforced sides gave her plenty of support to plant herself firmly and not fall over the other side.

For some reason, neither Deidre or Loshe could get the hang of this and they either over jumped it or ended up sliding down either side of the target. Tal rolled over in the grass and laughed her ass off until she was pounced by two non-shifted women and tickled mercilessly.

"I give, I give, please," Tal wheezed.

They let her up still gurgling and then pushed her over as she tried to sit.

Ceil just looked at them. "Come over here."

She put the pillion on the ground and had them pounce on it until they could land with all four paws in the middle of the cushion. Then she moved it back up to mid-way between ground level and horse height. This time they stuck.

Finally she placed the pillion on the target that was near enough to horseback height and they all tried again. It took awhile but finally, the four wolves had it down where they could jump, hit the pillion, and flatten themselves into the cushion to break their momentum. As a final test for the day, they tried in on the horse.

"Perfect," Ceil beamed at their successful attempts. "This one we're gonna practice daily because eventually you're gonna be doing this on run."

Deidre threw her head back and howled mournfully, sending Tal into fits of giggles again.

Ceil just shook her head, "Come on pooch, if you're lucky I'll find you a bone."

Alex snorted in amusement and paced off to lick Tal into giggling again.

"Bah," Tal grumbled, "Wolf slobber, eeewyuck."

They finally settled on the mounts being used and Tristian met them in the practice field.

"Alright, the horses need to know you, so lets get introduced."

"Like this?" Alex asked.

"Aye, your scent doesn't change that much and this way their eyes will fool them."

"You mean I still smell like a wolf?"

Tristian grinned, "Well, only to some of us."

The horses balked and Tristian, Ceil and Ches moved through the herd gently calming the nervous animals until the women were accepted as part of the herd.

"I want one of you to change, right here."

They looked at Alex who shrugged and shifted. The horses stomped a bit and a few reared but again they were calmed quickly and Tristian had Alex brush against them as they walked by. This took the entire day until the wolves were happily lying under the horses as they cropped.

"Alright, we'll do it this way for the rest of the week and we're gonna start using them for pillion training. That means we'll be practicing here so I don't have to chase the damn things half way back to Wet Springs." She paused before she headed out. "Stop by the leather shop before you head home. She's got something she wants to try on the four of you."

They rose slowly making no sudden moves and ambled out of the pasture then took off at a run for the leather shop.

They expected to cause a commotion but the people merely greeted them politely as they passed. The leather smith grunted in acknowledgement and beckoned them over. "I be putting this on ye in this shape cause I want to be sure the fit's right. Tain't nothing worse than chapped skin cause the fit be poor."

She adjusted four small lightweight packs whose straps would expand when stretched and retract when released.

"Okay, now shift to ye normal form."

Alex looked up dubiously imagining losing a body part she was quite fond of.

Tal poked her head in and grin, "Alea, Alex is worried the straps will cut her tits off."

Alea chortled, "As if ye were that big, come on, get on with it."

Alex glared at Tal and shifted finding the leather stretching comfortably. Once in human form removal and donning the pack was easy.

"Good, can ye shift back without tuckering ye?"

She nodded and did so.

Alea rechecked the straps and Alex nodded to indicate they felt perfect.

"Okay, I'm done with ye. Next."

Having to make a few adjustments for Trina and Deidre, Alea finally got them settled. "Use the packs while you're training. You'll get use to putting them on and can be sure they're on right. I'll be here to make adjustments. Once yer over there, yer on yer own so check it good before ye leaves.

The women now back in their human form thanked her politely and headed for home.

"Alex?" Deidre called out from her cot.

"Humm?"

"Are these people strange or what? They don't bat an eye when four wolves come tearing through their town. They don't think much of it when we shift back and forth. Hell, I don't think we've made anyone nervous let alone scared."

"It's nice, huh? We don't get this much acceptance from the humans at home."

"Yeah," Deidre replied wistfully. "But damn strange."

Tristian worked them for seven days and then called a meeting of the scout team.

"Come, on," Alex coaxed. "We're on the team and we've gotta be there."

"I hate meetings, I hate arguments, I hate..."

"You're gonna hate yourself if you're late," Tal popped in and provided. "Let's go ladies, Tian doesn't do waiting."

"I hate that saying," Deidre snapped as she followed her laughing friends out.

Tristian eye the assembled team and raised a brow.

Puck cleared her throat, "All of our seconds are trained, Consort. There is no real need for us to be excluded."

Tristian's team took the best that Riger had to offer in one fell swoop but Puck was correct. It was quiet and the seconds needed a chance.

She took her chair as the volunteers let out their breaths.

"Alright," Tristian eyed the room, "for those of you that don't know the drill. We're finalizing the plans for entry, all pertinent comments are acceptable, don't bore me with stupidities." When everything appeared to meet her sense of order she started the meeting, "Begin."

Maria stood and pulled the board down having checked off what was accomplished, calculated schedules for training, and listing the needs for final entry. "From the top. Twelve warriors will alternate point..." she paused and looked to Alex. "You four are not familiar with our terminology. If you're confused, ask. Better here than on the trail."

"Thanks, can you point out where the riders will be so we'll have an idea when we're out?"

Maria pulled a blank board. X's marked the locations. "Point, flanks, rear. Three on each and they'll alternate by day." She looked to Alex who nodded. "Tristian, Bri and Megan will ride in the center of the warriors."

"You four are the far scouts and will ride front and flanks unless we're worried about a rear attack. You'll position at a half-mile and range out to three miles. Never farther and closer only if the terrain demands it or Tristian calls you in. The pattern you follow is yours to choose but a scent should be followed until the three-mile point. If you're really concerned let Tristian know and she'll decide the need to pursue it. This is extremely important for your safety so don't screw it up. If we don't know where you are when shit goes tits up, we're either leaving your asses or getting ourselves killed trying to find your asses. You four are the most vulnerable. The positions are important but the objective is to give Tristian a chance to check the nodes and come home. Don't forget that. It will not be a good day to die." She eyed the four women to see that they understood the importance of what she said. Satisfied, Maria continued. "We're taking dried rations and will hunt on the trail. Unless pursued we stop nightly, once the command is given to camp, make a final sweep and return. If we need to run you'll receive the command to return, find the nearest horse and jump on."

Ceil chuckled, "Try to be sure it's one of ours."

The room chuckled and Maria looked around. "Questions so far? What we need to do now that the horses have accepted the weight of you four jumping on them is practice doing it while moving. That will be the start of the next training round. You'll be working with this team from now on and will find yourselves paired with any one of us. That's to get all of us familiar with each other and to be sure you aren't left stranded cause your favorite rider was too far away. Continue to use your packs and we'll be loading the horses with theirs so that will be an adjustment for the four of you."

She swept the room and sat down.

Brianna stood. "Alright, we're leaving out of Altair's south harbor. I've talked to the Elders at Trestle and they'll remember sending out fifteen of their people to see about finding some new trade." She grinned at Alex, "That'd be us."

"Jared also has a brother who's a Captain and the schedule he runs will suit us sufficiently. Three days sooner than planned but it's workable or we hold for another month. He returns in three weeks and we can connect or he'll set up the next four week's worth of ships to keep an eye out. There is a cove, it's on the far side and ships have been known to stop. We'll do a night drop close as we can and swim in."

Deidre groaned but said nothing more.

"Same with pick up." She looked around the room. "Questions?"

"Uhhh, how are we going to get to Altair?" Alex asked hesitantly.

"Magic," Tristian answered easily. She paused for further questions and continued when none were asked. "That's it, meet on the field in two days. Today you can rest. Alex, will the four of you wait a minute?"

The women cleared the room and Tal grinned encouragingly at Alex.

"Tomorrow will be a good day to visit your home," Tristian explained. "Care to try it?"

"Okay," Alex drawled. "This is that magic thing again, huh?"

"Yep," Tal answered bouncing in her seat.

"It's up to you four," Tristian reminded them. "We can load a ship and take the long haul, or, we go tomorrow."

Alex hesitated, then asked, "How...what do you need?"

"You're familiar with mindspeech," Tristian began, "Now I'm gonna ask you to visualize someplace in your home. You need to be very familiar with it and be able to picture it clearly in your mind. I'll want to check the visualization so we will be linked."

Alex turned to Tal who was nodding eagerly and she laughed. "Okay. I'm game. Are we sure it's not too far. I mean, what if we can't get back?"

"If we can get there, we can get back. If it's too far, we won't be able to get there in the first place."

"Alright. When?"

"Dawn," was the immediate reply.

"What is it about warriors and dawn?" Deidre asked plaintively.

"They stay less dead," Tal drawled lazily.

Alex giggled while the other three just covered their eyes.

"Have a nice day, ladies," Tristian smirked rising gracefully with Tal at her side, leaving the four of them sitting at the table.

"Alex," Trina muttered, "How old is that kid?"

"Eleven."

"Geez," Loshe mumbled

"Good morning," a gentle voice greeted them as they arrived. "I am Sidell and you are Alex, Trina, Loshe and Deidre."

"Lady, it's our pleasure."

"Please, Sidell will do. Tristian and Tal will be here shortly, they wanted to check on the plans for the stockpiling of supplies."

"You'll be joining us?" Trina asked shyly.

"I will if that's not a problem."

"No. I...why?"

"Because I represent Riger and if your people are offering to assist, Riger should be present to work out the details," Sidell offered reasonably.

"Hmmm, like an agreement."

"Or at least an understanding. It's not our wish to just use people as if they were throw away parts."

Sidell looked over their shoulders and broke into a dazzling smile. "My love?"

"My heart," Tristian replied gathering her close. Tal stood beside them.

Tristian looked up. "I need a volunteer," she murmured in faint amusement.

The four exchanged glances. Alex rolled her eyes and stepped forward.

"This won't hurt," Tristian assured her placing a warm hand on her cheek.

Alex almost fainted at the touch but an amused mind voice filtered through, "Visualize. Someplace large enough for all of us to stand comfortably."

Alex's mind flashed to a glen.

"Good," the voice encouraged her. "Focus in, what are we looking at?"

Slowly the image formed and sharpened, Tristian checked the scene to ensure it was whole. "Last chance, are you sure?"

Alex nodded faintly and the world moved.

She woke dizzily as her senses started to take in the sharp scent of the trees, the buzzing of the insects, the muted call of birds.

She stood in shock. "How in the hell?"

Tristian stood holding Sidell while Tal moved through the women gently nudging them upright.

"This is what you envisioned isn't it?"

"Yes...but," she peered at the maddening woman, "how?"

"Magic," came the inevitable response.

"Alex?"

She whirled to the sound of the voice. "Yes?"

"Really? Alex it's really you?"

Alex smiled recognizing the young voice. "Elias, come out here, silly boy."

A young boy popped up from behind the trees and ran laughingly into her arms. "Alex, it's you. How'd you get away? Did you swim? I've missed you. He turned to the party and threw himself at the other three as they laughed happily. "Where..where is Kyla and Moran?"

"Oh," he murmured crestfallen and Alex hugged him closer.

"Let's go to the village eh?"

"Okay, these your friends?"

"They are. This is Tal, Tristian and Sidell."

"Hi, come on."

"Sire," Tal spoke softly, her voice mildly alarmed.

"I know, leave them," Tristian soothed. "They're only watching and it is their land."

"They could be polite," Tal grouched at the unseen watchers.

Tristian grinned and ruffled her hair.

They entered the village and the three of them were immediately surrounded by spear wielding men and women.

"Tal...hold." Tristian murmured.

"What are you doing?" Alex hollered. "They saved us dammit, let them go."

"Go on with you, lass. The elders are waiting. Well take them to the cells and you can tell it to the elders."

"Bahrain, dammit, they're my friends."

"Go on I said."

"Alex," Tristian's low voice rumbled, "it's alright. They're just protecting themselves."

Alex stared at her in shock, "You expected this?"

"Aye, you were visited by slavers or some such. They're not likely to be welcoming visitors with open arms again. Go on, we'll be fine."

"It's not you I'm worried about," Alex muttered.

Tristian smiled, "Sidell is here, she makes me behave."

Tristian made herself comfortable on the hard bench allowing Sidell to pillow against her.

"Nice place," Sidell commented.

Tal snorted in amusement. "If you like native fauna."

Tristian left them talking and sent her senses outward feeling the land greet her, finding the nodes eager to be bonded. She tapped the nearest one and reached for Dyan, feeling her bondmate answer. Grinning, Tristian set about bonding with the node and sending it out to tap the rest. She sat back and waited patiently for the joining.

Tal smirked as the power rose gently and she felt the gentle acceptance of the bond sweep through her.

They were there for an hour when the final node was tapped. A simple probe showed no obstructions anywhere. With a smile, Tristian sealed them and called gently for the southern node she felt the response and a sheen of silver-blue covered her as the node bonded with Dyan. The glow faded and Tristian shifted Sidell into a better position checking on Tal to be sure she was handling the extra power well.

"Whoa," Tal muttered. "There's a pick me up if I've ever felt one."

Tristian burst into laughter as her daughter collapsed into giggles.

"They're what?"

"Laughing," the guard reported.

The women used to Dyan just grinned and shook their heads. They'd been arguing with the stubborn elders for what seemed like hours and they were all tired.

The room jumped when an amused voice interrupted. "Alex, Sidell is hungry."

"Damn," Alex jumped to her feet her friends right behind her gathering plates and food for their guests.

"Alex, Deidre, stop. What are you doing?"

"Sidell is hungry. Are you deaf?"

The elder scowled, "Who is Sidell?"

"One of the women in the cells." Alex dodged his outstretched hand and she and Deidre pushed their way through neither surprised to find Tristian still sitting in the cell holding her lover. The shouts of the guards outside looking for the escapee almost had them in hysterics.

"Hey," Alex called out passing the plates to Tal. "I'm sorry."

"S'okay, mum was hungry and...well you know what happens when mum's upset." Tal mumbled around her meal.

"I can imagine."

Sidell smiled sweetly and thanked them.

"Alex, what are you doing? We've got an escaped prisoner and you're feeding the others."

"Bahrain, you took three prisoners, right?"

"You know I did."

"You have three prisoners. Maybe you should check your eye sight."

Deidre snorted as the two of them made their way back to the Elders hut.

"Alright," the elder sighed. "I still don't know if we can trust them but they're welcome to roam the village until we've made a decision."

"We're leaving tomorrow," Trina put in curiously.

"You aren't going anywhere any time soon."

"Forgive me, elder, I didn't realize we were also prisoners," Alex retorted.

"Alex," the elder growled. "That is not what I meant."

"Sorry, that's what I heard and we are leaving tomorrow. We came because I believe we should help but agree or not, I will help."

She stormed out of the room and went to release her friends.

Loshe couldn't help but chuckle as Tristian and Sidell strolled hand in hand through the village casually ignoring their armed guards. Tal bobbed alongside pointing out neat things in the forest.

"Are you sure that's a dragon," Tal queried.

"Well..never having seen one before I admit I'm not positive but it's no horse, bird or wolf."

Tal couldn't deny that logic and scowled as Sidell's gentle laughter floated over the village.

"She is so much like you, my love."

"Aye, but she talks too much."

Tal stuck her tongue out and Tristian grabbed it in a flickering blur.

"Ahhh, otay, thorry."

"Tian, can we go swimming. It's hot and sticky."

"Ask your mum."

"Mum?"

"I suppose, is it safe?"

Twin pairs of eyes stared at her in utter disbelief.

"Sorry, I forgot to whom I'm speaking with."

They ambled along to a secluded swimming hole and Tal stripped and jumped in. To the guards' astonishment, Tristian did the same and Sidell merely shook her head and retrieve the discarded clothing.

"They're what?"

"Swimming. Nude swimming," Bahrain managed with a cough.

Alex giggled. "Sounds like a plan to me." The four women shifted and howled their way through the village.

"Company," Tal hollered happily.

"Hope they shed the fur. That would stink up the place," Tristian commented lightly.

The women did landing in the pool fully dressed.

Tal's brow rose. "You four always swim fully dressed?"

Alex returned the look, "You two always swim naked?"

"Actually, yeah, we do."

"Why did I ask?" Alex muttered crawling out of her outerwear.

Sidell finally consented to join them but she also entered dressed and then ported her cloths back out fully dry.

"Not fair," Deidre grumbled.

"Allow me, m'lady," Tal bowed elegantly and dried the remaining clothes on the banks.

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

Tal started a water fight and Tristian finally set Sidell down and dove after her daughter dunking her several times before she squealed her apologies.

Alex noted that Tristian immediately moved back into her lover's arms.

"S'not fair, you're bigger than I am," Tal mumbled.

"Whiner," Tristian teased.

"Alright you two. I'm tired of being drowned." Sidell chided them both.

They grinned but settled back relaxing.

"So what's the news?"

"They're talking."

"S'okay, told you we needed to come now so they'll have months to argue about it." Tristian reminded them.

"Yeah, I thought you were kidding."

"Tian doesn't do kidding," Tal replied blithely.

"Now that's a bold face lie, Taledyn," Deidre retorted.

Causing the two in question to laugh heartily. "She nailed you good, sweetheart," Sidell chuckled brushing her daughter's hair with her fingers.

"Aye, she did. S'okay, I wondered how many more I could get away with," Tal responded, unrepentant.

"How many have you come up with so far?" Tristian asked curiously.

"Tons," Deidre answered. "I was beginning to think it was a mantra, something we should chant as we practiced."

Tal's imagination took hold and she began chanting, "Tian don't do stupid, Tian don't do questions, Tian..."

She was muffled by her sire's large hand as Sidell laughed herself silly.

"Alex," the elder interrupted their play. "Would you and your friends come and speak with me in my place?"

"Of course, Elder, we'll be right there."

Tristian stood nonchalantly, the sun glistening off her bronze skin as rivulets of water streamed down her well-defined body.

"Geez," Deidre choked.

Tal jumped out and grabbed Sidell's clothes passing them to her Sire.

Tristian lifted her gently dressing her before anything was revealed and placed her carefully on the bank then she climbed up after her and donned her own clothes. She turned to find four stunned women in the pond. "Well?"

"Ahhh, yup. Coming. Yup, I sure am," Deidre muttered as they dragged themselves out. Tristian and Sidell strolled casually along while Tal waited for the four women.

I am Elder Trenor and I apologize for your reception.

"It's understandable, Elder, from what Alex has explained. I am Sidell, my mate, Tristian, our daughter, Taledyn."

"Ahh, the resemblance is uncanny," the elder murmured as he tried to accept the picture presented to him. Shaking off his musings, he returned to the present. "Alex tells me that your people plan to launch an offensive action against this tyrant that is trying to take over the world?"

"True. We are three weeks away from sending in a scouting expedition for information."

"Good. That is always a best first step." He stopped again. "Frankly, I'm at a loss. I have no idea what to say."

"An answer was never expected today, Elder. We merely wished to propose an alliance. Whether you join or not, we will continue with our plans."

"That is madness. You realize this? He is unstoppable."

Sidell shrugged, "We stopped him once. We'd prefer to stop him for good so this doesn't become an annual event."

"Actually, mum," Tal pointed out. "We stopped him twice. Once on Altair and once on Riger."

"True," Sidell agreed with a smile. "How could I forget?"

Tal grinned and returned her attention to the elder.

"I see. Alex also tells me you plan to leave on the morrow."

"That's true also."

"I'd hoped you could remain...as our guests for a week or so to allow us to become acquainted."

"I could, but I'm the only one that could."

Tristian growled and Sidell stroked her thigh lovingly. The growling did not stop.

"That would be helpful. We are not familiar with your people and..."

"Elder," Sidell interrupted gently. "Excuse us."

She rose and stepped towards the door. Bahrain in his excessive wisdom grabbed her shoulder to spin her around. And almost died.

"Hold!" Sidell commanded.

Bahrain eyes widened in shock at the sword pressed tightly up against his throat, perfectly set to slit it with minimum difficulty. "Never touch," Tristian growled low in her throat. He whimpered and lifted his chin exposing his own throat and signifying acceptance of her command.

She dropped him like a bug and stalked out of the room with Sidell at her side.

"You," Alex told the still quivering man, "are an idiot."

"Sweetheart, they are not going to hurt me and you'll still be in Dyan. If for some reason I'm not back you'll have all the time in the world to come get me. This is a good plan, love. If we can form an alliance, it's possible we can gather more friends. Not to fight but to allow us to seal the lands so his mages can't get to the power."

Tristian glared.

"You said yourself it needs to be done," Sidell reminded her overprotective mate. "For the world, for the people. One week and I'll be home."

Tristian growled.

"One week," Sidell remained firm.

"I don't like it."

"I know you don't but what can they possibly do to me?"

"You'll be alone and I don't like it."

"Honey, you're being unreasonable."

"Yes I am. I am unreasonable. I'm extremely unreasonable when it comes to you and I don't like this!" Tristian exploded.

Sidell sighed. "A compromise?"

"Tomorrow."

"That's not a compromise," she chided. "Try again."

"Six guards two mages."

"For this village?" Sidell's voice rose in disbelief.

"Four, two mages, my final offer, one week."

"Done."

"I don't like it."

"I got that part, love, I'll be fine. I promise."

They entered and Tristian glared at the elder causing him to gulp. "Four guards, two mages, one week. If a hair on her head is harmed, you will regret the day you met Dyan."

"Wait," he squeaked. "Did you say Dyan?"

"She did," Sidell answered quietly, settling her upset lover back on the bench. "Riger is made up of five holdings. Dyan is the largest and we are from Dyan. But the operation involves all of the people so we now say Riger."

"Ahh, well then forgive me. It would appear that this will be much simpler," the elder smiled weakly.

Sidell grinned, "I just got a compromise out of my overprotective lover and I'm not giving it back. Besides, I'd like to meet your people."

"Well in that case. We'd be pleased to have you, Lady."

"Sidell, please. My mother is Lady du Aulstet, I am Sidell."

"Dear Alwyn," the man trembled in shock. He turned to Alex and saw her confusion and shook his head. "I..I must call a council. I..Alex how could you not know?"

"Know what?" Alex responded in confusion.

"I..forgive me, Lady. I must call the council together. Could we possibly meet with you in...say two hours? I'll have quarters prepared for the three of you immediately."

He stumbled out, leaving a room full of confused people. Tristian snorted. "Tomorrow, this place is nuts."

"Hush you, we've already made our deal and you can't go changing it when ever you please."

Tristian pouted. Sidell grinned and gently suckled the protruding lip. "Be nice."

"I was nice. I didn't kill that idiot."

"True." Sidell chuckled and stood. "Shall we, this umm, hut is a bit claustrophobic."

They ventured back out and Alex turned to Tal. "Would she have killed him?"

"Without a thought. He touched me mum." Tal answered solemnly and rose to join her parents.

The council was not a rousing success. "How can we be sure you're from Dyan?"

Sidell rolled her eyes. At this rate, she'd be lucky if she could convince Tristian not to remove the village from the map. "What kind of proof would you like, Elder?"

That stumped them and they stared at each other in confusion. "Uhm, I don't know."

"Then yes," Sidell said reasonably, "It would be very difficult for me to prove my claim."

She sighed as they started arguing again. "Why don't we stick with the original plan and you can forget about Dyan. I'll stay the week, four guards, two mages."

"No guards, no mages," another snorted in disdain.

"Then how about we just leave now and forget about all of this. I really don't have the time to play and Tristian is notoriously impatient."

"How about we put you back in your cells and you can wait while we decide what to do with you."

"Enough!" Tristian rose in anger. Sidell sighed in defeat, she had tried. "We leave now and this land be damned." She turned to Alex, "Choose."

"Oh we're coming. When ever you are ready."

The guards came rushing in at the Elders' frantic calls and Tristian dropped them with a shattering clash of air. Power hummed and the air shimmered.

"Wait...please...wait..."

"Hold, love." Sidell murmured gently and the power dissipated. "Speak quickly, my Consort is out of patience."

"We agree," the elders shouted. "Stay on your terms, please."

"Why?"

"Because you are Dyan. Lady, please, stay."

A flickering bolt of lightning lit the sky and six women stood at guard on the door of the elder's home. "So be it."

"Do you get the feeling we should have insisted Sidell return with us," Deidre murmured softly.

"Ayup," Trina quipped.

They were watching a sparing match. Or rather, a match were the warriors were doing their best to stay in one piece while Tristian barreled her way through them with negligent ease.

Ceil stepped up behind them and sighed. "Guys, we love you furballs but the next damn time you leave Sidell anywhere, send a note so the rest of us can join her."

"Okay," Alex squeaked.

Ches, Maria, and Puck joined her. "Come on guys let's go see if we can tire her out."

Ches snorted and the four moved forward splitting up and attacking in concert. Tristian's blade whirled as she danced through, but the women moved with her keeping her blocked in. Parrying blows no eye could see they danced a dance of death and Tristian laughed as she shattered a blade and moved to the outside of the circle. But Puck went down when she felt the blade give crossing Tristian's path causing her to stumble she rose triumphant with another blade and moved back in never letting her leave the ring they had her surrounded in. The warriors roused themselves and joined in the fray, as they pushed closer the four women had to resort to blocking body blows as Tristian reigned her sword in so she wouldn't carve her own people in half, finally

after over two hours of sparring they managed to keep her trapped long enough to take her down and pile on her.

"Goddess bless," Deidre breathed as the Consort roared and the teeming mass of bodies flew outward leaving Tristian standing alone on the field.

"Very good," She praised them as she helped them off the field.

"She'll be home tomorrow," Maria muttered limping by.

"She better be," an equally aching Ches followed.

Tristian found her four scouts. "Come."

"Oh shit."

She whistled for Shadow and saddled her up, attaching the light pack and pillion. "Let's see what you've learned."

They shifted and Tristian rode by at various angles and various speeds. All four managed to hang on each time and one hour later she called a halt. "Good. In two days we go for the gallop."

"Can't wait," Trina mumbled as they passed Tal.

"Tian, mum says to come home and quit beating up on the warriors."

The people threw themselves out of her path as Tristian barreled past heading for her lover.

"Never again," Alex muttered after being squashed against the wall by a hastily dodging woman.

"Thank, Alwyn," Ceil breathed as she went to pass on the good news.

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~ The Return ~

by Tas

Disclaimers: [See Part 1](#)

The Return

**By
Tas**

Part 15

"We'll swing into the cove, Lady, I can't give ye more than an hour to get off. Less would be best. There be a land jetty we'll swing up to. Should be able to land you dry. If'n our luck holds no one will know you're here."

"Thank you, Mardrone," Tristian responded softly.

"Nay, Lady. Thank you," the ship's Captain smiled shyly as his crew swung the ship snugly up against the jutting land mass. They were off loaded and the ship moving on its way within the hour."

"Scout's out, okay furballs, do your thing, let's move people," Maria commanded in a low voice. "Alex, you and yours remember, we're supposed to go home. No heroics."

The majestic gray wolf padded up and laid a warm muzzle in her hand.

Maria grinned, "See you down the trail."

The four beasts vanished into the night.

Tristian sat Shadow in a negligent lounge as the scouts moved into place and Shadow followed the leader.

Tristian sent her senses out cautiously, expecting at any minute to find resistance. She connected immediately with a powerful node pulsing quietly in somnolent repose. She touched it, probing gently and felt the swirl of gentle mage energy reach up to test her. She lounged as the tendrils of power surrounded her touching, tasting, testing until she was recognized and the node roused filling her suddenly with a joyous rush of energy.

"Whoa," She bolted upright, unprepared for that reaction as power flooded her every pore.

"Hold," Maria commanded gently and Brianna sent out a mindcall to their friends. A simple signal if picked up that would not be understood but the wolves would know it well and hold their position.

They waited quietly as Tristian struggled to control the wild energy coursing through her.

She called for Altair, bringing the soothing touch of her bondmate swirling into the seething torrent of power and the nodes linked in joy, releasing her as the focus and allowing her a chance to sense the needs of the node. She touched it again and this time was not overwhelmed, she

sealed it now, claiming it the Mother's Own and the node responded in childish glee as she released it to find its brethren.

"Continue," she murmured. Maria moved them on and Tristian reclaimed her mindlinks settling their concerns and sending them off again.

They made their way through the thick undergrowth moving carefully up hill, their goal for the night the top of the rise. There they would make camp until morn.

Tristian called the wolves in and the small group sat easily hidden in the forests growth until the slinking black shadows of their scouts drifted into the camp.

"Got some human scent off to the east," Deidre reported. "Past the three mile limit but I can smell it on the wind."

"Got some due south, in our path as I remember," Trina added helpfully. The other two caught no unusual scent but game was abundant. Tristian's probe had all ready connected with three other large nodes and she marveled at the power of the land.

They continued in silence for a week and a half, their silent scouts giving them more than enough warning to avoid detection by the occupants of the land. Tristian's bond continued to extend and she began wondering whether she had the right landmass.

"Something's not right," She told them one evening. "These mages tap the land, I've seen that in Dyan. But the nodes I'm finding have been untouched for generations. They're so excited that someone is here the first node almost knocked me on my butt." She paused and looked around. "Any of you find a village or something."

"Off to the west is human scent." Alex mumbled around her supper. "Big village from the smells. Wanna go?"

"I think so. We need more information than the land can give me." She nodded, "In the morning we'll change tracks and follow Alex. Two of you scout the village and let me know what to expect. Try not to get yourselves skinned."

Loshe made a face. "That is such a disgusting practice. It's not like I'd take your skin and hang in on my wall."

"Cause ours aren't as pretty," Tinder shot back quietly. The women settled quickly, morning comes much to soon on the trail.

Three days saw them sitting in the forest shadows moving onto the village stealthily.

"I need to go in." Tristian announced.

"Not alone?" Puck growled.

"Aye." She held up her hand. "But, two pair of you can wander in from the other gates. I'll take the main gate and see if I cause a stir. While I'm doing that, four of you slip in and insinuate yourselves among the people. Objective. Where is the king? How does he get his power?" She reviewed the faces as Maria and Megan jumped up followed by Puck and Ceil. "Good enough. Shit goes tits up get your asses home. Megan you got this lot in the city, Brianna, the rest of them."

"Let me go with you," Alex pleaded. "I can go in my shiftshape and be your pet. Should make some kinda reputation for you don't you think?"

Tristian chuckled. "Not exciting enough yet?"

"Tristian, I've never been more scared in my life these past two weeks. Would have peed myself many times in this shape. But...I want to go."

Maria smirked, "All this do gooding can be damn addicting."

The four newcomers shifted guiltily and Alex sighed. "It is. I...I feel good. About me, about what I'm doing with my life." Her friends nodded sheepishly.

"Alright," Tristian responded on a soft laugh. "Come along little wolf, let's go see if g'ma's home."

The women smiled at the well-loved children's tale. Although in the version four of them had heard, the wolf ate the idiot child.

Tristian donned her pack and settled her weapons. She then trudged over to a muddy brook and splashed gleefully, splattering her clothes in muck.

"Eeeyew," Alex sniffed. "How come I get the messy human?"

Tristian proceeded to roughen up her appearance so she'd at least look like she'd been hunting for a few days. She opted to leave Shadow behind and the two women blended into the verdant depths of the woods.

"Are we sure she's not a wolf?"

"No," Tinder deadpanned. "Do you wanna ask her?"

"Uh...that would be no."

"Smart girl," Trey responded in amusement.

Tristian and Alex entered the front gate with out being stopped or challenged. The guards did move back as Alex drew abreast and she snickered internally. Tristian was far and away more

dangerous than this little wolf would ever be.

The village was...quiet. Odd in the extreme since it was a fairly large village but the noise was muted. No loud chatter could be heard in the square, no one laughed, and no sound of children could be heard. Tristian made her way to a likely tavern and entered, holding the door open and sweeping a knowing glance across the room. The tavernkeep eyed her warily and looked down at the wolf but kept his mouth shut.

She grabbed a table in the back of the room seating herself to view the entire room. Alex curled up under it making sure her tale was tucked out of the walkway.

"What ken I bring ye?"

"Your plate, ale, stew and water for the wolf, and a loaf of your bread."

"With honey," Alex sent.

Tristian bit her lip to stop the grin. "With honey, just slice in down the middle and pour some in."

"Be right back." Their server nodded nervously and moved to fill their order. They were half way through when the sounds of hooves could be heard and the despair around them rose even higher.

The door burst in and six swaggering soldiers pushed their way to a table rudely shoving the occupants out of the way.

"Well," Tristian considered, "Maybe it's the right land after all."

"Keep! Keep! Damn your hide man, you've thirsty men here. Let's have some service."

"Hmmm," Tristian read from Alex, "Raw soldier butt, my favorite."

"Stop that you," Tristian chided. "It's alright if you laugh at him, you're just a big dog. I'd start a fight."

"Okay," Alex sighed.

The largest of the group looked around the room sneeringly. "Alright, you folks know the drill, we'll be leaving in an hour. Have the people set up in the square. King Dronar needs more bodies and we need to come further and further out so double the shipment. I hate being out here."

Another growled, "And bring out the kids. He prefers kids and gods know you people breed like rabbits. Make us look for them and we'll tear this place down around your ears."

"And Keep, include the big silent one in the back in your homage payment."

Tristian left a snarling Alex near the gate. "Follow us, bring the rest, I'm going with them."

She'd order the other four out of the village but wasn't really surprised to find a struggling and cursing Maria being dragged into the square. She made her way to the waiting people and caught her before she fell on her butt.

"Hey there," Maria greeted her cheerfully, "come here often?"

Tristian grunted and hauled her upright by her collar. "Remind me to beat you when we get home."

"Got it. I'll make a note."

The people were so docile the guards quit watching by the time they left the village.

"So, what's this all about?" Tristian murmured to a neighbor.

"Ye picked a bad time to visit, lass. Sorry ye got stuck with us."

"Where are we going?"

"To the palace, the King." The man's eyes darted around. "They say, the King needs the blood sacrifice for his magics. He uses this land as a breeding ground and we supply fuel for his evil will."

"Considered fighting back?"

"Shhh," a woman hushed them. "They'll hear and kill us."

Maria stared at her in astonishment. "Forgive me if I'm wrong, but isn't that what's going to happen anyway?"

They stared at her in confusion as Tristian muffled a snort. She sent a query for the closest troops and found none. "How long's this been going on?"

"Half me life."

"Same King?"

"Only one we know. Been here since forever but he never gets older and he treats us well until he needs sacrifices. Been bad this year. Talk says he's been beaten, twice, so he's really stirring the pot."

"What about his mages?"

"Ah...talk is, they call to the land, he draws from them." He looked up curiously, "Ye got a lot of

questions."

Tristian shrugged, "I'm a nosy kind of girl."

"How far's the palace?"

"Three days once we clear the highlands. Seven from here."

"So, you guys wanna go back to your village or continue on?"

They stared at her.

"Gotta make a choice, time for us to leave. If we disappear they may take it out on you. If we kill them, you can go back and wait for the next bunch to finally be sent out."

"Yer mad. They're the best in the land. Ye can't kill them ye crazy girl."

"So, you want me to just disappear? Okay?"

"NO. Take us with you. Please. They don't know what villages are being taxed so they'll never know these came here."

"Okay."

Tristian made her way forward with Maria right behind her. "Hey, ugly. I gotta pee."

"Piss in yer pants. Won't matter, we only needs you dead, not clean."

She pulled him off his horse and he smiled. "Brave girl, to bad you're gonna be a hurting girl soon."

"Ya know...I've always hated being called a girl," she remarked casually and kneed him in the groin, a left to his jaw brought him upright and she reached out and snapped his neck.

His five companions saw this in shock and they charged. Four snarling wolves leapt and took the men out of their saddles. Alex's jaw clamped on a tender throat and then snapped shut. Her victim gurgling his last breath. Women swarmed through the woods and shortly, the path was clear again except for Tristian who stood looking at the villagers. "Go home. Live the best you can."

And then she was gone. There were no bodies and very little blood. The next rain would remove all signs. The people mumbled of spirits and trudged back the way they came.

They reached the descending slope that would lead the down from the highlands after four days of silent travel. Tristian's eyes blinked as she stared out across a valley that spread out below them and reached across to the horizons. She stared in shocked at the armed camp of Vostle.

Armed camps as far as the eye could see literally filled the valley floor.

"Goddess bless," Ceil breathed. "That's...that's more people than I can begin to count."

"He's got over seven thousand people cluttered in that valley," Tristian remarked having estimated the group strength of each camp. "I need to know how many are here willingly." She also needed to know why the node probe did not breach the valley. Something was stopping the bonding and to know that, they needed to be down there.

"We enter, try to look like competent troops. We'll just be one more set of scouts returning with news."

"What's the news?"

Tristian thought a bit, "Rumors that someone is launching a massive offensive. Seems the villages picked up on it from traders."

"Shaky but...what the hell."

"Alex, you four stay in your shiftshapes and mingle with the horses. I'll send you out at night. For now, we'll try to bluff our way in."

They descended openly without trying to hide. The people in the valley saw them and then returned to their own concerns.

"Halt. Whom do you ride with?"

Tristian swiped a name from the thoughts around her as the people came up with their own ideas on who these women must belong to. "Lessa's Raiders."

"Where are you coming from?"

Tristian eyed him coldly. "When you start to look like my Commander, I'll treat you like my Commander."

A grizzled old timer sauntered up grinning, "Best watch your tale boy. She be the type to catch Les' eye. Happen you twist the wrong tail, you're gonna wish your momma and daddy didn't do the deed that one time." He cackled at his own wit and shuffled off.

Tristian smirked. "Move boy, Les don't like to wait, and we don't keep her unhappy."

He grudgingly gave ground as the party moved forward.

Tristian could now feel the shields surrounding the valley nodes. They were spotty and not well maintained but she would need to guide the bonding rather than allowing the nodes to find their own way. Still. The valley nodes were free and she could seal them inside the shield and use

them to break through. But...not yet. "Maria, find me this damn palace and then we're out of here. I've one more thing I need to check."

They camped as they found clear space and moved on silently causing no problems in the camps. Occasionally they were challenged but no one wanted the take on the formidable women that rode as wild as the wolves that came to their hand.

The palace itself was situated lower still in a natural bowl of the soil. The massive courtyard was filled with people hanging from the beams erected to support them. Men, women and children groaned weakly. Channels were carved into the floor in keeping with the slope of the soil and led to a reservoir filled with a dark substance. The wolf's hackles rose and Tristian's senses recoiled at the smell of blood that hung over the palace.

"Shit," Trey whispered in horror.

"People of Vostle, hear me, King Dronar, Ruler on the known world. We have conquered the lands that surround us and now...we move to conquer the unknown. This then, is the start of our final campaign. The ships are ready, you have your orders, rejoice with me as I raise the blessings of our true god. The screaming began as soldiers fell out and surrounded the bound victims. Slowly, torturously, they made bloody slices on the now hysterical bodies.

Tristian felt the mages' touch to the nodes and the power rose, guided by their hands it coiled and pooled beneath the palace. King Dronar strode arrogantly through the screaming, bleeding masses of flesh and mounted his Dais. He raised his hands out in supplication and called on his god. The node power seared and burst forth in an angry red as it circled his powerful form in a show of domination.

"Yes, See, I am your King and our god comes to my call."

Blood collected in the channels and flowed slowly to the pooling reservoir.

Now Tristian felt the power of the King as he pooled the dark forces from the agony and misery of the tortured. He glowed with a dark eerie light of the damned and reached down for a dipper passing it through the reservoir and drinking greedily of the blood of the innocents. Power flared off of him and the node magic recoiled. Held in place by the mages but refusing to touch the unnatural energy in its midst. "Hear me now," he projected, "I am the King. Stand beside me and live, against me and you will serve as fuel for my god."

A building of power and a clash of lightning, the node magic was released and the King sagged into his chair, his aura still bristling with the touch of the mage. "Prepare, we leave in one month and we will not return until the world is mine."

"Move out," Tristian ordered softly to find they'd been surrounded by a flange of women eyeing them coldly.

"Follow me," the leader ordered. "Unless, you'd rather visit our king."

Tristian nodded and the company fell in while the women took guard positions around them. They were led to the farthest corner of the valley, away from the palace and relatively clear of others.

"Dismount," the gruff order came.

Again Tristian nodded and the company stood down.

"Keep your beasts under control or we'll skin em alive."

Alex sat on Tristian's foot while the rest of them attached themselves to a nearby warrior.

"Come."

They were led into an entrance in the caverns camouflaged well by the natural brush of the surrounding flora.

"Enjoyed the show?" A sharp voice asked them pointedly.

"I've seen better," Tristian remarked casually. "Less bloody too."

"I understand you're one of my squads. Been out in the north high country. So, Commander, report."

"As I told the boy, when you look like my Commander, I'll treat you like my Commander."

"You also told the boy you rode with me," Lessa stated coolly.

"I lied," Tristian growled.

"What shall I do with you?" Lessa asked, eyeing her sleek form appreciatively. "What shall I do with all of you?"

"Letting us go, comes to mind," Ceil muttered.

"Silence," a guard rasped swinging a staff at her.

Ceil snapped it in half leaving an astounded guard staring at her broken stick.

Tristian turned to her with an amused stare. "Be nice."

"Awww," Ceil pouted.

Lessa appraised them further. "Tell me Commander, you're in a large cavern, surrounded by over thirty women. What would happen if I ordered them to kill you all?"

"You would die. All of you." Tristian rasped softly. Bringing murmurs of anger around the cavern.

Lessa smiled in amusement. "You know...I almost believe you. Why are you here? You don't belong here and unlike foolish boys, I know you aren't common mercs. So, Commander, why or I'll just turn you in to our...King and see what he has to say."

Tristian studied her for long minutes before answering. "We're here as a scout force."

"For what purpose? To join him?"

"To kill him." She snarled. Alex's lip lifted in response and a low growl escaped her throat. Tristian's hand ruffled her fur and she settled.

The women in the cavern laughed heartily.

"That's a good joke, Commander. Pretty funny." Lessa's eyes snapped in anger. "I think you were sent as spies. To see how loyal his troops are to him."

"He doesn't care," Tristian responded evenly. "It doesn't matter, magic will push you to fight, magic will force you to continue when there is no way to win, magic will fight this war. You, all of you, are puppets, and the master is neither concerned with your loyalty, nor cares about your well being."

"How do you know this, if you aren't his spy?"

"I," Tristian paused to let that sink in, "am not an idiot."

Lessa studied Tristian again then turned to her guards. "Take them to the large chamber, get them food and drink, leave them free to move but confine them inside. Leave me, I must think."

The warriors stood poised for action when Lessa turned to Tristian. "Please, let me think. Does a single day really matter?"

Tristian nodded and the company followed quietly.

They were fed well and left to themselves. Being pragmatics at heart, the warriors napped knowing their senses were more than sufficient to warn them of danger. The four wolves curled up into a ball of tangled limbs, and the women sprawled out on the available flat tops.

"Lessa" Arina growled. "They're spies. Who else could they be? They're sleeping we could kill

them all right now and Dronar will never know."

"Arina, if you stepped into that chamber, you would be dead before you even knew they were awake. I looked into her eyes, Arina. I felt the truth of her words. She did not lie. Not to me."

"You're a fool. We've come so far and we're so close."

Lessa laughed. "Close? We haven't a chance. Even with the agreements we have between other companies, we're outnumbered and out magic'd. We need help and they are here. What else can we ask for, Arina? Alwyn has finally provided the chance; I'm going to take it. I have no choice."

"Les," Arina faltered. "Les, are you sure?"

"Yes," she stated with conviction, her belief shining in her eyes.

"Then, let us go see our new friends." Arina acceded with a smile.

"Thanks, my friend." Lessa squeezed her arm gently.

Arian held her back, winking, and walked softly into the chamber.

"You wanna die now or wait until I get up?" an amused voice mocked her. She spun and gazed into laughing brown eyes as Maria Delgado uncoiled her tall, slender frame and stretched. Maria grinned, "Well?"

"Uhhmm, not...no...not now."

"Good call, Tristian hates to have her naps interrupted."

Lessa came in chuckling softly, "I did warn you, Arina. Like the mule, you just have to be shown, huh?"

Lessa gazed around at the deceptively reclining forms and the somnolent sleeper on the front table. Knowing instinctively that, even now, that one was the most dangerous of all. "Can we talk? It's necessary and we can help."

"Tristian, how come every place we go, someone can always help?" Ches complained good-naturedly. "Just once, I wanna be the helper, and not the doer."

Tristian handed her some cheese.

Ceil laughed, "Aye, sib, have some cheese with that whine."

The women laughed softly and Tristian uncurled her powerful frame standing to face Lessa, "So...talk."

Maria clucked at her, "Forgive her, she never learned that lesson about being polite. Let's get comfortable and you can tell your tale and we'll tell ours."

"We hired on as mercs," Lessa stated baldly. "I'll not lie about that, it's what mercs do. We never counted on the blood baths, the tortures or laying waste to the land for a madman's dream. We've...had second thoughts."

Arina chortled, "Try fourths, fifths, and sixths."

"Well you get the point. I know quite a few of the companies here and...with subtle questioning, found that I could raise a quarter of these to rally against Dronar. Problem is, it's not enough and that's where we were when you all dropped into our laps. The old man you passed new you weren't mine and he sent word. We figured Dronar heard about the plot and was after my head. But...the fact remains, we are inside. No matter how many people you bring, you will still be outside."

"Not quite," Tristian laughed gently. "But I get your point. I admit that all the help we can get will be necessary. At the moment, I can raise four thousand fighters. The reason we came in were many but I'd hoped that not all here in the valley were fanatics."

"That's still a small crew, they're almost double your numbers."

"True but," she grinned, "we're not all just fighters." She turned to the pile of wolf fur. "Alex, can you get out from under there?"

The pile groaned but the large gray wolf eased out and padded over to Tristian. "I think it's time to show them. With Dronar's plan to ship out in a month we've no time to waste."

Alex sniffed, and shifted.

Arina tripped over her feet backing up and fell into a pile of outraged wolves, who also shifted and glared at her. "Clumsy human," Deidre chided her in amusement.

Ceil rolled over in laughter at the priceless look of utter shock on Arina's face.

Alex smiled, "My people have also offered to help. All of us are shapeshifters but not all are wolves." She went on to explain and Lessa began to discuss the upcoming plans with gleeful animation.

"What now?" Lessa inquired.

"You will need to find some kind of banner that will mark those who fight with us," Tristian warned.

"I can pass the word that all will wear black. Either an arm band or headband."

"It will do." Maria agreed.

"All that's left is to get us home. We've got a pick up point off the northern jetty but we'll miss the first ship. They've arranged for one to stop once a week after that to check for us."

"I can get you on board one of ours. It sails to Altair for trade. I often send squads out for information retrieval."

"When?"

"Let me check." Arina rose to call a guard. She passed quick orders and returned to her seat.

"Tristian, we're gonna be cutting it close."

"I'll destroy his damn armada. That will give us the time we need. I can wait till we're out to sea and then flame them all."

"Bad plan," Maria put in. "You did that in Dyan. A bit suspicious don't you think?"

"A calculated risk?"

"It will put him on guard and we sure as hell don't need anything else against us."

"The only other option is to port us home from the ship and that will cause all kinds of talk."

Ches considered this and then added. "So take the damn ship with us." She laughed, "We can let them go once we get there, it will take them weeks to return and they're merchants. It's not like they were going to fight anyway."

Tristian considered and sent her gaze around the room. Her Commanders nodded in agreement. She scowled. "Done, but the first thing I'm doing when we come back is sinking his armada."

"What a baby," Maria cooed, "Don't pout, it's unbecoming."

Ches laughed, "I never understood that saying. Becoming what?"

Maria shrugged, "How would I know? I just repeat em. Go ask Tal, she probably looked it up."

They were in Dyan in two days and Sidell had already passed the word that they were leaving in a little over three weeks. Whatever preparations had been made would have to do. She also went ahead to Newberg and the people there were told that the attack would take place within the month. They were quite content to follow along. Theirs was a history of great alliances with Dyan. Following now was as ingrained as eating. They would wait for their mages and come when it was time.

With two thousand troops at each site, mages prepared and linked with the Consort, the arrival

spots had been chosen previously and they would land in groups throughout the valley. Tristian was surrounded by the warriors chosen guards. She needed to break the shields and complete the bond but since she would not be calling for the master nodes, she didn't expect to encounter the same power feed as before.

"Company!" Tristian mindsent, "On three."

The air above the valley sizzled with electricity and Lessa ran outside. A shiver of anticipation ran up her spine. "They come, she shouted, raise the banner, do it now." From the far side of the valley a black pennant rose and fluttered in the breeze, across the valley floor, more were raised. Men and women dug out the scraps of linen saved for this day.

The mages of the palace ran outside in consternation, looking around them for a threat. Dronar screamed for information and the air roiled as sound cascaded across the sky. In a burst of blinding flashes, Dyan arrived. Above the sounds of battle a clear voice raised, "For Dyan, For Freedom."

Tristian called for the nodes and they rushed to her summons like bees to honey filling her with power as the mages tried to tap the energies. Tristian called for a bond and the node power merged to a single strand of concentrated energy, she sent it barreling back outside the valley shattering the pathetic shields that had them contained and reached for the other side of Vostle. The power surged, joyous in its homecoming, again she called for the bond, binding the nodes to Dyan and sealing the power to the Mother's Own. Mage energy flared around her as her mages battled to keep her safe until she could defend herself. Soldiers screamed in agony as unfeeling blades ripped through muscle and sinew with equal abandon

Finally, Tristian rose, and pulled her sword. As the dance began the warriors moved outward leaving her room to maneuver as she cleared a path to the palace, the mages, and the man who would be king. Her guards protected flanks and rear as she carved a deadly swath through the mass of humanity in her way.

"Alwyn bless us," Arina breathed as warriors and shapeshifters fought side-by-side, leaving nothing in their path unless marked with a black band.

"Hey guys," Maria laughingly called to them. "Waiting for an invitation?"

The women laughed in delight and ran screaming into the melee.

"Come on, Shelvern, lift your butt," Alex exhorted, "Up, Up, damn dragon's worthless on the ground." With an effort he was aloft and his brethren, seeing this, flocked to join him. Alex snorted, "Now go, do dragon stuff, just don't harm our people or Tristian will hang your hide from her bedpost."

Panic ensued as the dragons swooped, opening deadly claws and raking through frail human bodies with deadly results.

"Hey," Maria hollered, "Watch that damn tail!"

"Sorry," Shelvern's low boom sounded across the land.

"A dragon," Arina blurted, "that's a dragon."

"Point," Maria called out laughing. "That's one for the girl."

Horses ran rampant through the high grass kicking, biting, and trampling their way through. The warriors rushed after them, fighting to get closer to the center where the final battle would take place. They were still outnumbered but as the shadows grew long, the remaining troops fell back to the palace bowl and Tristian called off the attack.

"Fall back, set up camp. Ceil set a ring of guards around this place, no one in or out." She looked around, "Maria, where the hell are you?"

"Right here oh blind one."

"Set out scouts, get us some food, we've got hungry people who deserve to be fed."

"Aye,"

"Alex," Tristian shouted, "Alex!"

"Okay, I'm here," Alex replied limping up.

Tristian glared at her, "Trey, take her to the healers and find me one of the others."

"Puck!"

"Yes, oh bellowing one?"

"Settle the mercs."

"Commander," Trina panted running up.

"Settle your people, we've set out to hunt but if you've other things you need they'll have to provide it.

"Shelvern went fishing. He'll bring back enough for everyone."

Tristian tried to shake the image of a dragon with a fishing pole from her mind.

"The rest of you, collect these bodies." She looked out in the harbor to ensure the massive fleet was totally destroyed and smiled grimly at the burning wrecks.

"Tristian," Mardi ran up. "We need more healers, ours are over taxed and our mages pretty tapped out.

Tristian nodded and called to Jax. Two-dozen healers were ported in.

Slowly order was brought to the chaos on the field as the night darkened and fire pits highlighted the eerie landscape.

"Damn I'm tired," Ceil muttered dropping into a limp pile.

Puck hobbled up. "We lost over three hundred. Considering the odds, I'm thankful the damage was that low."

Tristian nodded, but numbers were one thing. Families another.

"I've got the Commanders from each company headed this way and Deidre will stand in for Alex. She took a nasty sword hit saving one of our youngsters but Jax got to her in time. She's pouting cause she can't play no more." Puck relayed as she joined the limp bodies on the ground.

Tristian snorted and extended her long legs comfortably.

Lessa came up with twenty people around her all chatting excitedly about the battle.

"Did you see that dragon?" Arina exclaimed in wonder.

"Who could miss them?" Another laughed at her. "Thought the world had ended when one of the stuck a claw down and damn near cleared the area around us. Got us back our second wind I'll tell ya or I wouldn't be sitting here tonight swapping tall tales."

"Them damn horses, I've never seen the like. T'was like they could think."

"They can," Maria inserted dryly, "pouring herself a glass of ale. They're shapeshifters, all of them, and they're our friends so you be nice to them no matter what shape their in."

A low whicker of approval sounded and changed as a man stepped into the circle. "Thank you for those words, sometimes, our own have trouble accepting us."

Maria shrugged, "People is people, it's the heart that counts and your people have good ones."

And that pretty much summed up Dyan's attitude. They did what they needed to do, that was good enough for them."

Tristian sat silently letting the ebb of her bondmate soothe her aching body and heal her slight injuries. She could still feel the thrill of excitement flowing through the bond as the energies soared and linked through the Mother's womb. She smiled, the difference between these nodes and Dyan's were incredible. Dyan's were staid, dignified, and familiar with the bond and their

responsibilities. This land was like a child with new friends and it reached out eagerly for acceptance. She heard the soft drone of her commanders but remained in the limbo of her bondmate for a needed moment of peace.

"She alright?" Lessa asked curiously.

"Aye, just napping," Maria replied. It was a much easier answer to give than the truth.

"She always glows like that when she's napping?"

Ceil chuckled, "Ahhh, it's just Tristian. She always had to be different."

Lessa could see she would get no information from the women and changed the subject.

"Alright," Puck spoke evenly, "from the numbers we've lost about three hundred people today. Most of you know that's incredibly lucky but lets not forget, all of them had someone at home waiting for them. The good news, we took down more than half of the original forces in the valley. With you all joining us, I'd say they've got less than three thousand people."

"So where are they?" Tristian's voice asked.

"Good question. The answer is, beats the shit out of me." Puck looked around. "We saw them fall back into the palace, at the time, it didn't seem like many since they were staggering in but now...they couldn't possibly fit three thousand people in there."

All eyes turned to the mercs who shook their heads. "Not us," Lessa declared. "We weren't honored enough to be allowed entrance in to the palace."

"Speculate," Tristian commanded.

"Caves? You saw our cavern; it goes back quite a bit. These hills are honey combed with tunnels. Maybe there's one beneath the palace."

"Possible," Tristian considered. "I know mage energy wasn't used to move them so those people are here somewhere. Where is the question?"

"I hate caves," Ches said with some heat. "I hate small dark, damp, slimy places."

"Ches," Ceil chided, "You want more cheese?"

"Alright, if they don't come out, I want all the wood you can gather. We'll enter the obvious entrances and build fires."

Maria grinned, "Smoke?"

Tristian nodded, "Smoke. The thicker the better." She looked around, "I'm going in through the palace. I want to clear that damn reservoir he's got and see what's in there. You all will be responsible for your people, keep them alive. Deidre, your people will split and double up with my warriors. Our Commanders will keep you alive. Maria, set me a team, twenty at best, two mages. I want someone to be able to get them out if I get into trouble."

"Uhhh," Lessa murmured, "Not to put a fine point on it but...who's gonna get you out?"

"I'll worry about that when it happens."

"Let's stay sharp, they may come pouring out of the hillsides in the morning hoping to over run us. No drinking, keep guards up, keep your eyes and ears opened. You're dismissed."

Tristian rose and made her way to her tent.

She stood at the path leading to the palace, twenty warriors at her side when a commotion began behind them.

"We're coming with you," a man shouted. "If'n they're in there you'll need help and we're coming."

Arina stood next to him daring her to deny them.

"Puck!"

"Aye, Commander."

"Secure this path, kill anyone that disobeys my order."

"Aye Commander."

Brianna moved up and the warriors dropped into place as Puck stepped forward. "Little man, Tristian does not care to have her orders ignored. When you're in charge you can make the decisions. Until then, do what you're damn well told to do," Puck ended in a roar and the crowd scampered back. "I better see smoke coming out of the damn hillside before the sun gets much higher or you'll wish I left you to Tristian." The crowd scrambled.

Lessa laughed and shook her head at a sheepish Arina. "You will learn. I just hope you aren't dead when it happens. Come on, let's go make smoke."

As Tristian's crew entered the palace courtyard the ground trembled and quaked. The warriors

stood firm. Power rose around them and a sheen of red surrounded the grounds sealing them inside, away from help.

Tristian moved forward to the reservoir and murmured a gentle spell. The blood of the innocents turned into the cool cleaning waters of the Mother. She sipped and then drank deeply, reveling in the power of her bond.

They moved forward and the palace doors burst opened. The warriors prepared to defend but it appeared to be an invitation. Tristian crossed the threshold shattering the wooden barricades with a word and the women stepped into hell. Along every open wall space hung a body, mutilated and bleeding, many still alive. Here she felt again that dark rush of energy, tainted with hate. They moved forward and she extended her bond sending the magics of the Mother outward easing those suffering into her embrace. Now, she felt the first stirrings of fear and the probing of the mages trying to break her link with her bondmate. She followed the scent of magic. Leading her warriors down, down, deep into the bowels of the cavern. And still they passed mutilated bodies, fresh victims, obviously many of those that followed their King into the palace. She eased their passing as she continued her search. They entered a narrow corridor. She took the lead into the stygian darkness. A low grumble alerted her and she froze, the warriors acting on instincts honed by years of practice stopped dead, blades at the ready. She raised a shield barely in time as a blast of searing flame filled the corridors. A gentle murmur sent a ball of light floating down the corridor lighting the darkness. A dragon, shackled to the wall, snarled and snapped at its chains as it sent another wall of flame at them.

Tristian used her gift to see the beaten husk of a man in the dragon's heart. She moved forward slowly, keeping her shield up until they were eye to eye. And then, she showed him home. The dragon whimpered as memories buried made their way to the surface and the shapeshifter changed. Now inside of her shield the mage had no hold on him. She knelt and touched his forehead clearing the taint that bound him to the King. They moved him gently to the side and continued on hoping he'd wake and find his own way. Tristian was not ready to test the shield around the castle. They now entered a large cavern. A pack of snarling wolves attacked and she dropped them with a spell again clearing the tainted bond and leaving them to follow their own paths. Yelling attackers poured into the cavern and the blades danced again as the warriors moved into position. Blood splattered, the sound of bones breaking, the strangled gargle. All sounds of death that these women had heard so many times and then the cavern was clear.

The fear and panic she could sense clearly now as the mages were almost hysterically searching for power.

The screams started then, screams of agony, of untold pain, of a hurt that could never be healed and it echoed into the caverns, around the rooms, down the corridors as the sound rose into a crescendo, sending shivers of fear down the backs of these women who had faced fear before...and won.

She let her mage sense draw her forward, ignoring the sounds that threatened to drive them mad and entered the final chamber. A large anteroom. The cavernous floor was covered in bodies, live bodies. In the center rose a column of stone and on the flat top surface stood King Dronar

and his mages. The screaming from the floor could now be understood as a black shadow covered the bodies the screams intensified building into mindless shrieks as the carnivorous insects burrowed into the flesh, eating their way through the obstacles in their path. Tristian was proud of her warriors. Even here, in a chamber of ultimate perversity, they held strong, alert, angry. She raised a hand.

"Stop her you fools," Dronar shouted, "Stop her, now, hurry."

They tried but without the nodes they were nothing and Tristian cleared the cavern in a blazing inferno that scoured both victim and victor alike.

"Nooooo, Master....help me." Dronar cried out in fear.

Tristian waited. Above everything else, she still didn't know what he was. She could feel the power but not the source, her patience honed by years of battle, she merely waited.

Dronar chanted, he pleaded, he cried and finally, he fell on his mages, cutting them open as he fed off the pain. He dove his face into a still bleeding abdomen and drank deeply and now, Tristian felt the power respond. Tristian called her bondmate and Dyan answered, merging neatly, the three master nodes answered the summons of their bondmate. Tristian glowed a burnished silver-blue that pulsed in wild arcs with the untamed power of Vostle. King Dronar stood, no longer cringing and weak. He exuded power, his eyes glowed and he was filled with the red haze of anger. "SO," his voice boomed through the cavern, deep and hollow as if coming from a vast distance. "She has found her bitch," he laughed madly. "And you think to stand against me?"

"PUNY MORTAL," Dronar spat.

Tristian merely cocked her head.

He raised his fists and struck out at her. Her shield held but she felt the power behind the blow.

Angry, he called for his master again, and the power grew. It filled the air, filled the cavern, the air turned thick with power and the mad king laughed. "YOU CANNOT DEFEAT ME"

The energy was so overwhelming she wanted to crawl out of her skin and then, a gentle voice touched her, "call the bond, Tian. I will guide it. Call the bond." Trusting that voice, she did.

Dronar roared in glee. "YES...call the bond...call the power that no mortal can control and save me the trouble of killing you myself. CALL BONDED ONE...call for your death.

The nodes answered rushing for the bond, racing for the joining, reveling in the merging, the power grew, it filled the cave, filled her soul, and continued to build as every node from Newberg, to Riger, to Baylon, to Altair, to Vostle answered the call. The power built but Tal's gentle hands shaped the power, guided the energy, protected her sire and settled it gently around her.

"NOOOOOOOOOO," Dronar roared..."NO mortal can control the power. THAT IS WHY I USE THE UNDEAD...." he struck her again but Tal was there, adjusting the shields, deflecting the energy. And then a flicker of light appeared, and Tristian smiled at her guide.

"Hear me, bonded, he must be returned to the Mother."

And now Tristian knew why she couldn't sense the source. The source was the Mother, the dark side of the Mother, freed by madness.

"I'm here, Tian, we will do what we must, together."

Tristian stood tall, a murmur threw the warriors out, another sealed the cavern and she called for the final bond. The nodes answered filling the cavern absorbing the energies hovering and claiming it for their own.

Dronar screamed, "NOOOOO," this cannot be."

A flicker of gold burst into a radiant haze that reached out for every nook and cranny filling it with the cleaning touch of the Mother. And through it all Tal shaped, pushed, urged, and manipulated the power around her sire as Tristian wielded energies never meant to be held by a mortal's hand.

She raised her hands and gathered the power, as Dronar chanted, his being diminishing as she watched. She held the power as it built and finally released it hitting him squarely in the chest holding it on him as he screamed. She watched his body melt, skin and blood oozed down to the ground and still she held it. The remnants smoldered and burst into flame, the ashes swirled and dissolved the clothing deteriorated until only smoke remained which was also claimed, until every essence in the room was again returned to the Mother's care and that which had been stolen so long ago was returned. The power focused, the air shimmered blue, and the power vanished leaving a vacuum that filled with the harsh crack of air. Tristian collapsed and the shields dropped.

Warriors scrambled lifting her quickly but gently and the mages ported her out to the healers. The rest of the warriors rushed out through the winding corridors, urging the now groggy wolves to follow, they reached the entrance to the palace never noticing the aftermath of the building's fate after the magics wielded in it. Never seeing the jagged strips of soil, torn from the ground in large gashes, never hearing the shouts of joy. They had only one mission, find Jax.

"Put her down," Jax barked, dropping to her knees and feeling the uneven thudding of her heart, the shallow breathing, the pale chilled skin."

"Blankets, get me the herb for weak hearts, get me some wet linens and get her out of these clothes."

A wave of Brianna's hand had her stripped, a warrior stumbled in her haste and set a bucket of

water down almost in Jax's lap, linens appeared in mid air as Jax reached for them. "Get me some drinking water."

Jax got her clean, warm, swaddled in blankets, the herb helping and her heart beat steadying as her skin flushed. Tristian blinked groggily and croaked..."Bri,"

Brianna dropped to her knees placing her ear directly over Tristian's lips, "Bri...home...mage...center....me...Tal...now.....Jax too."

Brianna nodded she rose to her knees and looked to Puck, "it's yours," she turned to Ceil, "pick her up," as Ceil complied and before Jax could squawk, Brianna had them at the door of the mage center where a hysterical Sidell pounded on the door to no avail.

Sidell turned, "It's sealed."

"Ceil, move Tristian to the door," Ceil complied and the door burst open. "In the shielded room Ceil, hurry, Jax move your ass."

Sidell moved to follow and six warriors jumped her holding on for dear life as she struggled, a mage blast had her clear but not before reinforcements had arrived. With the Mage Center shielded, she couldn't port into it and she couldn't rid herself of the warriors. She shattered the air dropping them but they held on continuing to crawl on her determined to follow their orders or die trying.

They found Tal convulsing but a small dose of the herb soon had her relaxing. Jax checked her over gently and pronounced her merely exhausted and needing to be put to bed. Brianna lifted her and the party made their way to the door as the ground shook and the air shattered in a resounding boom.

"Now what?" Ceil muttered moving a bit faster. She found the warriors grappling with Sidell. Emma and Aurora had just used the magics but the stubborn women weren't giving up. Many were down but they kept coming.

"Stand down," Ceil bellowed bringing the women to their feet in formation. "Goddess bless you idiots had better have a reason other than drinking. They remained in formation, faces impassive. "Remove yourselves, you're confined to the barracks until this is cleared."

Sidell was now wrapped equally around both precious bundles sobbing softly, calming now that she knew they were alive.

"Sidell," Ceil murmured gently, "Walk with us so we can put them to bed."

She nodded shakily and they stumbled forward. They tucked them both into the master bed leaving them to sleep.

"Sidell," Ceil touched her gently, "Come on, get up there with them." She lifted her up and

placed her in the center of the bed. Tristian and Tal immediately covered her with protective grasps. "Sleep, Sidell, they'll do better with you there."

As Brianna ported them out, Puck turned slowly taking in the damage to the valley caused by the incredible display of power. Gouges of dirt had been moved, the palace was merely a pile of stone, great cracks ran through the valley, trees were down, rockslides had rained down around the hillside. Puck sighed. "Call our people in. Let's see if we're missing anybody." She turned to Trey who had been at Tristian's side. She looked green, her eyes glazed with unseen horror. They all looked like that.

She knelt and touched the woman's shoulder. "Hey," she called gently. "Did you guys find the rest of the army?"

Trey shuddered and her whole body shook. Puck hugged her gently seeing much the same reaction in the rest of them. "Okay, I only need to know this? Will they be coming after us?"

Trey shook her head, jerkily. "No...never again."

"Alright, easy now." She looked up, "Deidre, get me a healer, get me several." Puck left them in the healer's care and moved through the survivors.

"Well, Puck," Lessa looked at her with a grin, "That...shit, that was incredible."

Puck smiled weakly, "Which that?"

"All of it. An all day battle which we won, and a mage battle that...I can't even describe it."

Puck laughed softly, "Well, we aim to please." She turned to find her people, "Tinder, send out the scouts, find the villages or as many as you can, pass the word, the King is dead."

Tinder saluted and rounded up those still mobile and functional sending them out. The mercs made plans to move on once the ships returned, and Puck set camp for the night to allow her mages to rest. Some of the folks from Newberg complained even after she explained that the mages needed to rest.

Alex ended it when she hobbled in and snapped, "Then walk dammit, those mages saved our lives and our world. We helped, yes, but I don't think that's grounds for saying we're more important. So quit your bitching."

Two days later Riger came home, they brought the bodies of their fallen comrades with them so their families could say farewell. It was a sweet and achingly heartbreaking moment and although the cost was low, it was ultimately too high.

"Alright," Puck looked around in amazement at the warriors facing her. Women she'd worked with, bled with, drank with and slept with. "One of you explain! Why were the warriors attempting to subdue the Heir?"

Emma slammed into the room. "I want to hear this also," She barked glaring around the room.

The warriors held their implacable masks but one stepped forward. "We were ordered to."

"By whom?" Puck roared having already checked with her acting.

"By Taledyn, Commander."

"She is the Heir to the Heir, what were you thinking?"

The woman hesitated and then offered, "She is her sire's Heir."

"Let me get this straight," Emma growled. "An eleven year old child, told you, supposedly grown adults that she wanted you to hold her mother back no matter what?"

"Aye."

"Aye," Emma hollered, "What the hell kind of answer is that?"

"Leader," a low voice rasped.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP?"

"Please, Emma," Tristian replied tiredly, "softly if you please."

She looked up at the women being reprimanded and smiled softly, "I'd give you all medals but that would probably send the wrong message, eh?"

"No need, Commander. We would not wished her to have seen....," the woman faltered.

"Aye, and for that you have my thanks. You'll also be glad to know that Sidell forgives you." Tristian rose and stood tall, "You are dismissed, and you have my eternal gratitude."

"And you, our undying respect," the first woman responded clasping her arm firmly. The women filed out each exchanging a warrior's clasp with their Commander.

Emma stared at her in shock and Puck just stood there. "Come on you two, walk me home."

"What the hell was that?" Emma asked huffily as they practically carried her back.

"You didn't ask them why."

Emma scowled, "Okay smartass, why?"

"Because it was very possible that Sidell would have entered that room to find Tal's brains splattered across the wall."

"Goddess bless," Emma invoked as they put her down on a chaise. Sidell came in with a drink and settled herself against her lover. As their equally tired daughter came in and snuggled into the pile. "Where's Ardy?"

"Class. Unlike others we know Ardyn loves to study."

"I liked tactics and strategy just fine," Tal defended herself.

Sidell just ruffled her hair.

"You awake yet?" Tristian asked gently.

"Aye, you want to hear it?"

"Aye."

Emma sighed in exasperation. "Sidell, when you take over, start a new mandatory class. Warrior speech, a translation class for non warriors."

Sidell giggled, the first laugh she'd had in awhile.

"Hardy har," Tristian smirked. "Our Leader, the comic."

"When you bonded with Vostle, the power changed." Tal began looking up at her sire.

Tristian nodded in encouragement.

"So, I entered the bond to see what happened. While in there, I got to playing and I figured out that the energies flow like water." She looked up again and smirked at Tristian's grin. "I started to experiment but...I can't call and manipulate at the same time." Tristian smiled fully. "That was it," Tal concluded.

"So you felt the final conflict?" Tristian asked.

"Aye, shivered me spine it did."

"Tried to crawl out of my skin," Tristian confided.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Sidell," Emma wailed. Her daughter chuckled.

"Tal figured out how to manipulate the energy flow of the Mother."

"Got that," Emma confirmed.

"She also found that you can't wield the power and manipulate the power at the same time."

"Why?"

Sidell looked to her lover and her daughter. "It takes too much concentration to do both and you run the risk of losing control." Tristian answered her mate's silent query. "Understand, Emma, unlike a mage gift which is called from the self, the Mother's power is everywhere and it has its own power. All we do is gather it and guide it. Equate it to sitting an unbroken stallion. Can you ride it and watch what it's doing at the same time?"

"Ahh."

Sidell took up the tale. "Once Tal was through and she returned, she still maintains the bond which gives her an awareness of what's happening at any node site, or...what's happening to any node in the bond. When Tristian faced the King, she called the node and Tal was aware of the energies swirling around it. From what they said, this was pretty bad, very powerful, and more then potentially harmful. Possibly more power than Tristian's ever seen wielded by another."

Emma stared at her. "They said that?"

Puck snorted.

Sidell ignored them. "So, seeing that her Sire was in danger and knowing Tristian would need the full bond to defeat him, she also knows the full bond actually controls the mage rather than the other way around. The full bond, especially now with the new lands, would also kill her. Tal decided, with her newfound skill, to help. She needed a safe place to enter the bond where there would be no interruptions, thus the mage center. With her gift, she can set a shield that we can't break, not because of the power but because of the type of power. And that's what happened. And, it worked but from the looks of them, I'd say barely." Sidell finished softly finding the two of them asleep. She brushed her hands over both of them and sighed. Turning to her mother she asked, "You understand the part about the warriors?"

"Now."

"So do I. I don't like it, but I do understand." She smiled gently, "Any other questions?"

"Did they really say all that?"

Sidell laughed sweetly, "I've loved her forever, I've become very adept at reading the REST of the story."

Epilogue

The day dawned bright, birdsong filled the air and an expectant hum filled the colony of Freelock. People bustled to and fro gather in the center square as the Colony Hall filled with Leaders of the other Holdings and villages, Elders of Dyan, and, and anybody else that could manage to get inside.

Across Riger, telecomms had been set up to broadcast the upcoming ceremony and the people happily chattered as the day's events unfolded.

Emma du Aulstet cast an amused glance at her daughter as Sidell fiddle with her dress. "Stop already, you look fine, perfect. What's got you so flustered."

Sidell turned to her in aggravation, "I hate being up in front of all these folks. Why couldn't we have sent a missive?"

"Oh no," Emma chortled, "This is too big of an occasion to send out in couriers. The people would revolt."

"Good," Sidell muttered, unwilling to calm down. "Let em revolt, they can go find somewhere else to live."

Emma laughed softly and gathered her flustered daughter in her arms. "Settle down. You are more than ready for this." She hugged her gently and smiled, "I am proud of you, Sidell, very proud of you. I don't think my life would have been filled with half the joys I've experienced if not for you."

Sidell's eyes filled with tears as she returned her mother's hug. "And I'm proud to call you mother." Trying to lighten the mood she looked up impishly, "Soooo, you ever gonna get around to finding me a second parent?"

Emma chuckled and released her offspring. "I don't know, your birthmother has always held my heart. Even after we lost her I've never been tempted." She smiled softly, "But I've all of you to keep me company and I'm in no rush. Now, quit stalling. Your mate is probably pacing and if we don't hurry she'll disappear and we'll never drag her back out."

Sidell laughed in agreement and followed her mother out the door.

Emma strode smartly onto the Common Hall floor. A stage had been erected and she took her place at the center. "People of Riger," Emma began. "It has been my honor to have led you this far into our history. We have come a long way together. Riger is once again a united land, well,"

She chuckled, "there is that little matter of Mhyr but, we'll get there eventually." She turned on the stage and looked out at her audience. "I've thought long and hard about this and my decision has been made. I'm tired of being in charge and I'm blessed with having an Heir fully capable of taking my place. She, in turn, is blessed with a mate that has more than proven her ability to defend our Leader and our land."

She turned to the front doors as they opened wide, "Join me, Riger. Welcome now, our new Leader and her Consort. Welcome the Royal Couple as they take their place in our history, welcome Sidell du Aulstet and Tristian Mardred."

Finis

Feedback is welcomed: blitteer@comcast.net

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