

~ Rezan ~

by Windstar and Zee

Once more we venture into the world of Selene and Nix, and is a sequel to that story. This is set in the world of Blood and Honor, although it is set before that story.

Disclaimer -

All the characters belong to Windstar and Zee.

There are same-sex couples running amok. If you don't like such things, please go elsewhere to read. This is a sequel, of sorts, to [Selene and Nix](#), which should probably be read first. Big thanks to our beta reader Packer.

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It was, Selene considered, a beautiful day. Bright summer sunshine flooded the streets of the small city that had grown up on the island in the middle of the Winderling. She smiled to a passing woman, well aware that there were more crow's feet that lined her eyes than there had been when she had first seen this island.

There had been many changes since then, some good and some bad, and she could only hope that the good outweighed the bad. Waving to another passerby, the first Queen of the North found her way down a path she had walked every day since she had taken Nix as her wife.

Humming to herself, she stepped around a pair of Alcens who were tied up outside and stepped into the heat of the forge itself. As it always did, the sight of Nix hard at work over another task caused her to smile.

The fact that her wife was working alone caused that smile to dim though. There was supposed to have been a second person working at the forge that day.

Nix grumbled, and generally huffed and puffed. In theory, she knew this day had to come, Kelsey had warned her, and the signs had been there for a while now. Her daughter just didn't want to spend time with her anymore. She wasn't as fun and exciting as the girls her daughter played with. Girls, she snorted, not with those developing breasts. Her daughter had thrown a fit and run off to hang out with some of the younger women in the city.

Selene leaned against the side of one of the massive anvils that were spread throughout the busy forge. "Hello, love." She nodded to the billows that were normally their daughter's responsibility. "What happened?"

Nix gave a yelp as her wife startled her. Turning, she easily saw Selene...even through the cloth she wore over her eyes to protect them from the sun. Her shoulders slumped. "What seems to happen a lot lately, our daughter has, once again, gotten out of her chores."

Biting her lip to avoid grinning, Selene moved over to the taller woman and gently grabbed her arm to stop her for a moment so she could claim a kiss. "I'm sorry. You know how they are at that age. She thinks she knows best."

With a sigh, Nix sat down on a stool, and looked at Selene. "We had a fight. She told me she hates me and my stupid forge, and ran off to hang with her friends."

The smaller woman winced, sitting down on one strong knee. "I'm sorry. How bad was it?" Nix had aged well over the past decades, still as strong as the day Selene had met her, even if there was now silver in that short, dark hair.

"It started out with what I thought was an innocent question. She asked what I thought of Sable." Nix shook her head ruefully, remembering the landslide she had set off with her answer. "I told the truth. I think the girl is a lazy, selfish brat." She crossed her hands over her chest defensively, and looked at her partner, "And that was the wrong thing to say."

The wince was more of a grimace this time, and Selene got up off Nix's lap to pace the confines of the smithy. It had been such a nice day when she was walking outside.

"Probably doesn't help that you were right."

Sable wasn't one of Selene's favorite people of all time. The girl was spoiled to death by her two parents and had the run of the city. Children were so precious, that sometimes Selene worried that they were all being coddled too much.

The smith stayed strong and stoic for about thirty seconds before her chin started to tremble. "I blame myself," she cried out. "You were right. I spoiled the girl too much as a baby. But I can't relate to this thing she's turned into. In the mines we didn't have these luxuries."

Selene hurried back to Nix's side.

The large smith sniffed and wiped away a few tears with one hand while the other stayed firmly around Selene's waist. She still remembered the day Cassia was born, hardly being able to contain her wonder. And the first time she held her, Nix had cried, so overwhelmed by love. Now, she really fought with herself. In the heat of their argument, all she had wanted to do was to throw the girl over her knee and spank her. Like any other violent thought she had ever had, it made her want to vomit.

Selene rubbed her fingers along Nix's head, slowly trying to massage out the tension she could feel there. "I'm sure it will be fine. We've argued before, you know, and it always worked out before." There was a note of uncertainty though; it took a lot to make her love cry. "We tried not to coddle her, and I never said you spoiled her. If anything, I spoiled her. You were always the voice of reason, remember?"

Nix nodded and leaned her head against Selene's chest, enjoying the feeling of her love's hands

rubbing her head. "I suppose it doesn't help she's the only child to the North's leader. The whole stupid city spoils her, but she didn't get really bad with those airs until she started hanging out with Sable. That girl has filled Cassia's head with nonsense, making folks bow and such."

The fingers paused for a moment and Selene blinked in surprise. "She makes people bow to her?" That was the first that she'd heard about that. Why hadn't she noticed that? The worry grew stronger as she wondered how bad this had truly become, and when had she missed it?

Nix looked at Selene and nodded. "Oh, yes. I caught her with Sable roaming around two nights ago. I saw Milla the seamstress bow to them while crossing the path to the well. I ran after her to ask why she did it. That old woman just shrugged and said Cassia told her to."

She sighed in pleasure, feeling Selene massage out a particularly nasty knot in her neck. "When Crow visits, I'm almost tempted to send Cassia back with her to work the mines. Crow and the rest of the Fire Clan won't put up with that nonsense."

They'd talked about that before and Selene had been against it. She had no desire to see her daughter work in a mine, no matter how much Nix promised it would be almost perfectly completely kind of safe. This time she held her peace, maybe that would be good for their daughter if she'd become so full of herself she was making people bow to her.

"We need to get her to realize she can't just go around making people bow to her." She sighed, leaning her forehead against the taller woman's shoulder.

"Being a parent is hard, harder still when you have no role models. Crow raised me in the mines, helped me survive and not feel so alone. Sometimes I feel at such a loss, but bowing is a respect that must be earned not expected," Nix said softly, reaching her hands up and gently returning the favor by kneading the stiff muscles in her lover's back.

A burst of giggling from the yard in front of the smithy caused Selene to look up, immediately regretting the loss of the nice massage, and sighing as she recognized the two girls who were heading towards the doorway. "Here comes our daughter," she paused, voice becoming considerably less happy, "and Sable."

The scowl that had disappeared earlier came back, and Nix eased Selene off her lap as she stood. "Cassia!" she boomed. "Get in here, young lady." She wished Crow was here, her Mine sister would know what to do, and probably, she mused, from putting up with Yuri for so many years.

Sable rolled her eyes at the smith's booming voice. Her mothers said that their Leader, Selene, had married way below her station with that one. Now that she was older, she had to wonder what their, for all-purposes, 'Queen' - except Selene hated that term - saw in that smelly laborer.

Her teenage brain figured it had to be all that muscle

"Mooommmmm...everyone can hear you when you yell like that." Cassia rolled her eyes in

almost unison with Sable. She thought about grabbing her girlfriend's hand and running away just to piss off her mom, but decided against it. They had important news to share, after all. Taking Sable's hand in hers, she led the way into the smithy, trying to look important. "You bellowed?" she grinned at her own joke.

In seeing her daughter's hand firmly clapped around that stupid mooncalf's in a rather disturbing intimate display, Nix feared the worst. "Sable, unless you want to spend the rest of your evening cleaning the smithy, I think you should go home. Someone has shirked all her chores today."

Selene stepped up next to her lover, placing her hand on the taller woman's shoulder and eyeing the two girls disapprovingly. Sable had always come across as a huge fawning annoyance every time Selene had met her before.

Sable rolled her eyes. Her parents had the philosophy of why sweat if you can have someone else to do it, and since her mothers were wealthy merchants who traveled to the South constantly bringing back valuable items in trade, they had a staff to do stuff in their house. Her eyes dismissed the smith, but lit up at seeing Selene. "Hello, your Highness," she simpered and curtsied.

Besides her, Selene shuddered a little at the annoying tone coming from the young woman. "I think you should go home, Sable, we need to talk with Cassia." She gave a dark look to her daughter. Which probably didn't work as well now that she'd grown taller than Selene, her height along with the dark hair were obviously gifts from Nix's side.

"Mom, we have something important to tell you!"

"Did your mother not just tell you to do something?" Nix said in frustration. Where had the little girl, who had wanted rides on her shoulders or thought it was cool her mother could see perfectly at night, gone?

Cassia might have been taller than Selene, but she was still shorter than Nix and had to look up to meet her mother's eyes, which worked well since she was lifting her chin to appear defiant. "Not until I tell you the news. We're going to have a commitment ceremony."

Selene grabbed onto Nix's arm so hard she was probably going to leave bruises. "What?"

Nix didn't even have to think about it. "No. You're too young."

"My mothers said it was all right," Sable helpfully pointed out, apparently oblivious to the glaring going on between Cassia and her mothers.

Suddenly, she felt so terribly old. Her, silly, immature little girl wanted to marry that...that...mooncalf. Nix sat down heavily on her stool, the wood groaning under her weight.

Selene nearly toppled over as her lover suddenly sat down, though she managed to stay upright only by grabbing onto Nix's shoulder and steadying herself. "You can't." She looked desperately between Cassia, Sable, and Nix, trying, praying, for some sort of solid, absolute reason why she couldn't.

"I can and I will!" Cassia said defiantly, head held high. "I don't need your permission! All we need is a priestess."

Nix surged off the stool and grabbed her daughter by the arm, halting what would have surely been an impressive exit. "You listen here, young lady, we are still your mothers and you will not talk to us in that tone of voice." She was totally out of her depth here. At her age, she had been in chains, forced to pump the bellows for the master smith. This creature that her sweet, innocent, little Cassia had turned into was truly a mystery, one that she wanted very badly to put over her knee and spank.

Sable stepped back in fear as she watched the huge woman grab Cassia. She had heard her mothers mutter over dinner once that the smith must have bespelled the Queen to get her to give up such a lovely, graceful woman as Laurel. Now, as she watched the woman's massive, meaty, paw close around her beloved's arm, she had to wonder if it wasn't true. Maybe the Queen had been bullied into the marriage.

"Nix!" Selene looked like she was on the verge of crying, her face twisted with warring emotions. "Please, Cassia, we should talk about this."

Their daughter ignored the nearly desperate voice of her mother and tried to jerk her arm free from Nix's grasp. She still had to look up into the taller woman's face, but she towered over Selene. "I'm an adult now, I don't need your permission; they all say so!"

At her love's words, Nix let go, feeling ashamed for her temper getting the better of her. "Who says you don't need our permission? The last time I checked, your mother's opinion outranked everybody else's." Goddess why wouldn't that mooncalf leave, couldn't she tell this was a family moment, one that didn't concern her. Nix shot a glare at the young woman, but since the cloth she always wore covered her eyes, it was less than effective.

The tears started at last as Cassia felt herself losing out on what she wanted. "You never let me do what I want! I hate you! I hate you all! You always tell me I have to become the next leader, but you never let me decide anything!"

At the sheer anger and rage in her daughter's voice, Selene staggered back, tears leaking down the sides of her face. "Cassia..." she whispered, eyes pained as she held out her hand to someone who had been her little girl only yesterday.

Nix sucked in a breath, at the moment feeling as big as a grasshopper. She looked to Selene for help before looking back at her daughter. "Sable, go home. We need to have a family talk. I'm sure Cassia will come find you when we are done."

The young woman didn't move for a second, but then shot her girlfriend a pitying look before leaving the smithy.

"Why do you have to ruin everything?" Cassia shouted at Nix, sulking as Sable left her there.

"Cassia, please, stop!" Selene begged. Why could she handle three hundred different problems a day from everyone else, but a few tears from her daughter and she fell apart?

"Us..? How have we ruined your life? What do you know about being a grown-up? You and the rest of you shirk your chores and run around doing what you please. For the past week you have avoided any of your responsibilities and you want me to believe that you are grown up enough to take on the commitment of a life dedicated to spending with another," Nix ranted.

"You always twist my words! I hate you, both of you!" Cassia yelled then sprinted for her room above the smithy, slamming the door hard behind her as she went.

Selene watched her go, a heartsick expression on her face, tears streaming down her face as she watched her little girl go.

Nix blew out a breath then went to her lover and enveloped her in her arms. "I'm sorry," she whispered over and over again. "I made a bigger mess of things. Next time I'll just sit and you can talk to her."

"She doesn't listen to me anymore." Selene buried her head in her love's chest, hiding the tears. "I can talk to everyone in the north, get them to stop fighting and bickering, but I can't talk to my daughter." She closed her eyes in pain.

"Ten to one Sable doesn't even really love our daughter. She just thinks she does because her mothers tell her she does. I won't let our daughter make a mistake like that, because it's more than just her life, it's the future of all of us. She needs someone more...more...well, one with a brain in her head."

Gently, her large hands stroked her love's hair and back, trying to comfort her as best she could while she spoke.

The tears slowed then stopped as Selene gratefully soaked up the strength and support offered by the taller woman. Finally, she whispered, "Do you think Willow could help?"

Nix nodded, "Maybe. Why don't I close down the forge and then I'll make you a nice cup of tea and we'll just go to bed and pretend this didn't happen? In the morning we'll go talk to Willow."

That earned her a sniffling nod, and Selene slowly let go of her. "I don't think I can pretend this didn't happen though. You might want to put something good in the tea."

Nix nodded, and kissed Selene lightly on the lips. "I'll do my best."

Nix sent her love to their room to try and relax while she started the task of shutting down the forge for the day. She wished Crow was here. Cassia loved Crow and would often speak to the woman of things she wouldn't with her mothers. And Crow could tell her what a fool she was for losing her temper like that. She quietly shut the front door of the smithy then moved to the common living area. With a sigh, she removed the cloth from her eyes and her blue eyes blinked in the dim light of her house.

Tomorrow had to be a better day.

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Selene was right, even in her sleep she couldn't forget that the awful night hadn't happened, although the tea that Nix had made had helped. Cassia had slipped out sometime before they had woken up at dawn, not that Selene was very surprised by that, but she was disappointed.

The two of them were sitting in the small kitchen off the smithy, both of them silent and brooding.

Without a knock, the front door opened and a large body filled the doorframe blocking the light. Nix winced and grabbed for the protective cloth for her eyes.

"Hey, Runt," came the cheerful, booming voice of Crow.

Selene had never been so happy to hear that booming voice as she was now. She could see the relief in her love's face as well, as they both turned towards the doorway, a welcoming smile, strained, but welcoming on the smaller woman's face.

"Crow, what good timing you have."

"By spark and flame, don't you two look stressed," Crow said, striding into the house. She, like Nix, had aged well, her once dark hair having turned silver, except for a few stray strands of black. Also, she needed to use a staff to help her stand and sit, her joints unhappy after a lifetime of hard labor, and she wasn't as strong as she once had been, but she was still stronger than most. But her mind was sharp and clear as ever. A smaller, compact woman followed her, and for a moment, Nix thought it was old times, with Yuri following at Crow's heels, but the woman wasn't Yuri.

The woman was young, too young to be Yuri. Crow turned, "Let me introduce this strapping young lass who was silly enough to volunteer to join me on my annual trek to visit you. This is Moriko, Yuri's eldest."

Moriko gave a shy wave to the women at the table.

"She has a lovely way with animals, and has even convinced the Alcen's to let her ride on them. Let me tell you, it made the trip far quicker, although I'm not certain my thighs have hurt this much since I spent that night with your local stone cutter, what's her name? Lily, Lin..."

Nix blushed for everyone in the room. "Crow, that's more than we ever needed to know about you and Theresa."

"It's nice to meet you, Moriko," Selene spoke up, grinning despite herself at the two visitors. Crow had always managed to make her laugh. "Please come in and take a seat. I'll see about getting you something to drink. How are your people doing, Crow?" She got up off her seat and pulled another chair to the table for them.

Moriko couldn't help the blush that came to her cheeks as the Queen addressed her. "Th-th-thank you, it-it's nice to me-meet you too." She grabbed a chair next to Crow, feeling somewhat less visible in the woman's shadow.

Crow just laughed heartily and slapped Nix on the back before taking a seat. "Oh the same...we drink, we fight to keep warm in the snow, and manage to mine some ore now and then."

"I think we have some tea, if you would like some?" Selene moved to the stove, aware that she wasn't doing a good job at being a happy, graceful hostess today.

"So where is my favorite little ankle bitter?" Crow asked, looking around for Cassia.

Pouring tea for their guests, Selene's arm suddenly shook at the question, spilling the hot liquid everywhere. "Sorry." She quickly grabbed an old rag to sop up the spill. "I'm clumsy this morning, it seems." She smiled faintly, the expression not reaching her eyes.

"Hey, hey, there," Crow said in a gentle tone, seeing Selene's distress. Looking at her long time friend, she saw the lines of stress in Nix's face and the same sort of sadness in her eyes. "Okay, what's up?"

Nix shot a glance over at Moriko before looking back at Crow. She was sure the girl was trustworthy, but still, this was private.

Feeling every year of her age, and certain that she had more silver hair than she had the day before, Selene retook her own seat, gazing sadly into her own cup of tea.

Crow got the hint and turned in her chair to addressed Yuri's eldest. "Why don't you go water and brush down the Alcens. Nix has a water pump out back."

The young woman looked offended for a second, but sighed and got up. "You could just say you wanted some privacy," she muttered as she left.

"Thank you, Moriko," Selene called after the young woman, feeling horrible that they'd just asked a guest to leave, but relieved at the same time.

After the door shut, Crow looked at Selene and then Nix. "So what's up with Cassia that has you looking like your Alcen died and you still have a bag of ore to deliver?"

Reaching across the table, Selene took her lover's hand for comfort. "Cassia is... going through a phase." She hoped that was it, but she wasn't sure.

Nix let out a breath and looked at Selene. "She's acting like one of the overseers," she blurted out.

Crow chewed on her lip. "Runt, I think you're blowing things out of proportion. No one can be that selfish, spoiled, and cruel." She looked back and forth from parent to parent.

"I don't know about cruel, but she's certainly got the other two down. And..." She ducked her head, ashamed of the way she had been reacting to her daughter's behavior. "...and I'm probably not helping any. I grabbed her the other day and all wanted to do was throw her over my knee and swat her good."

Crow just chewed on her bottom lip in thought.

"Maybe that would have actually helped." Selene twisted her lips in a grimace.

Silver eyebrows rose in surprise. Selene was the nicest, non-violent person she knew.

"And now she has it in her head she wants to be married to some mooncalf. She's only sixteen, for crying out loud! I'm certain Sable's parents are behind that," Nix continued on, giving her love's hand a gentle squeeze. "Crow, can you talk to her? Anytime we try we just end up yelling at each other and she runs off."

"Well...I mean..." She sighed, seeing their hopeful looks. "I suppose it couldn't hurt."

"Thank you, Crow, thank you so much. You've always managed to talk to her, she likes you. Maybe you can get her to think this through and see why it's not a good idea?" Selene looked hopeful. It actually was a horrible idea, from a political point of view.

"Sable's mothers wouldn't happen to be a couple of merchant traders, rich and kind of snotty." When Nix nodded, Crow just sighed. "I can see why they think it would be a good idea, it would be a great political match for them, and then they could really control trade."

Nix smiled and leaned over, hugging the woman who was like a sister to her. "Thanks."

"The other families would never agree to Cassia leading them if she did this. It would be horrible." Selene looked worried again.

"Yeah, yeah...let the grumpy old woman talk to the hormonal teenager. Why don't you two take the day off and go spend some time at that swimming hole you're both so fond of. I'll stay here and wait for my favorite ankle biter."

Nix smiled and got up and began moving around the small kitchen packing a haphazard picnic lunch. Perhaps they could get away for a bit and pretend they had no worries.

"Thank you, Crow." Selene got up. Pausing by their friend's chair, she leaned down to give her a swift hug. "I know she'll listen to you."

Crow snorted. They really were innocents in a land of teenagers if they thought that. "I'll talk. Who knows if she'll listen?"

"That's all we can ask." The smaller woman smiled, for the first time in the last day feeling a little better. Together, she and Nix left to give Crow her chance.

Alone in the house, Crow eased up to her feet. Her back and her knees gave loud, alarming pops, and she winced. Looking around, she spied a bottle of amber wine that she had given to the Runt and Selene two winters ago. Deciding it was a right shame it was still unopened, she eased the cork out and poured herself a glass. The front door opened and Moriko looked in. "Since the adults are gone, can I come in now?"

Crow looked at her over her glass. "No. You can go chop up that wood we spied outside of Nix's forge. I'm sure the royal couple would like that."

Moriko stuck out her tongue. "For the last time, I'm sorry I set the barn on fire, but it was an accident."

Crow snorted and sipped her wine. Sighing in pleasure, she shoed the young woman out the door.

Outside, Cassia stalked towards the front of the smithy with what she thought were determined steps. She was going to make her parents see that she was in love with Sable and that they were going to be married! She was going to show them that this was right, and then they would have to agree with it.

That determined stride was brought up short as she spotted a stranger chopping the wood she should have chopped two days ago now. "Who are you?" she demanded, changing direction and striding towards Moriko.

The stocky blonde paused at the question, and bristled at the tone, not liking it one bit. She thought about answering, but figured the best thing to do would be to ignore the rude person; she was a guest, after all. She brought the axe back up then down, splitting the log. She cleared it off and set another piece up to be split.

"Hey!" Not used to someone not answering her questions, Cassia kicked the log, making it topple off before Moriko could bring up her axe. "I asked you a question. Who are you? What are you doing at my parents' home?"

"Ar-ar-are you nuts...I-I could have chopped your foot off!" Moriko blew the too long blond bangs out of her face.

"But you didn't." Cassia frowned annoyed that this other woman was the same height as she was. How was she supposed to look down at someone that wasn't shorter than her? Trying to figure that out distracted Cassia for a moment or two, but she was as stubborn as her mother, and wasn't about to let herself be sidetracked. "Now, who are you?"

In a corner by the house, an Alcen watched the exchange amused.

Brown-eyes narrowed and she drew herself up to her full height, which was still a half-inch shorter than the other girl. "I'm Moriko. I'm visiting the Queen and her partner with my Fire Sister, Crow."

Blue eyes that were definitely inherited from Nix lit up at the mention of Crow. "Crow's here?" Eagerly, she looked around for the older woman.

Moriko sighed, picked up the log and placed it back on the chopping block. "She's in the house...mooncalf." She muttered the last part under her breath.

Cassia took two steps towards the house before she heard the last part. "What?" She whirled around, blonde hair, like Selene's, getting in the way of a marvelous snit and ruining the moment. Brushing it angrily out of her face, she stared at the other girl, face red with anger. "Why don't you just keep chopping wood, you...you...servant!" She turned and ran towards the house.

Moriko thought of several good comebacks, only after the girl had run into the house. She sighed and went back to chopping wood, feeling somewhat jealous that Crow would prefer to spend time with that nasty, spoiled brat than her.

A screech of a hawk got her attention and she looked up, to see a beautiful black-tailed hawk land on top of the uncut wood. "Did you see all that, Talon?" He just bobbed his head, so she took that as a yes. Setting down the axe, she walked over and stroked the top of his head.

The hawk just fluffed his feathers in response.

"Crow!" Cassia ran towards the other woman, happy to see her friend. It had been more than a year since her last visit to the city.

Crow was examining her second glass of wine, the muted rays of weak spring sunshine creeping through the window in the kitchen more than enough to see by. She looked up to see a beautiful young woman.

"Hey there..." She set the glass down and hugged the young woman tightly, unlike years past, when she would pick her up and swing her around, her back wouldn't put up with that anymore.

She let go and looked at Cassia. "Look at you. You're growing up beautifully. I think you've grown another inch."

"You didn't send word that you were coming," Cassia chided after hugging the older woman hard. She blushed at the compliment, grinning a little shyly. "You always say I've grown another inch. I'm taller than Selene now, but Nix is still taller than I am."

"Well, I say it 'cause it's true, but I don't think you'll outgrow the Runt, I mean, your mother. And I would have sent word, but Moriko talked me into riding the Alcens rather than walking beside them, letting them carry all the gear. I think we beat the messenger." She ruffled Cassia's bangs and sat back down slowly, her knees popped and she winced.

"Moriko..?" Those blue eyes narrowed as Cassia's mood switched in the sudden swings that teenagers have. "Is that the annoying girl outside? She's very rude." The teenager plopped down on one of the kitchen chairs with the boneless grace of the young.

"Really, I've never noticed her to be rude." She hid her grin behind her glass of wine. "She's always respectful to her elders, but she can be shy around those her own age."

Those blue eyes studied the older woman then Cassia smiled with a burst of near manic happiness as she decided to ignore the girl outside in favor of more important news. "I have the most wonderful news, Crow. I'm going to get married!"

Yet again, silver eyebrows shot up into her hairline in surprise, "Really?"

Cassia nodded happily. "Her name is Sable. I don't know if you met her yet, but she's perfect. She likes everything I do and we get along perfectly."

She set her glass down. "That's a huge step. I, myself, was never one to find marriage appealing. You know, there are women down south that I haven't even met yet." She wiggled her eyebrows.

Cassia laughed. "Crow, I have to get married. That's what they expect of me."

"Well, of course, but I don't think they're expecting it of you right now. I mean, you haven't even met every available young lady out there. How can you be certain this Sable is the one? You could meet someone tomorrow, or next winter, who's even better for you, but then you'd be in a mess 'cause you'd be married to Sable and unhappy."

The teenager set her jaw in a way that was almost eerily similar to Nix when she was being stubborn. "I love Sable. I'm not going to meet anyone better than she is for me."

Crow raised her glass and sipped it. "Okay, don't worry about that, it's my own marriage bias speaking." She set her glass down. "So, if you didn't have these expectations, what do you want to do? If you could do anything or be anything, what would it be? No one said you'd have to be Queen, your parents are young, they could pop out another ankle biter."

"They aren't that young." Cassia folded her arms, scowling a little. "What do you mean want to do? I have to follow Selene and be the next Queen, that's what I have to do."

Crow sighed. "You're talking about have to, not what you want to do. If you don't want to be Queen, I can smuggle you out of here, take you up north with me." She grinned. "I can teach you how to drink and fight proper, not this wussy stuff they call fighting down here."

The younger woman looked down, for the first time looking a touch unsure about something. That passed quickly, and she looked up again with the arrogance of youth.

"I'm not really good at fighting, but that's not what I'm meant to become."

Crow blew out breath. "So, neither of your folks is good at fighting. Although, your mother once fought the God Korgon, but from what I understand, she wasn't very good at it."

Cassia grinned. "She says she really sucked at it. Besides, don't I get to order people to do fighting for me if I'm Queen?"

She stared at the young girl, "So you're okay with ordering folks to go out and kill and die for you."

The teenager blinked...a surprised look on her face very much like the one that Selene sometimes got. "What? No, I mean...not like that. I just mean they can fight...umm and I can't." People actually dying hadn't factored into her thoughts. There had never been blood or dead people in her daydreams.

The older woman scratched her ear and thought hard; the sweet, thoughtful girl she knew a year ago had to still be inside. "When someone picks up a sword or an axe, you have to accept the fact someone will get hurt and might even die. It's the way of things."

"Oh." Cassia looked a little crestfallen. "Well, then maybe I'll ban all swords and axes. Then nobody can get hurt." She looked a little cheerier at that idea.

Crow rolled her eyes. "Then how will you fight off thieves, bandits, greenbacks, and wolves?"

The cheer was replaced with the beginnings of a sulk. "Well, then, I guess people have to die, right?"

The older woman clapped her on the back. "Not so easy to do what your Muanya does, now, is

it?"

Cassia rolled her eyes. "It's not that hard. She just talks to people all the time."

Crow sipped her drink and realized they were off topic, she was supposed to be working on the whole Sable, marriage issue. "So, back to Sable... You and she are perfect for each other?"

The sulk disappeared like the morning mist being burnt off by the sun. "Yes. She's perfect for me and I'm perfect for her. We even finish each other's sentences sometimes!"

That wasn't cute in Crow's opinion, it was creepy. "So you like the same things? She likes to wrestle, make pretty things with metal, and lie outside and stare at the stars."

Cassia blushed and looked down at the table, drawing things on its surface with the rings of water left from the teapot. "I don't wrestle anymore, only kids do that, it's not dignified." She didn't even touch the make things with metal part.

"And she would fight for you...protect you from harm, even if it meant giving up being queen?" Crow continued on undaunted.

"Of course," Cassia jutted out her chin defiantly. She had complete trust that Sable would do anything to protect her.

Crow tapped her chin in thought. "Good. You know, she may need to complete some tasks to prove that. Just so the other clans are happy. You know us sisters of fire like a good fighter, and we'd feel better following some we know can protect our Queen."

"Tasks, what sort of tasks? I've never heard of that before." Cassia looked skeptical and a touch worried.

"Well, this is new territory...we've never really been free to rule ourselves before. But you've got those ship builders northeast of here and us to the north. And to the south those tree huggers guarding the path through the mountains, then the folks here with your mother. They all need to feel comfortable with who's ruling them." Crow spun her words carefully. "So a few tasks to show how capable your Sable is to rule at your side should make everyone happy. And I bet your folks would like her better knowing she's able to take care of you and herself."

That made a sort of logic to Cassia, though not a kind of logic that she particularly liked. "What sort of tasks would they be? I'm sure that Sable can handle anything that you ask her to do."

"I don't know, one of courage, wits, strength, and loyalty." Crow swirled her drink and clapped Cassia on the back before taking a sip. "Nothing your Sable can't handle."

"She'll beat any task that you set in front of her." Cassia stood up and started towards the door. "I'll go tell her now so she can start to get ready. When will the tasks start?"

Crow shrugged, "Soon."

The teen paused then rushed back to give her Aunt Crow a hug, "I am really happy you're here. You can talk sense into my mothers, I'm sure of it."

Crow chuckled. "I've been trying to talk sense into the Runt for years."

The younger woman laughed, hugging her aunt tight then bounding towards the door. "I'll go tell Sable. You have to get everyone to agree so that Sable can win the tasks and we can be married!" The blonde burst through the doors into the courtyard outside the smithy.

Moriko was exhausted, but the wood was all chopped. She was tired and sweaty, and she really wanted to go inside, but she didn't really want to be stuck inside with that spoiled brat.

Actually dealing with people really wasn't one of her strengths, unlike her mother, Yuri. She got along better with animals; they didn't want things other than food and an occasional scratch.

Cassia's bound outside was abruptly turned into what she thought was a more serious step as she realized that annoying other girl was still here. "Are you done yet?" She covered her embarrassment at being caught doing something child-like with an angry barb.

"Just about, it wasn't that much. Nix's helper must be really lazy."

"Well, some people are good at this sort of thing, and others are good at ordering them around," Cassia snipped over her shoulder, cheek's red from embarrassment. She was well aware of the fact that it was usually her chore to chop the wood.

Moriko snorted. "As my Muanya says, those who can't shout orders, and eventually someone will wipe their ass."

"You...you...Alcen lover..!" It was the best comeback that Cassia could come up with then she fled the courtyard, refusing to let the annoying girl ruin her good mood, she had better people to talk with. Now all she had to do was find Sable. She would probably be down by the river playing with the other girls.

#####

Nix sat under a great tree, feeling relaxed and happy for the first time in a while. The small pool of still water next to the river was her favorite spot, it was where Selene had taught her to swim, and in truth, to love. "We should get away more often," she said softly.

The woman who was using her lap as a pillow smiled up at her then returned to her own contemplation of the slow moving expanse of water. Out further, one of the newer two-masted ships sailed past, its crew laboring up in the masts to set the sails. "We just kind of forgot to, I

guess. Things were always busy." Selene sighed, closing her eyes to enjoy the warm body she was almost laying on top of. "It seems like just a little while ago we were in that tent with Willow."

Nix blushed. "Despite the way I've been acting, I don't regret a moment of it. She was truly a wonder. Now I wonder where the little girl who used to follow me everywhere went to." One of her massive hands stroked her love's face then moved to light brown hair, content to run her fingers through it.

They were both silent for a little while, simply enjoying the closeness and the relaxation. "Did I ever tell you that I was jealous that you got to give birth to her?" Selene suddenly asked.

Nix frowned slightly. "No, but once things calmed down, you should have said something, love. We could have had another." Then she laughed as she tried to figure out how they would have managed it. When Cassia was two, her assistant Gina had moved down to Abnoa to be the smith, leaving her the duty as the town smith and Selene as its Queen. "Maybe not... We barely had time to raise one."

Selene shook her head, reaching up to stroke Nix's cheek. "I got over it. I was worried that you'd always be closer to her, that I'd be some sort of outsider when she was born." That hadn't been the case.

"Never... Remember how scared I was of holding her. Always afraid I'd crush her in my too large hands, or drop her." Nix smiled wistfully.

"I keep telling you, your hands are perfect, they suit you." Selene captured one of those hands and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Remember the first time she was sick? How terrified I was? We woke Willow up in the middle of the night to come see her."

A deep belly laugh came out of Nix. "It was only a cold. Eh, remember when she took her first steps, I missed them, but you were there. Then she was walking, zipping around the house, and I had to baby proof it."

"Don't forget the forge. We couldn't keep her out of there. Remember how much she would cry if you wouldn't take her with you? She was your little shadow all the time." Her smile was bittersweet. How things had changed since then.

For a moment Nix thought she might cry, she did remember that. "I got a letter back from Gina. Her first born is ready to leave the nest and start her own forge. I've offered to take her on for a year, and if she works out, she'll take the forge." The words felt like ash on her tongue, but the town needed a smith, and she wasn't getting any younger. "I had hoped to keep it in the family, but I can't wait on Cassia. The town will need a smith, and it's getting harder and harder to lift that hammer some days."

"Oh, love." The smaller woman sat up, pulling the larger woman into a hug. "She's still our little girl, somewhere under there. She's just having trouble now."

Nix nodded not doubting Selene's words, it was just so hard sometimes, and hugged her lover tightly to her.

#####

Cassia sprinted down the well-worn dirt path that led down towards the river's edge. Already she could hear the voices of her friends calling out to one another, laughing and shrieking as they played in and around the water's edge. This was their swimming hole, the Firstborns, as they called themselves. Even some of the adults had started to call them that, as if it was a badge of honor that marked them apart from every other generation that would follow.

The tall blonde sprinted out of the tree line, grinning at the warm summer sunlight that engulfed her, blinding her for a moment. "Sable!" she yelled happily, squinting into the sun to search for the other firstborn.

Sable rolled over on her side where she had been showing off the new fabric her parents had imported from the South. She raised a soft hand and waved, "Over here."

"You won't believe it!" The youngster leapt over a log and plopped down on her knees in the soft sand of the beach, grinning. Other girls were starting to draw closer, drawn in by the obvious excitement in Cassia's voice and face. "Something really good happened."

"You two are going to stop making goo-goo eyes at each other," Kealey shouted from the river, sending a splash of water to punctuate her point.

Sable made a face at Kealey, whom she really didn't like much. No matter how much status she got from dating the next Queen, Kealey would merely point out that she was the first firstborn. Sable hated feeling inferior. Her mothers told her that they were better than everyone else, and that she would always get what she deserved in life. Kealey hadn't gotten the memo, the girl refusing to bow or treat her with respect just because she was the firstborn.

Cassia wrinkled her nose in annoyance at the older girl. "No." She rolled her eyes and looked back at Sable. "Aunt Crow came to town. She's going to talk to my mothers, they'll listen to her. She'll make them understand that you and are meant for one another!"

Sable let out a shriek that had a few of the others rolling their eyes. "That's great. It's good to know at least one of those fire dancing muscle heads has a brain." She hugged Cassia and kissed her cheeks. "I'm going to be a Queen. I like the sound of that, don't you?"

Cassia bit her lip and nodded, trying to figure out how to break the condition. "Well...you have to do some sort of trial thing to make sure the other families will follow you, of course." She tried to rush it in there during the hug.

Sable promptly ended the hug and held her girlfriend out at arms length. "What?"

The blonde gave her a bit of a weak smile. This wasn't going quite as she'd thought it would, and she struggled for the words to make it better. "It's just a couple of trials so that the fire warriors will follow you, and those ship building fanatics, and of course those people down in the woods." It sounded reasonable to Cassia.

"They should follow me because you tell them to," Sable sniped. "I'm not doing any such stupid trial just to make some tree hugging, over muscled, water fanatics happy."

Kealey stomped out of the water and grabbed her clothes. "What a baby?" she snapped. "I'm out of here. My folks probably need some help at the Inn." She dried off and got dressed.

Sable turned and glared at the older girl. "You can't talk that way to me. I'm going to be a Queen."

"Not if you don't stop crying about what you want. Geez, the only stuff that ever comes out of your mouth is, you, you, you. I would have dumped your ass by now." With her piece said, the older girl walked off.

Cassia looked a little trouble as she watched the oldest of the firstborns leave. "Sable, it's not going to be horrible. You just have to prove to everyone that you're perfect to be with me as Queen." The beginnings of a frown started as she wondered if maybe she was getting into something she didn't completely understand.

Sable's mouth hung open as she looked at Cassia. Then her eyes narrowed and her mouth snapped shut. "I'm going home. When you are ready to talk sense and not these stupid trials then come see me." Sable didn't say anything further. Instead, she just grabbed her stuff and marched off.

Some of the other girls just snickered and whispered about trouble in paradise.

Her lower lip trembled for a moment then Cassia straightened her back and walked as fast as she could into the forest, tears threatening as the joy from earlier had completely burned away, leaving behind a cold, empty feeling.

The second she was in the trees and away from prying eyes, she sprinted through the forest, running as fast as she could from what she was sure was the most horrible thing that had ever happened to her.

#####

Moriko stood in the forest enjoying the silence. She had snuck away after the royal couple had returned, certain that she wouldn't be allowed in the house because they would be talking grown

up things. Just because her mother was Yuri, she sometimes thought folks didn't take her seriously.

For crying out loud, she was two months away from eighteen! Then again, she probably didn't want to be in the middle of whatever was going on. She had boarded the Alcens in a stable and had come out here to enjoy the freedom with Talon. Looking up, she spied him circling. She then let loose a sharp whistle and held out her leather covered arm.

#####

Cassia ran until her legs burned and her lungs heaved, tears streaming unheeded from her eyes. They blurred her vision, and it was a miracle she didn't run headlong into a tree. Only the fact that she knew the island like the back of her hand let her run through the paths nearly sightless, which was how she plowed into the shape that suddenly appeared in front of her around one of the tall trees at the northern edge of the island at nearly full speed, slamming into her and sending them both tumbling to the ground.

One moment Moriko had her brown eyes trained on Talon, the next, she was face down in the dirt. Slowly, she sat up spitting out dirt. Spying a body on the ground next to her, she stammered out, "Hey, are-are y-y-you okay?"

The younger girl curled into a ball, crying all the harder now that she had stopped running. Hugging her knees to her chest, Cassia shook her head. "Go away," she groaned miserably.

Talon lighted on to a tree branch above their heads and gave a harsh cry. Moriko shrugged at Talon, not sure what he wanted her to do about it. His feathers puffed up and he looked at her reproachfully. She sighed. "Are y-y-you hurt?" she asked softly.

Cassia rolled over and bit out through her tears, "I'm fine."

Moriko almost blurted out "oh, it's you," but to her credit, she held her tongue. "Well, that's good. That you're not hurt, I mean." She stood up and held out a hand.

The younger girl stayed where she was, curled upon the ground and staring up at the northerner. "You'd tell me the truth, wouldn't you?"

"Huh?" She looked at Talon for help, but the great bird just sat and preened his feathers. "Well, yes. Not much use in lying. It just makes the world more complicated." She retracted her hand and brushed the dirt and leaves off her and sat down, having a gut feeling this was going to take awhile.

"Do you think Sable loves me?" Cassia looked like a lost little girl, and she felt like one too.

"Um, well, I'm not really sure who Sable is. I'm not even really sure who you are, but I'm going to go out on a limb and assume she's your girlfriend." She scratched her earlobe in a nervous

gesture, and wished her Muanya was here, she was good at these hurting heart talks.

Cassia blinked, staring at the other girl in surprise. She'd never met someone who didn't know who she was before. "I'm Cassia. Selene and Nix are my mothers." She shifted until she was sitting on the ground, still looking up at the other girl.

For a second, Moriko froze in surprise. She'd been mouthing off to the princess, but a spoiled brat was a spoiled brat, Goddess save them. "You're mothers are really nice," she offered. "I'm Moriko, my mothers are Yuri and Pax of the sisters of flame."

"Yuri?" She had heard that name before from her mother. "I think Nix said she had a friend named Yuri." Her eyes narrowed as she remembered why she was there. "Do you think Sable loves me?" she asked again.

"I don't know. I've never met Sable. But I guess the real question is why do you doubt she does?" She held out her leather-covered arm and Talon hopped down on to it, his feet digging into the leather. Gently, she stroked his head, feeling more at ease with him around. Now, if only she could get him to answer the question of love.

Blue eyes clouded over with the memory of the past few minutes. "She won't go try to win Crow's trials to be with me." Even as besotted as she was, Cassie knew that wasn't a good sign.

"Um..." Moriko had no idea what these trials were, or how to even respond. "Well...perhaps she just needs time. Love isn't always easy, like they say in stories." She should know, her parents fought all the time. It didn't help that Yuri, was, well, Yuri.

Cassia looked a little more hopeful at that. Maybe she was right. Maybe all that Sable needed was a little more time. There was an irritating inner voice that didn't think that was true, but she could ignore that voice for now.

"Maybe..." Cautiously, the younger girl got up, wiping at her cheeks to get rid of the tears that still lingered there. "Sorry." She suddenly realized she hadn't said anything yet. "About running into you, I mean."

"It's okay. You were upset." Perhaps the girl wasn't such a brat after all. She shook Talon off her arm and he launched himself with an indignant squawk.

"I've never seen someone handle a bird like that." Cassia squinted into the sunlight, trying to see the bird as he flew upwards to roost on one of the nearby trees. "What is he?"

"He's a Black-tailed Hawk, 'cause he's got black tail feathers. I've had Talon since he fell out of his nest, nursed him best I could. His mother wouldn't take him back." She lifted her other arm, the one without the leather protection, showing off fine white scars from where the mother had attacked her when she had tried to put him back. "My mother told me it was silly, that she would

defend her nest and not care that he fell out. But I was a silly girl and didn't listen."

Cassia awkwardly scratched her arm, feeling embarrassed and still emotionally on edge from her crying and from someone seeing it. Biting her lip, she looked down from the bird in the tree. "I'm also sorry I called you a servant," she mumbled. She'd been angry at the time. Now she just felt stupid.

That one statement floored Moriko, who pursed her lips. "I'm not your servant. Just because you may be Queen one day doesn't give you the right to belittle me or demand respect when you haven't earned it." It was roughly the same speech her Muanya had given her Mother a few years ago, without the Queen part, but she felt it was okay to borrow right now. "But saying you're sorry helps," she added softly, feeling she may have been a little harsh.

The younger girl sniffed, brushing at her eyes, annoyed at the tears that threatened again. "I know." She did know, but sometime she just forgot and went along with what the others told her. It was always easier that way. "I guess I should leave you be." She bit her lip, trying to think of where else she could go. She didn't want to go home yet, not to face her parents.

Moriko got up and offered a hand to Cassia. "You don't want to go home looking all upset. Your moms will just get bent out of shape and get in your business."

This time Cassia took the offered hand up, looking at the other girl a little suspiciously. Could she actually be trying to be friendly? "Your moms do that too?"

"Well, they used to, but I'm the eldest of five, and well, Yuri is Yuri." Her mother had a wandering eye, which was sometimes followed by wandering hands, nothing serious, but enough to cause a lot of stress in her house. "You're welcome to hang out with me for a bit, until you feel ready to go back."

The younger girl gave a one-shouldered shrug then nodded. "Thanks." She started to walk alongside Moriko, studying the other girl with frequent sideways glances. "You have four sisters? That must be fun." Cassia had always wondered what it would be like to have sisters. To have someone to share all her worries and hopes with, to stay up late whispering secrets long past bedtime.

"It can be, but mostly I feel overwhelmed. It's a small house, you can't even find space to change your mind, let alone change your clothes. I like it out here in the forest; it's quiet, and peaceful." At home, she often slept in the barn just to give her younger sisters that much more space.

"What's it like up north? Aunt Crow says I should go visit, but I've never gone yet. I don't think my Muanya likes the idea of me going alone up there." Selene sometimes got a little too worried and protective for Cassia's liking.

Moriko stopped moving and gave out a piercing whistle, and in a second, Talon was landing on the outstretched arm. "The mountains are steeper, and it stays colder longer. We're a little

rougher around the edges than the women here. A lot of the older women live to mine, it's all they know, and it gives them some happiness."

Cassia stopped moving when she did, watching the bird land on her arm. He looked regal and wild, his gaze piercing and defiant. "Can I touch him?"

She pulled out a small pebble sized piece of dried meat and gave it to Talon, who nibbled at her fingers for a second before taking it. "Sure. Make sure he can see your hand coming. Otherwise he might get startled." She crooned softly and stroked his back.

Entranced with the bird, Cassia stepped closer, and very slowly moved her hand towards the hawk, making sure that the bird could see it coming. Gently, she stroked a feather along the bird's shoulder, grinning widely as he let her touch him. "He's letting me stroke his feathers," she murmured in wonder.

"That he is," Moriko said with a smile. Talon spread his wings and puffed up his feathers, but seemed content with the attention. "He's almost trained where he'll bring me his kills most of the time. Sometimes he's greedy and keeps them for himself." Not that she minded; he wasn't a pet.

Cassia let her hand drop from the bird and started to walk again, wondering what it would be like to have such a talent with animals. "So you aren't going to become a miner then, I guess?"

Moriko made a face. "I couldn't stand to be shut up inside a mountainside." In fact, just thinking about it made her sweat. "I prefer the woods."

"What would you want to do, then? Would you go south through the mountain pass and be with those others who wander through the woods all the time?" Even if Selene and Nix thought she didn't pay attention, she did listen when they both talked of their days at dinnertime.

Moriko shrugged, "Maybe. My Muanya wants me to stay up north and help her tame and train Alcons." She didn't really want that. In fact, she was enjoying being away from her mothers.

Cassia let out a long-suffering sigh and turned around, starting to walk in the general direction of the town. "Why do we always have to be something? Why do they keep bugging us about what we're going to become? Can't we just enjoy what we are right now?"

Moriko followed silently, thinking. "I don't know. You, I can understand. When your mothers are gone you'll be the one leading us. They have to worry about your happiness and that of the whole north; must be hard for them."

The dark-haired girl spun around having gone a little ways. "What if I don't want to be the queen? Everyone assumes I will be, that I have to be, but what if I don't want to be? What if I'm no good at it?" The last part came out as a whispered question, and Cassia wrapped her arms around herself. She hadn't meant to say those things, not even Sable had heard those doubts before.

Moriko looked up at Talon, who was circling, keeping pace with them. She bit her lip, thinking about how to respond. "Sounds like, you need to talk to them. They don't know how you feel, they can't help. Your parents seem nice."

In the age-old tradition of all teenagers, Cassia snorted and started walking again. "That's because they aren't your parents." She glanced sideways at the other girl. "Are you staying at our place?"

Moriko snorted and ducked her head, her blonde hair covering her face. "You could have mine. Um, I think Crow is. I'll probably sleep in the barn with the Alcens."

"In the barn..?" Cassia looked horrified by the thought. "No way...you're cool. You could sleep in my room if you want? There's room on the floor." She babbled on a bit, hoping she didn't sound like a moron.

Moriko blushed, never having been in close quarters with anyone other than her sisters. "No, the barn's fine. I sometimes sleep in the barn at home. It's not a big deal."

The other girl shrugged, "Fine. But trust me, inside is more comfortable." Of course, her mothers might not be very keen on someone sleeping in her room. "Come on, it's probably almost dinner time. We should get back."

"You go on, I'm going to go hunt with Talon. I'll bring back some rabbits." She whistled and held out her arm, the one covered in the thick leather.

The hawk swooped down and landed gracefully, his feet digging into the leather, scoring it.

For an instant the younger girl looked torn. She'd love to watch the hawk hunt for rabbits. Sighing, she decided she probably would be killed if she skipped showing up for dinner tonight. "Fine...I'll see you later." She would have much rather have faced the adults with some back up, but she was on her own it seemed.

Moriko watched her go, lightly stroking Talon's feathers. She liked this woman she'd met, and hoped that this Cassia was one she would see more of, not the spoiled brat from before.

#####

"I think Crow is onto something. We can make it so that anyone who wants to be married to our little girl has to go through some sort of trials." Selene liked this idea. They could weed out anyone who was a bad choice, like Sable. "I hope Willow will go along with this, though." She looked up anxiously at the taller woman walking alongside her towards the still under construction temple. It would take generations before that building was finished.

"What?" Nix said looking at Crow. "What if Sable completes these trials? We'll have to accept her."

"Runt, it was the best I could come up with. Plus, if she does complete the trials, don't you think that will prove to you that maybe she is right for your little one. Maybe you're wrong about Sable," Crow said with a sigh, using her walking stick to help her walk, and wincing as her back protested.

Nix snorted, but relented as her love gently rubbed her back. "I guess. Let's talk to Willow."

The High Priestess had been one of the younger women to make the Exodus, and she still retained some of that youth. No silver hair graced her head yet, although her eyes held more wisdom than they had all those years ago when they had first come here. She was sitting by the entrance to the temple, feet stretched out in front of her, watching the beginnings of what promised to be a spectacular sunset.

As always, Selene smiled at the sight of her long time friend. "Watching the sky again, Willow?" she teased as they drew closer.

The high priestess grinned, getting up and dusting off her simple robes. "Someone has to keep an eye out for more glowing rocks falling to the earth." The priestess bowed as she saw the guest who was walking along with them. "Hello, Crow, it is good to see you again."

"As always, a pleasure, Priestess... So, has the Goddess told you anything exciting lately?" Crow asked, tilting her head, her back not letting her bow anymore.

Willow smiled, shaking her head. "You know that isn't the Goddess' way." She looked from woman to woman, taking in the lines of stress on their faces. "I take it that this isn't just a visit to say hello?"

Selene shook her head. "It's about Cassia."

Nix nodded, "She came home the other day with some absurd notion that she wanted to marry Sable."

"Runt, perhaps we should go inside Willow's house and away from nosy ears," Crow suggested, clapping Nix on the back, interrupting her before she could go off anymore.

Willow agreed. "Come, please." She led the way to a simple log building that had been built years ago, when it became apparent that someone who had to be present whenever a woman wanted to become pregnant needed something better than just a tent. Willow wasn't the only priestess these days. Waving away an acolyte who had opened the door, she led the three other women into a sitting room inside.

"Kristin, why don't you go make sure we have enough candles for tomorrow's service," she sent the young woman off. "Please sit and rest. Can I get anyone something to drink or eat?"

Three heads shook.

Crow slowly sat down, her knees giving a loud crack. And then with a sigh, she sat. "It's hell getting old," she said, simply.

Selene took a seat next to Nix, taking a large hand in her own for strength and support.

Willow nodded. "Something that we will all experience, I fear. Before you go, let me give you some herbs that may help with your back. Now, what is this about Cassia getting married?"

"She thinks she's in love with Sable and wants to marry her." Selene looked genuinely upset at the idea.

"Sable's a mooncalf. And even if Cassia wasn't going to be queen, I wouldn't want her to marry that girl," Nix broke in.

"Is it possible that she is in love with her?" Willow folded her hands on the table top, not voicing her own opinion of Sable.

"She's a big walking hormone, she's a teenager, and of course Cassia thinks she's in love with this Sable," Crow said reasonably. "But the problem is that, from what I understand, Sable would be a pretty poor choice as a co-ruler. Because we have more than the whim of a young woman, we have the future of the north to consider."

"If I thought for an instant that Sable would make her happy, I wouldn't be this upset about it," Selene chimed in, hoping her friend saw how bad an idea Sable was.

Willow considered the three of them then nodded, sighing. "If she were any other girl I could try to put off the ceremony until they were older. I assume Sable's parents are pushing for this to go forward?"

"Of course, they think it's great." Nix also was quite aware of the fact that Sable's mothers had been good friends with Laurel. "They have this notion of how a Queen should be. They've been quite vocal of their opinion of the beastly smith who dared to rise above what is respectable," Nix said with disdain.

Selene just gripped Nix's hand tighter at that, having heard those opinions as well.

"You look like someone with a plan over there, old woman," Willow nodded towards Crow, grinning at being able to get away with calling her that after her earlier comment about getting old.

Crow made a face. "Watch it, priestess, I can still pick you up and throw you over my shoulder." She tried to be menacing, but failed. "Yes, I think the solution is a series of tasks, or trials. That

way once completed, no one will worry about a woman who wishes to be a...um..." she frowned, looking for a word, "a consort, a Rezan," she smiled, that was a good word, "who wishes to be the Queen's Rezan. It will prove devotion and loyalty."

"And you want me, as High Priestess, to give my blessing to these trials?"

Three heads nodded.

"Who would you have design these trials?" She looked to Crow, giving no indication if she agreed or not with the idea.

Crow looked at Nix and Selene.

"The head families," Selene spoke up. "That way none of them can disagree with who gets chosen if they all had a hand in shaping the trials."

Nix nodded, "That sounds fair. But this isn't open for anyone, just by doing the trial doesn't make you this Rezan. I don't want to force a marriage on my daughter."

Willow considered the idea, finally nodding in assent. "For the good of the future, I will agree. Although I'm not personally comfortable with making someone prove that they love Cassia enough to be with her by going through whatever evil trials you and the others can come up with. Cassia has to agree to whoever attempts the trials, and the rules must be made clear to all before the trials begin, so no one can complain of favoritism."

Nix nodded, biting her lower lip in thought. "It's a tough call, the heart of a young woman or the security of a whole land of people. Unless someone can propose something better, I agree with Crow's idea of the trials."

She wished she had a better idea, but Selene didn't have one. "I'm for it as well."

The priestess bowed her head. "So be it. I'll publicly support it. You do realize we might be setting a precedent here. All Queens' consorts, or Rezan's, might end up having to go through this."

"Would that be such a horrible thing," Selene asked, smiling towards her own mate, "might stop people from complaining?"

"Hopefully they will take it with the heart it is intended, only to prove merit, heart, and metal," Crow said. "Those who rule can not have the same comforts that others have. Was not Selene attacked by an ex-lover, but by a God as well? Unconsciously, I would say Nix proved herself to the Queen and its people."

#####

Cassia tossed and turned in her bed, sighing as the straw shifted under the thicker blanket that was used to hold it down. She heard rumors that the women in the south used feathers to make their beds from. How, she wondered, would sleeping on that feel like; certainly not as lumpy?

With one last disgusted sigh, she flung aside her blanket and got up. Apparently she didn't want to sleep quite yet. The house was silent at this time of night, Selene and Nix having gone to bed hours before.

Getting up, she carefully moved to the single window in her bedroom, careful to avoid any of the creaky floorboards. Sneaking out was something she was an old hand at by now. It took a careful amount of pressure to open the window without causing noise.

Then she had to perch on the window frame and stretch out her leg to catch the nearby tree limb. After, it was a shove and she was in the tree, clinging on tightly before shimmying down it towards the grass below.

With a muffled oof she dropped from the lowest branch onto the grass of the side yard of the smithy. She paused there, ears straining to hear any movement inside the house to indicate she'd been discovered.

Crow, snoring softly, was bedded down by the hearth, the warmth from the still hot embers making her back feel wonderfully relaxed for a change. She snorted as she heard Cassia land outside, but didn't bother to get up. Either the girl was sneaking out to see her girlfriend or to the barn behind the house to see Moriko. She was happy to see the girls had gotten over their differences.

At dinner the two had been civil, almost friendly, and she could only hope that Yuri's shy eldest had made a friend. She felt bad for the girl, knowing that her parents were putting pressure on her to take on more and more responsibilities that, in all honesty, Pax and Yuri should be doing. However, things were what they were, and hopefully Yuri and Pax would ride out this rough patch in their relationship.

With a quiet sigh she rolled over, snuggling under the blanket and enjoying being warm. Perhaps she would stay here with the Runt from now on and sit by the fire and tell rambling, pointless stories to whoever would listen.

Outside the house, Cassia relaxed when she didn't hear any movement from inside. Her blood pumping, as it always did when she snuck out, the teen started towards the path that would lead around the barn and towards the houses beyond. She'd snuck out often over the past few months to go see Sable.

This time, though, her feet slowed as she passed the barn. Without thinking why, she stepped inside, trying to see in the dim moonlight for Moriko. The other girl had insisted she was going to sleep in the barn.

Two shaggy Alcen heads rose up over their enclosure, their liquid brown eyes staring at her before going back to munching on some feed. From the third stall came the sound of light snoring. Moriko was curled up in a bed of straw in a little nest she had made with several blankets. Talon stood on a beam above her, watching everything in the moonlight.

Cassia crept closer, scratching one of the Alcen's on the nose as she passed. Creeping up to the edge of the stall, the blonde whispered, "Moriko?" She called a little louder, "Hey, you awake?" to the snoring woman.

The young woman shot up, her blonde hair wild with bits of straw stuck in it. "I'm sorry. I overslept. I'll get right on my chores," she mumbled out, her eyes not quite open.

"Hey, it's just me." Cassia stepped closer, worried. "I'm sorry. It's still night."

A brown eye cracked open. "Huh? What?" She rubbed her eyes and the blur in front of her took on a shape. "Oh, hey," she grinned, recognizing Cassia in the dim light of the barn. She frowned, realizing it was still night. "Is-is-is everything okay?"

"Yeah..." The other woman rocked back and forth at the edge of the stall, looking worried. This obviously had been a bad idea. "Sorry, I didn't...I mean, I shouldn't have woken you up. I'll go."

Moriko snorted. "Well, I'm up now. So don't just leave." She patted the blanket-covered straw next to her. "What's up?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to share the condition?" Cassia smiled hopefully. She felt like an idiot for waking the other girl up. "You could go back to sleep if you want," she said, climbing up onto the straw.

Moriko just shrugged. "So why couldn't you sleep?" She struggled in the straw for a moment then got comfortable with her back resting against the sideboards.

Flopping down onto the straw with the boneless grace of youth, Cassia squirmed around until she found a comfortable spot staring up at the ceiling above her. "I don't know, couldn't get comfortable, I guess."

Moriko looked at the young princess for a moment before standing up, brushing the straw out of her hair, and held out a hand. "Come on, let's go somewhere with a better view than the ceiling."

The younger girl grabbed the offered hand, getting pulled to her feet. "What did you have in mind?"

"Come on. You'll see." She led Cassia up the ladder to where the straw was kept above the stalls. Then, being young and spry, they were easily able to scrabble out and up to the roof of the barn. Overhead, the moon and the stars twinkled. Moriko laid back on the cool wood of the roof. "That

is what I call a better view."

"You're right, it is." Cassia stretched out on the roof, cradling her head in her folded hands. "I used to love laying in the backyard and watching the stars. Selene used to tell me stories about all of the constellations in the sky."

"My Muanya would sit with me at night under the stars when I was little and make up stories. My mother Yuri has never been that fond of the sky, she says it scares her, all that emptiness spanning on forever. Maybe that's why they love their mines so much." She shrugged. "I've always found it peaceful."

"Yeah, Nix never really liked staring up at the sky either, my Muanya said it used to remind her of when she was young and her mother told her stories of a better place." The younger woman let her head shift sideways so she could see Moriko's outline in the starlight. "Can you keep a secret?"

Moriko nibbled on her top lip for a moment. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked after a while of pretending to watch the stars.

Cassia burst out, laughing as the two of them asked the same question at the same time, almost. "I promise to never tell your secret if you promise to do the same with mine?"

Moriko nodded seriously. "I would never tell a secret. Well, unless it was a bad secret and someone's life was in danger." Her face had an utterly earnest look to it.

With the same earnest look on her face, Cassia extended the pinky on her left hand. "Shake on it?"

Moriko grinned and extended her pinky as well. "So what's this terrible secret the princess of the north has?" She grinned to show she was teasing.

The younger woman looked around, making sure that no one was around to hear. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, "I like buildings."

Moriko snorted, "Who doesn't. Their warmer than tents, and they keep the rain and the snow out."

Cassia laughed, swatting the other girl on the arm. "No. That's not what I meant. I mean, I like drawing them and drawing new ones that haven't been built yet. I keep thinking of all these different things that could be built that could be so much nicer than what we have so far." She paused, biting her lip to see what Moriko would think. Sable had laughed the last time Cassia had started to talk about buildings.

"Sounds like the north will have some nice new buildings once you're Queen," Moriko said, simply. "I'm jealous. I can't draw at all."

"I'm not really good with drawing people or sunsets or things like that." Cassia leaned back, glad that the night was hiding her blush. She didn't know what she had expected, but this outright acceptance wasn't it. "What was your secret?"

Moriko stared straight up into the night sky. "I'm not going back with Crow, when she decides it's time to return."

Cassia rolled onto her side towards Moriko in surprise at that. "What? You aren't going back home, why not?"

She blew out a breath she didn't realize she was holding. "Because..." It seemed silly now. "I'm tired of sleeping in the barn. I'm tired of taking care of my sisters and house. I'm tired of being the adult." She said the last part quietly. She could feel Cassia's eyes on her, but she was scared to look.

The younger girl was silent, not sure what to say to that. Instead, she reached over and took the other girl's hand, squeezing her fingers. "You could stay here. I'm sure there wouldn't be a problem with it. Mother already loves you since you cut the firewood."

"That would be nice." She gently squeezed back. "I like your mothers, they seem nice, and despite Selene being Queen, she makes time for you."

Cassia snorted and looked back up to the sky above them. A streak of light caught her eye and she smiled as a shooting star crossed the night sky. "Selene's not bad, but I can't seem to talk to her or mother anymore. We only get into fights."

Moriko snorted. "That's not fighting. My parents fight; they scream and yell and stomp off in huffs. They love us and each other, but it seems like they forgot how to show it."

"They yell at each other?" Cassia looked over at that, blinking. "I think I only remember one time when my mothers got that angry and I started that."

"Yeah, they forget when they yell at each other everyone can hear them. Yuri was in love with Selene, and my Muanya knows it. It makes her feel insecure, and Yuri forgets that and acts stupid. Then they fight. My Muanya freaks out now when Yuri even looks at another woman." She shrugged and was reminded they were still holding hands. Blushing, she let go.

"Yuri met Selene here in Nix's smithy, and it was love at first sight, according to my mother. According to Crow, Selene only had eyes for Nix, and Yuri never had a chance." She stretched her long arms and legs across the roof wood, before settling back down.

"After your mothers were married, Yuri met my Muanya when she was bringing some ore down. She was having trouble with an Alcen and my Muanya stepped in to help, which was good since Alcens and my mother don't mix." She snorted. Yuri was hopeless with any animal.

"So you take after your mother?" Cassia propped her head up on one hand so she could look at her new acquaintance. "I've never met anyone who's so good with animals before. You should try to teach others. I'm sure people would love to learn how to handle animals like that."

"I have a little bit." She shrugged, bashful at the praise, and yawned. "It's not that hard, you treat the animal well and it will want to please you."

"People are like that too," Cassia murmured, her eyes slipping closed a little as she lay on the roof. It was a nice night, even if it was a bit cool out. Her insomnia from earlier had fled and she smiled sleepily.

Moriko sat up and poked Cassia. "You should keep that in mind. Come on...let's climb down before we fall asleep."

She groaned in protest, but sat up as well. "Are you saying I'm not nice to people?" Her attempt to sound upset was hampered by a yawn midway through her question.

"You weren't the first time we met." The other girl grinned to take away the sting of her words. "But you're getting better."

Cassia had the good graces to look ashamed. "Sorry. I was being a bit of a brat, wasn't I?"

"A bit..." She held up a thumb and index finger to show how much then swung down onto the hayloft.

Letting out an annoyed huff, the younger girl followed her down into the hay. "You aren't going to let me get away with anything, are you?"

"Hey, I could treat you like my Alcens when they misbehave. Trust me, I'm being nice."

Eyeing her warily, Cassia followed her down into the main stable area. "What do you do to your Alcens when they misbehave?"

"Depends on what they do. Normally it's a smack on the nose. Since it's sensitive, they don't like that. If they do something that endangers a life, I might have to use a crop on them." She didn't really like that, but her mother could not take a chance on selling an Alcen that might try and kill someone with one of its horns.

"A crop?" blue eyes widened. "No using a crop on me. I'll fight back," she huffed, flopping down on the blankets that Moriko had been using as a bedroll in the hay.

She laughed, "You think they don't." She walked over and began to pet one of the Alcens, scratching its nose, and pointed out its big horns. "Those really hurt."

"Yeah, but I scratch, scream, and may bite." Cassia yawned again, snuggling down into the blanket. "Besides, I could get people to beat you up if you try," she muttered sleepily.

Moriko walked over to the yawning Cassia, leaned over, and smacked her lightly on the nose. "That wasn't very nice. You'll have people beat me up. I haven't done anything."

She flopped on to her bedroll, yawning.

The younger girl yelped in surprise, glaring at the other girl. She sighed and pulled the blanket up over her to ward off the chill. "I guess that was mean of me, huh?"

"Not mean, so much as thoughtless. Hey, don't you have your own bed with blankets in the house," Moriko grumbled as her blanket was stolen.

"Comfy," Cassia mumbled, using her arm as a pillow and closing her eyes, "night."

"What?" the blonde grumped at the two Alcens looking over their stalls at her.

#####

Nix frowned and stomped around the house. "She's not here again. She snuck out. I thought things were better. She was civil at dinner," she muttered to her audience of Crow, who wisely said nothing.

"Good morning." Selene came down the stairs from the second floor. "Hi, Crow, did you sleep well?" The shorter woman paused to give her wife a hug and a morning kiss before seeing what they had for breakfast.

Crow noticed Selene coming down the stairs and chose to flee. "Slept great, how about I go get some eggs?" she muttered and flew outside as fast as her aching bones would let her. She frowned thinking she had been wrong and the girl had gone off to find Sable.

Selene looked up at Nix in confusion as the older woman fled the room. "What's wrong with Crow?"

Nix returned the kiss. "The little one escaped again last night. I'm thinking I should chain her to the bed at night."

The shorter woman sighed and shook her head. "She's getting really good at that. Neither of us heard her this time." Letting go of her wife, Selene moved to the cupboards to start fixing something for breakfast.

Nix just shrugged and began poking the belly of the oven she had made three years ago, until she got a fire started. "What really gets me is that we had a nice dinner last night. She was actually

sitting at the table with us."

#####

Outside in the barn, Cassia grumbled and pulled the blanket up over her head to block out the annoying light that was threatening to make her wake up. She didn't want to wake up, she was comfortable and nice and warm.

Crow could see perfectly inside the still dark barn, and her eyes twinkled in merriment. "Now this is an interesting picture."

"Go away," Cassia mumbled, blonde hair mussed up with bits of straw sticking out of it, waving her hand in the general direction of the annoying noise.

An unintelligible sound emerged from the pile of hay, and one eye cracked open to stare blearily up at the figure in the doorway. "Crow?" she yawned. "It's too early. Can't I just go back to sleep?"

"Nope," the older woman said. "You know, it's a good thing I came out here. I don't think your mothers would like you sleeping in the barn with some girl."

"What?" Cassia sat upright when she realized where she was and why she itched in odd places. A quick check confirmed that she was indeed in the barn still. She'd never slept in the barn before. "Moriko?" she looked around for the other girl.

Moriko let out a string of nonsensical words and rolled over taking the blanket they were sharing with her.

"Wow, you really must have kept her up late, she never sleeps past breakfast," Crow said with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

Cassia blushed hard. "We didn't do anything! I don't even like her like, well, like that." She stood up hurriedly, straw sticking everywhere. "We just talked on the roof." She paused. "Are my parents up?"

"Yep, ankle biter, they are. I think the Runt is a little hurt 'cause she thinks you snuck out again. But she's hiding her hurt by being mad," Crow replied in warning so that the girl wouldn't get blindsided when she went inside.

The youngster grimaced. This was going to be horrible. "I better go inside before she gets really mad and gets Selene all upset also. If they're both angry, it's going to be impossible."

The nearest Alcen gave a bleating hoot of annoyance at not having been fed yet and stomped a foot. Moriko quickly sat up, her eyes not even open. She rubbed her sleep-crusted eyes, and half-asleep, got up and started getting the feed ready.

Crow just watched with amusement. "Look at that, boy is she housebroken." She turned her attention back to Cassia. Reaching down, she helped the girl up. "Probably a good idea...oh, and grab some eggs, I'll just tell your folks you beat me to it this morning."

"Eggs, right." Cassia couldn't help but laugh at the sleepy look on Moriko's face as she started to give the Alcen's their feed. "Morning, Moriko," she called, heading for the smaller chicken coop by the side of the barn.

"Morning," the girl responded automatically. One of the Alcens tried to shove her out of the way to get at its feed, and she lightly smacked it on the nose. With a bleat of protest, it backed off. Now a little more awake, she blinked and looked around the barn, catching Cassia coming from the back carrying eggs. "Are we in trouble?"

The girl shrugged, risking a glance at her aunt Crow to try and judge how bad it might actually be inside. "I don't know. But I'm bringing a gift," she held up the basket of eggs.

"Not if you don't hurry up. But next time you want to sneak out for a little fun, try to make it back to your own bed," Crow said opening the door.

Moriko gave a pat to the Alcens' then ran after Crow and Cassia.

"Aunt Crow," Cassia groaned, "we weren't having fun...wait, we were having fun, but not that kind of fun!"

"Uh huh," was all Crow said.

Crow stepped inside with a grin. "Hey, look who I found getting us some eggs for breakfast?"

Selene looked up from the bread she was seeing to and smiled, looking relieved as she spotted Cassia. "There you are. See, she even got us eggs this morning, Nix."

Nix was still frowning, but it looked like it wanted to turn into a smile. "Um, well, um...thanks, pumpkin." She flushed remembering how Cassia hated being called that now. "I mean, uh, thanks."

Ducking under Crow's arm, which was holding the door open, Cassia offered the basket of eggs to Nix with a smile. "Here, there were a few this morning. Moriko's going to eat breakfast with us also, right?" She let the pumpkin thing slide for now.

"Of course she can eat with us, if she wants to," Selene called from where she was building up the fire in the stove Nix had built for them years ago. She rather hoped the young woman would relax a bit and not be as painfully shy as she had been the last time she'd seen her.

Nix blinked, somewhat shocked at the lack of outburst and the lack of mentioning anything about

Sable. "Sit, Moriko, we don't bite."

The young woman fidgeted then carefully sat down at the table. It was odd being in this house, there was some tension, but nothing like at her house, and it was warm and inviting. "Th-thank you..."

Crow laughed...a loud sound that startled nearly everything. "She's not so shy once she gets used to you. Then you can't get her to be quiet."

Moriko flushed, "Crow, that's not true."

"Aunt Crow, you're being mean," Cassia frowned at the older woman, then, to Selene's surprise, started to set the table without having been asked to do it. She exchanged a surprised look with Nix then set about making an omelet with the eggs that Cassia had brought in.

"I'm not being mean, ankle biter. I'm just tweaking her a bit, kind of like I do with you." The large woman sat down gently next to the blushing blonde.

"You can't talk more than Cassia does when she gets excited over something." Selene decided that some gentle teasing was in order. "Like that time she managed to make her first piece in the forge. I think she talked about it for two weeks straight."

"Really..?" Moriko asked. "I didn't know you worked metal like your mother. What did you make?"

The young woman could feel herself flushing as she realized that everyone in the room was watching her closely for her response. Risking a glance up at her mother, she dared meet Nix's eyes only for a moment. "Mother helped, I mean, she made most of it herself. I wasn't old enough to do it myself, but I helped make the door knocker outside to replace the old wooden one we had."

"She's being modest. She told me what she wanted to do and I just helped her lift the hammer and such," Nix broke in, her face beaming with pride.

"Really, you made the knocker on the door? It looks nice. You're lucky to have an important skill like that," Moriko said shyly.

"Mother..." Cassia sighed, in the way that only teenagers could mix a warning and disparaging comment in one, then turned and smiled widely at Moriko. "Thanks." Seeing that Selene was almost done with the eggs, she shot up off her seat to go grab the clay dishes. In record time the breakfast had been split up evenly and placed at each of the settings on the table.

Smiling with amusement at the human tornado, Selene paused to press a kiss to Nix's temple then took a seat next to her at the table.

"Th-thanks for breakfast, um..." Moriko hesitated, not certain how to address the Queen.

"My name is Selene, dear." The other woman picked up her wooden utensils and started to eat.
"Would you like some tea?"

"I'll get it!" Cassia stood up, nearly knocking over her chair to grab the tea pot and pour some for Moriko before she could even answer. "Did you know Moriko has a falcon that follows her around?"

Nix met Selene's eyes and gave a little grin, which she quickly hid, "Really, a falcon?"

Their daughter nodded, quickly finishing a mouthful of omelet so she could talk. "I've never seen a falcon come to someone like that. She has this leather thing on her arm that he lands on, and he comes to her whenever she calls him."

Selene ate at a more leisurely pace, using the act of eating to hide the grin that she was having more trouble hiding than Nix.

Moriko's cheeks were quickly dusted with a faint blush. "Um, yes, he's a black-tailed hawk. I've had him since he was a baby. He fell out of his nest, and the mother wouldn't take him back, so I raised him." She tried to think of something to deflect the conversation from herself.

"I think it's still amazing that you made the door knocker, to have a skill like that to make things. It's just..." As her mother pointed out on several occasions, it was best if she stood away from fire. She didn't have any skill, be it with metal or making food, her and fire didn't get along.

"It's just neat," she finished quietly, embarrassed she was gushing and everybody at the table seemed to be looking at her funny.

The young girl lowered her eyes to study the tabletop in front of her. "I like working in the forge, but it's not what I want to do for the rest of my life," she whispered, not daring to look up and see Nix's face. To see the disappointment she was sure was going to be clear in her mother's expression.

This was the first time she'd said such a thing clearly, instead of during the heat of an argument.

Very carefully, Selene avoided making any sort of sound or letting any expression cross her face as she reached over to take Nix's hand. This was the closest to an actual conversation that the family had had in what felt like forever. She just hoped that her lover would answer calmly and not act hastily.

Nix's eyes left Moriko's form and switched to Cassia, hurt by the statement. Deep inside she knew Cassia wouldn't follow in her footsteps, but still, to have it out in the open, it did hurt her. She felt Selene take her hand and felt somewhat lighter. "I know," she said it quietly, almost as if she forced it out. "It's okay." It wasn't, but it would be someday.

The big woman suddenly didn't have much of an appetite. "Gina's youngest will be up within the week to start her apprenticeship with me." Her watery blue eyes were fixed firmly on her plate. To have said it out loud made it so real.

"I'm sorry!" Cassia did look up at that, tears forming in her eyes at the calm words from her mother. Somehow they were worse than anything Nix could have shouted. "I tried." Tears gathered and two course down over her cheeks.

Moriko felt like she was intruding and seriously wanted to be any place other than here at the moment. Her own eyes were fascinated by the patterns she was making with her eggs. Crow poked her hard and she looked up and the older woman gestured for them to go outside. Quietly as they could, they left the table.

Next to Nix, Selene watched them go with a feeling of relief. She couldn't have asked them to leave, not politely anyway, but this was a conversation to be had with family members only.

Nix finally looked up. "Cassia, you have nothing to be sorry for. I guess I'm sorry if I made you feel like I had all these expectations to follow after me. I just, I just thought you liked spending time in the forge with me. Then one day you just stopped speaking to me and doing your chores..." She blew out a breath, probably a good thing, 'cause she wanted to end with, 'and you started acting like a spoiled brat'. That would just send them backwards.

Her daughter leapt from her chair, moving to take the chair that Crow had sat in next to where Nix sat, tears freely flowing down her cheeks. "I like being with you. I loved spending time in the forge. I thought I wanted to be a smith." She had dreamed of taking over the forge when she was young.

"But then I couldn't...there was so much more I wanted to do." She knew she was explaining it badly, but it was so hard. She felt like her heart was breaking it was so full with sadness at the expression on her mother's face. "Do you hate me?" she cried, fearing the answer.

Nix laughed, a few tears streaking down her face. "No, pumpkin, I don't hate you. You're our daughter, your Muanya and I love you very much. I will admit I haven't been very happy with you skipping out on your chores and running around like some moonstruck calf. The sneaking out has given us more gray hair, I think, but I don't think I've behaved much better on occasion." It was hard to admit, but blowing her stack at Cassia had probably made it worse.

The tears calmed to a few sniffles, and a bashful look came over the young girl at the mention of her chores and running around. "Both of you don't like Sable much, do you?"

Nix went quiet. After a moment, she managed to say something. "Um...well...I like her fine."

Her wife laughed a little at her answer, grinning fondly at their daughter and her wife. "No, I

don't think we can say that we are very happy with the thought of you marrying Sable."

"Actually, I don't think we like the idea of you marrying at all yet, you seem so young, pumpkin. There's so much to learn and experience. It's a huge new world, and we don't even know the half of what is out there." Nix looked at her daughter carefully, to see if they were on the verge of a blow up.

Cassia drew in a breath to immediately start arguing then forced herself to let it go. She couldn't just keep on yelling at her parents every time they said something she didn't like. "I still like Sable." She folded her hands over her chest, daring them to argue about that.

Nix blew out a breath. "Why don't we stop while we are all ahead? I feel a lot better and closer to my most favorite women than I have in a while, and perhaps we should take some time and think about all this."

"Truce..?" Cassia smiled.

Nix grinned and looked at her partner before back at the young woman in front of her, "Truce."

"Good. Now that you two have settled that, you can both do the dishes." Selene kissed Nix's cheek then Cassia's.

Nix rolled her eyes and got up from the table. "I'll do the dishes. Go have fun for today, but tomorrow, no more slacking on your chores. It was nice of Moriko to pitch in, but it's not her job."

Cassia rolled her eyes in an exact imitation of her mother. "I can dry then I'll go have fun."

Nix didn't argue, "Fair enough."

#####

Moriko was brushing down Ruger, the huge male Alcen she had raised from a fawn. He stomped his feet and tried to act annoyed, but she knew he was loving it.

"Excuse me!"

Moriko knew she wasn't going to like whoever was attached to that voice.

She turned her head away from her task, "Um, y-y-yes."

The young girl snorted in annoyance. "Who are you? And what are you doing in the royal stable? And you should address me as Lady Sable, and put a bow in it if you're capable."

Moriko bit her lip to refrain from saying anything too nasty, and turned back to her chores. So

that was Sable. She was a twit. "Cassia is in the house."

"Cassia is in the house...Lady Sable," Sable tried to correct. After a moment of silence being her only response, she stomped her foot and left for the house.

In a huff she marched up to the house. That girl was just so...rude, yes rude. Why was she here? Had the royal family finally hired a servant? She reached the house and knocked politely at the door, plastering a smile on her face. Her mothers had reamed her out good for her little stunt yesterday. They had told her to make up and agree to the stupid tasks and they would make sure she passed at any cost.

#####

It had been a nice morning, although Cassia didn't like crying in front of her parents. She'd enjoyed feeling close to her mothers again though. They'd cleaned up after breakfast, teasing one another and laughing like old times. No mention was made of the smithy or any potentially explosive topic. Soon afterwards, Nix had gone out to the smithy and Selene had to go to meet with some of the women who had come in from over the southern pass.

Humming to herself, Cassia hurried downstairs from her room where she'd been sketching some new ideas and opened the door. "You don't have to knock..." she trailed off, having expected it to be Moriko at the door. Instead, it was Sable. "Hi," she said awkwardly.

Sable pouted. "You're still mad at me, aren't you?" She even worked up a few tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry about how I acted yesterday. But you can't blame me, it did come out of nowhere, and why should we have to prove our love to your parents," she continued barely taking a breath.

The taller girl couldn't stay angry at Sable when she produced a few tears and looked up at her like that. "I know it was sudden, I'm sorry. But even Willow is saying that you would have to go through the trials."

Sable sighed. "Okay." She paused to think of the words her mothers had told her to say. "If that's what it will take to get your mothers to like me, I'll do them."

There was a hint of doubt in Cassia's mind. Sable had seemed so very vocal yesterday about never doing any sort of trial. "Are you sure?" she frowned a little.

"Of course, I want to be Queen to your Queen. I just needed some time to think." She leaned in and kissed Cassia's lips, a little concerned at the lukewarm response.

The kiss was as nice as it had always been, and Cassia relaxed into it. "Will I see you tonight?"

Sable grinned, that was more like it. "Of course...the usual spot?"

The other girl nodded, smiling. "See you then."

"Oh, did your family finally get a servant?" Sable asked.

"What?" Cassia leaned out the door to see who she was talking about, frowning again. "No, that's Moriko."

Moriko was heading up towards the well when she spied the young couple in the doorway to the house, a frown spread out over her face. She pointedly ignored them and walked past to the well to draw water for the Alcen. She was beginning to like Cassia, but she wasn't sure she could stand her being with that twit.

Sable blinked. "Oh, well, she's very rude. I'll see you later." She gave Cassia another kiss, this one a little more intense to make sure the girl was focused on her. She didn't like the way she was familiar with this Moriko.

She left Cassia to stand in the doorway, frowning as she watched her girlfriend leave. Why did it bother her that Sable thought Moriko was rude and had insinuated she was a servant? Cassia herself had done almost the same not too long ago.

Moriko walked past and stopped suddenly as Sable nearly ran into her. Water slopped over the sides of the rough wooden bucket and on to her pants and boots.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" Sable yelled.

Moriko simply gritted her teeth and said nothing, just turned and went back to the well for water.

"Sorry about that," a quiet voice said from not far away, as Cassia walked towards the well. "She's just..." Cassia paused, not sure what words to use to describe Sable.

Moriko stayed silent, and drew up another bucket of water. Turning, she looked at Cassia for a second. "Last night you asked me if this Sable loved you. I told you I didn't know. Now, I'm only going to tell you what I think once, and then unless you truly want my honest opinion, we won't speak of it again. She loves only the idea of you." She walked past the princess back to the barn.

Her short conversation with Sable let her know that the twit loved only the idea of being Lady Sable.

The other teen trailed along behind her into the barn, the frown deepening. "But that means that she kind of loves me, doesn't it?"

Moriko shrugged, "I guess." She poured the water into the trough and rubbed Ruger's nose before letting him drink.

Cassia jumped up onto one of the piles of hay to watch the other teen rub the nose of the Alcen.

"My mothers like you." She decided to change the topic. "Nix said it was nice for you to pitch in, but it's not your job. You don't have to do chores. I do."

Moriko smiled. "Well, seeing as the Alcens are mine, I think I'm doing my chores." She set the bucket down and went into the empty stall she was using and looked for her pack. Wet boots and trousers spun with Alcen hair were really uncomfortable.

With a huff, Cassia flopped backwards onto the pile of hay to stare up at the roof above her to give the other girl some privacy. "Well, I guess that's all the chores you need to do."

She started to take off her boots, hopping around a bit and almost falling over, but finally got them off. The trousers were a bit easier. With a sigh of relief, she hung the wet pants over the stall door and pulled out a clean pair and put them on. "Yeah, at least your chores don't include taking care of something that poops." Rose, the smaller female Alcen, looked up at her mistress and gave a hoot of displeasure. "Well, you do," she muttered at the beast.

The other teen laughed at the interaction between the handler and her animal. With a mischievous smile, she got up onto her knees and crept up to the stall. Peering between the wooden boards, she picked up a pile of the hay she'd been laying on and tossed it over the top of the stall.

"Hey!" Moriko squawked indigently, her hands holding up her trousers while she tried to tie the simple braided belt. Taking a breath she blew straw out of her face.

Laughter came from the other stall, swiftly followed by another shower of straw that rained down from above. "You having problems over there?"

In a second, she finished tying her belt, and with quick steps, she was out the stall door and running into the other empty stall. "That wasn't very nice." She scooped up some clean hay and tossed it at the girl.

The laughter turned into a shriek as Moriko moved faster than Cassia had expected and she got straw flung at her. "No fair!" She tried to back up, but the stall was only so big. In desperation, she started to fling hay back at the other girl, and suddenly, the air was filled with flying straw.

Moriko laughed and tackled Cassia into the hay. "Let this be a lesson not to start things you can't finish." She had four sisters, so she doubted there was a move or dirty trick she hadn't encountered. "Let's see if you're ticklish." Her hands started on Cassia's sides, looking for a ticklish spot.

#####

Nix came out of her shop after hearing what sounded like Cassia shouting. Crow waved her off from where she'd been enjoying the sunshine in the courtyard.

"They're just playing," Crow nodded. "Moriko wouldn't hurt a fly." She smiled, "Hear that? That's Moriko's laugh. I haven't heard that in a while. So just go back to work and let the girls have their fun."

Nix sighed, but went back inside.

#####

The shrieks turned louder and shriller, "N-no!" Cassia laughed, struggling to get away from the probing fingers. "I give up! I give up!" she struggled to yell between bouts of laughter, squirming in the pile of hay.

Moriko laughed and stopped only when Cassia threatened to pee on her. She flopped down into the hay. "For a Princess, you're pretty strong."

That earned the other girl a punch to the arm from the still laughing Cassia, her face red from the tickling. "And you aren't very nice," she retorted jokingly.

The blonde rolled her eyes, "I haven't dunked you in the trough, so I'm being very nice."

"You wouldn't dare!" It was the wrong thing to say, and Cassia knew it the second the words left her mouth. Eyes wide, she sprung to her feet, frantically backing away from the other girl. "You wouldn't dunk me in the water, right?"

Moriko made no move to get up. "Not right now. This is my only other pair of trousers, I'm not getting them wet, 'cause Alcen wool is horribly scratchy when wet. And I'm not walking around naked. I think your moms would not like me very much if I did that."

She sighed happily, and couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed like that.

Not quite trusting that the other girl wasn't going to make a move, Cassia stayed where she was, standing at the edge of the stall door. "That's the only other pair of trousers you have?" She frowned. "We should go shopping." Her comment brought a glint of excitement to her eyes. "We could go find you at least another pair of trousers that's not made from Alcen hair."

Moriko frowned and picked at some straw on her chest. "I can't afford to go shopping." She didn't have any money, and nothing, really, to barter with.

Cassia moved closer, holding out her hand. "Come on, it will be fun. I have some money that we can use. My mothers give me an allowance; well, they did when I was doing my chores."

The other girl looked unsure. "I don't know. You don't need to spend your money on me."

"I don't need to, but I want to. Please?" Cassia tried out her best smile, the one she used whenever

she was trying to get something out of either Nix or Selene.

"Sure."

There was another mischievous glint in Cassia's eyes. Grabbing the other girl's hand, she pulled her up and towards the door to the barn. "I know just the places to go try on some pairs."

#####

Keshet stifled a sigh as her advisor droned on and on about the northern royal family. She was prudent enough not to ask how the woman knew all the dirty laundry going on in a fledging city miles from them, or why it mattered so much. In all honesty, she wasn't that brave a woman. Her partner had been the brave one, the warrior; she was merely an ex-pleasure slave who fell in love with the woman who would found the southern territories. Of course, the Followers of Armando would have a snit about that, they considered themselves the southern territories, and her territories the midlands, but it was her land now, and she would call it what Morgan had.

Her advisor, a gift from the Goddess of Shadows, was a scary woman. Not that the woman had ever done anything, it was just a feeling that she got. And Keshet was a woman who listened to her gut feelings. The advisor wore all black. Even her face was covered in black cloth, leaving only twin black pools that were her eyes, visible.

It was times like this that Keshet hated her partner for dying and leaving her this awful chore of running a kingdom; balancing loyalties between various gods and three petulant children. Actually, the eldest seemed like she had outgrown that phase and the twins. The twins, on the other hand, had their moments where she thought she might actually let them live to see twenty.

A creaking of leather behind her let her know it was Eira, a tall, whip-thin woman with the same unnerving black eyes as her advisor, and a hungry look that constantly sat upon her features. A look that was not helped by the severe bun she pulled her light brown hair into. Eira was a gift from the Temple of Shadows, a bodyguard for her and the children. One that Keshet didn't really want, but politically had to take - with a smile.

Utterly bored, her gaze strolled around the throne room, the comforting presence of her Guard Captain, Penka, and her hound Rage stood by the doorway shadowed by the newest chosen of Vladlin's Temple, Valdis, and her hound Wraith. Penka was imposing in her dark armor, almost frightful, but to the Queen, Penka was a soothing presence in the throne room. Valdis was average height, with white blonde hair and piercing blue eyes that seemed to miss nothing, and the new tattoos on her hands showed up easily on her pale skin. On top of each hand was a black paw print, showing her as a chosen of Vladlin, God of War and chaos.

Keshet's wandering mind snapped back to her advisor's words. "What was that? Selene's child is looking to get married?"

The advisor nodded. "But her parents have created some boundaries for marriage that is causing

some conflict in the royal family."

"And I'm caring about this private matter, why?"

The advisor fought to roll her eyes. "Well, you do have three available daughters. Who knows, if perhaps you took a visit up north to visit our cousins, maybe the Royal daughter would prefer one of your daughters instead? It would be a good political move."

Keshet frowned. "Brody is happily courting some girl from the plains, and I have no intention of getting in the middle of that. As for the twins, they're only sixteen, and aren't even capable of taking care of themselves, let alone to get married."

Under her black face cloth, the advisor gritted her teeth. The poison was supposed to have killed this stubborn bitch, not Morgan. Morgan had been easy to manipulate until she married Keshet. So her plan in the winter had been to poison Keshet with a poison that reproduced the effects of wet lung rot. But stupid Morgan had to eat the food off of Keshet's plate.

"Well, their daughter Cassia is only sixteen."

Keshet shuddered, "I feel for them."

"Yes, I'm sure you do. Anyway, I think it would be prudent if maybe you and your daughters went up there as a sign of good will. Introduce the twins to their royal cousin, so to speak. If there's a spark between one of them, so much the better, it would strengthen our ties to the north. Plus...it would give Brody a chance to cut her teeth on the throne, so to speak, without having you to fall back on."

Keshet mulled it over. The only good point to come out of all that crap, she thought, was in letting Brody have the reins, so to speak. "I will think on it," she replied dryly

For a moment the advisor looked like she would say more, but then merely bowed and left.

Keshet sat for a while in thought, life in the throne room moving around her. After a while she turned, looking at Eira. "Eira, I'll be fine for a moment. Why don't you go check on the twins, I'm still not real fond of their new guards."

For a moment she thought the tall bodyguard would argue, the woman looked a little offended, but thankfully in the end, bowed and strode off.

A happy sigh bubbled over her lips as the woman left, and slowly rose from the simple wooden throne Morgan had carved for her years ago. "Penka, Valdis," she commanded, "attend me, please."

In a second, the two warriors were at her side. "My Queen?" Penka asked with a slight bow.

"I am going for a walk in the garden, and you two shall be my temporary bodyguards."

The women nodded and followed their Queen.

Keshet loved the gardens. Morgan had wooed her here, and it still held happy memories. And this was where she felt the closest to her dead lover.

The two guards waited, knowing that when the Queen was ready, she would speak her mind.

After a minute, the Queen sat on a simple wooden bench, and the two guardswomen came to rest on either side of her. "I'm not sure why the advisor is pushing for a match between our two lands. The twins hardly seem the type to marry at this point. Her idea has some merit, just not the part on marriage..." Keshet trailed off, thinking.

Valdis felt awkward. She was new to this post, and unlike her mother, was not used to having the Queen ask things of her. She darted a look at her mother, who just stood stoically, not surprised at all.

Her mother's sweet quiet voice asked, "Something about this bothers you. Once you figure that out, you'll know what to do."

Keshet smiled. "I know what troubles me. It's what always troubles me...the advisor. I know she's up to something. She bares a great hatred of the northern territories, and this stinks of some plot. I refuse to be her pawn to continue her own private feud with the north. We have enough problems here with petty Lady's setting up little fiefdoms, ruling them no better than the lords who ruled them."

Penka merely grunted, knowing well her Queen's personal dislike of her subjects who set up brutal households. The Queen made it no secret that she had been a pleasure slave in a violent household before the exodus. As a soldier for the Royal family, she had been sent out to fight many a petty despot trying to take advantage in this new world they were creating. Morgan had won Queenship through violence and blood, as well as promises to the gods. Keshet was left to fulfill this burden.

The Queen stretched then stood, looking from one soldier to the other, their sleek fearsome frames panting at their feet. One older, with gray peppering her hair, and scars of battle worn proudly; the other young and unmarked, a sign of change coming; they would grow old and die, but they would continue. She turned away. "A vacation would be nice, and I have yet to make a trip to the north. Before I was pregnant, and Morgan went alone. Perhaps those wild barbarians will wear out the twins?"

Penka snorted. "That would be a miracle, my Queen, not a vacation."

"Too right, Captain, too right." She grinned for a moment before becoming all business. "Start planning, we must be prepared, my loyal advisor has a trick up her sleeve. One that I think I will

find no enjoyment in. You and Valdis will, of course, be joining us. Plan the rest accordingly. Don't forget Brody will need some muscle here as well."

Penka bowed, "It will be done. Valdis, attend the Queen."

Valdis nodded and followed the Queen.

#####

Keshet watched the twins squirm around in their saddles. Despite the early hour, they were alert and ready to go. She loved them dearly, although they tried her patience on a daily basis. They were both long and lean, their frames just starting to fill out, and both had Morgan's gray eyes. While Brody had her dark skin, the twins had dusky tan color to theirs, a combination of both parents.

Annoyed, she watched the other members of their traveling party fall into line. It was not the small little group she had originally planned on. Her advisor had insisted that Eira join them. Then the High priestesses from each temple had insisted that she take a representative from each one. Politically, she couldn't say no.

With a sigh, she looked over at Penka. "Can we go now?"

The Captain of the Guard hid a smile. "If you are ready, then we shall go."

The Queen nodded.

With a piercing whistle that got everyone's attention, they finally moved out.

#####

Vertag stretched her back, wincing at the soreness that pulled her muscles. With the end of summer in sight, all of the people of Abnoa were busy trying to pull in enough crops to endure the winter months ahead. Not for the first time, the gray-haired woman wished that they had something better to endure the harsh conditions that prevailed during the deep winter months, instead of the simple wooden houses they made do with now.

Waving to a party of women who were returning from hunting in the forest, she moved towards the communal kitchen hut. "Vertag!" a young voice called out, and she had to brace herself to catch the small form that flung itself at her.

Laughing, the older woman picked up the youngster and spun her around in the air as she had since she'd been born. "Hello, Melissa! What has you so excited today?" The youngster laughed happily at being twirled then tried to pretend to be all serious. "Mother sent me to tell you she saw horses coming towards us. Visitors!" the child was nearly vibrating with excitement.

"Visitors..?" Vertag ruffled the youngster's hair, her sister's child and dear to her heart. Shaking out dark brown hair that was almost always in a long ponytail, now streaked with gray, she changed course and headed towards the edge of the camp. "Go get some food, Melissa. I'll go find these visitors of yours."

#####

A messenger, fleet of foot, ran up the mountainous path. Abnoa pass was the gateway to the north, a territory that was somewhat of a mystery to those in the south. Her dark skin was flushed, her black, curly hair was plastered to her head, and her breath was labored, not used to the altitude. However, she kept going, her stride never slowing. She had a royal message, and she was proud to do her job.

The air was colder than she was used to, and she wished she had brought an over-tunic, but there was no use in wishing for things she didn't have. It was starting to grow dark, and she hoped she reached the settlement soon, unsure how she would find her way once it became full dark.

The trees were tall, and most of the landscape was unfamiliar. She was used to rich farmland and rain.

She heard a noise and gripped the leather hide scroll tighter, and fear made her legs run faster.

"Ho! Traveler!" the voice came from the source of that noise as someone tried to keep up with the sprinting woman through the dark trees.

The woman skidded to a halt, her chest heaved. "Who-who is there?" she gasped out.

It took Vertag a few seconds to catch up with her, and the older woman was breathing hard as she did. By the Goddess, whoever this was she moved fast! "My name is Vertag." She took several deep breaths, trying to calm her racing heart. Night would be on them soon, it was a miracle she'd seen the other woman at all through the trees.

The messenger blinked at the woman who just appeared out of the trees. "Are you with the settlement of Abnoa?"

Vertag grinned, moving closer so she could see the other woman clearly in the gathering twilight. "Yes I am." She studied the obviously younger woman.

The messenger sighed in relief. "I have been given the task of running a message ahead to the settlement of Abnoa."

She looked around, but saw no sign of a village or town, "Is it close? It is important I deliver it to the town's leader."

"You must be the mysterious visitors that I heard about." She gave a wry smile at that and motioned in the direction of the camp. "You can give me your message at camp if you want. The nights are getting cooler, and we have fire and food. You are welcome to share."

"Thank you, Vertag. It would be very nice to be warm. I did not think it would be this cold." She gave a small bow and followed the older woman.

Vertag laughed. "This isn't cold yet." She glanced over her shoulder as she led the way back towards the camp. "Do messengers have names?"

"Only when we are not Royal messengers... I am on duty, so my name doesn't matter, just my duty." It was true; names gave away too much, when the privacy of message might be at stake. It was easier to find a messenger if a name was leaked.

"A mystery woman..." Vertag gave that chuckle again as she started to walk again. "Welcome to Abnoa then, whatever your name is." Ahead of them, she could just make out the flickering light of the campfires between the tree trunks.

The older woman wondered what this messenger was as they emerged onto the edge of the camp. It had been built at the foot of the mountain pass, not far from a good source of water. But it was undeniably a bare place, with simple wooden cabins set around the perimeter, and a large dining hall that was used as a communal gathering place, in the center. Fires burned in a ring around the settlement to guide the hunters home, and keep the wild animals at bay.

Silently, the messenger sighed in pleasure as she sat on the ground next to the fire, once again she was warm. She knew she should stretch or her muscles would hurt, but she couldn't manage it at the moment. She looked up at the woman who had guided her. "So, who is your leader?" Once she was relieved of her burden, she could eat and drink.

Vertag grinned, crouching down next to the fire so that her features were in the light. "That would be me, I guess." Spotting movement, she called out. "Melissa, you better go tell your mother that I found our visitors. Get somebody to bring something warm from the kitchen for her as well." The youngster bobbed her head and scampered off into the darkness.

She broke the scroll with a happy grin and unrolled it. "From the southern Queen Keshet, Greetings to my northern sisters. I have sent this Royal Messenger ahead to give advanced warning. I'm bringing my twins, so you'll need it..." The messenger flushed at the informal language and faltered for a second before picking back up.

"I and a small party will be visiting the Northern territories, with my family and a few others I couldn't ditch due to politics. I look forward to finally visiting the north, and learning of my sisters, many of whom I have not seen since the Exodus. Please send notice on to your Queen Selene. I don't expect special treatment, but it would be nice to have a warm place to sleep. Sincerely, Queen Keshet..."

Vertag was chuckling before the messenger had even finished reading the scroll. "Ah! A woman I think I can get along with. I like the sound of this Queen Keshet." The northerner stretched her hands out to the fire as a different youngster shyly offered the messenger a bowl of hot venison stew.

"I'll send word through the pass to Selene. I'm sure she'll be happy to meet Keshet, and will find someplace warm for her to stay." Vertag wasn't one to mince words or try for flowery dispositions.

"Thank you. My name is Fleet. I chose my name because I was always a fast runner. I was but a small child during the Exodus, but thanks to kind women like you, I survived." She took the food and tasted it carefully. "This is nice...different, but not bad."

The older woman's smile widened at that and held out her hand. "Well met, Fleet. Does this mean you aren't on official duty anymore?"

"I have done my duty, and now I am done. At least until the Royal family arrives." She shrugged then she didn't know.

Vertag clasped the other woman's hand in welcome then released it. "That means you can enjoy some drinks with us tonight, then?"

Fleet, grinned. "That would be nice." Actually, she was happy just to be warm by the fire.

#####

Fleet watched the women as they sang and danced around the fire, and sipped the warm red wine. It was different. She was used to the wheat-tasting beer they brewed on the farms near the Royal homestead. She pulled on Vertag's sleeve to get the older woman's attention. "What are you all celebrating?"

Vertag swayed a little as she finished another mug of red wine, waving to her sister and her wife, who were calling it a night. "What?" The older woman smiled. "Oh, well, a visitor is as good an excuse as any. We've worked hard all summer, and it's nice to relax."

"Oh." Fleet gave a little grin. "It's good to relax." She was amazed at how few of them were up here, at the settlement. In the south, the settlements were packed with women vying for power and land.

A little unsteadily, the older woman took a seat on one of the logs that had been dragged over for people to sit on. "Are things so different here than where you came from?"

"Sometimes the farmers and other laborers have festival nights like this, normally to be thankful for a good harvest. But, well, the settlements are packed with people and temples. You have no

temple here, but I admit I would not know what a temple to the Moon Goddess would look like. No one worships her in the south." She stared at the red, swirling contents of her cup. "But there are so few of you here. I could wander for days in the trees and not see another person, I bet." She said the last part with a bit of wonder in her voice, trying to even imagine it was hard.

Vertag made a choking sound. "No one worships the Goddess of the Moon?" She looked horrified by the very thought. "Well, there's a temple to her up in the mountain pass. The priestesses tend it, and those who wish to have babies make the trek up to them."

"Oh, we have the Goddess of Love, people travel to her temple to be blessed with young ones. I, myself, haven't been inside." She blushed at some of the things she had heard about the temple.

The northerner shook her head in wonder. How had things gotten so different between the two lands within only a few decades? Were there so many more people in the south than there were in the north? "My sisters and I left the city that most of the others lived in to move here. We found there were too many people for our liking. We have our space here; the forest gives us all we need to live."

Fleet wasn't sure she could be self-sufficient enough to survive in the forest.

There was a commotion near the edge of the settlement, sounds of raised voices, horses, and dogs. Fleet hid her face in her hands. "I think the royal family is here."

The music ended abruptly and the dancing swirled to a stop as everyone stopped what they were doing to turn towards the sound of the chaos at the far edge of the camp. With a sigh, Vertag levered herself upright. She had just been starting to enjoy her ale and the company of a beautiful younger, not to mention, exotic woman. Sigh, the fates were cruel sometimes. "I think you better come introduce us before someone gets too edgy."

"You can't just ride your horses in here... Idiot do you know who you are talking too.... It's cold, this sucks... I want to go home... My Queen, you just can't..." Everything was acoustical chaos. Finally, a voice rose above everybody else's, "Would you all shut up?!"

Fleet's eyebrows rose. "Um, that last voice would be the Queen."

Keshet stared around at her travel party. "All of you get off your horses and thank the nice people for staying up this late to greet you."

Penka and Valdis got concerned looks on their faces. "Your Highness, we haven't had a chance to scout the area..." they both said at the same time, only to get cut off with a look.

Vertag chuckled and headed towards the sound of that voice, waving the other women back to their dancing by the fire. This was going to be interesting. "You must be Queen Keshet!" she called out in what she hoped was a loud and friendly enough voice "And the rest of your royal party, of course. Your messenger warned us you would be coming."

She paused on the way to glare at two women who had quietly taken up their bows, nervously watching the sudden influx of strangers. "Gala, Era, go get some more stew ready for our guests." When the two hesitated, she took a step towards them, "Now!" They fled...bows in hand.

"Before everyone started thinking with their asses, there was nice music playing, and people looked happy. Do these people look happy? No, they don't. So everybody get off their damn horses!" Happily, the Queen was the first one to dismount. Her own ass was much happier not to be in the saddle. She turned to the woman addressing her. "That would be me. And whom do I have the honor to address."

Penka and Valdis quickly dismounted and rushed to their Queen's side. Their sworn duty was to protect her.

Keshet rolled her eyes. "They're harmless, just loyal, and they worry a lot."

"Not sure about that honor part, but my name is Vertag. Welcome to our humble village. You and your company are welcome to join in the celebration. We've hot stew, wine, and dancing." The northerner shrugged, as if to say what can you do. "Don't mind my lot either, they just haven't seen this many outsiders in a long time." Ever, actually, but she didn't say that out loud.

Fitfully at first, but then with growing certainty, the music resumed and a few of the more outgoing women, or those who had drank more than the others, started to dance by the fire again.

The Queen followed Vertag. "It's nice to meet you, and all of that sounds wonderful." She pulled the twins by their ears to her side before they could run off. "These two are Cailin and Caron. Believe nothing they tell you."

"Mom..." both young girls said at the same time, looking annoyed.

"I can tell they'll have a lot of fun with our own youngsters." Youngsters who were doing their level best to appear disinterested in the new arrivals, but all just happened to be lingering close by in a small group.

The two women that Vertag had sent earlier returned with large bowls of stew that they began offering to the travelers who had recently arrived. "Can I offer you some wine? I don't think Fleet liked it too much, but hopefully it will warm you up some, at least." Vertag moved towards the large pot of mulled wine warming near the fire.

"My loyal guards are Penka and Valdis. As for the rest, they are a political hardship I must endure, and I apologize now for anything they say and do. They are representatives from the different temples." She ruffled the twins' hair before releasing them to run wild. "Don't break anything or anyone," she shouted after them.

She smiled at the offer, "Sounds wonderful. Morgan told me it was colder up here, but I never

realized how far up we had to travel. I can't wait to see it in the daylight."

The northerner watched with an amused smile as the twins disappeared into the waiting group of youngsters, who moved as an excited pack towards the far side of the campground, away from the adults. "If you think this is high, then you are in for a surprise when you climb the pass. You can see the entire valley laid out before you from the top." She gestured towards one of the log chairs, "Please take a seat. The road must have been a long one." She eyed the horses for a second, "They're larger than the fire warriors' Alcens."

"Alcen..?" Keshet questioned. "Is that the deer thingy you folks use?" Morgan had told her about them.

Vertag grinned, white teeth flashing in the firelight as she wondered what the fire warriors would think about their Alcens' being called deer thingies. "That's them. We don't use them...they're more common north of here." She accepted a mug of red wine from a passing girl and took a deep drink. Wiping her mouth, she eyed the other woman speculatively, "Not that we aren't happy to have visitors, but may I ask why you're going to visit Selene?"

Keshet looked around to make sure her bodyguard Eira wasn't in hearing distance. She did not trust that woman at all. With a frown, she realized she had no idea where the woman was. She motioned for Penka, and the woman was at her side in a second. "Find Eira and see what she's up too." Penka bowed once and made a gesture for her hound, Rage, to stay and guard the Queen then the next moment she was gone.

The northerner watched the exchange with interest, sipping her wine thoughtfully as the guard took off. "She might have snuck off with some of the others to smoke some Karro weed," Vertag mentioned, motioning towards some of the women who were off in the shadows of the trees.

She turned her attention back to Vertag. "One of my advisors said this would be a good time to visit. That the young Princess was thinking of marriage. I was huge and fat, pregnant with those twins, when Morgan visited, so I missed out. My eldest, needs to learn to rule without actually having the stress of being in charge, so I thought why not."

She bit her lip and debated a second. Finally, she made a decision. "However, I doubt the sincerity of some that travel with me. I hope to root it out before something happens. I think there is something foul underlying my advisor's motives. She has a hatred of the north she thinks she hides from me, but I see it quite clearly."

The other woman pursed her lips, frowning slightly at the thought that someone would hate the north so much in the south. "I hope you find the source of your troubles during your voyage, though I warn you that a trip through the mountain pass is no place to doubt the loyalty of those you travel with. It is not an easy trip, and as soon as the winter snows start, it will be impassable."

Keshet nodded, "Good to know. Means someone used to live here and is familiar with your lands." Valdis tapped her shoulder, drawing attention to a grimacing Penka, being followed by the gloomy Eira. With a sigh, Keshet's face closed off. "Some of that wine would be lovely right now."

#####

Cassia groaned as she realized exactly how late it was, or early, depending how you wanted to look at it. What had started out as a quick trip to visit Sable...had turned into something decidedly more. Hiding a yawn, she leaned against the side of the barn, resting for a moment as she wearily considered the climb up the tree to her bedroom window. Sable had wanted her to stay, but Cassia didn't want to deal with the inevitable arguments if she didn't come home before morning.

A black-tailed hawk landed lightly on a tree and observed the young woman. Being ignored, he gave a small cry that was easily swallowed by the muted early morning hour.

Cassia nearly peed herself in surprise as she whirled around, her heart in her throat. She shook her head when she spotted the dark form in the tree. There was just enough light that the world was shades of gray. "Sh...you're going to wake up everyone if you do that any louder."

He puffed up and shook his feathers; one fell and swayed gently back and forth until it hit the ground. He stared at her as if he were sizing her up.

"What?" she demanded, feeling ridiculous for feeling ashamed of herself because of the look a bird was giving her. Pushing off from the barn, she bent over to pick up the feather.

Ruger and Rose shook their great frames and hooted softly, wanting to be fed. Moriko cracked an eye at the noise then shut it, mumbling that it was too early.

Talon squawked and took off from the branch and flew into the barn.

"Shhhh..." Cassia quietly moved into the barn, rubbing each of the beasts on the nose and carefully moving feed into the front of the stalls for them. "How about we let Moriko sleep in today?" she whispered.

"Why are we letting me do that?" Moriko asked sleepily, her eyes still not open. "And what are you doing up at this early hour?" Her hair was standing up in places, and straw was stuck in it. Her face was turned towards Cassia, but the eyes were still shut.

"Hush, you, 'cause I'm being nice to you. Something I decided I'd try and see how it goes," Cassia teased, finishing the feeding and grabbing their buckets to go and fill them from the barrel in the corner. "Go back to sleep." She avoided answering the part about why she was up so early, when she hadn't been to bed yet.

One brown eye cracked open. "Do you even know how to feed them?" The other eye popped open, and after a second, when shapes grew to defined edges, she frowned softly, seeing that Cassia was dressed in the same clothes from yesterday.

"Sure, you just give them a bunch of hay and some of those oats you always feed them, right?" The other girl started to blush as she realized that Moriko was studying her, no doubt noting that she was still dressed in the same clothes she'd been wearing before nightfall. "See, all fed."

She swallowed the angry retort before it could be uttered. It wasn't her business, it really wasn't. With a sigh, she got up. "It's more than that. It's carefully measured. Too much hay and they bloat. And I have to sleep in here, so I'd prefer if they didn't have gas."

She stood behind Cassia and grabbed the scoop. "It's two-parts of this oat mixture with the hay."

Cassia's shoulders slumped slightly. "Oh. Sorry." She sighed. Maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

Moriko gently bumped shoulders with Cassia. "It was sweet, really, and now you know."

Despite herself, the other girl smiled. "Ok, well, next time you can sleep in without having to get up." She glanced outside and winced as she saw the beginnings of the sunrise lighting up the horizon. "I should go before they find out I was gone."

"Come here." She pulled Cassia into the stall she slept in and tossed her one of the new trousers the girl had bought for her and a shirt. Since they were roughly the same build and height, it would be fine, except, she realized, Cassia had a lot more going on in the chest area. She blinked and looked anywhere else. She'd really not noticed that before. "Put those on in case your mom is up making breakfast."

She nervously ran her hands through her hair, dislodging the straw, and stepped out to give the girl some privacy.

"Thanks." Quickly, the younger girl stripped out of her shirt and pants, gladly putting on the ones that Moriko had offered her. "I'll get these back to you as soon as I can. I bought these pants for you, not to keep me out of trouble." Cassia wrapped up her old clothes in a bundle and stuffed them under a pile of hay. "I'll come get this later, when I know they're both gone." It wouldn't be long now until Nix was up; she usually rose with the sun. "You want to come inside with me?"

"Um..." The animals were fed, so really, there wasn't anything she needed to do for a while. "Sure." She hastily raked her fingers through her hair a few more times and sighed, annoyed at its length. She fished in her pocket for a leather tie. Tied back, she felt much better.

"We could do something about your hair today, if it's bothering you?" Cassia decided it was too late to even try to get some sleep before the day started. She could try to catch a nap later. Moving towards the house, she could hear someone moving around inside, which meant that at

least Nix was up.

"It's just long. It's not so bad when it's tied back. I just hate when it gets in my face." She yawned and followed Cassia to the house. As the younger woman opened the door, she said just loudly enough to be heard. "And that's why you feed the Aclens the oat mixture, with the hay." She almost giggled at the odd look Cassia was giving her. "Oh, hi, Nix, I was just showing Cassia how to feed the Alcens."

Nix looked perplexed, then frowned, then looked perplexed again, "Hi, Moriko. Um, pump, er, Cassia, I didn't know you were interested in Alcens."

"Oh, she's not," Moriko broke in. "But I made her promise to get up and help me this morning since I helped her out the other day."

Cassia gave the other girl a strange look then smiled brightly at her mother. "I would rather be asleep," which was the complete truth, as far as it went. "But I did say I would help her feed them this morning, so I had to get up insanely early," which wasn't exactly the complete truth.

"Ah, well, okay. That was nice of you." She looked between the two girls. "Well, have fun today. I've got to finish the repairs on Kelsy and Valla's stove for the Inn." Nix knew, in her gut, something was up, but she couldn't figure out what.

Moriko had no idea why she was covering for Cassia, and looked around the house, not wanting to make eye contact.

"Thanks." Cassia smiled brightly at her mother, grabbed Moriko's hand, and nearly dragged the girl from the room before her mother could figure out what was going on. "Come on...time to show you my room."

"Kay."

Nix still had a perplexed look on her face as she went to start the forge.

#####

Cassia had to hide a yawn, as her body demanded sleep, and she shoved open the door to her room. "It's not big, but it's home." She grinned sleepily. Trying to look awake and alert in front of Nix had been exhausting. "I didn't mean to be out so late."

The blonde stood awkwardly, not sure where to sit. "So why did you?"

A hand reached out from the bed and blindly grabbed onto the other girl's arm and pulled her towards the bed. "Sit down," she groaned and rolled over. "I don't know. I didn't realize what time it was."

The room was small but it was her room. The bed occupied most of the space while a simple set of drawers filled up the other wall. Pieces of precious paper were scattered across the top of the wooden piece of furniture, and the shutters were still open from her earlier escape.

Moriko gave a squeak of surprise, but sat on the bed. She snorted in amusement, "You disappeared after dinner. Crow and I didn't buy that I'm so tired act. What were you doing that you didn't realize it was almost dawn?"

The dark-haired girl blushed at the question. "Nothing," she said a bit too quickly. Then sighed and cautiously opened an eye to see if Moriko looked upset. "We didn't do anything, just kissed, and then we went out to the river to swim during the high moon."

"Oh." She wanted to smack her forehead. Of course Cassia had been running around with her girlfriend. "Sounds fun..." Since she'd never really kissed anybody or been swimming, she didn't really know, but didn't want to seem naive.

"Sounds fun..?" Cassia grinned, eyeing the other girl. "You haven't kissed anybody before, have you?"

"Well, um, of course I have." She saw that Cassia wasn't buying it and stopped trying, "No, not really, unless you count Sparrow kissing me. We were both six at the time." She cleared her throat nervously. "Her and her family lived next door to us for a while. We grew up playing together. Her mother died in a mining accident and they moved down to the pass to be with her Muanya's family," she shrugged; it wasn't a very interesting story.

Cassia grinned against the skin of her arm as Moriko avoided part of her questions. "That means you haven't kissed anybody else, right?"

She shook her head, her blonde hair moving with the movement, "No, I um, no. Can we talk about something else?" she asked, her cheeks turning red.

"But this is fun to talk about." Mischievous eyes peeked up at the other girl.

Moriko hid her face in her hands.

Cassia poked the other girl in the side with a giggle. "Come on, what do you talk about with your friends from home?"

"Um, well. I don't really...we talk about Alcens, and they talk about mining. But I really don't have time to do stuff, between taking care of the Alcens and my sisters," she mumbled into her hands, not looking up.

The dark haired teen sighed, leaning back with a frown. "Well then, we're going to change that," she yawned. "Right after I take a nap," she mumbled.

Moriko got off the bed. "Okay, you nap. I'll go do, some stuff."

One eye opened for a moment. "What? You go down there and I'll get yelled at to do things."

Brown eyes stared at Cassia. "Then what am I supposed to do while you're napping?"

"Take a nap too?" The other girl looked hopeful.

Moriko sighed and sat down on the floor. "Okay."

"Kay." She sighed sleepily and curled up on the edge of the bed. Then as soon as she woke up, they could see about catching Moriko up on her important life skills.

#####

The woman stopped her work when she spotted the group of people climbing the pass. She'd seen them off and on all day, ever since they started up the steep slope towards the top of the mountain pass where she lived. At first she'd thought it was a company of women from the northern settlement, but then she realized that they rode animals far larger than Alcens.

Now, she brushed off her hands from the dirt of the small garden she'd been tending and moved to stand on one of the large boulders that littered the top of the pass. The boulders fell from the mountains to either side of her from time to time, and sometimes she could hear them thunder past in the night. There she stood, waiting as the first of the strangers finished their long climb.

Valdis rode ahead, her hound, Wraith, following sometimes behind, sometimes in front. The dog loved the new smells. He wasn't very tall, but he was massive, his stocky body running low to the ground. Black fur gleamed from the brushing she had given him this morning.

They came around a corner and he stopped his smelling spree. Standing still, his fur rose along his spine and he growled, exposing long fangs.

Ellris watched the first of the strangers climb the last few feet, only noticing the black dog that climbed with her as they rounded the last set of boulders. She held her hands out, trying to look non-threatening as the dog started to growl. "Hello," she called out, irritably brushing a strand of reddish blonde hair from her face.

Valdis pulled her horse to a stop and called out, "Wraith, heel..."

The dog went silent and walked over to his mistress, but he continued to stare at the woman suspiciously.

With a sigh of relief, Ellris lowered her hands, smiling brightly at the stranger. "Welcome, my name is Ellris." She debated coming down off the boulder, but frankly, the dog scared her a bit.

Valdis dismounted, her blue eyes taking in everything quickly on the mountain pass and cataloging it. Her hand stayed on the pommel of her sword, but after a moment, she let it drop away. "Wraith, sit." The hound sat with a huff. She approached the older woman. "I am Valdis, of the Queen's Guard."

From below them on the pass, shouting and laughter could be heard, but Valdis was almost certain they were at least twenty minutes behind her

"Which Queen would that be?" Ellris hopped down lightly off the boulder she'd been standing on. From here, the small cottage that was her home was just visible around the edge of the same boulder. "You're lucky you chose today to start up the pass, it's the first good day of weather we have had in at least a week."

Reaching up, the young warrior removed her helm, shaped in the form of a snarling dog. A gift from their god was the knowledge of armor and weapons crafting. And for his few chosen was the gift of a half-breed puppy, when one of his favored hounds decided to mate with a common mortal dog. "The Queen of the south," she responded, helm tucked under one arm.

Ellris's eyes flicked to the helm, the uneasy feeling staying with her as she kept her distance from the other woman. There was something about this scout and her dog that made her feel wary. "As all travelers are, she is welcome in my home. You are all welcome to spend the night if you wish." She had never turned away a traveler yet, and the priestess would not start now.

"Thank you. The rest of the party will be up shortly. I drew the short piece of straw and got the task of scouting ahead for danger. I'll warn you, the Queen's party is a handful. Some complain about the weather, some about getting dirty, the others about the lack of servants to wipe their asses." She gave a wry grin. "So maybe I didn't get the bad end of the lot, now that I think about it."

Amazing what a smile can do, Ellris thought as she felt her shoulders relax and smiled back. "If you want, I could invite you in for some tea before the others arrive. You could get a seat close to the fire."

"Sounds lovely... I found out this morning I rather enjoy the tea you brew up here in the north. It's a tad sweeter, and it smells more refreshing than what we have in the south." Her grin got bigger, making her seem her age. "Do you have a place to board the horses?"

The priestess frowned at that; this was going to be interesting. "I have a lean-to that those who bring Alcens up here use to shelter them from the wind. I don't know if it will be big enough to handle your horses though."

Valdis nodded. "We'll make do." She walked back to her horse, grabbing the reins. "Wraith, follow." The hound perked up and trotted over to his mistress, his stumpy tail wagging.

The small cabin was tucked away against the far side of the pass, somewhat sheltered from the howling winds that came through with every storm, and especially during the winter. A simple garden was laid out around the cabin, from which a trickle of smoke curled up out of the chimney. Next to it was a lean-to, with a wall of chopped firewood next to it. "Here, you can leave your horse here. I'll see about getting some tea on for you and the rest of your group." Ellris ducked into the cabin, closing the wooden door behind her.

Quickly, the young woman set about removing her saddle and checking her horse. Wraith whined at the lack of attention and bumped his head against her leg.

"Stop that," she said, lacking any real conviction. "You know, I don't think she's fond of you."

Wraith sat and stared at his mistress, his stumpy tail wagging.

"You, mister, probably shouldn't have growled at her." The dog just kept wagging his tail. With a roll of her eyes, she patted her horse's head and turned to Wraith. "Sometimes I have to seriously question the fact you're half divine animal."

#####

Inside the cabin, Ellris quickly cleaned up her small sleeping area and set her best pot of tea to start heating over the fire. She added a few more pieces of split wood to the fire to get it going, then pulled out some of her bread and carefully horded cheese that was brought up by the women from the valley bellow. There, she surveyed her area with satisfaction. It might not be palatial, but at least it was clean and warm.

Her last action was to close the curtains that separated the special bedroom from the rest of the cabin. It was there that those who sought the Goddess' blessing came to spend the night.

Valdis knocked on the simple wooden door, uncertain if she should just enter. She had removed her simple armor, but kept the short sword at her side, unwilling to part with it in a place filled with so much of the unknown. Her under-tunic, trousers, and boots were colored in red and black, the colors of her god. Her blond hair was pulled back from her face with a simple leather tie, and against the paleness of her skin, the tattoos on her hands stood out. She stared down at Wraith, uncertain to bring him in or leave him outside.

The slightly older priestess opened the door, smiling in welcome as she stepped aside. "Please, come in." She paused at the sight of the dog. "He can come in too, if you want," she offered, proud that she'd only hesitated a little.

"If he makes you uncomfortable, he can stay outside. He is bred for war, I won't deny that, but he can play the role of the house pet." She looked down at Wraith. "Tell the lady you're sorry for growling at her earlier." The stout hound sighed but promptly rolled over on his back, exposing his belly, and gave everyone present puppy dog eyes.

The northerner grinned and dared to give him a quick scratch to the stomach. "Well, he can come in too. How long do you think we have before the rest of your party comes?" She crossed the room to check on the water in the pot.

Valdis grinned. "About twenty minutes, give or take. The twins could do something evil and set everyone back an hour. They already had the priestess of the Goddess of Love sit on an ant hill, which set us back an hour today." Something she had been relieved about, as the woman had finally stopped flirting with her and trying to get her alone.

After that, they had drawn straws to see who should scout ahead, and she had a feeling her mother had stacked the draw against her.

The blonde paused at the fire to look back at the southerner. "A priestess of the Goddess of Love is with your party?" This was going to be more interesting than Ellris had thought. "Who else is coming up the pass?"

"Queen Keshet and the royal twins, Caitlin and Caron...myself and my mother, you could say we represent Vladlin." She paused, since there was always some sort of reaction because they followed a male god. Pleased that the woman had no comment, she continued. "Eira, a gift from the temple of Shadows, she is a bodyguard to the twins. Melody, a Priestess from the Goddess of Death, she's not creepy at all, I never really expected to meet one unless I was on my death bed. They are said to give comfort to those dying. Lilly is the Priestess from the Goddess of Love." She sat down by the fire, Wraith curling up by her side, and she absently scratched his ears.

"I'm kind of suspicious that the Goddess of Shadows didn't send one." A frown broke out over Valdis face. She should have kept her thoughts to herself. The followers of Vladlin were not supposed to speak ill of his twin. But she was concerned, and she wondered about Eira and where her loyalty really resided.

The northern priestess looked a little worried about that as well. With a shake of her head, she poured two cups of tea and let the herbs begin to steep in the boiling hot water. "You are all going to visit Selene?" She brushed a hand through her long hair, pushing strands out of her face.

"That is the Queen's plan. I merely follow and protect." She gave a nod in thanks and took the mug.

"You merely do what you are told?" Ellris raised a finely sculpted eyebrow, somehow not completely believing that as she pulled a chair next to the fire and joined her guest there.

"I have pledged my life and my loyalty to the Queen and to the Land. Unless I feel she has abused the trust to the land in her request of me, yes, I do what I am told." For two years she had fought and killed for the crown, putting down despots who wished to overthrow Keshet. Three months ago she had been asked to become a guard for the Queen. Nothing could have made her more proud, that and in two years she was tired of the stink of blood and war on the field of battle.

Considering the god she had pledged her life to, it was odd the fire of bloodlust did not burn in her.

The other woman sipped her tea, considering her words. "I did not mean to cause offense. I only meant that you do not strike me as a simple guard who doesn't have a thought between her ears."

"My mother spent a lot of time chasing after me making sure I went to school to learn the basics of math and reading. But, I admit, I was quick and hard to catch." She grinned to show no offense was taken as she took a sip of her tea with a grin. "So, did you piss off your own Queen to get sent out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Ellris laughed. "No, I chose to come here. I dreamed of this place when I finished my apprenticeship with our head priestess. The day I arrived here, I knew that I would build a house here and serve our Goddess from here." She nodded towards the curtained-off room. "The women from below come here to seek the blessing of the Goddess in the form of children."

Valdis coughed on the sip of tea she was taking and blushed. "Oh, um, well, I guess privacy is good for that sort of thing."

The priestess smiled, her eyes dancing with amusement as she took another sip of tea. "You can't tell me that you are embarrassed to talk about that?"

She had heard stories about the Temples dedicated to the Goddess of Love, and figured it wasn't that different from the south. "I, um..." She blushed even brighter shade of red. "Maybe a little, it's not like I'm a virgin, but well, it's different, somehow, if it's conception," she squeaked out.

This was just too much fun. The northerner leaned forward in her chair, a finger tracing the rim of her cup of tea. "Would you like me to describe the process? You could see if it's any different from how you would normally bed a woman."

"I, um, really, that's okay." Thankfully, Wraith stood up and went to the door, his stumpy tail wagging, which could only mean her mother and her hound, Rage, were nearby. "Looks like the rest of the party is here..." She stood, grateful to have an excuse to focus on something else.

Light laughter followed her, as Ellris got up to join her at the door. "Bring on the rest of the party, then. It should prove to be an interesting night."

#####

Moving as quietly as she could, Ellris opened the door to her cabin and slipped outside. She had to step over two women to make it, but she managed to get out the door without making too much noise. The floor of her cabin was littered with sleeping bodies as the Queen's party rested. They had been an interesting group to host, although Ellris couldn't say she would be sad when they moved on and gave her back her peace. She wasn't much for a lot of people in one place, and the sudden onslaught of talking, laughing, and shouting had started to wear her thin towards

the end of the night.

Now she gladly escaped out into the evening, taking her one good robe with her. Even without the bright moonlight outside she would have easily been able to find her way.

Even during the new moon, when it was dark as the pits of the abyss, she could find her way at night. Now, she walked the path that led towards the highest point in the mountain pass easily. The full moon above her bathed the area in silvery light, and she felt the tensions from earlier drain away as she walked.

#####

Valdis woke easily at the silent tread of footsteps, not too concerned, as the pattern was the steps of someone carefully choosing their way, not being stealthy. Her blue eyes pierced the darkness, Wraith stirring next to her. She gave the command for silence, and he was instantly on his feet ready to move. She motioned him to guard the house as she got up and followed the figure in the moonlight.

#####

The slim northerner made the climb up to the jumbled pile of tall boulders to the tallest spot in the pass. There, she paused, drinking in the sight of the valley spread out below her. Turning, she could see the northern side of the pass. And far below her, the silvery ribbon that was the Winderling River. Sighing with contentment, she turned and moved to the center of the boulder, kneeling down in front of the items she'd prepared there earlier. The full moon was a holy day to the northerners, and although she had no one to celebrate with, the priestess would hold her own ceremony tonight.

The piled wood caught fire easily, the small flames racing through the dry tinder and beginning to lick at the piled wood. Carefully, she picked up a length of leather and tied her hair back out of her face.

#####

Wraith watched his mistress leave him, unhappy to be left guarding the house when his place was at her side.

Valdis easily picked her way up the mountainside, sweat slightly damping her back as she reached the high point of boulders just as the fire was lit. She wasn't sure why she followed, Ellris seemed honest and trustworthy. Valdis was certain the older woman meant no one any harm. But still, to be sneaking away in the middle of the night was an odd thing, something she should surely look into.

#####

The simple wooden bowl of rain water was right where she had left it earlier, and she placed it between herself and the fire, arranging herself so that she could see the reflection of the full moon in its surface. "You're welcome to come closer if you want," she called, not turning to look towards the path behind her.

Valdis frowned in annoyance that she had been spotted so easily. Carefully, she picked out a path over to Ellris. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I was...um, curious what you were up to at this dark hour."

A flash of white teeth in the firelight as the priestess smiled. "Wanted to make sure I'm not up to anything that might hurt your Queen?"

"Of course, but I wasn't concerned enough about your intention to grab a weapon, but as mother says, 'better safe than sorry'." She was still dressed as she had been at dinner, in cloth of red and black. It was cool away from her sleeping nest, with Wraith's warmth at her back, but now by the fire, warmth was returning again. "Has the Priestess of Love sent you out in the night to drum up curses at her, or perhaps Eira with her glowering face?" For some reason, the bodyguard had taken an instant dislike to Ellris. "The twins were fond of your cooking and your stories, you managed to keep them calm. You won the Queen's love with that. She was able to actually enjoy her dinner, rather than spend her time apologizing to her dining companions."

The northerner laughed, shaking her head, "None of those. The priestess of love was..." She paused, not sure how to say overbearing diplomatically. Instead, she moved right on to the next topic. "I don't know why Eira seems to dislike me. She hasn't said anything, just glared a lot," she shrugged, dismissing the unpleasant woman from her mind. "I'm here because of that," she pointed up into the sky, "a full moon. Time for me to celebrate She who led us here and blesses us with all that we have."

"Followers of Vladlin celebrate on the night of the Bloodstar." The Bloodstar was an odd event that occurred in winter. On that night, the Followers of Chaos and War met for feasting, drinking, and a display of arms under a moonless sky where a single red star glowed like blood. Vladlin walked among them, feeding on their tribute and frenzy. On occasion, he took one of his best warriors to bed. Twenty years ago her mother had been one of his best warriors. She had met the god once, on the day she was chosen and took Wraith as hers. It didn't take her long to put two and two together, why her mother would never speak of her Muanya, and why her hair was the same white blonde as their god.

"Since you have no weapons, I'm going to assume this is a more gentle celebration."

Ellris grinned. "No weapons involved, although there might be a bit of wine at the end. You're welcome to join me or just watch." She wasn't very clear on what followers of Vladlin did, other than fight, of course. The flames had started to devour the largest of the logs by then, and the area was bathed in the flickering firelight.

"We're all her children." Ellris would enjoy having another present for the ceremony; it had been

a while now since she'd shared it with another. "Here, come sit by the fire." She moved a few of the items in front of her to make space.

Valdis sat quietly by the Moon Priestess' side. "Why are you the only one here, in this pass?"

"I'm the only one who was called to stay here. The others come here when they need me, but no one wants to live up here during the winter." It did make things a little lonely sometimes.

"So you train other priestess, is this a retreat to keep their minds pure?" The Temple of Chaos had such a thing, although this was much more pleasant a place.

"Acolytes come here before they finish their training." She added another two logs onto the blazing fire, glad for the warmth now that the wind was starting to pick up. "They come here to clear their minds, and sometimes receive visions from the Goddess."

"I heard a rumor once, when the Goddess of the Moon chooses a Priestess, that they awaken with their eyes turned green. Is that true or were your eyes green since birth?" She studied Ellris' face.

The priestess tilted her head, returning the favor as she studied the other woman. "It's a true rumor. Willow was the first of us to be chosen, but not the last. Have you always had hair so white?" she countered, smiling slowly.

"Yes. I was born with it, a great big mop of white curls." She held up her hands, showing the paw prints. "This is my mark branded in the Temple, showing my devotion to Vladlin."

"It fits you, the hair, that is." The northerner reached forward and picked up the wineskin that had been resting by the fire, warming in its heat. The wine inside had been made carefully over the past month, taking the best wine from the northern fire warriors and mixing it with special herbs. "If you wish to join in the celebration," she offered the other woman the wine skin, with an almost a daring look.

Valdis snorted and took the wineskin. Tilting her head back, she took a long swallow then wiped the redness from her mouth. "Not bad, far better than what we had last night."

"This is the good stuff," the priestess agreed, tilting it back so that she, too, could drink from it. The wine was smooth and had a pleasant taste from the aging it had gone through. The herbs it had been soaked with added an almost smoky flavor. Wordlessly, she passed it back to the other woman. If this had been one of the large gatherings, there would be singing and music to go with the ritual, but she had neither here.

The warrior took another swallow, her skin starting to flush with the alcohol.

They drank until more than half of the wine in the skin was gone and the first tingles of the herbs it had soaked in were starting to be felt. As always, things took on almost dreamlike quality to

Ellris, and the northerner slowly stood, careful not to disturb the bowl of water. She offered her hand to the other woman, smiling. "Now we dance."

Valdis stared at the hand for a moment, but then shrugged and took it. "I'm not a great dancer," she warned.

"You'll do fine," the northerner promised, already swaying, her long braid swaying in time with her.

As she was pulled to her feet, she felt the alcohol hit her, and she grinned. "Whoa, good stuff."

Laughing, Ellris drew her into a dance, whirling around the fire that was now more glowing coals than open flames. The moon above seemed to fill the sky with its light. "The best," Ellris agreed, her heart beating in time with their dancing, or was it the other way around? She could never figure it out afterwards.

Valdis watched for a few seconds before she began to move slowly, somewhat awkwardly. She tried to picture footwork for fighting, but everything was just getting jumbled up in her head.

"You're thinking too much." The slightly taller northerner moved behind her, placing hands on her hips and thighs. "Move with the music inside you. Relax and enjoy the feelings as they come to you. Revel in the life all around you, and the feel of the moon and fire."

She blew out a breath and grumbled at the priestess, but slowly tried to shut off her thoughts until there was nothing but the smell of the fire and the sounds of the night sky.

"Good." The word was whispered, almost purred, as Ellris could feel the other woman's muscles relax under her touch. Her movements became more fluid and natural. "Empty your mind of all thoughts, all worries, anything that would distract you."

Slowly, she felt her body loosening up as she moved around the fire.

With a laugh of pure joy, Ellris moved with her, changing the moves until they were moving around the circle. "Don't think, just move." The more they moved, the faster her heartbeat. And the faster they danced, the more dreamlike things seemed. She never knew how long the dance would last.

#####

Valdis was awake at first light, and grinned into the shoulder she was using as a pillow. This was a first; she'd never slept with a Priestess before, especially one who worshipped the moon. "So, was that actually a ritual or were you just trying to get me naked?"

Ellris moaned, not at all ready for the morning. "A little of both," she grinned, which turned into a yawn. "That doesn't always happen, but I won't pretend I wasn't hoping it would."

Valdis gave a gentle kiss to the shoulder before sitting up, "Unexpected, but not unpleasant." She leaned over and gave the woman one last kiss on the lips. "I need to get back. If my mother comes looking for me, it won't be pretty."

That earned her a grin, and the priestess slowly pushed herself upright, wincing, sleeping on bare rock was not very comfortable. Not that they had really been in any shape to notice. "Go on, I'll clean up here." The empty bowl lay nearby. She barely remembered sharing the water inside before they collapsed.

The southerner got up and began looking for her clothes. "She has this odd idea I'm still innocent." Finding her clothes, she quickly dressed, and with a wave, headed on down the path.

The priestess watched her go with a wistful smile. She'd had no delusions going into this what would happen come the morning, but it had definitely been worth it. "Thank you," she whispered, looking up to the sky above, then got up and started to gather the items that had been used last night.

#####

Moriko stared out of the one window in Cassia's room. The other girl still slept, worn out from her night out. She noticed the stout tree branch so close to the window, and knew how the other girl was sneaking out so easily. It was kind of odd how Nix and Selene could miss it. Then again, they hadn't grown up like this.

Muttering a little, Cassia rolled over and tugged the blanket up over her a bit higher, trying to block out the late morning sun. "I don't have to wake up yet, do I?" she mumbled into the pillow.

Moriko grinned and turned. "No," she said softly, thinking maybe it was best if she left. She had taken a small nap, but now found herself wide awake and a little restless.

"You must be bored." Cassia yawned and stretched, uncovering her eyes a little to peer up at the girl by the window. "Did you sleep a little?"

Awkwardly, she sat on the bed, avoiding the girl's feet. "I slept a bit," she confirmed. "But if you need to sleep, go ahead. I'll go take Rose and Ruger out for a romp."

The other girl sighed then forced herself to sit up. "No. If I don't get up now, I won't get up, and then my mothers will be really upset. Even worse, they'll ask me all sorts of questions about why I'm tired." She stretched her arms over her head, rolling her head back and forth as her back cracked.

"At least they care to ask, but you have a point. I looked at some of your drawings." She looked hesitantly at the other girl, afraid she would be mad.

"You looked at my drawings?" Cassia bit her lip, suddenly shy as she looked at the papers that were spread out across the table next to the far wall. "Did you like them?"

"They're really amazing. Do you think it's possible to build something so tall and not have it fall over?" she asked, curious.

With a flurry of tossed blanket, pillow, and flailing limbs, Cassia surged out of the bed and over to the table. She grabbed the papers there and jumped back onto the bed. "I think so. Look, if you build the sides like this, they can support all the floors." She showed Moriko one of the pictures of a large building that seemed to dominate the area it was built on. "I think."

"You should ask your mom, she understands a lot about structural support from all the stuff she makes," Moriko suggested quietly, although she had to grin at Cassia. She'd never seen the woman so animated than she was right now.

She sighed, staring at the pictures that she'd drawn with charcoal on the precious pieces of paper. "I'm afraid she'll laugh at them."

"I doubt it. She might not get it, but I don't think she'll laugh." Tentatively sensing Cassia's distress, she gave her an awkward one-arm hug.

"I know, but what if she doesn't?" Cassia was pretty sure she couldn't live with it if Nix didn't like her drawings. She leaned on the other girl's shoulder, enjoying the offer of support.

She'd already been a disappointment by not becoming a black smith; a second time would be the worst thing she could imagine. She wasn't sure what Selene would think either, since her Muanya seemed to be fine with the buildings on the island as they were. Then there was the fact of how much work it would be to make even one of the buildings in Cassia's drawings to consider. The worst thing, the one that gave her nightmares, was that maybe all of her drawings and ideas were all just the dreams of a silly teenager.

Moriko leaned her head against Cassia's. "You won't know 'til you tell them. But I think they're amazing. Imagine being so high up, you could see everything, and you'd be that much closer to the moon."

"You aren't just saying that, are you?" Cassia twisted to give her friend a slightly suspicious look. She was starting to think that some of Sable's friends did that anytime she asked them a question.

Moriko bit her lip. "Well, some of them, I think, look kind of weird. I don't like the ones where the tall thingies, um, towers look like they have onions on top. A slanted roof makes sense, for snow, that way it won't build up and cause the roof to fall in. But I guess I'm not one for curves," she babbled out, hoping she hadn't hurt Cassia's feelings.

"Onions on top?" the other girl's eyes narrowed at that. "You don't like curves?" She reached behind her to grab the pillow from the head of her bed.

"What?" Moriko held up her hands. "I mean, I like curves, but well, on the tower thingy, I just prefer your other drawings."

The pillow made a satisfying thump as Cassia whacked the other girl over the head with it in an over handed swing. "I'll show you!" she laughed, swinging again. Enough of this serious talk...

"Hey!" Moriko yelped in surprise. "Unfair, I'm unarmed." She laughed as she got whacked again.

#####

Downstairs in the kitchen, Selene looked up at the sound of laughter coming from their daughter's room. She smiled and looked over at her wife. "I guess they're having fun." She sprinkled more flower on the board she was using to make bread dough. She'd been about to go tell Cassia not to waste half the day sitting in her room.

"You sure that it's a good idea leaving them alone up there?" The smith asked, from her spot at the table.

"I'm more worried about Sable than those two. Cassia won't do anything as long as she has herself thinking that she's destined to be with Sable. That stubborn streak comes from you, my love." She picked up some of the dough from the nearby bowl and started to roll it.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, love. I am not stubborn," Nix retorted with a mock glare.

With a groan, she got up from the table and enveloped her lover in her arms. "I'm going back to the Inn. I almost have the repairs done on the Valla and Kelsy's stove."

Selene laughed. "Of course you aren't." She gladly leaned against the strong body of her love. "I can't wait until your new apprentice comes, then you won't have to work so hard."

"And after a year I can retire and take advantage of being the Queen's, what was it that Crow said...Rezan. Sleep the day away, take the Queen swimming, and other stuff." She gave Selene a kiss on her earlobe.

"You'll have to fill me in on that other stuff part." Selene sighed with pleasure at the touch and reluctantly let go of Nix. "Go on now before our daughter comes down to find her mother taking advantage of her Muanya."

Nix snorted, "Okay." She looked up at another squeal of laughter. "I'm going with your and Crow's judgments on Moriko, 'cause I'm just going to admit now that I'm overprotective."

The other woman smiled and gave her a push towards the door with a pat on her ass. "Go on. I'll

go make sure that you are just being overprotective and break up whatever is going on upstairs."

#####

"Then she went home and found out that she'd left her door open and all of the chickens she'd been arguing about had run off!" Selene grinned at the laughter from those at the table, sliding the fresh bread over towards Moriko for the other girl to grab some. "Needless to say, she didn't come back to complain about them."

"Moriko and Cassia helped." They'd burned the first loaf, but the two of them had managed to do a good job on three others.

Cassia smiled at the memory of how they'd spent the afternoon. The burnt bread had been perfectly fine after they'd cut off the burnt part, and ate the left over with jelly.

"Hey! I would have warned you, but nobody told me it was my job to watch the bread," Moriko grumped good-naturedly.

"Well, this loaf turned out wonderfully," Nix said, tearing off another piece.

Selene looked around the table, enjoying the easy banter that was taking place this evening. What a difference a few nights had made. Crow had a seemingly limitless store of stories to tell, and Cassia had been on her best behavior. It felt like a true family dinner, and she shared a smile with her wife. If only every dinner could be this nice, which was something she prayed to the Moon Goddess they'd be allowed someday, probably after Cassia grew out of her teen years.

"I'll get it!" Cassia was out of her seat before anyone could answer as the doorknocker she'd made was put to use outside. With a yank, she pulled open the door, her smile becoming strained when she realized who was standing on the other side.

"Uh, hi," she smiled at the three people on the doorstep.

Sable gave a happy little wave from where she was standing flanked by both her mothers, with a smaller, nervous looking woman standing behind them. Cressida and Oriana were both on the short side. Oriana had a shrewd, calculating look to her face, one that made you feel like you were being appraised and given a price for your value. Cressida was curvy, although as she got older, her curves were becoming more of a round, she smiled, a lot and appeared nice, but the smile never reached her eyes.

Behind them, nervously shifting from foot to foot was their servant, Alma. Slender like a reed, she always looked like she wanted to be somewhere else.

"Muanya, I think this one's for you." The youngster stepped back out of the doorway to allow the small group inside.

Oriana and Cressida both bowed to the royal family. "Oh, you're eating dinner. We didn't realize," Cressida simpered.

Nix bristled, Crow just looked amused, and Moriko leaned back to be hidden in the shadows of both Nix and Crow.

Oriana's gaze slid over all three of them, dismissing them as having no value on what was to happen.

Selene hid a sigh and stood, returning the bow as she stepped in front of the chair that Nix was sitting in to block the view of her wife's face from the guests. "We were just finishing. What brings you all here tonight?"

Feeling like things were just about to spiral out of control, Cassia closed the door behind the four visitors, smiling a little at the nervous looking servant. She gave a questioning look at Sable, who just smiled in return.

Oriana smiled, "Your Majesty, we were concerned that nothing was going forward on these tasks. The happiness of not only the north, but of two young women, is being held up. Sable agreed to these...well, rather pointless tasks, wouldn't you say, two days ago. Yet we have heard nothing."

"I would not say they're pointless," Nix barked out, trying to get up, but Crow had a firm grip on her belt.

Sable moved away from her parents and gave Cassia a nearly full body hug. "My parents thought things were moving too slowly. Isn't it great? They just want us to be happy," she whispered to her girlfriend.

"Yeah, great," Cassia awkwardly hugged her back, catching sight of the look on Moriko's face as she did.

Selene firmly put herself between Nix and the visitors, hoping this wasn't going to end with someone being thrown through a window or door.

"We have had to take our time setting tasks that would be fair and truly test anyone who wishes to become the next Rezan," she replied smoothly. "In fact, I believe that representatives from each of the families should be gathering tomorrow."

Moriko desperately wanted to be anywhere other than here. She didn't deal with conflict well, and seeing Cassia with that twit wrapped around her, made her realize that sooner or later, Sable would put her foot down on their friendship, and then she would lose Cassia, and that made her feel slightly ill.

Cressida laid a hand on Oriana's arm. "See, dear, I told you. You were just getting upset over

nothing. They want our girls to be just as happy as we do."

Cressida knew that it was far from the truth, if the look in the smith's eyes was anything to go by. She smiled that fortunately, that brute would have no say in it. They had already hired a few stupid thugs to help their daughter win the tasks. And once that was over, they would be royalty. They could control trade, legalize slavery, and all sorts of things that would make them richer.

If Selene's smile was forced, thankfully only her family knew her well enough to tell, she hoped. "That is all that we wish for, to make certain that they are both happy." She stressed the word both slightly.

Just as awkwardly as she'd started to hug Sable, Cassia let go of the other girl. Not sure where to stand, she stepped aside, standing by herself a little ways into the kitchen, separate from both sides.

"I know I'll be happy once we're wed," Sable chirped in happily, as she tried to cling to Cassia.

"Selene! Selene!" Someone who sounded like they had just run up a mountain was shouting the Queen's name. The door burst open. "Selene..."

Now what, the Queen almost demanded. Instead, she slipped through the four guests to the doorway and the panting woman that was leaning against the doorframe. The woman wasn't familiar, but that didn't mean anything with the way the outer settlements had spread out. "What is it?"

"I've...I've come from Abnoa pass." The woman's sides heaved as she sucked in air. "I was sent to tell you the Royal family from the south is on its way for a visit. They were only a day behind me."

There was a moment of silence as everyone in the house absorbed the news then chaos erupted as everyone started talking at once. The room was not big enough to house all of these people at once, and Selene stared at the messenger in dismay as the people behind her started excitedly talking.

Nix finally got loose from Crow's grasp and shouted. "Shut up!" When she had everybody's attention, she looked at Sable and her parents. "You'll have to excuse us, but now we need to start preparing for a Royal visit."

"But we can..." Cressida started, only to be steered out of the house with Sable, Oriana, and Alma in tow.

"We'll let everyone know when they're here so you can all bow and simper to your hearts content." And she shut the door in their faces. Her blue eyes looked at Selene. "Honey, I think we should look into getting you a royal guard."

"Don't you start with that again. I'm not going to have people standing around me with swords all the time. How would people come to talk to me if they get scared away by mean looking women?" It was an old argument, one that neither was going to win right now. Instead, she gave her love a grateful look and turned to the messenger, who was still leaning against the wall wearily. "You look like you are about to fall over. Do you have a place to stay?"

"I...I hadn't thought about where I would be sleeping," the woman admitted.

Nix, still in dictator mode, looked at Cassia then to Moriko. "You two go get Moriko's stuff out of the barn. She's sleeping in your room tonight so this nice young messenger can sleep in the stable." She shrugged in apology. "The royal house was not built for entertaining."

The woman nodded, happy to be sleeping somewhere safe and warm.

"Where are we going to put these southerners?" Selene frowned. This was going to be interesting.

"Then I want you two to go down to Valla and Kelsy's Inn and see if they have room to host the Royal Southern family. You're mother and I, are now way busier than I thought we'd be," she said to Cassia.

For once, the teen just nodded and opened the door, glad that Sable and her family had departed. She waited for Moriko then slipped out, heading for the Inn. "Don't worry, we'll go by the market and see if we can find something you can sleep on in my room."

Moriko just nodded and followed silently behind the Princess.

No doubt Sable's mothers had immediately fled off to begin their own preparations. Cassia sighed and turned to the other girl, worried that Moriko hadn't said a thing since they'd burst in on the dinner, "You all right?"

Moriko pursed her lips. She really didn't like Sable or her parents, they were just...not good people, was the best she could come up with. However, in her experience, nobody really wanted to hear the truth. When they were in love, they just wanted to hear how wonderful everything was. "I'm okay, that was just a little weird." And creepy, how Sable's mothers had just looked at her and dismissed her as nothing.

"Sorry." Cassia felt the urge to apologize, even though she wasn't really sure what she was apologizing for. "I didn't know they were coming." They walked down the main street of the town. It wouldn't take long for the news of the impending royal visit to spread.

In fact, Cassia was pretty sure that before dawn tomorrow morning, most everyone would know about it.

Moriko just shrugged. She was kind of nervous about sleeping in the same room with Cassia for

some reason, and she'd miss Rose and Rugor, the Alcens a comforting presence when she slept.

"Should we get my stuff first or go to the Inn?" she asked.

"Your stuff, then we can go to the inn. The market won't stay open much longer; everyone will be starting to shut up shop now." She grabbed Moriko's hand and started to run down the street. They'd have to hurry to get there before everything was closed. Enough time to question Moriko later.

#####

Moriko shifted again on her nest of blankets, trying to get comfortable. It was hard to sleep on the floor. She missed the night sounds in the barn, the comforting shifting of the Alcens, or the sound of Talon fluffing his feathers.

"Are you awake?" a whisper came from the bed above her.

Moriko looked up into the darkness. "Yes," she whispered back.

A shuffle of blankets as Cassia moved closer to the edge of the bed to peer down. "I'm sorry we couldn't get something better for you to sleep on."

Moriko shrugged, but then flushed when she realized Cassia couldn't see her. "It's okay. It's just quiet. I'm use to the sounds in the stable." She paused for a second then asked hesitantly. "Are...are you going to sneak out to see Sable?"

"No." She was sure she didn't want to sneak out tonight. "I mean, unless you want me to so you can have the room to yourself?" Cassia had the awful thought, that maybe Moriko wanted her gone.

"No! Um, no, I just didn't want you to think you had to stay if you'd rather be with your girlfriend. It's, um, okay, you know...if you want to go see her." She bit her lip to get her mouth to stop running, and felt like an idiot.

"No, I'm fine here," which was completely the truth, something that Cassia didn't really want to think too hard about. She moved even closer to the edge of the bed so she could see the other teen in the dim light coming in through the window. "You can't be comfortable lying on those blankets."

"It's not too bad. Your mom was able to scrounge enough blankets. I have a nice bit of padding going on. It must be weird for you to share your space."

"We'll have something better for tomorrow." Cassia bit her lip. "Come up here," she suddenly demanded. "I can't sleep knowing you're down there suffering on the floor."

Moriko sat up and leaned against the bed so her head was next to Cassia's. "You feel guilt at the oddest times." She lightly knocked her forehead into Cassia's.

"That's 'cause I'm strange, everyone will tell you so." She grinned in the darkness.

Moriko grinned, loosening up a little bit. "That's it, the whole north is doomed once you're Queen."

"But it will be a fun doom. I'll make it a party." She laughed then scooted sideways until there was room on the bed. "Get up here so I don't feel bad about you sleeping on the floor."

Moriko sighed, feeling awkward. She felt kind of funny crawling into bed with Cassia, which was a very intimate action, and the thought of sleeping next to her friend made her mouth dry and her palms sweat. She started to move up onto the bed then stopped. "I'm fine on the floor," she squeaked out then hastily cleared her throat.

The other teen sighed and reached down to grab her hand, "Stop being silly. The bed is plenty big enough and I don't smell." She pulled, trying to get Moriko to get up on to the bed. "I feel weird talking to you when you're down there."

Giving up, Moriko finished climbing up into the bed. "You win," she said with a mock grumble, trying to get comfortable.

"Just don't steal all of the blankets." Cassia poked the other girl in the side, tossing the blankets over both of them. "See, isn't this more comfortable?" The lack of a second pillow might become a problem, she realized.

"Me steal the blankets?" she snorted. "You're the blanket thief. The other night in the barn you stole mine and were snoring like a drunken Alcen, in less than five seconds."

"What?" Cassia looked horrified. "I do not snore!"

"Yes you do," Moriko said, teasing. Then she opened her mouth and imitated the girl's snore.

She made it nice and loud, and obnoxious, which earned her a thwap over the head with the pillow.

"I don't sound like that! You never stop moving when you sleep, you keep rolling around and kicking like an Alcen."

"Yeah, well..." was the best Moriko could come up with for a witty comeback. She grabbed at the pillow and missed, and ended up getting smacked with it again. Huffing, she dug her fingers into Cassia's sides, looking for her ticklish spots.

"No fair!" Cassia tried to avoid shrieking, well aware that her parents were probably asleep in the

next room over. In desperation, she tried to get away and fell straight off the edge of the bed to land with a thud on the floor. A groan followed, drifting up from the spot where Moriko had been laying before.

Positions reversed Moriko looked down from the bed to the floor. "Oh shit. Are you okay?" She strained her hearing to make sure Nix wasn't going to come bursting into the room.

"You kicked me out of my own bed," came the grumble from below as Cassia picked herself up. She was going to have to get her revenge for this.

"It was an accident," Moriko said, worried when Cassia ignored her outstretched hand. "Um, do you want me to sleep on the floor now?"

The girl narrowed her eyes then leapt onto the bed, tackling Moriko. "I'll show you an accident!" she responded, her fingers probing for ticklish spots.

Moriko's eyes widened and she gave an 'uff', as air was rapidly exhaled.

"I...don't...have...any...ticklish spots," she said, squirming around on the bed. It wasn't a lie, doubting Cassia was going to go for her feet.

The tickler gave a huff of annoyance as she failed to find a single ticklish spot in her attack. How was she supposed to get revenge if the other girl wasn't ticklish? "Everybody has a ticklish spot." She was almost sure that was true, and narrowed her eyes, staring down at the girl under her as she tried to figure out where she could be ticklish.

Cassia's fingers stilled as she watched something change in Moriko's eyes. She wasn't sure what it was, but a flitter of excitement swept up her spine. She was suddenly aware of the other girl's body beneath hers in a way that was so powerful it took her breath away. She could feel their legs entwined, and the place where they pressed against one another. It was sudden and strong.

Moriko tilted her head to the side then placed her hands on Cassia's thighs. "Hey, are you okay?" She had been expecting a second attack, but then Cassia's body language had shifted, to something. The best word she had was 'different', because she didn't have a reference for the look in the girl's eyes.

The dark-haired girl licked her lips, wanting to do something, not sure what it was, but scared of it at the same time. "I'm fine." She managed a shaky smile and rolled off Moriko before any of those half formed images tempted her into doing something she was pretty sure would be a bad idea. "Sorry." She didn't know what she was apologizing for.

Moriko frowned, feeling like she had missed something, but quickly pushed it away. "No need to apologize. I started it, after all."

Picking up the blankets that had been pushed off, she pulled them up over both of their bodies. "We should get some sleep." Something had almost happened there, something Cassia had

wanted to happen, which was impossible, because she was supposed to be with Sable. Wasn't she?

Somewhere between trying to figure out how to make Moriko feel better and trying to figure out what had changed, Cassia fell asleep.

#####

Moriko was up and out in the barn with the Alcens before the sun had dusted the sky with color. The messenger was still snoring away as she poured the feed into the troughs. Rugor hooted at her and tried to shove his nose in her stomach, but she just pushed his horned head away. "Come on, I'll take you out later for a run." He just hooted and stuck his nose into his feed.

She felt different, and since she couldn't get the memory of Cassia out of her mind, the way she looked, the way she smelled, and the way her hands felt touching her, even if it was an innocent I'm going to tickle you touch. She had a suspicion she was attracted to her.

She groaned and put her head in her hands. She had finally fallen for somebody and they were taken. Goddess she was just like her mother.

"Hey." The voice was shy and not far away, as Cassia stopped by the edge of the barn, looking awkward and unsure of herself. "You got up early." In fact, it was beyond early, and she was pretty sure Moriko hadn't slept at all.

Moriko's head shot up out of her hands, "Oh, um, hi." She quietly moved out of the barn and over to Cassia, "Just had to feed the Alcens." She stood awkwardly next to Cassia, but not too close. "Um, you're up awfully early too."

The Princess shrugged in response. "I woke up when you got up." The reason being she had been using the other woman's arm as a pillow. "Did I snore again?"

"No, and um, you never snored the first time, I was just teasing you. You knew that, right?" she asked, suddenly afraid she had hurt Cassia's feelings.

Cassia smiled weakly. "I didn't? You had me worried." She shoved off from the side of the barn and gestured towards the house. "Want to make breakfast for my parents? That should destroy their image of me."

Moriko nodded. "Sure, I could do that. You want me to get some eggs?"

"Good idea." The strangeness of the moment was fading, and Cassia wondered if she looked as relieved as she felt. She didn't want things to be strange with Moriko. She liked the girl, maybe a little too much. "See you inside?"

"Yeah, I'll be right in." She gave a good attempt at a smile and went to the back of the barn for some eggs. She just needed to get her head straight then she could ignore her feelings. Maybe a nice hunt with Talon would get her mind off things.

#####

Valdis rode ahead of the traveling party, who were quiet for a change. The cold temperature up at the top of the pass, followed by more riding, had shortened tempers and ceased the pointless chatter. She had to smirk. The Priestess from the Temple of Love was looking like she was seriously regretting her choice of skimpy clothing, which meant she was now trying to get Valdis' cloak rather than into her pants.

A smile broke out, hidden by the snarling hound's head helm she wore, as she spotted the ferry barge that Ellris had told them of. Her smile became even warmer remembering her night spent with the woman. She was glad there had been no awkwardness the next morning. It had been fun, but she had no plans of settling down, her life was for her Queen and country, for now.

#####

"Last chance love, you could still take Crow and run north," Selene whispered sideways to the woman standing next to her as they waited with the rest of the small crowd. Behind them, the ferry barge that would transport them back to the island stood ready. They could see the first rider moving down the road towards them, and Selene straightened, letting out a breath. "Here they come."

#####

She pulled the reins of her horse to a slow stop as she spotted women standing on the shore. Panting, Wraith followed at her horse's heels. Slinking around the horse, he eyed the women warily, waiting his mistress' command.

For a moment she looked at the women before her. Most looked uneasy, a few let their hands brush crude swords at their sides, but she dismissed them as any sort of threat. Easily, she dismounted and removed her helm. "I am Valdis of Queen Keshet's guards."

Stepping forwards, Selene smiled in welcome to the stranger who had ridden forwards. Behind her she could see Willow near the edge of the crowd watching with interest and curiosity. "Welcome to the north, Valdis. I am Selene." Even now, she didn't call herself a queen. "This is Nix, my wife," she motioned to the tall blacksmith, "and our daughter, Cassia."

Valdis gave a respectful bow and threw in a wink at Cassia. "I am very happy to meet the royal family. I was sent on ahead to make sure the way was clear." And even with the small band of thieves, the way had been excessively dull. Wraith had growled out a vicious warning snarl that had them running.

"They should be only a few minutes behind me. Queen Keshet wanted me to apologize ahead of time for the twins. They are um...a handful."

For once, Nix and Sable had something in common; they both huffed when they saw the wink the young warrior gave the Princess.

Cassia's smile widened at that, and she looked even more interested in their visitor.

Sending her daughter a warning look, Selene motioned to the ferry behind them. "How many are with your party? We might have to make several trips out to the island."

"There are twelve of us, Lady Selene," Valdis responded respectfully, not liking the glower she was getting from the smith. That was probably one woman who could hurt her.

Twelve people and their large horses...it was going to take at least two trips on the ferry, not to mention the crowd of people that were already gathered here. "We could remain here to wait for your party, or go on to the island and send the ferry back for them." Selene left it up to the scout, trusting her to know her Queen better than she did.

"Queen Keshet doesn't rule on formality, which is fun to watch, because it drives the other Priestesses crazy." Valdis made a face. "Oh, I should probably warn you we have Priestesses from the Goddess of Love and Death with us. Lilly, the Priestess from the temple of Love, is a bit..." She flustered, unable to think of a good word. "She's overly friendly with her hands and her ideas about her Goddess," she blurted out.

"Good to know." Selene smiled and waved towards the ferry. "I can stay here to greet your Queen with Nix. Willow?" The priestess stepped closer. "Could you see our guest to the island?"

The head priestess bowed. "It would be my pleasure."

Cassia snuck closer as well, intent on going as well.

Valdis bowed again then took a firm hold of her horse's bridle and led him towards the ferry. She whistled for Wraith, and the thick hound bound to her side.

Willow led the way down to the ferry, grinning as Nix grabbed Cassia to keep the young woman from following. Once they were on the ferry and starting across the Winderling, the priestess turned to their visitor. "I hope you have had a good trip so far?"

Valdis stowed her helm, happy not to be wearing it, and turned toward, judging by the green eyes, a priestess of the moon. "It has been pleasant. My mother came with Morgan sixteen years ago and spoke of the harsh landscape and the cold. With my eyes I see a beautiful landscape. However, at night it's still damn cold."

Especially if one was doing a Moon Goddess celebration in the middle of the night with a frisky

priestess who was able to get your clothes off. She grinned at the memory.

The older priestess' smile widened at the expression on the other woman's face. "Did you, by any chance, encounter one of my sister's up in the mountain pass?"

She nodded, "Ellris. She was gracious enough to feed us, and let us stay the night at her humble retreat."

"She is doing well, then?" Willow asked, just a touch too nonchalantly.

A bit smugly, Valdis replied, "She seemed to be doing very well, when I, we, left this morning."

The head priestess laughed out loud at that. "Were you there during a full moon?"

She winced internally at the slip, but betrayed nothing on the outside. "Last night was the full moon, so yes, we were there." She stared at the priestess for a second. "Is there something in particular you wanted to know?" she asked bluntly.

"I just wished to know if Ellris was doing well. It has been a very long time since I have climbed the pass, and the last acolyte was several months ago. That is all." Willow touched the other woman's arm. "I did not mean to imply anything."

"Fair enough... I spent enough time this morning with my mother fishing around for why I wasn't at my post outside the Priestess' home, without going through another fishing trip. I hate fishing, it's boring." She gave an easy grin, showing she wasn't upset.

The ferry bumped up against the dock on the island side of the Winderling. "Come, I will show you where you and your Queen will rest. Then later you can come see me at the temple and I promise not to fish." The older woman led the way off the barge.

#####

Keshet gave a sigh of pleasure as she spotted the ferry dock, as did the women standing by it to welcome them. All she wanted was to get off the damn horse and into a hot bath.

Penka signaled for the party to come to a halt. The Queen's guard Capitan stayed seated, assessing the women in front of her. She frowned seeing her daughter had gone on to the other side, which wasn't proper behavior; Valdis should have waited for them.

Keshet frowned as well, but was unhappy to still have her ass in the saddle. "Everyone, get off their damn horse and show these women some respect."

"My Queen, we haven't been announced," Lilly's low, husky voice broke in.

"Yeah, well, sitting on a horse towering over folks shows a distinct lack of respect. It's best to be

on a level playing ground," Keshet said and dismounted with a happy grin. The twins tumbled off their horses, grinning like fools, and took off for the ferry dock, leaving Keshet with the feeling one or both would be really wet soon.

"You must be Queen Keshet!" Selene called from the group of women still standing by the ferry docks. "Your rider has gone ahead to see to your accommodations on the island."

"Cailin, Caron, don't fall in the water..." her shout was cut off by a loud splash, "never mind." She pinched the bridge of her nose then looked at Selene. "I'm Keshet, those would be my twins. And oddly, Morgan described you and your burly smith perfectly. You must be Selene and Nix. You know, Nix, she never got over the fact you beat her in arm wrestling."

Nix blushed, but gave a slight bow to the southern Queen. "I'm a smith...she really should have seen the outcome before we started."

Keshet gave a loud laugh, "Morgan was a warrior, and never was one for believing the odds. If she had, we wouldn't have become the Queens of the South."

"I am sorry to have heard about her death, my condolences. She was always a staunch supporter throughout our journey here." Selene hadn't had much to do with Morgan, but her brief visits had revealed an honest and quick to laughter woman.

"Thank you. I miss her everyday. But the twins don't give me too much time to dwell on it," she replied, her smile dimming just a bit.

Cassia appeared at her mother's elbow, whispering to Nix. "Should I go make sure that those two are all right?" she asked, hopefully, as she watched the twins splash in the water. They looked like a lot more fun than the polite hello's going on with the main party.

Nix smiled and nodded, "If you think you're up for it. They don't look like proper princesses, they look like they enjoy wrestling and getting dirty. Bowing doesn't look like something they're fond of."

That was true, Cassia looked a little uncertain. They did look a lot different than Sable and her friends, but she had the sudden idea that maybe Moriko would like them. "I should learn to get along with other people." That was something Moriko would say, she was pretty sure, and she reached up to give Nix a kiss on the cheek before bounding off after the twins.

"You must be tired from the journey." Selene gestured towards the ferry barge that had just pulled up to the dock and was being tied down. "Come, we have a place for you to rest and recover. Then perhaps later you would do me the honor of coming to our house for dinner?"

Keshet nodded, "A rest sounds lovely, and dinner later even better. Since it will be a royal dinner, I think I can ditch my traveling party, but only if you think you're up for me and the twins."

Selene had to work at not laughing. "As long as you can take our daughter and whatever mood she happens to be in at the time." She stepped aside as the party started to lead their horses down towards the ferry. "Or any of my daughter's friends..." Now, to make sure that Sable and her family didn't show up tonight. She wondered if maybe she should have Nix board up their doorway, then dismissed the idea wistfully. That wouldn't set a good example for Cassia.

"I've survived Brody and the twins, and just now, I survived those damned priestesses bickering and whining across the pass. Dinner shouldn't be a problem. So how about you take us across this ferry thing so I get the twins into some dry clothes. Then we shall have a lovely dinner," she said as Penka came up behind her and took the bridle, the warrior looking annoyed as Eira followed at her heels.

The Queen's face took on a guarded look as well.

With a glance from one face to another, Selene nodded and led the way towards the ferry.

While the first ferry load was being sorted out, Cassia moved over to the edge of the Winderling and watched the two girls who were splashing around in it. Nix had been right; they didn't act like what Cassia had been told Princesses should act like at all. "Umm...hi," she called out.

Caitlin looked up from where she had her sister pinned in the mud. Her short dark hair was just shaggy enough for it to dip in front of her gray eyes. "Hi!

"I'm Cassia, are you Caitlin or Caron?" She couldn't tell which was which.

Caron looked up, her face covered in mud, the only thing visible were her gray eyes. "I'm Caron. The brat on top of me is Caitlin." She grinned, her teeth very white against the muddy darkness of her face, and shook her braided hair.

"Cassia, we're taking the first group over, stay with our guests and come over on the second ferry," Selene called from the barge as they started to pull away from the dock.

Cassia waved, rolling her eyes. It was what she said she'd do.

"Mom made us get different hairstyles so I'd stop sitting in on Caron's math classes," Caitlin said, tickling her sister.

The still dry teen blinked as she looked back at the two mud wrestlers, for the first time noticing the difference in the hairstyles. "Hey, those are nice." She looked closer at the braids. "I like that, how do get all those braids to stay like that?"

"Little leather ties, and a lot of help," the one on the bottom said with a grin. "Hey, Caitlin, get off, will ya, it's getting cold."

"Can you show me how to do that?" Cassia's eyes lit up. She'd be the first one on the island with hair like that - it would be great.

"Yeah, I can," she grunted, and tried to push her still grinning sister off of her.

Caitlin rolled her eyes and finally got off her sister.

The teen hesitated for a second, since the hand held out to her was covered in mud. With a mental shrug, she reached out to grab the slippery hand and try to pull one of the twins up.

Caitlin laughed and batted the hand away that Cassia was offering. "Don't fall for that. She can get up fine on her own."

Caron rolled her eyes and hopped up.

The northerner eyed the two twins suspiciously. "You two get in a lot of trouble, don't you?"

"Us," Caitlin said, making her eyes wide and batting her long, thick eyelashes, "never, we're sweetness and light."

"Sure you are." Cassia didn't believe a word of it. "Come on...let's see what trouble we can get into in the town." She was pretty sure that the three of them could get into a lot of trouble.

Caron started laughing so hard she almost fell back down into the mud. "All the time... But look at them," she pointed to the riding party, the stern Penka, the brooding Eira, the scantily clad Lilly, and the rest of the party. "It's so hard to resist, especially Lilly, she thinks she's so hot like no one can resist her sex appeal. We made her a very special seat."

Caitlin chuckled, "Right on top of an ant hill."

Laughing, Cassia shook her head. She couldn't believe they got away with that. She was pretty sure her mother would have killed her if she'd ever done that to a priestess. Of course, none of the Moon Goddess' priestesses ever dressed that skimpy.

#####

"Can you believe that the Queen of the south is here?" Cassia was literally bouncing around on the bed in excitement. "And the twins are fun. You have to meet them." She smiled at the other person in the room.

Moriko quirked an eyebrow at the hyper young woman, "I take it everything went good today?" She had missed hanging out with Cassia, but was glad she hadn't been asked to join. The thought of meeting all those important women made her stomach twist into knots. "I got a good ride in with Rugor. And Talon and I caught a couple of pheasants for dinner," she added in not nearly as excitable tone as Cassia's.

With one last bounce, Cassia stood up, "You have to show them Talon; they'd think he was great." For some reason, she was eager that the twins both liked Moriko. She wanted them to think her new friend was amazing. "You ready for dinner?" She could hear her parents moving around in the kitchen below as they prepared for the upcoming dinner.

"Sure. Crow said she'd roast the birds in her honey walnut sauce," the other girl said, nearly drooling. "She got some from Willow, somehow." Moriko secretly thought that Crow and the Priestess had a secret love thingy going on, but knew better than to say anything, walnuts were pretty rare, and honey was only easy to get if you had someone dumb enough to go into a hive and get it.

Moriko was certain a priestess could convince someone to reach into a hive of bees and steal honey.

That sounded delicious, and Cassia could feel her stomach rumble in anticipation. "Cassia, Moriko, time to set the table!" Selene's voice echoed up the stairs. And with a grin, Cassia grabbed the older girl's hand and pulled her out of the room.

Crow was tending the birds on the fire when they came down the stairs, with Nix and Selene making preparations for the rest of the dinner. The fire in the main room of the house was blazing, shedding light throughout the rooms. Nix had stoked it high in deference to the southerners' problem with cool weather.

#####

Keshet was trying to brush off her foul mood as she strode over to the Queen's house. It had been one thing after another. First, Eira didn't like being left out, and started ranting about her job as a bodyguard. Then the Priestess protested being left out of the loop, and leaving the Queen in the clutches of heathens. At least the twins were clean and dressed somewhat nice. Caitlin was dressed in a soft green dress, while Caron was in a dark brown shirt, and trousers. Keshet knew they did it as a ploy so folks would assume Caitlin was the nice one, the sweet one, Caron merely following her sister's lead.

Finally she had gotten a dinner party of her, the twins, and Valdis for protection. Penka, she was certain, was making the girl work guard duty because she wasn't happy the way her daughter had left them at the docks.

She went to raise a hand to knock, but found Valdis in her way, and with a bow and wink, the younger woman was using the knocker.

"Not those dishes, Cassia! The nice ones, put out the nice ones!" a voice from inside called, followed by a muttered comment from the girl in question.

The twins snickered, but looked innocent as their mother leveled her mom gaze at them.

Nix wiped her hands on a towel and went to open the door. "Honey, guests are here." She blew out a breath and opened the door.

With a glare at her daughter, who had suddenly decided to be less than helpful and was only now managing to finish setting the table, Selene went with Nix to the door. Smiling at the people outside, she motioned them to enter. "Welcome, come inside, please."

Valdis bowed to the smith and the Queen, but didn't miss the quick frown the smith gave her. "I have the honor of presenting Queen Keshet and the Royal twins Caitlin and Caron."

Keshet sighed. "Valdis, stop with the formalities. I want to eat, drink, and be warm, so move your butt out of the doorway."

Valdis smiled and moved into the house.

Keshet beamed as she stepped into the house and the warmth instantly surrounded her. "What a lovely place you have. It's so inviting and homey."

The house wasn't designed to host this many people, and the night was going to be a bit cozy. "Cassia, pour our guests something to drink." Turning to Keshet, she led the other woman towards the chairs around the table, extra ones had been placed around it. "It's good enough for Nix and I, we haven't had cause to want anything larger."

"It's a lot cozier than the manor," Caron said.

"That thing's drafty and huge," Caitlin agreed.

Grabbing Moriko, Cassia pulled the other girl over towards the twins, while the adults did their mingling thing, to introduce her.

Moriko had instantly gotten nervous once she'd gotten downstairs, not having realized dinner meant with the southern Royal family. She nervously let Cassia drag her over to the younger women.

Caron beamed. "Heya, Cassia, who you got there?"

"Caron and Caitlin, this is Moriko." The youngster smiled at the twins then left Moriko for a moment to start handing out mugs of mulled wine. "I'll be right back, but I better help, you know how mothers are."

"You don't have any servants?" Caron asked, suddenly realizing there was nowhere to put servants.

Moriko bristled, waiting to yet again be mistaken for help.

"Nix doesn't believe in other people doing the work for you," Cassia answered, handing the three of them a mug of wine before moving towards the adults.

The three took the wine and stood awkwardly for a moment.

Keshet smiled. "How thoughtful, thank you, Cassia," she praised the young woman as she was handed a mug. "Ah, if only some of your manners would rub off on those two."

Selene took one of the offered mugs from her daughter, whispering, "Play nice" before turning back to Keshet. "I hope that the rooms at the Inn are all right for you and your party?" Not that there was any other place for all of the strangers to room on the island.

"See, she thinks I have manners," Cassia said to her mother, handing Nix the third mug before blushing and offering one to Valdis.

Valdis took the mug with a wink and a quiet thank you.

With that, Cassia practically fled back to the three other youngsters. "Did Moriko tell you about her hawk Talon? He's amazing, comes right to her arm when she holds it out." She tried to hide the blush by talking faster.

This time Nix had missed the wink, but Moriko hadn't, and frowned a little into her mug.

Caitlin grinned, "Really? A pet hawk, can you train him to steal people's hats?"

"Or better yet, train him to poop on people's heads," Caron burst in excitedly. The three other teenagers just looked at Caron in disgust.

"She's not a pet," Cassia spoke up for Moriko, trying to get the other girl to get involved in the conversation. She wanted these three to like each other darn it, and that wasn't going to happen with Moriko just standing there looking like she wanted to be anywhere but here.

"Um, he and I go hunting. He caught dinner tonight, actually," she responded, warming up a bit. "He's beautiful, with reddish-brown feathers, and his tail feathers have black tips that look like a stripe."

Caron looked at the two girls. "Cassia, is Moriko your girlfriend?"

Caitlin rolled her eyes. She had been working on her twin to think more before she blurted out the stuff on her mind, which was sometimes fun, but this wasn't one of them.

The northerner blinked in surprise at the sudden question that had come out of nowhere. "What?" she asked, intelligently, eyes wide as she tried to figure out an answer. This should be simple; she

should be able to answer this. Then why wasn't she?

"No, um, Cassia's girlfriend is Sable. We're just friends," Moriko answered instead, with just a hint of sadness. She cleared her throat and looked into her wine again.

"Yeah, friends," Cassia smiled. *See, that hadn't been too hard to answer.* "Why?" she countered, narrowing her eyes at Caron, and wondering what had prompted that sudden question. A horrible thought crossed her mind as she wondered if maybe Caron had plans.

"Cause she looked unhappy when Valdis flirted with you," Caron replied with a shrug.

The wine that Moriko was sipping on suddenly went down the wrong pipe and she began coughing, her face turning bright red.

The dark-haired girl turned red as she stared at the southerner. "Valdis didn't flirt with me!" Her voice went up a few octaves, and she nervously looked toward the adults to make sure they were still deep in conversation. Then she patted Moriko on the back to help her.

Lowering her voice again, she hissed at the other girl, "She didn't flirt with me," still patting Moriko on the back.

Caron looked at Caitlin, who just grinned. "She flirts with everybody, she just likes women." She giggled. "She slept with that older priestess, the one in the pass."

Caron hit her sister. "Caitlin, some things should be private, you shouldn't have said."

Caitlin just shrugged, and Caron shook her head, her braids moving with the movement.

The northerners stared at the two southerners with almost identical expressions of surprise at that. "Ellris..?" Cassia whispered then grimaced at that image. "Okay, no more talking about older people sleeping with other people." Ellris was a friend of her mothers.

Moriko quickly drank her wine and went to get some more. The twins were like a thunderstorm, they just rolled right over you and you did your best to survive."

By the time she got back, Cassia had recovered a little from the previous outbursts that had rocked her world. "You need to show us how to do that to your hair though," the dark-haired girl was saying, pointing at Caron's braids.

"Yeah, it's fun, and easy to take care of," Caron said. "Caitlin did mine, so she can show you how to do it. You just have to take it out a couple times a month to wash your hair then put it back up."

The sharp crack of the doorknob froze everybody, most eyes turning towards the door. Nix frowned, having a good idea of who thought they could get away with disturbing them.

"Excuse me, Keshet." Selene gritted her teeth and followed her wife towards the doorway. They exchanged a look, both of them knowing who it probably was at the door. "I don't suppose we could just ignore them?" Selene asked Nix, hopefully.

"Maybe I should tell Valdis they pose a threat to Queen Keshet," Nix joked. She took a moment to prepare herself then went to open the door.

The Queen was pretty sure that wasn't going to work, although it was tempting. With a sigh, she went to see who was at the door as Crow finished her cooking of the birds and got the youngsters to help start carrying food over to the table.

Valdis felt the tension and instinctively put herself in front of her queen, her hand groping for the sword Keshet had made her leave in her room.

Nix opened the door and pasted a fake grin on her face that made her look more sick than happy.

Cressida, Oriana, and Sable all stood at the front door. They were all dressed in their best clothes, their fingers decorated in gold rings. "Nix, how lovely to see you..."

"Cressida, Orianna, what a surprise." Selene pasted on her own smile, although hers looked more real than the one that Nix was wearing. She purposefully stood in the middle of the doorway, looking down at the two women and a small shape in the back that was probably Sable.

Nix just blinked at the warm reception, thankful her wife had better people skills than she did.

"What can I do for you this fine autumn evening?" she asked the three who were outside.

"Well, since we're practically family, we knew you wouldn't want us to miss out on meeting the royal family. So it will be less awkward later after Cassia and Sable get married. This way everyone will know each other," Oriana spoke while Cressida simpered and smiled.

Sable looked slightly dazed, but followed her mothers into the house.

Caron and Caitlin did a double take and stared hard at Cassia. "You're getting married?" Caron blurted out.

Moriko wanted to go hide in the barn with the animals.

The teen looked from one twin to the other, feeling more uncertain in that single moment than she had felt so far since they'd announced their intentions. "Umm, well, I mean...yes?" That didn't come out like she had wanted it to.

With a frown on her face, Selene closed the door behind the pushy people. Now, how to get rid of them without causing a major scene in front of the southern Queen?

Oriana went to take the southern Queen's hand, only to find it halted in Valdis' firm grasp. The warrior's eyes were narrowed and had a dangerous glint in them. "Lady, I don't know who you are. I do know you were not invited. So unless you want to lose that, don't be placing it anywhere near my Queen."

With a comforting pat on Nix's arm, the northern Queen moved closer before one of the two did something idiotic. "Oriana, Cressida, may I present you the Queen of the south." She, on purpose, left out Keshet's name, forcing them to address the other woman formally.

Turning towards Keshet, she nodded towards the two women and their daughter. "This is Oriana, Cressida, and their daughter Sable."

Oriana's face was pale, and Valdis released her grasp one finger at a time, until all that was left was the red imprint of her hand.

Cressida cleared her throat and both smiled, weakly this time. They bowed, "It's a pleasure to meet you, your Majesty."

Keshet's face gave away nothing, but she nodded her head in return and whispered something to Valdis. The young woman snorted, but backed up a step.

At least this time they were acting more respectfully towards their guest. Selene caught Keshet's eyes and smiled. "I am certain they have just come to pay their respects to you and then will leave so that you can enjoy the dinner we've prepared for you."

The couple looked at each other uncertainly; this was not going at all like they planned. That move with the Queen's guard had changed the whole dynamic, having been called on their behavior, and could not take back control of the evening.

Oriana cleared her throat, "Um, yes. We hope that you have a lovely stay in our humble town. It's nothing like the city of Thullis that you and Morgan founded, but it has its bright spots."

Selene nodded to Nix, giving her wife a slight gesture towards the door of their home. Now was the time to get them out before either of them made things worse. "Now that you've paid your respects..." Selene took Cressida's arm and started to steer her towards the door, leaving Oriana to Nix.

"Oriana, Thullis is a pit of political backstabbing. The only nice thing is the garden Morgan made for me. I much prefer the peace out here. I shouldn't have to worry about snakes waiting in the grass." The gauntlet was thrown, it was subtle, but still, Oriana didn't miss it.

The merchant bowed again and let Nix lead her to the door. As they reached the door, Sable looked around, confused. Her parents had told her they were having dinner with Cassia and the

royals, but now, they were leaving. Even worse, Cassia didn't even try to come over and speak with her. She threw the other woman a look that meant she was in so much trouble later.

With a happy sigh, Nix firmly shut the door.

In the silence that followed, Selene gladly leaned her head against Nix's shoulder for a moment. With a sigh, she pushed away and smiled weakly to their guests. "My apologies for that, they are...eager...to make an impression."

Cassia bit her lip, worriedly watching her girlfriend as the door shut on them. The look she'd just been shot by Sable had not been a pleasant one.

"It's nothing I haven't dealt with before. They are politicians, they seek power any way they can. My sympathy to your daughter," she smiled wanly, then perked up as Moriko brought her more wine. "Aren't you thoughtful..." Moriko just blushed, making the Queen laugh.

Moriko scampered back over to the others. "Good move with the wine. Bonus points with that." The teens praised, giggling as they made Moriko turn even redder.

The fourth of the young women shook herself out of her worried look and turned to Moriko, nodding in agreement. "See, you're good with people."

"Um, Cassia, not to be rude, but your future wife doesn't seem that bright," Caron said, only to wince a second later when, Caitlin elbowing her in the ribs.

Moriko decided to go see how much longer dinner was going to take, and scurried into the kitchen to check in with Crow.

"She's nice, you just don't know her." That sounded lame, even to Cassia's ears. Shaking her head, she pointed towards the table. "Look, how about we just forget about Sable for now? Help me carry over the rest of the food?"

Caitlin and Caron looked each other, "Uh huh." Then they trailed after Cassia.

Moriko came out of the kitchen with a platter full of roasted pheasant in a honey-walnut sauce, nearly bowling over Cassia. "Sorry," she said as the sauce splattered up, sprinkling her face in a few spots.

The younger girl danced sideways to avoid something worse, grabbing onto Moriko's arms to steady them both. She grinned in amusement at the sudden distraction. "How nice to be dancing with you..." she joked as the adults started to take their chairs at the dinner table.

Moriko chuckled. "We'll have to do it sometime when food's not involved." It was out of her mouth before she'd really thought about it. "I should go get this on the table," she added in a rush of words, and moved towards the table.

"Oh, be quiet," Cassia said to Caron as the other girl watched the exchange, eyes dancing with amusement.

Crow came to the kitchen doorway. "Come on, ankle biter, the food's not going to move itself to the table, so stop looking at Moriko's ass and take the steamed squash to the table."

At the table, Selene was happy to have relative calm return. "As you can tell, your arrival has caused a lot of excitement," she told Keshet.

Keshet sighed and relaxed for the first time in a long time. "I can tell. How odd people forget not too long ago we were all equally nothing in Korgon's lands, slaves, the cattle had it better than we did. In the south I have petty despots trying to reinstate slavery. Can you believe that? It amazes me how some can fall back on what we hated so much."

Reaching over, Selene took Nix's hand in hers, and nodded in understanding. "There will always be those who will try to become what we all struggled against, those who forget our past." They would have to do something about that, some way to tell their descendants why they had done what they had done and where they had come from.

Keshet nodded, "I have women like Valdis who go out and fight and die for my honor. To uphold the laws Morgan and I felt were worth living under. It's never easy. For Morgan, it was easier 'cause she was out there leading them. But I'm no warrior, and I feel bad every time."

"We haven't had those kinds of problems, not yet, anyway." Selene passed the food towards the person to her left, and gave Moriko a reassuring smile. The girl looked slightly petrified to be there right then.

Keshet smiled as she bit into the pheasant. "Mmmm, this is lovely." She turned to Selene. "Enjoy it while you can. Well," she thought for a moment, "I guess your faith paid off. You have less people and a lot of land. Fierce land, that will bond you together, you have to work harder together to maintain what you have."

Caron rolled her eyes and mimicked her mother, only to wince when her mother smacked her in the back of the head.

Cassia leaned closer to Moriko, whispering, "They're gone now, you can relax a bit." The older girl looked like she was going to pass out.

Moriko gave a weak grin at Cassia, but said nothing, not having anything positive to say about Cassia's soon-to-be in-laws.

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"That went pretty well, right?" the teen asked, staring up at the stars above them, the weight of

the blanket on her a pleasant feeling against the cool winter air. Cassia turned her head to the side to regard the other three girls who were up on the barn roof with her.

"This is so cool," Caron said her voice filled with awe as she stared up at the stars.

"Your mom is nice," Cassia said, lowering her head to stare back up at the night above.

Caitlin looked over at Cassia. "Mom is mom. Your mothers are pretty nice too."

"You all right over there..?" Cassia called to the other side, a little worried about how quiet Moriko had been since the beginning of dinner.

Moriko shrugged, "I'm okay."

"You're not still overwhelmed by eating dinner with us, are you?" Caitlin asked.

"Um..." Moriko stuttered out nervously.

"That's so cute," Caitlin said, running a hand through Moriko's hair.

For some reason, Cassia didn't really believe the other girl. Getting up, she moved around Caron, who was staring raptly up into the sky, past the leaning Caitlin, to settle on the other side of Moriko.

Moriko squeaked and jumped, landing on Cassia.

"Ack!" Cassia caught the other girl around the waist and steadied her, blinking in surprise at Moriko then frowning at Caitlin. "Hey, stop that." She wasn't sure what she was annoyed with, but she didn't like Caitlin being so close to Moriko.

Moriko blushed, tangled up with Cassia. She quickly scrabbled over Cassia and plopped down on her other side.

Caitlin huffed, not understanding what the big deal was. Cassia had made it clear that she and Moriko weren't dating, and the older girl was cute in an awkward shy way. Caron looked over and chuckled.

The other girl glanced from Caitlin to Moriko, frowning a little. That had been unexpected. "Umm...anyway...how long do you think your mom's going to stay here?" She liked the twins; well, she liked them when Caitlin wasn't trying to slide closer to Moriko.

"It's okay, Moriko, Caitlin will only bite you, if you ask her real nice," the twin said with an evil grin, which only caused Moriko to blush harder and Caitlin to try and smack her twin. "Maybe a week or so...depends on how much she likes being away from her life, I guess." Caron chuckled and moved out of the way of her sister's swing.

Moriko groaned and put her hands over her face. She thought she had seen all the tricks, thanks to her sisters, but the twins had a few she hadn't, and Caitlin was making her really uncomfortable. "Thank you, but I really can't imagine being bitten as a fun thing, so I'll pass," she mumbled through her fingers.

Caitlin snorted. "Shows what you know," she snapped out before turning her attention to the stars.

It was really hard not to try and give Moriko a hug, considering how cute the other girl looked in her embarrassment. So instead, Cassia crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Caitlin. "Do you always move so fast?" So much for trying to avoid the situation entirely...

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Life's short. If I spent my time wondering and worrying about what was proper, I'd miss out on a lot of fun. Brody's going to be the next Queen, so it's not like I can shame the Royal family with my behavior. Besides, she's cute in a quiet, nice way. It's refreshing from all the posturing warrior wanna-be's running around the manor."

"I'm right here, could we not talk about me," Moriko stated, her face still hidden by her hands.

Caron flicked Caitlin's ear and moved so she was looking at Cassia over her sister. She could sense things were going downhill. That was her talent, knowing when they needed to stop before their mother dished out real punishment. "So what's up with your marriage requirements? Is it true anyone who wants to marry you needs to complete some horribly hard tasks?"

She shrugged, even though the others couldn't see it. "Willow announced it. There's some sort of tasks set up for anyone who wants to marry me." She laughed, a little nervously. "That's just to keep people from trying to marry me simply because I'll be the next Queen."

And that wasn't Sable, because Sable was going to do the trials for her.

"So, is your girlfriend going to do the trials?" Caron asked before looking at her sister. "You don't think this is giving mom any ideas, do you?"

Caitlin shrugged. "Probably it's mom," she replied.

Both turned and looked at Cassia, waiting for her to answer.

"Of course Sable will do them," she answered, a little defensively "She promised she would conquer all of them for me." Cassia bit her lip, trying to picture Sable doing any sort of trials. It was hard to imagine.

"Oh," Caron said. "Her family looked like they were only in it to get the Queen part added to their names." Sable and her family reminded her of a lot of women her mother dealt with; all of

them only interested in power.

Moriko bit her lip to avoid saying anything, but Caron just said what she had been thinking.

That was the first time that anyone had actually said anything like that to her, and Cassia sat up quickly. "You think she's just in it because I'll be the Queen?" she sounded horrified.

"Actually, I think she's in it 'cause that's what her parents told her to do. I hate to tell you, but your girlfriend doesn't look like she's ever had an original thought," Caitlin said with a sweet smile.

The other girl narrowed her eyes as she stared at Caitlin's outline in the darkness. It was hard to glare at someone that you couldn't see. "You haven't even met her except for two minutes at dinner!"

Moriko stayed very quiet, not really wanting to get into it.

"Whatever... All she did was look to her parents the entire time. They told her where to stand and what to do. The only thing she did on her own was glare at you," Caitlin stated.

Cassia was starting to get really annoyed with Caitlin, as the girl kept pushing every sore spot she had. "She likes me because I'm me, not because her parents want her to. You don't know anything about what you're talking about. You're just jealous because you'll never be a Queen yourself." She knew she was being nasty, but she didn't care.

"No I'm not. I certainly do not want to be Queen. And I'm really grateful I don't have some simpering girlfriend who couldn't find an original thought even if one bit her on the ass," Caitlin replied.

"Hey!" Moriko said sharply. "Stop it, you two!"

Both girls turned on her and told her, "Mind your own business!"

"At least I don't have to have a permanent babysitter around me all the time like Valdis, just to make sure I don't run off." Cassia gave the other girl a shove on her shoulder.

"You're just jealous she's watching me," Caitlin taunted back, with a shove of her own. "I've seen how you get all flustered when she winks at you."

"Why, you little bitch..." Cassia tackled Caitlin. That was it! She wasn't taking any more crap from this annoying southerner.

Caitlin's eyes went wide and she tried to throw the taller girl off her. While she wasn't as big as Cassia, she was scrappy and used to wrestling with the soldiers.

Moriko and Caron watched them roll around on the rooftop. Caron laughed out loud while Moriko looked worried.

The two wrestlers rolled across the roof, each of them trying to get the upper hand. Cassia was bigger and had wrestled some before, but Caitlin definitely was faster and had some nasty tricks up her sleeve. With grunts and curses, they tumbled across where Moriko was lying and straight off the edge of the roof.

Both expressions changed to ones of horror as the two young women fell from the roof.

"Shit, they better be okay or I'll have to work in the kitchen for a month," Caron moaned out.

There was a shriek as the two girls fell off the edge of the roof, followed a second later by laughter from the ground below. "I hate you!" Cassia yelled from the straw she was laying on, laughing and tossing a handful at the other girl.

Moriko scrambled to the edge of the barn's roof and looked over the edge. Not seeing anything, she moved quickly to the window they had crawled out of from the hayloft to the roof and into the barn. Easily, she scrambled down the ladder and out the doors. "Cassia, are you all right..." Her words fell flat and she frowned seeing the object of her worry playing and tossing hay at Caitlin. Annoyed, she crossed her arms over her chest.

Laughing, Cassia ducked a handful of hay that Caitlin had tossed her way then looked up at the sound of Moriko's voice. "That was fun!" she smiled, teeth white in the darkness.

Not certain what she was feeling, something between relief and anger, the blonde turned on her heel and stormed off.

Caitlin laughed and fell back into the hay pile. "Never mind, Moriko is too grumpy, you can keep her."

"Moriko?" Cassia stopped moving and watched her go in surprise, then turned and tossed hay at the other girl. "Why'd she leave?"

Caron yelled from the top of the roof. "'Cause she cares about you. You two just scared the crap out of us. I think I need to go change my trousers now."

"Eww, Caron. No need to be gross," Caitlin yelled up at her twin.

"I'm just joking," the reply came. "I'm not serious."

"Sooo..." Cassia looked from one twin to the other, having to tilt her head far back to look up at the girl on the roof. "Should I go after her or just let her be?"

"Is she really that dense?" Caron asked.

"I'm not dense!" Cassia was getting a little annoyed again.

"Guess so," Caitlin replied.

The northerner sighed and sat up in the pile of hay that had been placed next to the barn. "Would you two stop being annoying?"

"Just do what you think is right," Caitlin said, tossing straw at her.

"Can't have regrets if you tried," Caron added.

"If I tried what?" she asked, although Cassia had a sinking feeling she knew what, as she scrambled out of the pile of hay.

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "If you wonder how things might have been if you'd gone after her." She paused. "Or don't. I don't care."

The teen shook her head then tossed a few pieces of straw at her. "Thanks." She stared off in the distance towards where Moriko had stormed off. "You two know how to get back to the Inn, right?" Her mother would kill her if something happened to them.

"Yeah, Valdis or Eira will come looking for us sooner or later. They can always find us."

Caitlin might have been annoying, but despite herself, Cassia liked her. "Good night, then, I have to go see about not having regrets." Now, if she could just manage to find Moriko, Goddess only knew where she'd ended up on the island.

"Good Luck," Caron said then shouted, "Look out!" and jumped from the roof into the hay.

#####

She didn't have the thick leather protector for her arm, so Talon couldn't land there. Instead, she found a sturdy branch that made an L shape and stuck it deep enough into the ground for him to rest on so Moriko could be close to him.

She sat on a rock and gently stroked the feathers on his neck and back, he occasionally nipping at her fingers trying to find a treat. "I don't know, Talon, I was probably being an ass, but she scared the crap out of me. I had a flash of her broken and bleeding body in my mind when I ran down that ladder. Then she was just laughing like it was no big deal."

He puffed up his feathers and shook himself before settling back down.

"I know, silly, huh." Talon just regarded her quietly. "Maybe I should wander down to Abnoa with those women who separated to watch the pass into the north. This thing..." She paused,

feeling uncomfortable evening talking about it with Talon. "Well, let's say I don't want to be my mother, falling in love with someone who can't... Let's just say I don't want to be my mother."

The hawk nibbled at her fingers.

"Hey," a quiet and uncertain voice called from the edge of the trees. "I thought you might come here. Actually, I was hoping you would be here, because I didn't know where else to look for you."

"Oh Goddess," Moriko said quietly, and covered her face with her hands, embarrassed. Talon gave a soft shrill little cry in welcome and bobbed his head a few times.

The other girl stopped in her tracks at that, a worried look on her face. "Umm, do you just want me to go?" Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

Moriko blew out a breath. "No, no, I was...I was just kind of embarrassed." She cleared her throat and looked up at the other girl.

"Oh, all right." Cassia resumed her slow approach, smiling as she spotted Talon in the moonlight. "Hi, Talon, you look very regal at night," she told the falcon.

As if understanding the words, the falcon stretched his feathers out and flapped them for a second before resettling on his perch.

Moriko smiled softly and rested her chin on her fist. "You know, you gave me a really good scare," she said, finally breaking the silence.

The dark-haired teen approached the bird and his friend carefully, as if both were wild animals that would bolt if she moved too quickly. "I'm sorry about back at the barn," she apologized. "I didn't want to scare you, but Caitlin was being soo...ugh, and then we rolled off the roof, and it was really fun landing in that pile of hay."

"I'm sure it was fun, but I didn't know you landed on the hay. For all I knew, you two were on the ground dying," she snapped back then frowned. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to snap at you." She sighed and rubbed her face.

"Don't worry. I'm sure I deserve it." Cassia gave her a weak smile. "Can I sit with you?" She felt nervous at being here, at being close to Moriko, but she wanted to be anyway.

"Sure." Moriko scooted over on the rock.

Sitting down in the free space, Cassia glanced up at the nearly full moon. "I am sorry I scared you, it just kind of happened." She risked a grin over at the other girl. "I'm glad the hay was there, though."

Moriko leaned over and bumped shoulders with her. "I'm glad the hay was there, too. I don't know what I would have done if you'd been hurt." She blushed lightly and cleared her throat. "I'm glad you're okay. I'm sorry I overreacted."

She grinned, bumping her shoulder back against hers. "It's all right." She looked around the silent woods that were around them. "So, what do you do when you run off into the woods alone?"

"I, um, I talk to Talon," She replied hesitantly, although her embarrassment was lessening, since she was fairly certain Cassia hadn't been there long enough to have heard her earlier conversation with Talon.

"Does he talk back?" That was interesting. Cassia leaned closer to study the falcon with interest. She'd never heard of a bird talking before.

"No, silly, he's a bird. But he does listen real well," she said, leaning forward a bit and stroking his neck.

Talon cocked his head, but then started preening his wing feathers.

That got a giggle out of Cassia, and she turned towards Moriko, lowering her voice. "I'd listen well if you wanted to tell me something too." She smiled her most charming smile.

"Well, at least you speak back." Unthinking, she reached up and brushed some straw that was stuck in Cassia's dark hair, laughing lightly as the fibers broke apart and rained down on the girl's shoulders.

The dark-haired girl wrinkled her nose at the straw, trying not to sneeze, and failing. "That's the problem with hay, it gets everywhere." She wasn't sure why they were whispering. Cassia caught the other girl's hand, tentatively holding it.

"I think something's trying to nest in there," she joked. Automatically, she said, "Bless you," then blinked and went quiet as the other girl took her hand. She swallowed nervously.

Caitlin and Caron had told her to avoid having regrets, and it sounded like good advice to Cassia. Licking lips that had suddenly gone dry, she tilted her head slightly and leaned closer, whispering, "You know what?"

Moriko's heart started pounding in her chest, and was slightly embarrassed that her hand was all sweaty. "Um, what?" she asked quietly.

"You're really cute." The dark-haired girl was barely talking, afraid she was going to fall right off the rock. With excruciating slowness, she leaned closer and brushed her lips against Moriko's. It was a bit clumsy as a kiss, and Cassia half slipped off the edge of the rock as she lost her balance, but managed to hold on long enough to at least give the other girl a light kiss.

Talon, figuring he wasn't needed anymore, flapped his wings and sprang easily up from the makeshift perch he was on.

Moriko never noticed. Her nose hurt from where she had banged it against Cassia's forehead when the girl slipped, but still, overall, it was the best kiss she'd ever gotten. She let go of Cassia's hand and grabbed her around the waist to prevent her from falling anymore. "I...I...think you're cute, too."

The other girl let out a burst of surprised laughter when she got an impromptu hug from Moriko, returning the favor and hanging onto her tight. "Sorry about that, I slipped."

"No more falling tonight," Moriko whispered into Cassia's hair, only to sneeze the next second as straw tickled her nose.

Cassia nodded in agreement then impulsively stood up and pulled the other girl to her feet. "Do you dance?" she whispered.

"A little," the older girl stuttered out, but let herself be pulled to her feet. "My Muanya taught me a little, said women like women who can dance. But I only could follow her a little bit." In truth, she had felt like she had two left feet when her Muanya tried to teach her.

"Want to try?" Cassia looked at the other girl, eyes dark and hooded in the pale light of the moonlight. She wasn't thinking anymore, she was just enjoying the moment, relishing it. Sable didn't exist, her parents didn't exist...nothing outside of this little clearing did.

"Okay." She smiled nervously and wiped her sweaty hands on her pants before taking Cassia's. Her Muanya had been a slave on a ranch. It had been hard, wild work, but even the slaves had been treated better there, the hard work everyone shared bonding them. Her mother knew wild, racy songs with wilder beats that required twirling dance movements and fancy footwork. She loved the fast paced music her Muanya would sing or play on a beat up fiddle. She was lucky, she guessed, her Muanya's owner had died and her Muanya had been sold to the field hands with Selene, or she wouldn't be here with Cassia.

She started to hum one of the tunes, slowing it down to the level she could go at. And with a gentle squeeze to Cassia's hands, started to move them, guiding the other woman into the steps she knew. The dancing wasn't as racy or wild, but it took on a life of its own that made her blood race and pound in her ears.

"And you said you only danced a little?" Cassia whispered, a little breathless with surprise and excitement as Moriko led the dance. It was different than any of the dancing that she'd done with the other girls, this was wild, and definitely faster moving. The steps were unfamiliar, and she found herself leaning into Moriko, letting the other girl's body show her the steps as they moved.

Moriko grinned; actually feeling relaxed for the first time in a while. "You should see my

Muanya, she's amazing. This is only about half the speed that it's supposed to be danced at, but I can't keep up. It makes me dizzy," she confided.

"Dizzy can be good," Cassia smiled, a flash of teeth as she nearly tripped over the other girl's feet then hastily corrected herself to continue the dance. "Know any others?"

Moriko slowed them down, her breath streaming out in white puffs in the cooling night air. "Um, I know a waltz, which is kind of formal, and I trip over my feet a lot, and a few variations of this one."

She was grinning from ear to ear, her skin buzzing where she and Cassia touched. She wanted to either kiss Cassia or have the girl kiss her again, but didn't want to ruin the fun they were having. Part of her mind was well aware of the fact that reality lurked outside this clearing, a world where Sable and Royal families existed.

This time Cassia took the lead, taking them through a slower dance that was filled with a lot of twirling. "Know this one?" She grinned, liking the warmth of the other girl's body against hers.

Moriko giggled, getting dizzy. "The twirling dances always make me dizzy. Careful or I'll fall over." Just as soon as she spoke, she mis-stepped and nearly bowled them both over.

The teen wrapped her arms around the other girl, holding her tight to keep them both from falling over. "Wouldn't want that, would we?" she whispered then ducked her head, not able to resist tasting Moriko's lips again.

Moriko held on to Cassia as well, and even though she wasn't well versed in kissing, she was relaxed enough to let her instincts help out. She held the Princess reverently, all pretense of dancing coming to an end, so enraptured by the sensations that kissing Cassia was causing.

#####

Dark black eyes, invisible in the surrounding darkness of night, watched the unfolding scene. White teeth were illuminated briefly in the darkness, as lips pulled back into a sneering smile. Then in a second, eyes and teeth were gone, leaving only the night and the sharp, cracking retort of a broken, dried out tree branch that was stepped on as the woman walked away from the scene.

#####

Moriko didn't feel much like getting up, despite how much Rugor was hooting to get fed. Last night had been horrible and wonderful. Cassia had kissed her. Kissing Cassia had made her feel so amazing, but then there was the whole crash and burn.

She groaned and rolled over in the straw, remembering the crack of the branch. It had been loud, echoing menacingly in their glen, and had ended their dance. Cassia had panicked and fled, and she had returned to her nest in the barn, not even trying to attempt to go up to Cassia's room.

Finally, Moriko gathered her courage to face the day. She drew back the covers and threw on some clothes over her sleep shift. The morning light came through the cracks in the wooden beams. She tossed the grain mixture into the feeding trough, snagged the water bucket, and stomped out of the barn. She nodded at the Queen as she saw her leave the house, with goodbye kiss from a rumpled looking Nix.

That touching scene just made her mood fouler.

"Have a good day, Moriko," Selene called out, heading towards the center of the town and the Inn that was there.

Moriko grunted and lowered the bucket into the well, "You too, Selene."

The older woman hesitated for a moment. Moriko was often shy, but she'd never seemed unhappy before. Selene changed course, walking towards the well and the girl who stood by it. "Is everything all right?"

Muscles popped on her arms as she pulled the rope, raising the bucket. Giving a squawk of surprise, she let go of the rope, then tried to catch it again, only to let go again as the rope ripped the flesh of her hands. She turned sheepishly and faced the Queen of the north. "Um, everything's fine."

Selene winced in sympathy and caught Moriko's wounded hand. "I didn't mean to startle you, child." There was a red stripe down the center of the teenager's hand, and it probably hurt a lot. "We should get that looked at, just in case."

"It's... It will be fine." She blushed as Selene took her hand. "I'm sure you have more important things to do."

The older woman smiled gently. "I'm early. Cassia is in a foul mood this morning, so I'm leaving Nix to deal with her," she confided with a grin. "Now let's see what we can do." The Queen finished hauling up the bucket of water and used the contents to rinse Moriko's burn. "We can put some of that ointment that Willow's priestesses make later."

Moriko ducked her head. "Thank you," she said softly.

"Stay here." The older woman quickly ducked back into the house, coming out with a length of clean linen strips. These she started to wrap around the teenager's hand, trying to keep the wound from getting rubbed on anything. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked quietly as she bandaged. It didn't escape her notice that her daughter and Moriko were both upset, or that Moriko had apparently slept in the barn last night.

"Yes." She really didn't want to talk about her problems with Selene, since the Queen's daughter was the source of her problems. "I was just out too late with the royal princesses."

"Hmmm..." Selene's non-judgmental response as she finished tying the bandage. "Come see Willow or one of the other priestesses later, and they'll put an ointment on that." She touched Moriko's shoulder to try to make sure she had the girl's attention. "You can talk to me if something is bothering you. I like you, Moriko, you're a good person, and I think you're a good friend for my daughter. If you need to, you know where I am, or Nix, for that matter."

"Thank you," the young woman replied, but kept her head ducked, not meeting Selene's eyes.

The queen sighed then stood up. "Well, have a good morning, then. I'll see you later."

Moriko nodded and returned to the well, to get water for the Alcens.

#####

Nix frowned and stared at her daughter, uncertain what to do. The girl was mashing her oatmeal to death with her spoon. Considering that oatmeal was already pretty much mashed, that was impressive. "Pumpkin, I didn't think my oatmeal was that bad. It's one of the things I think I cook fairly well."

"The oatmeal is fine." Cassia glared at her bowl, smashing the contents a few more times just to make sure that it wasn't going anywhere. Stupid, why had she listened to the twins? She should have known it was a bad idea! Now look what had happened, she'd kissed Moriko and someone had seen it.

"Okay, then." Nix just stared at her daughter's profile for a second, hoping for a clue. Not getting one, she bravely trudged in. "Is there something bothering you?"

"No," was the nearly growled answer as Cassia shoved away the bowl of oatmeal, having decided she wasn't hungry.

"Okay." Nix slumped in her chair. She was horrible at this. "So what are you and Moriko doing today? You taking her to that swimming hole all you young women are so fond of?"

Cassia frowned. No, that seemed like a really bad idea right now. With a sigh, she slumped back in her chair, staring at her mother. "Mom, what do you do when you do something stupid? I mean, how do you fix it?"

"Um..." Nix blinked, taken by surprise. "Well, it depends on what stupid thing I've done. Normally I just apologize or I hope nobody noticed my stupid act."

"Oh." That wasn't as helpful as Cassia had been hoping for, and the teen transferred her stare to the bowl of oatmeal. "What if you aren't sure who to apologize to?" she asked quietly. That was what worried her the most. She wasn't sure if she should apologize to Sable for kissing Moriko.

Or to Moriko for freaking out and running off. Shouldn't she know which one to do?

"Pumpkin, maybe if you were a little more specific, I could be a bigger help?" She stared hopefully at her brooding offspring, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door.

It was on the tip of the teenager's tongue to confess what had happened last night, and she wasn't sure whether to curse or praise the interruption. Jumping up, she ran over to the door, yanking it open to see who had interrupted the conversation.

Sable's narrowed eyes bored into her girlfriend as the door opened. "We need to have a talk," were the horrible words that came out of her mouth.

Cassia physically cringed. Those had to be the most horrible words she'd ever heard put together. "Bye, Mom," she called over her shoulder to Nix, then stepped outside and shut the door behind her before her mother could ask any questions. "What's wrong?" She smiled feebly, her stomach churning.

Nix waved weakly.

Sable turned to her girlfriend and looked at her. Her parents had given her a weird talk this morning, about doing whatever was necessary to keep Cassia's focus on her. She didn't get what they were hinting at. Of course she had Cassia's attention, she loved Cassia and Cassia loved her. Her parents told her all the time how she was meant to be Queen and Cassia's wife, what else was there? But Cassia had been rude to her last night. "You are in trouble for last night," she snapped out.

The other girl felt like she was going to throw up. "For last night?" she asked weakly. Any second now she was sure she was going to topple over.

"Yes, last night. You were so rude. You didn't come over and say hi. You didn't invite me to stay to dinner, and you didn't introduce me to the royal twins. I might get the impression you don't love me anymore."

There was, apparently, a Goddess, and Cassia was going to make sure she made some sort of sacrifice to her sometime soon. Weak kneed with relief, she managed to look appropriately apologetic; at least, she hoped she did. "I'm sorry. It was all a big surprise last night. I didn't know what to do."

Sable sighed. "I guess I could understand that." She grinned at Cassia, her anger forgotten. "You didn't come get me last night. I missed hanging out with you in our spot." She leaned forward, kissing Cassia soundly with the kiss that she was fairly certain turned her girlfriend's brain to mush.

Moriko came out of the barn hoping to sneak into the house and talk to Cassia without having to endure Nix asking her what was wrong like Selene. She stopped suddenly, seeing Cassia and

Sable kissing, and felt like she had been kicked in the kidneys.

"I'm sorry," Cassia whispered once she could breathe again. Sable's kisses were very demanding things, which did wonderful things to her brain. "The dinner was really late." She felt horrible lying, but it seemed the easiest way out. "I have to go help Nix, but I'll see you later," she promised.

"You better. A girl could start to think you weren't interested in her. I'll meet you at our swimming hole later." She turned and frowned. "Is your servant sick or something, she doesn't look too good?"

"What?" Cassia looked over Sable's shoulder, freezing as she spotted Moriko.

Sable frowned. "I think you should look into getting less willful servants. My mom says the quieter they are the better."

The other teen mumbled something that might have been agreement, her eyes locked with Moriko's. She didn't know what to do, what to say, to wipe away the awful expression on the other girl's face. This was worse than facing Sable.

"I'll see you later, Sable," she managed to say, amazed at how level her voice sounded. She struggled with a smile to the other girl, tearing her eyes from the expression on Moriko's face.

Moriko couldn't hide the expression on her face. Finally, she tore her eyes from the scene and fled back into the safety of the barn, her eyes watering and burning from holding her tears at bay.

Unthinking, she rushed to Rugor's pen. Her forearm scraped against the rough wood of the gate as she blindly reached for it, shoving it open. All she wanted was to be away from her and into the safety of the woods.

Rugor hooted in joy as his gate opened. Fingers wrapped around the simple bridle, and automatically, she outfitted the Alcen for a ride. Her hands grabbed the thick fur of his neck and she swung on to his back. The next thing she knew, she was in the middle of thick trees, Rugor's sides heaving under her legs. She blinked, having no conscious thought of how she got here.

#####

Crow came up the path to Runt's house, whistling happily. She'd had a most pleasant evening that had turned into a most pleasant morning. She easily heard the thundering hooves, and was well out of the way of the Alcen that came tearing down the road. Recognizing Moriko, she rolled her eyes.

She didn't once envy these youngsters and their boiling emotional states. She continued up the road, not even bothering to give chase, knowing it to be pointless to chase after a wildly running Alcen.

A minute later, she passed a snotty Sable, who glared at her as they passed. Finally reaching the Runt's house, she saw Cassia's solitary figure standing in front of the house.

The youngster was staring down the road, a lost look on her face. She blinked, suddenly seeming to realize that Crow was there. "Crow..." She paused, looking at her in confusion. "I..." She didn't know what to say.

Crow sighed and clapped a thick hand to the girl's shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked softly.

Cassia looked like she was going to cry. "It's all a mess." She didn't know where to start.

"Okay, then." She tugged Cassia's arm and led her behind the barn. There was a gentle slope and a few rocks then it opened into a lightly wooded plain before hitting the neighbor's house. "I figure you don't want to talk to your moms about this, so let's sit a spell and maybe the world will make sense."

"I don't think it's ever going to make sense again." The dark-haired girl wrapped her arms around herself, the tears getting harder to avoid, and she sniffled. She let herself be pulled down onto one of the sun-warmed rocks and leaned against her aunt as she had when she was a little girl. "Everything is messed up."

Crow rolled her eyes, knowing the cloth that protected her light sensitive eyes covered them. "Well, the sky seems up and the ground seems down, so not everything is messed up," she joked.

That earned the older woman a sniffly, shaky, laugh. "But everything else is. My parents don't like my girlfriend, who I thought I wanted to always be with. But then I kissed Moriko, and I like her too, but differently than Sable. Now I don't know who I like more, but it's all the twins' fault." The words all sort of tumbled out.

Crow said nothing. She looked at Cassia for a second then at the ground as she tried to make sense of the young woman's rambling sentence.

"Do you think I'm horrible," Cassia asked, not sure she could bear it if Crow did, "for kissing her?"

Crow blew out a breath then asked, "Did you want to kiss her?"

The teen considered the question for a minute then slowly nodded her head against her aunt's shoulder.

"Ah, ankle biter, no, I don't think you're horrible." She gave her niece a hug. "But you can't blame this on the twins. They may be a horrible influence on the outside world, but they didn't make you do anything."

"I know," Cassia sighed. "It's easier to blame them, though."

She loosened the hug but didn't let go completely. "Now, if I'm understanding everything, you're in love with Moriko and Sable. And don't think I didn't notice how you were drooling over that southern Royal guard at dinner, so that brings the total to three."

The younger woman's face started to turn red. "I wasn't drooling over her," she protested weakly.

Crow wasn't really worried about Valdis, the young guard had more than half the population swooning around the place. And while the young woman enjoyed flirting, she seemed to know with whom to have her fun with and whom to avoid.

"Oh, yes you were, you and most of the other young ones running around," Crow teased. "And if I was younger, I'd probably be drooling myself. However, not to break your heart, I think she's chasing Kealey's skirt." She grinned, thinking about how Kelsy and Valla were about ready to kill the young woman for even looking at their daughter.

Jokes aside, she knew that Cassia was in a whole lot of emotional pain. Crow pondered what to say. "Well, Runt Jr., what you and Moriko did to Sable was kind of crappy. I wish I could coat the truth in honey, but you can't blame yourself completely. Moriko knew you had a girlfriend, and she still allowed herself to be kissed. I assume she even did some kissing of her own?"

Mutely, Cassia nodded in agreement. There had been a lot of kissing, very enjoyable kissing. "I'm the one that went after her, though."

"Well, I think what you need to figure out is if you're shedding a few wild hairs before you make a life forever with Sable, or if maybe Sable isn't the one for you? I hate to bring up a dead horse and beat it a few more times, but, Cassia, you are still young, life is just opening up before you. Maybe you should see where it leads you before settling down."

"I shouldn't be kissing other people if I love Sable, should I?" Cassia sighed and closed her eyes. "I really thought I loved her. I don't want to hurt her."

Crow smiled sadly. "Love is messy and it hurts. Sometimes a little hurt now prevents a big hurt down the road."

The teen sighed and finally pulled away from her aunt. "That doesn't make it any easier right now." Idly, she kicked at a small pebble with her foot, watching it tumble away from where they sat. "What should I do?"

Crow frowned, wishing she could make everything better. "What do you want to do?"

Cassia smiled hopefully. "Go away?" That way she wouldn't hurt anybody.

Crow laughed. "When did running away ever help anything?"

"Why do you have to always be right?" the younger girl mock pouted. "I should talk to Sable. Then I should talk to Moriko...if I can find her."

Crow got up off the rock she was sitting on and ruffled the young woman's hair. "No. What you need to do is sit down and figure out what you want. If you're not happy with yourself and your life, well, ankle biter, that's not something you're going to find or get out of another woman. It's something you need to find for yourself."

"There you go, being right again," the teen grumbled, getting up off the rock herself. "Tell my moms I'll be back later? I have to go take care of a few things."

#####

"Hey!" Cassia's mood instantly improved as she spotted two familiar figures walking down the road towards her. She had been on her way to Sable's, but that could wait at least a little while. "What are you two doing?" she asked the twins, nodding to the older woman who was trailing along behind them, one of the guards, she thought.

Caron perked up, "Hey, Cassia."

Caitlin just smiled and waved.

"Hey, we're going to go to this swimming hole the girl at the Inn told us about." Hyper, Caron bounded over to Cassia, nearly tackling the girl.

"Ah!" Cassia yelped in surprise as she got a handful of twin. Grinning, she gave her a hug back. "Good to see you too, Caron. Which swimming hole..?" Cassia really, really, didn't want to go talk with Sable.

"The one on the far side of the village, um, past the stonecutter's house, I think she said." Caron looked to her twin for confirmation.

Caitlin nodded, "Yep. Hey, Cassia. You fall off anymore roofs last night?"

The northerner firmly told herself she wasn't going to blush, but she did anyway. "No. I didn't fall off anymore roofs." She'd done something far more enjoyable. Turning, she started to walk along with both twins. She could talk with Sable later, and the Goddess only knew where Moriko had gone to.

Caitlin laughed at the blush. "So what did you end up doing? You ever find Moriko, or is she still mad at you?"

Caron made a face at the guard watching them. "Khalil, we're fine, you don't need to follow us everywhere."

The guard sighed. "Princess, since Penka has apparently gotten caught up in something and lost track of time, I'd feel better if I watched over you." The guard knew her duty, and Penka would have her hide.

Although she was somewhat distressed that Penka hadn't shown up for her shift, she figured the woman was allowed a mistake, since it was the first one the older guard could think of the woman having made.

It still amused Cassia to know that the twins were followed around all the time by guards. She wasn't sure if it was for their protection or to protect others from them. "I found Moriko," she answered, simply, not wanting to say too much about the evening.

"That's good. Cassia, I don't think she was mad, more like scared you were hurt. I would have acted the same, but I'm use to it," Caitlin said quietly to Cassia. She liked Moriko, the quiet girl something she wasn't use to, and it was refreshing.

"We kissed," Cassia couldn't help but whisper back, even though she'd just promised herself that she wouldn't say anything about it.

Caron stumbled then caught herself. "Um, what?" she whispered back.

Caitlin looked at the two in front of her suspiciously.

"We danced and then I kissed her," the northerner whispered back.

"Wow. Was it nice?" She looked over her shoulder at her twin then quickly asked. "What's it like, to kiss someone?" Caron hadn't had the chance. Although she'd had various crushes on some of her tutors, they knew better than to kiss the princess.

Cassia tripped over her own feet in surprise at that. She'd assumed that both twins were more experienced than she was. "It's really nice," she gave the other girl a quick grin. "I can't explain it, but your stomach gets all filled with flutters and the good kisses take away your breath."

Caron grinned dreamily, "Sounds nice. Caitlin was sneaking out to see one of the guards in training, but she won't speak about what happened and what they did. Penka found out and had the girl transferred, she died in a battle. I think they both feel angry and blame each other. That's why she was telling you not to have regrets." Caron huffed a little. "But nobody will even let me do anything to have any regrets. Either Caitlin, or my mother, or the guards are always watching. Caitlin is only a minute older. I don't know why that makes her think I'm the baby."

The other teen gave her a friendly bump with her shoulder. "Tell you what, I'll race you to the swimming hole, and then tonight we can see about finding somebody you can kiss."

"Okay, but it has to be somebody cute." She took a little hop step then took off running.

"Last one there has to do whatever the others want tonight!" Cassia yelled back to Caitlin as she took off in a sprint as well, bursting past a couple of adults and down the last stretch of street. Past the stonecutters house was a sharp left, then down a simple dirt path towards the river.

Caitlin rolled her eyes, but took off running. The guard grumbled, but easily followed the younger women.

From the shadow of a barn, dark eyes watched everything. The face was hidden completely in darkness then momentarily white teeth were exposed in an evil grin.

#####

A shaggy snout wormed its way under Moriko's arm then Rugor flipped his head up to catch the crying young woman's attention.

Moriko snorted and wiped her eyes, "Sorry there, boy. Did you want attention?"

The Alcen hooted and she scratched his shaggy head.

She was feeling better out here in the woods, now that she had a good cry. Everything that had happened shouldn't have shocked her. It wasn't like she hadn't known about Sable.

She wiped her face again and stood up. Rugor hooted and tried to butt his head into her side. She just pushed him away, avoiding the horns.

Moriko felt disjointed inside, her heart and head hurt and weren't talking logically to one another. Her heart was trying to convince her that all her youthful hopes and wishes were created around one kiss of Cassia's lips. Her head was telling her that all those hopes and wishes were silly and not likely.

She started to walk along the game trail, Rugor following at her heels, nipping at leaves and plants, constantly eating.

This part of the island was as far away from the northern civilization as you could get and still be on the island. The trees were thick and untouched, and few people came here for any other reason than to hunt or forage for edible berries or herbs.

Her morose thoughts came to a halt as the smell of smoke invaded her nose. She sniffed and slowly turned in a circle, afraid of a forest fire. She moved in the direction of the smoke, hoping to pinpoint where it was so she could go back and bring help.

The sound of laughter drifted through the forest as shadows moved in front of the small fire that

was as carefully shielded from view as possible. There was a small group of women crouched around it, passing mugs back and forth to one another, and sharing small pieces of meat.

Moriko frowned when she didn't recognize any of them, not that she knew everybody in the north. But these women had short swords and armor, something like Valdis and the other guards from the south were wearing.

"How much longer do we have to sit out here?" one groused, wiping her lips with the back of her hand.

"Until we're told otherwise," another answered, tearing a piece of meat off the bone of a rabbit with her teeth and a knife.

A figure appeared, stepping out of shadows, the features blurred, but Moriko felt scared just looking at it.

The four women around the fire stopped speaking immediately as they spotted the figure, each scrambling to go to their knees as quickly as they could.

"Listen up. I have orders from your employer. The merchants want you to kidnap the northern Princess and the twins from the south. Nothing is to happen to the northern Princess. However, treat the twins whatever way seems best," the figure barked out.

There was a bit of snickering at that, as they had a few ideas of what they could do to the twins. The one with the dagger risked raising her eyes to the shadowy figure. "What about our payment? We don't mind coming this far north, but we haven't seen a single gold coin yet."

"After that twit frees Cassia, you all run away. Meet back here for payment. It will be more than you can imagine," the woman said with a sneer.

The one with the knife grunted in pleasure, imagining a lot of gold. "We'll take care of it immediately. The northerner won't have a single pretty little hair harmed."

"Good. They're currently on their way to a swimming hole on the far end of town." The woman crouched down to draw a map in the dirt.

The four women crowded closer to see the map, studying it with the casual skill of those used to skulking through shadows to accomplish their missions. "We'll get them all together." That would work just perfectly.

Moriko felt her stomach clench in fear. Something bad was going to happen to Cassia, and she needed to get back to town. Carefully, she backed away from the sight before her.

"Now what do we have here?" A rough southern voice asked from just in back of Moriko.

"Looks like a little spy to me." Grabbing the youngster's shoulder, she spun Moriko around, grinning nastily. The woman was dressed like the others, in leather armor with a sword at her hip, and a nasty scar down the side of her face.

Moriko tried to shake the hand off. "Let go of me," she growled out, her fear coming out as anger.

"Where did you come from, little mouse?" one of the women from the campsite called as the four mercenaries started to advance towards Moriko, hands on swords.

"Oh, I don't think I'll be letting go of you anytime soon," the one holding onto her grinned an unpleasant expression.

Moriko whistled shrilly, and within a second, Rugor charged through the trees, hooting loudly. Shaking his head, his horns slashed at the woman holding Moriko.

With a startled curse, she let go, barely managing to avoid getting gored by the angry Alcen's horns. "Get her, you fools! She can't get back to warn them!"

Moriko took off running, while Rugor hooted and slashed with his horns, protecting his mistress' escape, his horns cutting flesh, drawing blood.

"Get that beast down and get that girl!" the shadow woman shouted before vanishing.

One of the women drew a bow and released an arrow. Rugor gave a shrill scream of pain then thrashed around wildly in pain.

The others raced around the thrashing animal, grimly giving chase through the trees after Moriko. They knew what would happen to them if they failed. The shadowy shape would make sure they regretted their failure for a long time before allowing them to die.

Moriko paused and looked back, for a moment warring with stopping or continuing.

An arrow whizzed by her ear and she started running again, sending a quick prayer to the Moon Goddess to watch over Rugor. As she ran through the trees, more and more arrows rained down around her.

Huffing for breath, one skimmed so close to her head that it cut a thin line across the flesh of her cheek. Wincing, she turned away from it only to have all the air forced out of her lungs as an arrow buried itself in her flesh, feeling like an Alcen had kicked to her chest. And for a moment, she sucked for breath as her eyes trailed down the red bloom on her chest. Her arms wind milled then she fell down the side of the small hill, and everything went black.

"Did I get her?" a raspy voice asked.

"Good shot," one of the women complimented the other, standing at the steep hillside where the body had toppled down. "Looks like a clean kill." She wasn't wasting time going down there then having to scramble back up.

"Let's go, we have to catch them while they are still all together," the first woman from the campfire called out, pausing to peer down the slope at the still body. "She won't cause us any trouble."

The rest of the women hastily packed up their camp, then walked around the dead, bleeding corpse of the Alcen, and headed to the river.

#####

Cupping her hands together, Cassia showered the nearest twin with water. Laughing, she dove sideways, trying to get out of the way of any retaliation from either sibling. The worry that she'd been carrying with her earlier was still there, but she was ignoring it for now and enjoying the sunny day.

"That's for making me fall off the roof last night."

Caitlin sputtered then swam away from the taller girl. "I didn't make you do anything," she gasped out, wiping the water out of her eyes.

"You fought with me," Cassia laughed, moving deeper into the water until her feet didn't touch the bottom.

Caron yelled out a warning shout as she swung out over the small cove of water on a piece of braided rope that had been tied to a tree limb. She lost her nerve at the last moment and didn't let go, and swung back into the trees. Her sister's laughter and giggled shout of "Chicken" made her try one more time, this time letting go and falling into the water.

Caitlin wiped water out of her face one more time and looked over at Cassia. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you and Moriko were lusting after one another. She's cute, reminds me of..." she trailed off before finding her words again. "Um, she's just the type of woman I like. Nothing personal..."

Caron's head burst out of the water and she gasped for breath, "I don't think I like that."

The splash caused the northerner to sputter this time, as she rode out the waves that rippled out from Caron's cannonball. Shaking her head, Cassia swam closer to the southerner. "It's all right. Sorry I lost it. I shouldn't have been so angry."

The guard chuckled at the antics in the water and went back to watching the trees. The north was nice and peaceful, and she wondered, when she retired, if she could move up. As far as she could tell, there were no petty warlords stirring up trouble and small land wars.

"Truce?" Cassia swam until she could touch the bottom and stuck out her hand to Caitlin.

Caitlin stared at the hand for a second then grinned, "Okay, truce." She reached out and shook Cassia's wet hand.

"Good. Now I better get going. I need to talk to Sable, even if I really don't want to." The water wasn't that warm either, and she didn't feel like spending a lot of time in it if the day wasn't hot enough.

Swimming towards the bank, she paused on the edge to turn back towards the two southerners. "If you see Moriko, will you tell her I'm sorry? I'll find her after I talk with Sable."

Caron splashed her sister then quickly swam away. "Okay," She shouted.

The guard nodded her head respectfully at the northern Princess then turned to give the girl some privacy as she got out of the water.

Cassia smiled back at the southern guard, whose name she couldn't remember, and started to get up out of the water.

The arrow came out of nowhere.

One second the guard was standing there, the next an arrow had sprouted out of her throat, blood cascading from the fatal wound, and the southerner collapsed to the ground. It was so sudden and unexpected; Cassia froze, staring down at the dying woman with wide eyes.

Women, ragged and dirty, emerged from the trees, and most of them had a dark, hungry look in their eyes.

Caron gave a squawk of surprise and started to swim for the river.

"Hey, girl," one of them said with a nasty sneer, emerging from a bush right next to Cassia.

She turned and managed two steps back into the river before she was grabbed from behind. "Let go of me!" she yelled, squirming in the iron tight grip as she was hauled back to the bank.

"I wouldn't if I were you!" a voice shouted. "I'll have my archers use you for target practice. The only one I have to keep in one pristine piece is this northern lovely."

An arrow hit the water next to her, and Caron quickly rethought her options. Her gray eyes searched for her twin, unsure what to do.

Caitlin swam to shore and got out of the water, her faith fully on her mother, Penka, and Valdis to find them.

Cassia managed to scratch the arm of the one who was holding her, which aimed a curse at her. "Bag them," the one who'd been yelling demanded. The next thing Cassia knew, a rough burlap sack had been drawn over her head and her arms tied behind her with rough hemp rope.

Caitlin was given the same treatment by the women waiting for her on the bank. "Be smart, do what your sister did. Would be a shame to have to kill her because you did something stupid," the leader of the little group called to Caron.

Caron lashed out with a foot as she was roughly handled, getting her backhanded by a meaty fist. She cried out in pain. Other than her sisters, no one had actually hit her before.

"Caron, stop it," Caitlin whispered.

"Let's go." The mercenaries herded the girls down the bank, shoving them when they didn't move fast enough for their liking. Within minutes, the only thing left was the body of the now dead guard.

#####

Selene waited until after the drinks were poured before talking to the woman seated across from her. "I hope that you have enjoyed your visit north so far." They were back in the Inn after having toured the island for the majority of the morning. "I know we aren't as grand as some of the southern cities, but we will be."

Keshet smiled, taking the drink, "It's fine, Selene. Grand just is a nice word for drafty, trust me."

On the southern Queen's left, the Priestess from the Temple of Love just sniffed at the Queen's comment. Keshet rolled her eyes, but said nothing. "Actually, I think I'm going to thank the royal advisor this was actually a nice trip."

The northerner shrugged, "Maybe, although it might be nice to have a larger house to host people in." That was something that neither she nor Nix had thought of. "How are your daughters enjoying it so far?"

The Priestess made another rude noise at the mention of the twins.

Selene took a sip of the drink in front of her, working hard at ignoring the priestess, which she'd been doing all day. The other woman rubbed her entirely the wrong way.

"Oh, they've loved it, they really like Cassia. You know, I haven't had to apologize once for their behavior." She sighed in contentment, "That's been nice."

Valdis emerged from the upstairs dressed in her red and black tunic and trousers. Her hair was messy and she gave a jaw splitting yawn. Wraith followed at her heels, his stumpy tail wagging.

The Priestess perked up a bit at seeing the warrior.

"We are all a little rough around the edges, something to do with the cold winters, I think."

Selene smiled, ignoring another distasteful expression on the priestess' face. Honestly, why had the woman come along with them if she was going to find everything lacking? Just to needle the woman, Selene leaned forwards.

"Thank you for the suggestions on our temple to the Moon Goddess." She nodded in welcome to the southern guard, glad that Cassia wasn't around to lust after her.

Keshet smirked behind her glass and rolled her eyes. "You know, um..." She paused as she drew a blank on the priestess' name. "The Priestess of Death at least took some interest in learning about the Priestess of the Moon Goddess."

When the priestess ignored her, having only the attention span for Valdis, she looked over at Selene, fighting off a laugh. "It was no problem. In the big scheme of things, we are all sisters, so why should I not help. I actually have never pledged my loyalty to any of the gods."

That got the priestess' attention.

The northern queen shifted over on the wooden bench to make room for Valdis as the guard joined them at the table. "Do you worship all of them, then? Or none?" Selene could barely remember a time when she hadn't believed; the days before the Goddess had come to her were from a different lifetime.

Valdis nodded her thanks and sat down, ignoring the priestess' leering gaze.

"Oh, politically I worship them all. Personally, after Morgan died, I find it hard to have faith in any of them," Keshet said with a small, sad smile.

As was becoming a regular thing, Selene was impressed with the other woman's candor in speaking about her opinions. "Regardless, the suggestions you gave Willow could shave off years of construction time for the temple."

The priestess, however, looked like she had bitten into a lemon. "How could you say such a thing? The Goddess of Love..."

She was cut off by Valdis' hand gripping her arm painfully. "You forget yourself. She is the Queen and can say anything she likes. Maybe you should go pray to your Goddess or something."

The woman looked angry for a second then fearful as the grip got stronger. After a moment, she got up and left the table.

Selene didn't even try to hide her relief as the priestess left. Oddly enough, of all the priestesses

that had accompanied Keshet northwards, the Priestess of Death had been the nicest.

Valdis sighed in relief, and looked at Keshet reproachfully.

Keshet chuckled. "Yes, yes, I need to be more careful what I say around certain people."

The northerner hid a smile by taking a sip of her drink. She started to ask a question about how many different Gods and Goddesses were actually worshiped in the south, when the door to the Inn slammed open. Sable stood in the open doorway, the teen looking around almost frantically. When she spotted the three women at the table, she practically ran towards them, dodging past one of Keshet's other guards.

Her mothers followed shortly after, moving at a slower pace.

"This doesn't look good," Selene whispered, standing up as the girl reached the table.

Valdis sighed and rubbed the sleep from her eyes then stood, putting herself in front of the northern and southern Queens.

"Selene!" the young woman shouted. "I, well, I, there has been..." She trailed off and looked to her mothers. The two women nodded encouragingly.

The northern queen stepped up next to Valdis. Whatever was going on, she was pretty sure she wasn't going to enjoy it. "What is it, Sable?" She glanced towards the teen's mothers, then back to her.

"I was on my way to meet Cassia at our swimming hole when, well, she and the Royal southern Princesses were swimming, well, they weren't swimming..." She looked to her mothers.

Cressida broke in. "Just tell the Queen what you told us."

Sable just blinked confused at her mother then looked back at Selene. "There were these rough looking women; they were taking all of them away."

Selene frowned, asking, "Taking who away?" even as her stomach clenched in sudden fear.

Sable blinked and thought for a second, "Them, the, er, Princesses."

"Impossible," Keshet shouted, standing up. "Penka is guarding the twins this morning, she is the best."

Selene paled at that. "Where is the swimming hole?" Maybe the younger girl had misunderstood what she saw. She prayed that was what had happened.

"Actually," Eira's oily voice came. "I didn't see Penka on guard duty this morning."

"What?" came the surprised voices of both Valdis and Keshet.

The woman broke away from the shadows in the Inn. "I saw Khalil on duty."

"There's no way, she had night duty. She wouldn't have done a double shift, unless..." Valdis trailed off.

Eira picked up the thought, "Penka didn't show up for her shift."

Valdis was torn, to look for the Princesses or to look for her mother. Eira stood there, challenging her, her black eyes fathomless. "I will go with Sable and a few guards to check it out. Eira, you look for my...look for Penka."

"Valla!" Selene yelled to get the innkeeper's attention. "Please, find Nix, tell her that Cassia's missing and that we're going to the swimming hole she likes, to try and find her." Ignoring Sable's mothers, she turned back to the girl. "Take us there now," she commanded.

"Selene. Give us a minute to get ready. If we go like this and there is trouble, more could be hurt," Valdis said quietly.

It took a lot, but the northern queen nodded, not trusting her voice. "Hurry," she answered, meeting the anguished look on Keshet's face. "I'm sure they are fine. They have to be."

#####

Moriko stumbled out of the trees into the town. She had broken the arrow shaft off, but it was still in her right below her collarbone, so close that if she moved her arm, she could hear the arrowhead grate against the bone.

Blood still sluggishly oozed out of the wound, and she was feeling lightheaded. There was vomit on her shoes, her first reaction to seeing Rugor's corpse shot full of arrows and cut open. The second had been tears.

The only thing keeping her going was knowing that Cassia, Caron, and Caitlin's lives were depending on her.

It was quiet, and as she looked around, all the houses were blurry. She spun around in a small circle, unsure of where to go. Her eyes caught the sight of the blurry Inn sign and she staggered over to it, missing the door and leaning heavily against the wall, nearly sliding over.

There were voices mumbling. "Eira, I'm glad you told us about Cassia and that servant."

"It is in my best interests that your house and the house of the north make a match," came the same cold voice she had heard at the southern bandit camp.

"This plan is even better, this way Sable is a hero. There's no way they'll ask her to do those tasks now, and Cassia will be so star struck by her girlfriend the hero she'll forget about anybody else."

Moriko nearly vomited again. Rugor had died for this. So politics could be played.

Tears sprung up in her eyes and she pushed off from the rough wooden logs of the Inn. She wanted to be far from here. Where life was simple and there was no love and politics, nothing to confuse the heart and the head.

She staggered a few more feet before she dropped to her knees.

Her vision was dimming, and croaked out for help.

"This way, Willow, there's a woman who's on the edge of life and death, I can feel it. She will either need you to help her live or me to help comfort her as she passes over." The voice was soft, almost musical.

"There she is." Gentle hands touched Moriko's side. "Moriko, child, we are here. Can you hear me?" She pressed against the wound to stop the sluggish flow of blood.

"It's all right, child." The older priestess slid an arm under the teenager's shoulder. "Melody, can you help me bring her back to the temple?" she asked the Priestess of Death, who had come out with her.

"Of course," she answered as her smaller hands picked up the young woman's feet. "My, you do grow them solid up here, don't you?"

Despite the gravely injured woman that they were carrying, Willow smiled. "I think it is to survive the winters." Carefully, they carried the teen down the street towards the unfinished temple building, which was thankfully not that far away.

Novices helped the two carry the teen inside as soon as they spotted the two priestesses carrying Moriko towards the small building next to the temple. Carefully, they carried the injured teen into one of the small rooms and made her comfortable. Willow entered after them, frowning at the arrow shaft still in the girl's shoulder. "Moriko, this is going to hurt, I fear."

Melody, smiled at Willow. "She's passed out, so now would be a good time to remove it."

The older woman shook her head at herself. "So she is." With the help of two of the acolytes, they ripped open the girl's clothing to reveal the wound underneath. Willow winced at the ugly mess. Cautiously, she took up a dagger and began to cut away the skin to remove the shaft.

As she worked she prayed to the Goddess for the girl she worked on.

#####

Keshet blew softly on her mug of tea, concerned, rightly so. Penka was still missing, her children were kidnapped, or worse; there was a lot to be worried about.

She watched the northern Queen through her eyelashes, the woman beyond pissed at being made to stay behind.

The map was a bit crudely drawn, but it worked. It was scribed on the back of a sheet of expensive Valium and laid out on the table of the smithy. On it was a sketch of the area and the surrounding land. Selene was staring down at it, arms crossed, and furious. "I can't believe she left me here," she growled, glancing up at the southern Queen.

Keshet smiled sadly, "I understand completely. Morgan left all the time to lead the troops. I was pissed and worried, and it didn't stop until she came home."

"She left me behind!" Selene growled, unhappy and worried. "Cassia is my child too." She sighed and unfolded her arms. "Valdis is good, right? I mean, she's your best?"

"Valdis is my second best. Penka is my best." She sighed sadly. "I'm worried, she's never disappeared before. Valdis will get them back."

"I hope Nix and she are safe. Please, Goddess, bring our children back safely," the northerner whispered, looking down at the map again.

#####

Valdis crept through the trees, Wraith moving ahead of her, his nose to the forest floor.

Nix moved behind her, the large woman trying to get used to the awkward weight of the sword strapped across her back. Selene had demanded that she take at least a sword with her, although she was much more at ease with the hammer in her hand. "I hope she forgives me for making her stay behind," the large smith said quietly, pausing as Wraith decided which way the trail went.

Valdis frowned and looked over her shoulder, "She loves you, why would she not forgive you?"

"She looked pretty angry," the northerner rambled, running a hand over her hair. The nighttime looked bright to eyes that were still sensitive to the sunlight no matter how many years had passed since she'd been a slave in the mines.

The young warrior rolled her eyes. "Cook her a nice dinner tomorrow, pour on some romantic charm, she'll be fine, especially if we get your daughter back."

Vladis ducked under a tree limb and whispered. "Okay, can we have a little less talk and more

sneaking?"

The northerner nodded and followed the southern guard.

Behind them, the rest of the southern guard moved through the trees, silent as ghosts.

Wraith paused then snorted. His stumpy tail wagged as he darted around a clearing trying to find the trail. He gave a small wuff then looked at his mistress.

Valdis went over to where he was standing and looked at the trail he had chosen. Crouching down, she examined the forest floor, "Looks like someone wasn't happy." She studied the track marks showing someone had been dragged.

"One of the twins or Cassia?" whispered Nix. So far they hadn't found any sign of violence against the girls, and she hoped it stayed that way. The dead guard they had found back at the river had showed how serious the abductors were. They'd sent Sable back to the village after that.

"I can't tell. I'm sorry." She motioned her warriors forward and stood. Wraith took off down the path.

The smith followed as they moved down the path, frowning when she realized where they were going. "There's a dock ahead for fishing boats." That could be bad. If they got off the island, it was going to get that much harder to find them.

Valdis nodded, and moved out, pushing everyone into a faster pace. All the trees looked the same to her, but she could smell water.

Ahead of them came the sound of voices, which sounded like either Caron or Caitlin arguing with someone. A second later, there was the sound of a fist hitting flesh and the voice stopped.

"If you or your sister makes noise again, I'll slit both your throats myself." a rough voice growled then gave the girl a shove towards the boat they were being loaded onto. The former occupants lay dead on the shore where they'd been ambushed.

Valdis could feel her blood heat in anticipation of the fight to come. Unconsciously, she gripped the pommel of her sword, her teeth bared in snarl. Wraith sensing his mistress' mood snarled as well, the fur on his spine standing up.

She growled as she was brought to a stop by Nix's meaty hand. "What?" she hissed at the smith.

The rest of the guards came to a stop wondering what to do.

"They might hurt the girls. We have to surprise them." Nix wasn't going to risk having Cassia hurt.

Valdis ripped her arm from the smith's grasp. "Good point," she said grudgingly.

"How about this..." Nix whispered as the guards leaned closer to hear.

#####

The boat scared Cassia more than anything that had happened so far. If they were loaded onto it, they could be sailed up the river to the mountains or down it all the way to the sea.

Caron blinked, trying to get the blood out of her eyes, since her eyebrow had split under the blow.

Caitlin watched horrified as her twin was beat. "Caron, just stop," she whispered. She hadn't been enjoying the woman feeling her up, but she didn't need Caron to risk her life being a hero.

Caron groaned and tried to get her feet under her as one of the bandits grabbed her and lifted her roughly to her feet.

The hard voiced woman grabbed the southerner's chin, forcing her to look at her. She tapped the long, wicked knife that she held in her hand against the girl's cheek. "If you or your sister makes noise again, I'll slit both your throats myself." She smiled an unpleasant expression. "Understand me?"

Caron nodded, her face going white in fear.

"Good girl." She tapped the twin on the cheek one last time then looked past her towards the simple fishing boat. There were dozens of them that plied across the Winderling, and it would be hard to track. "Load them onboard," she ordered, stepping over the body of one of the previous owners.

Caitlin was working on getting the ropes loose around her wrist, but it was slow going.

"No...wait...my mothers will pay you whatever you want," Cassia babbled, scared out of her mind as the nearest mercenary reached to pick her up. "Please..." she begged, only to have the woman laugh at her.

The one with the dagger paused, turning towards the trail that they'd been following. "What is that?" she frowned, listening intently.

The other mercenaries went still, drawing weapons if they had them. Faintly at first, then growing closer, they could hear singing. Two forms staggered up the path, leaning heavily on one another, singing loudly and quite drunk. They were dressed like fisherwomen, simple warm work clothes and a rain slicker.

A quick gesture had two of the mercenaries drag the bodies aside, and hastily hide them. Two of

the others slid into the shadows of the trees, hiding their weapons to avoid any light glinting off the bared steel.

"Oh, hey," one of the women hiccupped, "looky see, we got visitors. Perhaps they'd like a drink."

She staggered away from her companion, nearly dropping the large earthen jug she was holding.

"Hi, ladies," the leader of the mercenaries stepped forward smiling in what she hoped was a friendly manner. Behind her, the rest of the mercenaries stepped behind the girls, bared steel pressing up against their backs to keep them quiet.

"You-you-you, you want some of this, just got it in from the miners up north." The woman belched something toxic and waved the jug under the bandit's nose.

The southerner winced at the foul smell, eyes watering, and flinched back from the offered jug, whatever was in it smelling like piss. "Ugh, that smells like horse piss!"

The woman swayed for a moment then blinked at the jug, and bringing it to her nose, she sniffed. "Does not!" she waved it back at the bandit, smacking her hand in the head. "Here, take another whiff."

The mercenary swore at the hit, seeing stars for a second. That drunk sure could hit hard.

Valdis and Wraith emerged soundlessly from the water, staring hard at the women's, who held the three Princesses, backs. Silently she drew her sword from its scabbard.

In the shadows, the mercenaries under the trees waited for the signal to attack, oblivious to the other southern guards and Nix, who ever so quietly moved through the trees towards them.

Near the two drunks, the mercenary leader was losing her patience. She shoved the mug away from her face angrily. "Get out of here, both of you."

"Hey, Fox, I don't think they like your sister's drink making ability," the drunk said to the other one.

"Wha? Don't like my sister's alcohol. That's rude."

The woman fell back into the other only to be pushed forward. One second she was a stumbling drunk, the next she was a calculating warrior. The jug came crashing down on the woman's head, shattering both.

The other drunk stood up straight and revealed a short sword hidden under her robe.

Chaos erupted in the clearing near the boat launch. As soon as the leader went down under the hit to her head, the mercenaries hiding under the tree fell. One took a wicked stab from a short

sword in the back from a southern guard she never knew was there. The other crumpled to the ground from a single blow of Nix's hammer to the head.

Valdis nodded at the one that held a drooping sword point at Caron, and Wraith sprang silently, latching on to the woman's sword arm. The young warrior quickly grabbed another, pulling the sword away from Caitlin and slitting the woman's throat. Not even pausing, she turned on the woman holding Cassia.

It had all happened so quickly that the last standing mercenary was caught staring at Valdis, mouth open as she slit the throat of the one holding Caitlin. Desperately she backed towards the river, knife coming up to press against a crying Cassia's throat, "Stop! Come any closer and I'll kill her, I swear!"

Nix moved closer to Valdis, hammer in hand, dripping blood.

Valdis looked the woman in the eye and growled out. "If you kill her, you're dead. If you run, you're dead. So I think your best bet is to drop the knife." She smelled the air and grinned, "I can smell your fear. I can hear how your heart pounds." She practically licked her chops. This fight hadn't even come close to soothing her battle fever. "Please do something foolish."

Wraith circled, looking for an opening.

The woman's eyes were wide and wild as she desperately looked around for a way out. There was only the grim southern guard and the large northern smith. She saw death in all of their eyes. "Back away now! I'm getting on the boat and you're going to let me go, or I'll make sure she dies slowly!"

Valdis barked out a laugh. "Before you could finish a cut, I'd have your throat slit." But she gestured for the guards to step back.

Cassia met her mother's eyes, swallowing. "I'm sorry," she whispered, wishing she could apologize for all the problems, all the arguments they'd had.

Nix just smiled. "It's going to be okay, pumpkin." She said reassuringly.

"Yeah, everything's going to be just fine," the mercenary laughed, dragging Cassia back another step onto the wooden dock. "We're going to go now, and if you're lucky, I'll let her go somewhere downstream."

Nix was familiar with the boats, and she waited for that moment. It was the step down into the small craft from the dock, the step down that was longer than it looked, taking many inexperienced woman by surprise.

As soon as the mercenary stepped down from the dock, Nix sprang the instant she saw the look

of shock on the woman's face. In the darkness she could see perfectly, and avoided the mud and slick boards.

The knife had cut a shallow cut against the flesh of Cassia's throat then Nix was there, forcing the arm away, her own thick, calloused hands wrapping around the woman's throat.

She was so angry that someone would take advantage of her daughter, would hurt her and her wife like that. She was unaware of how she had easily already broken the woman's neck, she just kept squeezing.

"Mom..?" Cassia held onto one of her mother's arms. The mercenary was obviously dead, her feet dangling above the deck, head at an unnatural angle. "Mom, she's dead."

Nix blinked and slowly realized what she had done then felt bile creep up the back of her throat. "Oh Goddess," she whimpered.

Valdis snorted, slightly pissed off she hadn't gotten the kill. "The woman was a right bitch, and she threatened what was yours. Don't feel bad about that."

Cassia eagerly fell into her mother's arms after Nix had dropped the body to the deck, not at all ashamed to cry into her mother's shirt.

Nix nodded, but wrapped her arms around her daughter. "It's okay. I've got you. Let's get you home, your other mother is worried sick."

"You really need to thank that girlfriend of yours. If she hadn't seen the bandits take you, well, who knows when we would have figured out what was going on," Valdis said, motioning for her women to check the bodies. These were paid swords, if she'd ever seen them.

"Yeah, I never thought that mooncalf would do anything important. Guess she showed me," Nix grumbled a bit then helped Cassia to the shore.

"Sable saw them?" the northern teen was confused. She hadn't seen any sign of Sable at the swimming hole. "I'm sorry about the other guard," she told Valdis, stepping out onto dry land and flashing a shaky smile at the twins.

Valdis smiled. "Don't be sorry, just rejoice being alive." She turned to Nix. "Will you and a couple of the guards take them home? Caron looks like she needs a healer."

#####

Valdis returned much later than the rest of the guards and Nix to the Inn. Her blood had been too hot to return to civilized company, and while she did not begrudge Nix the kill, she had wanted that scum's blood dripping off her sword. So instead of returning with the rest, she and Wraith had gone hunting in the woods. They had run through the trees until sweat poured off their bodies

and their chests heaved for breath. Unfamiliar with the north, they had rested against a soft moss-covered bolder.

Only that to their surprise the bolder came to life. Uncurling, the Greenback had lifted up from its resting place on to its hind legs, and opening its huge maw, had roared, its black fangs shining in the moonlight. Its gray, slick fur camouflaged it among the other stones in the clearing, and the green on its back made it look like it had moss.

Valdis had grinned, feeling her father's gifts quicken inside her and her bloodlust grow. She drew her sword and Wraith snarled, exposing his own fangs.

A much happier and calm Valdis returned to the small northern town dragging the Greenback's corpse. The few women still up and about gave the woman looks of respect and a wide berth.

Bloody and worn, with slowly healing cuts and slashes on her body, she dropped the bear-like creature's body in front of the Inn and entered.

It was a serene scene that greeted her. Selene and Nix sat by the fire, Cassia's body curled up on Nix's lap. While Cassia wasn't small, the Smith was still easily able to hold her daughter. Keshet sat as well, drinking what looked to be tea. There was no sign of the twins.

At Valdis' questioning look, Keshet replied, "They're upstairs, asleep."

Valdis nodded then looked around hopefully for Kealey, but the Innkeeper's daughter was more than likely asleep.

Keshet cleared her throat and gave the young warrior a pointed look. "Do I want to know what you've been doing since the rescue of the princesses?" She sighed at the grin Valdis gave her and replied, "I didn't think so." The southern Queen took a sip and spoke as Valdis made her way to the stairs. "We found your mother."

Valdis turned and made her way back to the Queens. "Where was she?"

"Eira found her drunk and passed out in some woman's bed. The rather busty young woman claims Penka and she got drunk and went back to her place where, well...you know happened." Keshet and Valdis looked at each other for a second then busted up laughing.

Selene and Nix looked at each other confused, then at the laughing pair. Nix blurted out, "You two seem rather relaxed about this, considering that woman failed to do her job, and as a result wasn't there to save the princesses when she was really needed."

Keshet wiped her eyes and got her breathing under control. "I understand your anger, I really do, Nix, but..." She looked at Valdis and motioned for her to speak.

"Well, that young woman is lying. One, my mother doesn't drink, and two, well...she doesn't like

women, um, like that." The young warrior blushed slightly.

"Doesn't like women?" Selene muttered confused. "Then who is your Muanya?"

Valdis looked around then quietly said, "Twenty years ago Vladlin, the God of War, took his best warrior to bed, that was my mother."

"I don't see what that..." Nix started to say, only to have Valdis cut her off. "Twenty years ago, the best warrior was my mother."

"Oh," was all Nix said.

"What happened to her hound Rage?"

"He was found shut up in a storage shed where, apparently, he'd gone wandering. He's with your mother now."

Valdis nodded, "This woman that was with my mother is more than likely working with those bandits. You want me to have a talk with her?"

Keshet thought for a moment. "No. Do it in the morning. Go clean up and get some rest."

Valdis bowed and started up the stairs to her room.

Keshet just stared into the fire and sipped her tea. She was worried that all this chaos was because of them, that they had brought all this danger to the north. The bandits were southern. Luckily so far, no one in the north was blaming them

The northern Queen smiled at the sight of their daughter sleeping on Nix's lap. "They look so peaceful when they're sleeping, then they wake up." She looked up across at the southerner. "You look like a woman who is worried."

The dark woman blew out a breath. "That's because I am. Those women were southerners, and I'm worried how that reflects on me and my people."

Shaking her head, Selene slowly slipped out from under Cassia's feet and went to get them some tea. "Valdis said they were hired swords. That means anyone could have gotten them." Offering Keshet her cup, Selene continued, "Even a northerner. We aren't very experienced with using swords." She gestured towards the sword that hung off Nix's chair, grinning as she realized her wife was on the edge of falling asleep in her chair.

Nix snored then her head jerked up, her eyes blinking, and she looked at her wife. "Wha, hummm, I think it's time to put this day behind us." She yawned wide.

Keshet smiled. "I think you're blessed to have avoided knowing the sword for so long, but I'm

afraid we may have brought change upon you."

"Everything changes," Selene answered a touch sadly, as she watched Cassia yawn and get up also, sleepily rubbing her eyes.

With a muttered g'night, the teen stumbled off, a bandage on the cut at her throat as a reminder of the day.

"For now, let's just be grateful both of our families are safe." She slid an arm around Nix's waist as they headed out of the Inn. "Goodnight, Keshet."

"Goodnight," the southern Queen said, still staring into the fire.

#####

Nix wrapped her arm around her wife and buried her nose in her hair, enjoying the clean smell. Her breathing hitched for a second and she almost started to cry.

Immediately, Selene turned and wrapped her arms around the taller woman. "She's safe, love, she's safe. You brought her back," she whispered, rubbing her arms across the still strong back of her wife.

"I know, but I..." She looked at her hands and felt sickened. "I-I, I killed a woman tonight. I've never, but she held a sword to our daughter's throat..." The smith did finally succumb to the tears blocking her throat, and she cried softly, her face hidden in her wife's hair.

The other woman closed her eyes in pain. She'd known what Nix had done, and was ashamed to say she didn't feel sorry for the dead women who'd taken their daughter and the southern twins. "You did what you had to." Selene tightened her hold on the larger woman, standing outside of the Inn. "They would have killed Cassia."

"I know. I've never...all my life my great stupid hands have created, and now they've done the one act the men in the mines said they were meant for. You know, they said it was a pity I wasn't a man, 'cause my great mitts were meant for war."

The smaller woman pulled back at that, freeing her hands to gently cup her face. "Nix, you are the gentlest person I know. You would never hurt someone unless there was no other way. I'm sorry you had to kill a woman, but I'd rather it was her than you or Cassia."

Nix didn't say anything but nodded her head. She cleared her throat and pulled back to wipe her eyes. "My head tells me that, but my heart feels bruised about it." She kissed her wife soundly. "I love you, don't ever forget that."

Selene smiled, eyes shining in the moonlight. "I know. I love you too." Tugging the larger

woman's arm, she pulled Nix towards their house. "Come on, hero, let's go home."

#####

Keshet forced a smile and waved at the northerners. It had been for the most part a good trip. However, with the mysterious death of the woman who had been with Penka, and Penka's own shame over what had happened, it was time to go.

She could see the wheels of despair churning in her captain's head. She couldn't risk being in a foreign territory with her Captain's attention elsewhere. Valdis, while good, just didn't have the experience her mother did.

She smiled as the twins teamed up against Cassia and hugged the girl from both sides. They were still thick as thieves; however, the little trio was made tense by Cassia's new intensity in her girlfriend.

There was talk of a royal wedding soon in the future. So, thankful for Sable's help in finding their girl, the northern Royal couple was going to wave the tasks. This left an unsettling feeling in Keshet's gut. Sable's mothers looked all too comfortably happy with themselves.

The only one who seemed unhappy was the shy quiet girl whom Keshet had met at that first diner at Selene's house. She had heard the girl had been attacked by the same women who had kidnapped the Princesses. Unfortunately, the girl's attack and been drowned out by the attack on Cassia and the twins. Keshet understood that was the way of things, but now the girl only seemed to keep a brooding company with her pet hawk.

She waved at Selene. "Send us a Royal message and we'll be here for the wedding."

"I wish neither of you had to go," Cassia mumbled, hugging the twins tight in return. "Promise to come visit again?" She'd already asked them to stay for the wedding, even though there was no love lost between the twins and Sable.

Caron grinned. "Of course, we can't wait to see you make the worst decision of your life," she teased.

Caitlin rolled her eyes. Caron could come if she wanted, but she was two-seconds away from throttling that simpering idiot. At least Moriko had been fun, quiet and shy, but fun.

"Hey, Caron, why don't we dunk Cassia in the mud one more time, just so she doesn't miss us too much," Caitlin said with an evil look in her eye.

"No," Sable cut in, ending their fun. "I hate it when Cassia gets all muddy."

The twins sported similar frowns.

Cassia hid a sigh also, and reminded herself again that Sable had helped save her. Instead, she forced a smile and gave the two one last hug. "Stay safe, and I'll see you both again soon."

"Kay. According to mom, we'll be back for the wedding," Caron called out. Both twins ran to their horses.

Keshet laughed as Valdis tried to free herself from various admirers, the young warrior slowly making her way to the traveling party.

The young woman winked at Cassia as she strode by. "Take care, Princess."

As usual, Cassia blushed and mumbled something in return to Valdis as the warrior strode past her.

Valdis sighed in disappointment. There was no Kealey. True, she hadn't made the best impression on the woman, but she had hoped that she was slowly wearing her down with her charms. She swung up into the saddle, surveying the crowd. The ferry and the river were behind them, and the mountains lay in front of them. "Move out!" she shouted.

Along with her mothers, Cassia waved in farewell to the southerners as they headed away from the ferry dock. She'd hoped that Moriko would be here as well, but as had happened ever since the kidnapping, Moriko had avoided her. Even while she'd been recovering, Moriko had refused to let Cassia visit her.

"Be well, Keshet, Queen of the South!" Selene yelled smiling as a reply floated back on the late autumn wind.

"Be well, Selene, Queen of the North!"

#####

Moriko was packing what few things she had. It was early in the morning, and the sky was still gray pre-dawn. She didn't want to meet up with Crow or Cassia. Crow would try and stop her, and drag her home to her mothers. Cassia, just the thought of Cassia made her heart ache and piss her off at the same time. Absently, she patted Rose's head, the female Alcen seeming sad with the death of her stable mate Rugor.

"I know, girl," she whispered. "I miss him too." She was tired of being told she was irrational to mourn the death of an animal, that she should rejoice that the Princesses were all found alive and unharmed. Now, she resented Cassia, Caron, and Caitlin. She had raised him from a fawn, and he had given his life for hers, yet his death meant nothing. She had thought about telling Cassia about what she had overheard, but the young woman was now firmly attached at the hip of her girlfriend, and the kisses that had transpired between them seemed like a bittersweet dream now.

She opened the Alcen's stall and clucked her tongue at Rose, the smaller Alcen docilely stepping

out of the stall and letting herself be saddled. Moriko had just gotten her meager bag of belongings secured to the Alcen when Talon gave a soft cry of warning.

The blonde turned and blinked in surprise. Of all the people she expected, Sable was not one of them.

"I thought I spied you from Cassia's window," the girl snapped out.

Moriko felt ill at that statement. Cassia had invited Sable into her room in the middle of the night, and it didn't take a genius to figure out what was going on. "Good for you," she snapped back. She grabbed Rose's halter and started to exit.

"Thank the Goddess you're finally leaving. I hope you didn't read too much into those kisses you and Cassia shared. She's mine, since the day we were born my parents told me Cassia and I were meant to be together, that 'I' was meant to be Queen. Those kisses, well, she just needed to have a little fun before we were married.

Moriko felt ill for a second then rounded on the girl. "You know, Sable, I bet you've never had a thought in your head that your mothers didn't put there. One day you're going to wake up and realize that you never loved Cassia and you're stuck in a Royal marriage watching the one you do love pass you by, all because your mothers trained you not to think for yourself."

"My mothers love me!" the girl hissed out.

"They love you enough to have Cassia and the royal twins kidnapped and almost killed." She smiled in pleasure as the girl went pale. "I heard them. When I came back to the town half-dead looking for help. I heard their plot."

"It was just so I wouldn't have to do those tasks. Nobody was meant to get hurt, but those women got out of hand," Sable babbled.

"How could you even stand to be in the same room with someone who would hurt the person you love?" Moriko questioned then marched out of the barn, past Sable. She never looked back.

Sable stood stunned then got an odd look of concentration on her face. Pondering what had been said, she sat on a large stone. The sun rose and she didn't even notice, so lost in thought was she.

By midday, Moriko had caught up to the southern travel party. The twins were overjoyed. Keshet merely looked at the young woman and nodded before continuing up into the mountain pass.

#####

It had been a month since Sable had gotten everything she had wanted. Her mothers and Cassia were talking back and forth, making wedding plans. Everyone still called her a hero, and Cassia, for that most part, seemed to be smitten with her. Every once in awhile she caught a sort of

bittersweet look on the other woman's face, and Sable had to wonder if Cassia was thinking about Moriko.

More and more she found that odd girl's words rattling around in her head. She was finding that she wasn't really sure what she wanted out of life anymore. Her mothers were annoying with their schemes as to what she would be doing once she was Queen. And there was a young boat smith who had just come to town to talk over some ideas on redesigning ships with Nix that made her heart beat in a funny way and her hands sweat.

In the month that had passed, Cassia had tried hard to put aside any lingering thoughts or feelings she had about Moriko. The other girl's sudden departure had hurt, a lot, especially since she'd not even once allowed Cassia to speak to her. Besides, she was in love with Sable, the hero who had saved all of them. And for that, Cassia owed her. So instead, she focused on talk of the wedding and of what would happen afterwards. She was determined to put aside what she saw as childish things that she'd done before, and become someone worthy of becoming Queen.

"You're quiet tonight." They were both sitting on top of the stables, watching the stars. It had been a while since either of them had spent time alone, all week having been one thing after another with all of the planning. Cassia had finally had to sneak out of her bedroom window to get alone time with the other teenager.

Sable normally wasn't one given to thoughtful ponderings, but she just couldn't get her mind away from what Moriko had said. "I think about my moms a lot and why people call me a hero. I'm not a hero, your mom and that southern guard, the one you were always swooning over, they were the heroes," she said softly, breaking the silence.

The dark-haired girl shifted uncomfortably at that. Had everyone noticed her instant crush on Valdis? Frowning, she shook her head to clear those annoying thoughts.

"You are a hero. You told everyone what happened, without you we'd be..." Cassia paused, not even sure what to say. Where would they have ended up...dead, slaves? Either one was a possibility.

Sable frowned. It was on the tip of her tongue to admit she hadn't seen anything. Her mothers had told her what to say. But in the end, she stayed quiet, not willing to make them look bad. "Do you really want to spend the rest of your life with me?" she blurted out. She hadn't really meant to say it, but now that it was out, she didn't want to take it back.

There was a moment of stunned silence, as Cassia stared in surprise at Sable, an uneasy sensation growing in her stomach. Like she'd lost control of some important thing she hadn't even realized was on the edge of chaos. "I love you," she answered, still trying to figure out what had suddenly changed. "Do you want to spend the rest of your life with me?" Cassia asked, hesitantly.

Sable chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, not answering right away.

"I know about you and Moriko...kissing in the forest. My mothers told me," she said finally. "You go away sometimes and I think you're thinking of her."

It felt, Cassia thought dimly, like her world was tipping on its side. This conversation had come out of nowhere. It was her turn to look away for a moment and not answer. "I liked her," she answered, slowly, truthfully. "I'm sorry about kissing her. I should have told you."

Sable felt worse now, it wasn't like she wasn't without her own secrets. "I saw her, the day she disappeared," she admitted. "I was nasty to her and she was cold in return to me. She said some things I thought mean at the time, but now..." She sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

Dreading and hoping for the answer, Cassia leaned forwards. "You saw her when she left? What did she say?"

"She said that I never had a thought that was my own. She said my mothers did all my thinking for me. Now all I do anymore is think, and wonder," Sable cried out nearly bursting into tears. "She was attacked by the same bandits that attacked you. She lost one of those Alcens of hers, and he died protecting her. My mothers thought it was funny that a simple miner's daughter would get so distraught over an animal."

She might have thought it was funny too, if she hadn't seen the loss and hurt on the girl's own face.

The dark-haired teen closed her eyes in pain at the image of the Aclen's body. She'd gone out to the sight of the attack while Moriko had still been unconscious and recovering. "His name was Rugor," she said quietly.

"My mothers have been telling me we would wed before I even knew what a wedding was. They told me you were the woman for me. I always just believed them, because my mothers were never wrong. But, Cassia, I think they're wrong now." She looked up at the woman she thought she had been in love with, her face wet with tears.

"There's that boat smith visiting your mother...I...she..." Sable couldn't finish. "I think I feel things for her that I should be feeling for you. But telling you all this hurts so much. I'm so confused."

"You...you don't want to get married to me?" Cassia jerked her head up, confused and hurt. The hurt was more than she thought she could bear, wrapping her arms around her knees and hugging them. "You like her?" she asked quietly.

"I'm sorry, Cassia, I do. We haven't done anything but talk. She doesn't even know that I..." Sable blushed and coughed quietly. "My mothers blew up when they caught us talking. I guess we were standing a little too close to each other."

"I guess that means the wedding is off," was all that Cassia could think of to say, closing her eyes once again and leaning her head against her folded up arms. She wanted to crawl away somewhere and make the world go away. First Moriko, now Sable.

She looked over at Cassia, wanting to do something that would make everything right. She was hurting, Cassia was hurting. "I can't talk to anybody about this. My mothers want me to marry you, and you just love me 'cause I'm a hero. And I'm not. I wasn't at the river. I didn't see anything. My mothers told me what had happened and that I should tell the Queen 'cause it would make me look good," Sable rushed everything out, horrified, but feeling happier than she had in a long time.

"You weren't at the river?" Cassia repeated dumbly, feeling sick to her stomach as she realized how everything must have seemed to Moriko. No wonder the other girl had left without saying a word. "Thank you for telling me the truth," she managed to whisper, quite proud at herself for managing even that. "If you like her..." the words were bile in her throat, "you should get to know her before...before she goes away." Cassia had to leave soon, before she completely lost it.

"I'm sorry, Cassia, I'm so sorry. I'll tell my mothers the wedding is off. You'll find someone that makes you happy, not some snobby bitch like me." She grinned, well aware of what she was called behind her back.

Cassia gave a laugh that was more of a sob, and impulsively hugged the other girl. "I never thought you were a snobby bitch," she whispered, hugging her tight. The feelings were getting too much for her to handle, she could feel the tears starting. "I have to go," she blurted, pulling away and standing up.

Sable nodded and wiped her own tears away, but she didn't move, wanting to give Cassia the time to get away so they wouldn't bump into each other.

#####

It was a near thing, but Cassia managed to reach the door to the house without bursting into tears. She'd even hoped to make it to her room without embarrassing herself further, but the instant she stepped inside and saw her mothers, to her horror, she burst into tears. "Sable doesn't love me!" she cried.

Nix frowned and looked at her wife for a second then both of them were moving towards their sobbing daughter. "Pumpkin, what do you mean she doesn't love you?"

"She doesn't want to get married to me! She likes the boat smith!" It came out in a tumble of sobs as she leaned against Nix and felt Selene's arms come around her to hug her.

Nix's face turned red. "I'm going to...I'll...I'm going to boot their asses from one side of the river to the other." Part of her, however, was relieved. Although, she had always thought it would be her daughter to admit she wasn't in love with Sable.

"No!" Cassia pulled back in horror, knowing that would make things even worse. "No, Mom, you can't. You have to promise, please. You can't do anything," the teen pleaded, face streaked with tears. Selene met her wife's eyes, not happy either.

"Well, fine. I promise I won't do anything. Can I at least growl at them and look threatening?"

That got at least a weak smile from the girl, and she gave both her mothers a hug. "Yes, Mom, you can growl and look threatening. I'm going to bed."

Selene watched their daughter storm up the stairs, tears still trailing down her face, then back to her wife. "I guess the wedding is off."

"Thank the Goddess," Nix said with a huge grin. "It was killing me to be nice to those harpies."

Selene smiled back and gave the taller woman her own hug. "Thank the Goddess," she repeated, then stepped back and headed towards the kitchen. "For now, though, we have a girl who has a broken heart...time for some sweets and wine."

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~ Rezan ~
by Windstar and Zee

Once more we venture into the world of Selene and Nix, and is a sequel to that story. This is set in the world of Blood and Honor, although it is set before that story.

Disclaimer -

All the characters belong to Windstar and Zee.

There are same-sex couples running amok. If you don't like such things, please go elsewhere to read. This is a sequel, of sorts, to [Selene and Nix](#), which should probably be read first. Big thanks to our beta reader Packer.

Feedback always welcome Adarkbow@yahoo.com or zeeamy@gmail.com

The Turning of the Wheel

Moriko lead the Alcen over the pass. It was cold, but it hadn't started snowing yet.

A small favor, she knew.

On the Alcen was a huddled figure hidden under a cloak. She couldn't believe it had been eight years since she had left the north. She had left and never looked back. So much had happened since then, that she didn't even really feel like the same person.

She struggled and almost slipped. This disturbed the sleeping bundle on her back and began to cry. Moriko winced, having the young baby's shrill cry so close to her ears. She stopped and shushed the child, her patience running thin, and she didn't want to kill the last heir to the southern throne.

An older looking Valdis wearily tilted back the hood of the cloak, coughing painfully for a few moments before she could speak. "They've been busy," she said hoarsely, nodding to the light that spilled out of the windows of the fairly impressive stone building that had been built at the top of the pass.

She looked at Valdis, happy to see the woman come out of her depression for a moment to speak to her. "Aye, they've been very busy. They look like..." She left the statement stillborn. They looked like the buildings Cassia had drawn.

Valdis looked so old now. The bloody coup that had occurred a week ago had wiped the woman of her spirit. They had argued, with Valdis wanting to go back and die in battle, trying to at least attempt to kill the ones who had murdered the royal family, the ones the guard had been sworn to protect.

Moriko felt hollowed out herself. Her friends were gone, murdered, but she had been given a task, and had promised Caron. So here she was, going back to a place that was once her home. Only she felt like a stranger. She wondered if anyone would recognize her now. Her hair was braided, the braids coming to her shoulders, Princess Caron having done it herself two days before the coup.

Her eyes looked older. She had seen battle, taken life, and nearly had hers taken. Starting at her eyebrow and going about an inch into her hair was a thick, white scar where an enemy's sword had just about cleaved her head in. Caron use to joke it made her look mad all the time. Caitlin said it made her look sexy and roguish. Now in the cold, it just ached.

The building was definitely an improvement over the small hut that had previously adorned the top of the pass. It was two stories tall, with a high peaked roof to keep the snow from piling up, and an attached stable building. As they drew closer, the large front door opened, spilling warm firelight out into the pass.

A woman in a warm looking robe stepped out of the door, waiting for them to draw closer. "Travelers!" she called over the howl of the wind. "Welcome to the Ellris pass. You are

welcomed to spend the night in the abbey."

Moriko laughed. "It's an abbey now. Last I was here, only Ellris tended the pass in her little hut."

The woman, with the green eyes of a priestess, smiled. "I often wonder what she would think about our little building being here instead of her simple wooden hut."

Vladis leaned forwards in the saddle, almost falling off the Alcen's back in her weakened state. "You don't know what she'd think?"

The priestess sighed, folding her arms in front of her. "Our sister Ellris passed away several years ago. The pass is named for her now."

The southern guard closed her eyes and let her head fall forwards, the cloak hiding her expression from the world.

"Please, won't you come inside? The night wind will chill you to the bone. We have a fire and spare rooms." And added with a glance towards the woman on the Alcen, "And healers, if you wish."

Moriko coughed uncomfortably. Just what her friend needed, someone else she cared about to die. Finally, she grabbed the lead rope on the Alcen and started forward toward the abbey. "We would love to spend the night. Camping out in the cold with an infant is a horrible."

"You have a child!" The priestess looked delighted, calling behind her to a waiting acolyte to prepare for their guests. The Alcen had most of the stables to himself, with only two other Alcens for company. The abbey itself was warm, and the priestesses were quick to welcome and feed their guests. Valdis grudgingly allowed them to tend the sword wound on her back, then refused to speak to anyone as she sat by the fireplace.

They'd even managed to find some milk for the infant from the abbey goat. "You dress like southerners, yet your friend rode an Alcen," the priestess stated quietly as she watched the infant eat. They were seated in the main room, the priestess finally having sent the acolytes off to do their chores and stop bothering their obviously tired guests.

Moriko sighed sadly. "You may get more southerners coming up this way, escaping the south. There was a coup in the castle. The entire southern Royal family was murdered." She felt the tears slip from her eyes and down her cheeks. She gritted her teeth together and tried to push away the feeling of overwhelming sadness.

A warm cup of mulled wine was pressed into Moriko's hands. "It has been a long, hard road for you, then." The woman was perhaps a year or two her elder, but for an instant, she had the all knowing look all the Moon Goddess' priestesses somehow managed to pull off once in a while.

She took the wine and offered it to Valdis, only to have the woman ignore her. Moriko sighed

and sipped the wine, smiling slightly as it warmed her. She reached over with her free hand and tickled the baby's stomach until she received a toothless grin. The child had a thick shock of blond hair that stood up no matter how much she tried to smooth it, and soft gray eyes.

The priestess studied them both, raising her own mug of wine to sip it. "What is the child's name?"

"Her name is Kai. It means the sea, her mother loved the ocean." She gritted her teeth and tried to ride out the wave of grief that rolled through her again.

A hand warmed from the cup of wine that it had just held clasped over Moriko's, lending silent support. "Come, I will show you to your rooms. You can rest, and tomorrow, you can make your way to the base of the pass. If you wish, you can take a boat from there to the Queen's Island, or follow the road."

"Thank you," she said.

#####

The smithy was larger than it had been. A wall had been knocked down and a second kiln had been installed. It was almost full dark outside even though it wasn't that late, a warning that winter was not far away. Many of the trees had begun to change color, and there was a definite bite of cold in the air.

Cassia smiled at one of the fire warriors who passed her in the street, probably in the city with one of their shipments of stone or steel that floated up the Winderling on the new larger ships.

The woman hummed to herself, happy with the day's work, as she ducked into the smithy itself, shaking her head as she spotted her mother by the forge studying a piece of glowing metal held between tongs. "Mom, I thought you weren't doing any work anymore."

Nix looked up with a smile. "Shhhh. Don't tell your Muanya." She winked and thrust the item into a bucket, and thick steam billowed out. "Sometimes I still feel the urge to create things, the metal and the fire just call to me." She pulled the item out of the water bucket.

"I'm working on a crib for that baby Kealey's carrying around. She's going to pop soon." Nix smiled wistfully. She had been there when Kealey was born, and now, the town's first pride and joy was having her own child. She set the now cool metal down and wiped silver bangs away from her forehead, leaving a smudge of black.

"I keep telling you to come see the buildings we're working on if you want to create things." The younger woman moved around one of the large anvils to see what her mother was making. "It looks great though. I take it Muanya doesn't know you're out here again?"

"Oh, it's your Muanya, I'm sure she knows. There's not much she doesn't. But she lets me pretend

"I'm getting away with something." Nix set down the tools and walked away from the forge. Sitting gingerly down on a chair, her knees popped and she grimaced. "I only make small things now. I can't swing the big hammers with the strength I used to have. I leave that for those strutting young pups. So what's up, pumpkin..?"

Cassia winced in sympathy as her mother sat down. Nix's once raven hair was nearly all white now. "We finished putting the roof on the new Inn today. It looks just like I thought it would. I wanted to see if you and Muanya would like to come see it?" She smiled hopefully, having so far gotten both of them to come see each building she'd helped finish.

"Of course we'll come see it." Nix beamed with pride. "You know, pumpkin, these buildings you created, I never, well, they're simply amazing."

Cassia tried to hide her beam at the praise, but she still glowed under her mother's praise.

"Did those books the twins sent up with that rather quiet scribe help you out?" Nix asked, trying to hide a smile as she remembered the socially awkward woman, with the premature silver hair.

Cassia nodded in excitement. "Ryuu is perfect. She knows where to find everything. You should see the books that she brought up with her. I just have to show her a picture of what I want to do, and she knows where I can find out how to make it."

Nix brightened a bit. She hadn't heard her little girl blather on about a woman in quite a while. "She's perfect, huh? You ask her over for dinner yet?" Nix asked, poking her nose into Cassia's business.

Rolling her eyes, Cassia sighed. "Mooooom..." she drew out the word, "stop trying to get me to bring someone home for dinner."

"Cassia, I know we built a bigger house and let this become the permanent forge for the town smith, but sooner or later, your Muanya and I expect you to move out into a place of your own, maybe even give birth to a future Princess as well," Nix said with a chuckle as Cassia's face got even redder.

"What? Why do I have to give birth to the future princess?"

"Well, your partner could, but that's not going to happen either, 'cause you refuse to notice all those looks the women around the town give you," Nix said with a sigh. "Honey, we want you to be happy. I know what Sable did was a crappy thing to do, but it was eight years ago. It's okay to have a little fun. You're twenty four, I think it's allowed."

Cassia laughed, taking a hold of her mother's hand and helping the taller woman stand. "I can't believe you just told me to go have fun. Wasn't it just a little while ago that you were yelling at me for wanting to get married?" Their old house was now the home to the full time smith. Their new house was a bit further away, and definitely an improvement, as far as Cassia was

concerned.

Nix kissed her child's forehead and stepped back. "Pumpkin, that was eight long years ago, my hair is silver, and my joints hurt. And you are now a smart, lovely woman, instead of a pain in the ass teenager. Things change."

"I was never a pain in the ass teenager," the youngster laughed, wrapping an arm around her mom's side and giving her a hug. "Come on, I'm sure Muanya is waiting for us for dinner."

Nix followed her daughter out of the smithy, letting the subject drop. Her daughter was beautiful, smart, and driven. The town was improving in leaps, and slowly, her wife was letting Cassia take more and more responsibility, which made the retired smith happy. She loved sleeping in most mornings now with her wife. The new rule was, if there was a problem before noon, Cassia could handle it.

But ever since the called-off wedding, Cassia never had an eye for the ladies, seeming utterly driven to build her buildings, and learn what her Muanya did as a ruler. Nix wasn't so sure that was healthy.

"Besides, if I moved out, you'd miss me interrupting those early morning romantic moments that you and Selene sometimes have," Cassia said, with a mischievous look up at her mom.

Nix blushed. "Honestly, no, I can't say I'd miss those."

Snickering, Cassia waved to a few of the women who looked their way curiously as they walked down the street. "I can't wait until we can line the streets with stone. Imagine how much cleaner that will be." They made a detour around a muddy patch. That would have to be a project for later, there was only so much stone that they could quarry at a time.

Nix nodded, "After winter we'll get these paved roads started. I will admit it will be nice not to get those carts unstuck in the muddy season."

The house they headed towards was much larger than the one they had once lived in, and was made of stone. The thick stonewalls and large fireplace helped insure it stayed warm during even the coldest of winters. Light streamed out through the windows. That was another innovation from the south, glass to make windows from. It was definitely an improvement over the thin hides that had been used.

"Dinner first..." She held open the door, breathing in the nice smells from inside.

#####

Moriko awoke in the dark, fear drumming frantically on her heart, and sweat dotting her skin, soaking her night shift to her body. She checked on Kai. The baby slept peacefully, worn out by

the cold, frantic struggle to get out of the south and up the pass. They had bypassed the trail to Abnoa, Valdis having felt certain the advisors dark-eyed spies would be watching that trail.

Watching the babe in the dark with only the light from the stars, gave her a sense of peace, and she felt the nightmare that clutched her recede. "You won't remember what happened, but I'll tell you everyday, so you'll know how brave your mom was. The coup was just the middle to this story. Someday your children's children will sit back on that lovely throne of Keshet's, and then the story will really be over," she whispered softly, not wanting to wake Valdis, the poor warrior needing what rest she could get.

"I think the story begins," she started again, "when the Royal advisor to Keshet suggested that the Queen and the twins go to the north on a Royal goodwill trip. I think it was in Keshet's absence that the Royal Advisor wanted to test the future Queen, Brody, and see if she would be malleable to the advisor's way of thinking. By the time Queen Keshet returned, this advisor had found out that Brody was much too stubborn, and in general, had a good heart, which was not what the advisor wanted at all. So she started on Plan B. A petty noble in Thullis, which is a horrible pit of slavery and vice, so you, young lady, should never go there, this petty noble, while verbally praised the Queen, in her heart she wanted the Queen's blood."

She rearranged the blankets. "The advisor nurtured this anger and hatred, slowly laying the groundwork for Alina to take the throne." She paused and cleared her throat. Kai still slept, oblivious to the story Moriko told.

"The advisor had Eira join the Royal Guards soon after the Royal family returned from the north. Valdis' mom, Penka, quit in disgrace that her actions had put the royal twins in danger. Everyone knows she was set up. She stayed on in the manor as a trainer, and she trained the young warriors to be fighters. But more and more of the new recruits had these scary black eyes and serpent tattoos. You must remember to watch out for women with such marks, Kai, those are the marks of the Goddess of Shadows. And she is a Goddess of dark deeds and black hearts."

Moriko yawned, but continued on. "Now, you probably want me to get to the part with your mom. I came to the south with the Royal family. Why I left the north isn't that important, it's actually kind of silly now. Too many teenage hormones and a need for drama is all I'll say on it. Keshet was kind and let me stay at the Royal manor, but I couldn't just sponge off of them, I had to earn my place. Valdis was very patient as she tried to teach me to wield a sword, but even a daughter of the War God couldn't make me a soldier. So, to make a long story somewhat short, let's just say that after trying various things, I found my place in the stable taking care of the warhorses. Caitlin, Caron, and I were close, and only got closer as the years went by. I often times went out with the army, taking care of the horses and dogs. And I'll admit I saw more than enough bloodshed, and sometimes I was safe away from battle, but most of the time I wasn't. That's how I got my scar, some petty wannabe noble with a plan to burn the horse tent down. I was sleeping in there and woke up. We wrestled, and she tried to cleave my head open. Lucky for me Valdis was wandering home from a night, um, err, well, you're too young for such things. Anyway, she came in and saved my life, pushed that woman away so I only got nicked, would have been dead otherwise. So I owe her my life. Sorry for the rambling road there, but I wanted

you to know where I fit into all this. "

"Your mom, your aunt, and I were all real close, if things had gone differently, you might have actually been mine. Your mom and I were really close for awhile, but then something happened and she told me she thought we made better friends. It hurt, but I got over it. She fell in love with some ship builder in Lucin, and that is where you came from. Your mom just had to visit when she did, although knowing that bitch, the advisor, she was waiting for the moment the entire Royal family was together to strike. Your mom was so brave. She made me promise to get you out alive, and it broke my heart when she took your blankets and ran across the courtyard pretending to hold you. For a moment I thought she might make it, took all those two-faced bastards by surprise. I guess that's what I wanted you to know, how much she loved you, and what she gave up so we could be here." She stroked the soft cheek with her finger then went back to her bedroll.

She could still see them stabbing the swords into Caron's body over and over again. She had run to the stable and grabbed her Alcen, Oscar. He had been a gift from Crow. The only time the woman had visited, she had brought him as a fawn. They had stormed out of the stable, taking the invaders by surprise, many of them having never seen an Alcen before, and were quickly cut open by his dangerous horns. That was probably the only reason they had escaped. Kai had been so quiet she had been afraid the baby had been hurt in the desperate fight. But Kai was just fine.

They hid in the woods for the rest of the night, and then the next day, not moving until the sky started to go dark again. She found Valdis strung up along the road with a few other warriors that had been loyal to Keshet. Only because of her divine heritage was the woman still alive. But Moriko hadn't known, she looked just as dead as the rest.

Not wanting to leave her friend's body for the animals, she had cut it down, only barely hearing the smothered groan of agony. Her hands were broken, and she had been stabbed multiple times and was covered in blood and dirt, yet she lived. Moriko had done what she could. They hid in a small temple dedicated to the War God until Valdis had tried to grasp a sword and rush back to the manor.

It had ended badly, with Kai crying, Moriko spitting blood, and Valdis passed out. It was then that she decided to make a break for the north. There was nothing good left in south, and she had a promise to keep to Caron.

She rolled over on her side, knowing sleep was far away, but watching for the sky to lighten.

#####

Bloodshot eyes stared at the bridge that hadn't been there before. The wood looked weathered, but strong and sturdy.

She was tired, and all she really wanted was a hot bath and a warm bed. She was sick of changing and washing out diapers, and tired of sullen warriors who couldn't even speak two words to her.

"We're almost there, I think. This used to be where the ferry was, but now there's a bridge," she said to nobody, not really expecting a reply.

She kissed the fuzzy blonde hair under her chin. Kai was strapped to her front so the cold wind at her back would not hit the child. "I can't wait until you can speak," she mumbled.

Valdis had insisted that Moriko ride the Alcen down from the pass, saying that she was well enough to walk.

A small building had replaced the one that the ferry owner had lived in, this one built from stone and had a small garden planted in front of it. A woman looked up from harvesting the last of the garden's herbs to dry before the winter and wiped sweat from her face. She waved to the strangers as she spotted them, taking a break from her work.

"Hail, travelers," the woman in the garden called out. "You're in luck. The new Inn is open, if you're looking for a place to stay."

"Really, a new Inn, what happened to the one that Valla and Kelsey ran?" Moriko asked, slowly getting down from the Alcen.

"Valla and Kelsey?" the woman frowned. "Well, their daughter, Kealey, is running it now with her wife. The old one burnt down after the chimney caught fire last winter, so the Princess designed a new one for them."

Her legs wobbled and she realized how exhausted she was, but after a second she was fine. That made her pause, happy that Cassia had followed her dreams. She coughed then cleared her throat, "How far to the Inn?"

The woman pointed towards the island, "Just over the bridge, go straight past the temple of the Goddess and you'll find it on the other side of the main street. They should have plenty of room, not too many travelers with winter coming."

"Thank you." Not feeling like remounting Oscar, she took the lead from Valdis and started walking over the bridge. Their footsteps sounded odd on the wood, but they disappeared quickly under the noise of rushing water. The first thing she noticed was the packed dirt trail turned into smooth cobblestones, and the next were the buildings.

She sucked in a breath and stopped moving. "Goddess," she breathed out.

Valdis looked up from her contemplation of the river, letting out a breath as she saw what had startled Moriko. "They've been busy." Gone were the simple wooden buildings that had made up the town. There were more buildings now, and almost all of them were now made of stone.

The temple to the Goddess was the tallest, although its main dome was still being built. Another large building was under construction at the other side of the island, opposite the temple,

although only the foundation was being worked on.

"Yes, they have." She made her legs start moving, and Kai awoke and started fussing. "Sh, sh, there, there, please, for the love of the Goddess, don't start crying, or I may have to join you."

Moriko may have practically raised her four other sisters, but she never had to travel over the pass in the fall wind with them, feeling hungry and tired.

With a wince, Valdis slowly started to follow after the other woman, her face expressionless as they crossed onto the street. There were more people about than when Moriko had left, although still by far less than in any of the southern cities.

"No guards," the older woman remarked, not entirely surprised after her first visit years before.

"No, there aren't. I guess they still don't really need them. But unfortunately, I think with us being here, that will change. That advisor wants all the royal blood. I doubt she'll rest until she gets it. I'm surprised she's not up here already making demands. It's no secret how much she hates the north," Moriko said, kissing Kai's head. "Let's find that Inn, there's a whole mountain pass where I want to wash off my body."

The inn was right where the woman by the bridge had said it would be. The same old wooden panel hung outside from the old Inn, but that was where the similarities ended. The front had good quality glass windows, and a full stable was set up next to it.

Moriko handed the Alcen to the young stable girl and made her way to the front doors. "Do you want to continue to share a room, or would you like one of your own?" she asked the soldier.

The southerner paused, sighing as she considered her answer. "I should be close to the princess," she nodded towards Kai, one of the few times she'd actually acknowledged what had happened.

Moriko just nodded and made her way inside. "I'll get us a room, then. Do you mind watching her I really want a hot bath?" She looked hopefully at Valdis, hoping that playing nursemaid/guard to Kai would get the soldier to snap out of her mood.

It was hard. All Valdis wanted to do was withdraw into herself as she had for the entire trip north and ignore everyone. She managed a short nod, agreeing to her new role. If she couldn't die fighting against the usurpers, at least she could keep the true heir to the throne safe.

Moriko wasn't surprised that she wasn't recognized, since she had been a quiet, shy girl who would only talk to animals, not people. She quickly got a room and left Kai and Valdis to get settled.

The youngster who was tending the bar directed Moriko to the bath house that had been built down the street. The long, low building ensured that everyone who wanted to could have a hot

bath, even in the depths of winter.

Moriko smiled at the design, and merely stood and stared around at the inside of the building. The attendant at the front just smiled at the woman, "Your first time here?"

"Um, no, well, yes. I guess. This wasn't here when I left home eight years ago."

The woman just smiled and nodded. "Yes, Goddess praise that Princess of ours, she has quite the head on her shoulders. She designed this."

Moriko just smiled and took the offered towel then entered the common bathing area. Privacy wasn't a big deal to her, she had grown up in a small house with four other sisters. And when in a battle camp, well, privacy was a thing of legend.

She was happy to see only four other women using the area, and quietly slid into the shallow, warm water. It was all she could do to hold back a groan of pleasure. For the time being, she ignored the thick, brown soap and the coarse washrag, content to just sit and soak.

The central bath was ringed by smaller baths that were isolated from the main one with simple curtains to give a measure of privacy. Several of the curtains were drawn across the opening, indicating that they were in use. Others were open, and a few attendants moved through the room, cleaning up and bringing things to the bathers.

From the closest of the semiprivate rooms, two voices could be heard talking about shipbuilding and current trading prices for goods such as wheat and wood. One of those voices was familiar although it had changed from the high-pitched teenage voice it had been years ago.

Moriko did let out a groan and sat up. "Of all the people to run into," she mumbled then grabbed her soap and cloth and started to quickly clean herself. She had waited years to hear the Royal wedding announcement, but it had never come.

Finally, she had asked the twins about it, and they had rolled their eyes at her. "They didn't get married," was all Caitlin had said. When she had pressed for more details, they told her to write a letter to Cassia if she wanted to know what was going on in the woman's life.

She had about a dozen letters that she had never sent.

"We're going to need another big barge to keep bringing all that stone into the city if she's really serious about all those new buildings. I think that the fire warriors are going to have to open a new quarry just for this new castle she's building. Sable's voice carried as the two women behind the curtain stood up, preparing to leave the bathhouse.

Her companion responded. "We could always buy some smaller ones from the southerners. We'll have to wait to summer to sail them north though, the ocean crossing is always tricky."

A moment later, the two stepped out, pushing the curtain open. Sable was still toweling dry her hair and didn't notice Moriko, until she lowered the towel and paused, staring at Moriko as if trying to place her face.

"Good luck getting anything from the south," Moriko muttered before she could stop herself, instantly feeling her face heat up.

She busily went back to cleaning herself, ignoring the woman staring at her. Sable annoyingly looked even better as she got older, Moriko couldn't help but notice.

Sable's companion paused, realizing she wasn't following, and turned back to look at the two of them curiously. Sable and her companion had the bronzed skin of people who spent their time outside. Where Sable was still tall and thin, her companion was smaller and more muscular, long hair tied up behind her in a simple braid.

"Do I know you?" Sable asked with a smile, obviously still trying to place Moriko's face.

Moriko looked up at Sable. It was on the tip of her tongue to lie, but instead, said, "I see you finally had a thought that was your own." She nodded at the woman at Sable's side.

The confused look cleared, "Moriko?" She stared at her as if she were seeing a ghost. At that, her companion moved closer, possessively wrapping an arm around Sable's waist.

Moriko looked down at the water. "Um, yes..." She awkwardly stood, grabbing her towel and wrapping it around herself.

The other woman looked a little uncomfortable as well. "Welcome back." She hesitated. "Moriko this is Sonia, my wife."

"Really..?" Moriko looked confused. "I thought...errrm, when I left..." She left her awkward attempt to make a sentence. Instead, she held out her hand, "Nice to meet you."

The shorter woman grabbed it and gave it a hard shake. "So you're the famous Moriko."

"Famous?" Moriko looked at both women confused.

Sable smiled weakly, grabbing her wife's arm to stop her from saying anything more. "She just means she's heard a lot about you." She started to back away, seeking to make her escape. "You know, we've all told stories about that girl who could talk with animals and got me to realize I wasn't meant to be with Cassia."

Sonia was staring at her wife in obvious confusion as Sable babbled.

"It was nice to meet you!" Sonia managed to get out before Sable pulled her out the door.

The blonde just blinked, getting even more confused, and watched them leave. She dropped the towel and slid back into the water.

The four other women who were in the central bath watched her with obvious interest, talking quietly to one another as they stayed at the opposite side of the pool from Moriko.

Feeling uncomfortable with the attention, she quickly finished washing and exited the bathhouse.

#####

Moriko looked over at Valdis. "I know you want to go out and pout in the woods, but I need you to watch the little Princess. I want to go talk to Selene."

The warrior looked up from where she was checking the edge of her sword then reflexively looked over to check on the infant. After waking them up before dawn to demand food, the little one was now thankfully, taking a nap. "Fine..." She looked back down at her blade.

She wanted to talk to Selene so the Queen knew what had happened. The north was slow to get information from the rest of the world that had been created by the women of the Exodus. She rolled her eyes at the warrior's flippant response.

"I need you to change her and feed her. After I talk to the Queen, I'm going to see what I can do to secure more permanent lodging. We can't stay here too much longer. What money we have will run out."

She finished lacing her leather boots, and stood up, grabbing a warm fur-lined winter cloak. While the snow still hadn't fallen yet, the days were now very cold.

"I'll take care of her," Valdis answered, not looking up from an imagined nick that she had found in the blade.

Moriko frowned at the door. "Okay. I'll be back as soon as I can." She opened it and left their room. Quietly, she slipped down the stairs avoiding most of the small staff of the Inn.

They had to leave the Inn soon, not because of the money, but because of the memories. She hadn't known that during the brief stay of the southerners in the north, Valdis had been courting Kealsy in her own way. Having come back to find Ellis dead and Kealsy happily married and expecting had sent the warrior on another sharp downward spiral of depression.

It was early, the sun having just begun to rise above the horizon, and the streets were still relatively empty. Only those who had to be were out in the coldness of the early morning. The wind carried the smell of snow on it, promising the arrival of winter soon.

Moriko frowned as she stared at what had once been the family home of the Royal family, now it was just a smithy.

The door to the house opened and a stranger stepped out, stretching and yawning as she started towards the smithy. "Morning," the woman called to Moriko, stopping at the entrance to the smithy. "You looking for me?" She wasn't as big as Nix, but she had the build of someone who worked with metal all day.

"No, I was...this used to be the Royal family's house. You don't happen to know where I can find them, do you?" she asked.

The smith rubbed a hand through her close-cropped hair. "They built a new house after Nix let me take over most of the smithy work. It's a bigger house, stone, nice and warm for the winter."

Moriko blinked in confusion.

The smith pointed north "You head towards the castle, and you'll find it near the baker's place. You can't miss it." The smith started to duck into the smithy to start up the furnaces then stopped. "If you see her, tell Nix that she can finish off her piece whenever she wants."

"Castle?" she frowned, looking in the direction the smith pointed. "Alright, I'll let her know." She started down the path the smith had pointed out, hoping she would know a castle when she saw it. Once she figured out that the huge stone foundation that was being built was to one day be a castle, she easily found the royal house.

She stood outside, staring at the place, which was much larger than their old place. She paced, wondering if she was too early, maybe she should have waited until later in the day.

"Can I help you?" a voice suddenly asked from just behind Moriko.

She turned her head, looking at the speaker. "No, I was just here to talk to the royal family." Her brown eyes studied the woman in front of her. "You look familiar."

The woman was just as tall as Moriko, with intelligent blue eyes and pure silver hair loosely pulled back behind her ears. She was dressed in elegant dark leather clothing that contrasted with her pale skin and hair. In one hand she held a thick, leather book that was bulging with papers. "I don't believe we've met before," she said, her accent not one that Moriko had heard before.

Moriko frowned in thought while she tried to place the woman. "I'm Moriko," she said, finally.

"Ryuu," the woman replied then nodded towards the house. "If you wish to speak to the royal family, I have an appointment with them right now to review the plans."

"Oh..." Her posture drooped. "If you have an appointment, I guess I can come back later." ...If she had the courage to try and do this again.

Quick blue eyes studied Moriko's face. "Why don't you just come inside with me now? I just need a few minutes before I have to go back to the construction site."

She blew out a breath. Relenting, she nodded, "Okay."

Ryuu nodded and quickly walked up to the front door. Without knocking, she opened it and held it open for Moriko to follow her inside.

The house was warm and smelled of baking bread, which caused her stomach to growl. Embarrassed, she held her hand over her stomach.

The other woman smiled for the first time at that, and made a detour to the kitchen to grab a fresh piece of bread. "I'm sure Selene won't mind," she said, offering it to Moriko. "Come on, she's probably upstairs." The silver-haired woman started up the main staircase.

#####

Nix looked over at her wife. "Honey, it's before noon, let Cassia handle it. Remember that was the agreement. Besides, it's probably a builder or worker for her anyways," Nix said, trying to be reasonable.

Selene hesitated halfway to their bedroom door. She'd heard Ryuu's voice, along with someone else's, which meant they had a visitor. And on reflex, she had started to get up to greet whoever it was. "You're right." Selene turned around and climbed back onto the bed. "Cassia can get us if it's something important."

Nix just nodded. "Finally, after all these years you start to listen to me." She wrapped her arms around her wife, hugging her.

The Queen laughed. "I always listen to you."

#####

Ryuu led Moriko up the stairs, past a window that dominated the upstairs hallway and was obviously positioned to let in the morning sunlight, to the first room on the right. She rapped twice, waiting for a voice from inside to call out before opening the door and stepping into Cassia's room.

Moriko blinked in surprise, not expecting Cassia. "Where's Selene?" she asked, almost panicked. Had the woman died or been hurt?

"Ryuu, I had some thoughts about the library last night. We could..." Cassia trailed off as she spotted the visitor standing behind the silver-haired woman. When Cassia continued to stare without answering, Ryuu sighed and turned to answer for her. "Cassia handles things before noon unless there is an emergency."

"Oh," was all Moriko managed to say. Cassia looked good. She had grown into an adult woman beautifully.

"I brought back your sketch book." Ryu pressed the thick book into Cassia's hands. "I'll see you this afternoon." She turned and started to leave. It might have been Moriko's imagination, but she might have winked at her before closing the door behind her.

She swallowed a couple of times trying to coat the dryness that had suddenly overtaken her mouth and throat. "I need to talk to the Queen," she said dumbly.

"Moriko..." Cassia was well aware that they were staring at one another like idiots. "I...didn't know you were back," she finished, wincing at how stupid that sounded. She'd imagined Moriko returning for so long and pictured hundreds of different ways they could have met again, none of them involved the other woman simply walking into her room.

"Valdis and I got into town yesterday." She felt like a teenager again, all awkward and gawking. She blew out a breath and nervously brushed a few braids behind her ear.

"Oh." Cassia shook her head. "Sorry, you wanted to see the Queen?" This could rank getting Selene for. "Did the twins send you?"

There was a flash of pain in her brown eyes. "In a way, I guess. I... Cassia, something horrible has happened." Unshed tears watered her eyes. "I really only want to tell this once, can we get your parents, please?"

A tight feeling settled in the pit of Cassia's stomach. Quickly, she nodded and led the way back out of the room. "They should be in their room. I haven't seen them yet this morning." She knocked on the door to the master bedroom.

Moriko followed, trying to focus on what she needed to say, her brain frantically trying to figure out the best way to say it. Her mouth was dry again.

#####

Inside the room, Selene sighed and sat up from where she'd been trying to enjoy some quality snuggling time with her wife. "I guess it's serious. Come in!" she called, getting out of bed.

"You have a visitor," an unusually subdued looking Cassia announced, stepping inside then out of the way so that Nix and Selene could see who was following her.

Nix blew out a breath and slowly got out of the bed, running a thick hand through her hair trying to get it under control. She blinked as light spilled into the room and studied the woman who followed her daughter in.

"Moriko," Selene smiled at the girl, no, a woman now. She'd obviously grown into womanhood

during her time in the south. Crossing over to her, she took both of the other woman's hands in hers to greet her, frowning when she noticed the faint tremor in them. "What is it? Something's happened, hasn't it?"

Cassia stood off to the side, arms crossed, full of conflicting emotions at Moriko's sudden appearance. Glancing towards her mother, she offered Nix a faint smile. "Sorry, she asked to see you both."

Moriko nodded and swallowed a couple of times. "I always meant to return home. I just didn't want to come bearing such bad news." She coughed and cleared her throat. "Something horrible has happened to the southern Royal family. They were attacked, a coup at the palace, everyone was murdered." She could feel a few tears escape down her cheeks.

Everyone froze at that, staring at Moriko in shock. They'd known something must have happened, but this was worse than they'd expected. The two royal families had stayed in touch over the past several years. Selene had been comforted by that connection to those in the south. Cassia was staring at Moriko, mouth open in shock. Selene gently squeezed the other girl's hands "I'm sorry. What's happening in the south now?"

"The royal advisor, I'm sure she is involved somehow." She shivered, remembering the woman dressed all in black with the cold, dead eyes. "I'm not certain, I was in the stables taking care of the horses, we had just returned from a campaign to put down a minor rebellion. I had finished what I could, leaving the rest for my stable hands when I returned to the manor. There were sounds of battle and of the dying. I recognized the colors of a minor noble lady Alina. Her women were attacking the Queen's warriors."

She paused, taking a breath, her stomach rolling as she remembered the smell of blood and the screams of the dying.

"Most of the troops were already tired and had their thoughts on warm food and a bed, and the troops that were fresh in the manor, many were double-crossers. Eira led them against all of them with black, soulless eyes like the advisor, followers of the Mistress of Shadows. I made my way up the servants' stairs to the twins' rooms. I ran into Caron. She said her sister was dead. We ran back down the stairs." She paused again, unsure what to say in regards to Kai.

"We were separated, and I watched them kill her. I ran to the stable and got my Alcen, and I will admit I ran away like a coward." She stared out the single window in the room, not wanting to see their faces. She couldn't deal with pity or the sorrow of others right now.

"I hid until the next morning. I found Valdis, left for dead. We hid for a few days then made our way here," she finished softly, feeling worn out. "I wanted you to know. I'm not certain what that murderer has in mind, but she's probably crowned herself Queen. And the advisor has never made a secret of how much she loathes the north. I didn't want to you be blindsided."

There would be time to mourn soon, for good friends who were now dead. "Moriko..." Selene

waited until she had the other woman's attention again, "thank you for warning us." She looked over at Cassia, meeting the young woman's stunned look. "Cassia, make sure that they have what they need. Then go get all the family leaders, we're going to need to tell them what's happening. We better send word to Abnoa, also."

Moriko nodded. "Trust me, I wish I wasn't here right now telling you this. I wish it had never happened." She turned, feeling unsteady, like the first time Valdis and her troops had gotten her drunk. "I'll leave you to your business."

Within a step, Cassia was there to take her hand, steadying her. "I've got you," she whispered, holding on even when Moriko started to pull away. "Come on, I'll walk you back to the Inn. Is that where you're staying?" Valdis was with her; it would be nice to see the roguish woman again.

Moriko nodded, a small grin breached her lips when she couldn't pull away from Cassia's grasp.

#####

Once they were outside, the cold wind felt good and she felt herself become more grounded in reality. Sometimes the memories of what had happened were still too strong, and she felt herself taken over by them still. She studied Cassia as they walked towards the Inn. "You look good, Princess. Womanhood has been kind." She flushed, realizing what she had said sounded like she was flirting.

Smiling, Cassia slowly let go of the hand she'd been holding once they were outside. "You look good, too. I like your hair like that." That wasn't the only part that Cassia thought looked good. She'd filled out quite nicely in interesting places.

The smile died as she remembered why the other woman had come north, which hadn't been to come visit her. "I'm sorry," she said as they stepped out into the street. "I promised myself I'd tell you I was sorry if I ever saw you again, so there it is...I'm sorry."

Moriko looked at her puzzled. "Cassia, I'm not certain what you feel you need to apologize for, but whatever it was, it's the past." She missed Cassia's hand, but didn't know how to take it without looking silly. But for a brief moment, she felt connected to another woman, and everything didn't seem so overwhelming.

She cleared her throat. "The buildings look amazing. I was speechless when I crossed that bridge thing and saw them."

The smile came back at that, and Cassia looked undeniably proud. "I'm glad you like them. I can't wait to show you the drawings for the castle to see what you think of those. Ryuu's been helping me with the actual engineering part, which is good, because I really didn't know anything about engineering at the beginning. Do you know how hard it is to get huge stone blocks to stand up in

an arch?"

"No, not really, I can say that's something I've never thought about." She grinned slightly and bumped her shoulder into Cassia's.

The smile disappeared a bit at the way Cassia talked about Ryu. "I'm glad she could be helpful."

"I think my parents would be happy if I decided to date her." She gave Moriko a sly grin. "Too bad I don't like her like that."

"Oh," she said sadly then followed it with a happier, "Oh." She looked at the foundation that would one day be a castle. "Speaking of dating women, I ran into Sable at the bathhouse. Now, the twins told me there was no wedding, but imagine my surprise when she introduced me to her wife, and it wasn't you."

Cassia grimaced at that memory. "Speaking of things that are in the past..." she sighed, both of them pausing to allow a cart loaded down with slabs of rock, and pulled by several Alcons, to rumble past them, "...turns out that she fell in love for a Boat Wright."

Moriko reached over and gently touched her elbow. "That must have hurt, I'm sorry." For the longest time her parting meeting with Sable had hurt because Sable had been spending the night in Cassia's room and had seen her go into the barn from Cassia's window.

"It's for the best. I'd convinced myself that I loved her." She smiled sadly then started to walk once the road was clear again. "What about you? I know Caitlin liked you."

Moriko stumbled as they started walking again. "Errm, no...Caitlin and I never did anything." She easily caught up. "Caron and I..." She swallowed as the pain loomed up and she saw Caron murdered before her eyes. "...we, um, for awhile then she decided we made better friends. It hurt, but I survived. She married a Merchant Sea Captain from Lucin, they had...they were very happy."

"You and Caron..?" That was a surprise, a bitter one at that. Cassia forced a smile, glad that they were almost to the inn. "I'm glad you enjoyed your time in the south, then. I always wondered how you were doing. All the twins would say in their letters was that you were fine." It still hadn't hit yet that they were both gone.

"They wouldn't tell me about you. Caron said if I wanted to know how you were doing I should go and ask you myself." She reached up and lightly grabbed Cassia's shoulder, to stop her. If they got to the Inn, then they would have to say their goodbyes. "Cassia, I'm sorry. I wrote you a dozen letters that I never sent. I'm sorry I let teenage hormones build everything up until it was more important than it really was. The truly sad thing was...I had told Keshet I was leaving in the summer. I was going to return home. I missed a lot of things here in the north."

Cassia turned to face the other girl, tilting her head to one side as she watched the early morning

sunrise highlight the other woman's features. "I'm glad you're back, even though the twins are..." She couldn't say it, not yet. She closed her eyes then shook it off. "You aren't the only one who did stupid things. I should have realized Sable didn't really love me."

Moriko shrugged her shoulders. "Live and learn. We were kids, what did we know about the world?" She felt her heart flutter in her chest and realized she still had feelings for Cassia. She had always assumed it was a teenage crush, and that time and distance would reveal it for what it really was, the passing fancy of a fickle teenage heart. Maybe this was what Caron saw in her and had ended their short romance.

She nervously cleared her throat then wet her dry lips. "Cassia, would you..." She was interrupted by Valdis, who was making her way out of the front doors of the Inn.

"Moriko, take her, she won't stop crying! I can't, I thought..." The flustered woman fought to make a sentence as she dumped the wailing baby into Moriko's arms.

For a moment, Cassia felt like she was back in the clearing, dancing. She had even started to lean closer, when suddenly, Valdis was there and Moriko was holding a crying baby. Instead of kissing her, Cassia jerked back in surprise, eyes wide as she stared at the girl in Moriko's arms. "What in the name of the Goddess?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out what was wrong. "Goddess, Valdis. She's swimming in her diapers. You have to change her. Remember we had this conversation." She blew out a breath and held the crying child away from her body so it wouldn't leave a wet stain on her tunic.

Cassia and Valdis took a hasty step back from the screaming child with almost identical looks of worry and complete cluelessness as to how to deal with the situation. "Umm...Moriko..?"

Moriko sighed. "I'll take care of it." ...Like she always took care of it.

Valdis looked conflicted for a moment, before she turned and walked away.

Resigned to her fate, she carefully held the infant in her arms, feeling the wetness soak through into her clothes. "Shhhh, shhhh, it's going to be okay. I'm sorry the grumpy warrior is afraid to change a diaper."

There was a definite odor coming from the young one. Cassia held open the door to the Inn. "Want help?" She wasn't sure what was involved in the helping thing, except whatever it took to get the baby to stop crying.

"Sure," Moriko said absently, concentrating on comforting the unhappy child. She rushed them to her room.

"Umm...do you need me to go get something?"

"Ask the cooks for a pot of warm water, please," she said, opening the door to the room.

"Right, warm water..." Now, if only she could get Moriko to answer where the baby had come from...

She quickly got the child settled and removed the soiled cloth. She pulled an empty washbasin over and gestured for Cassia to fill it when she brought the pot of water in. After checking the temperature, she gently lifted Kai up and put her in the water. "I bet that feels good," she said softly. Kai just looked at her with her big gray eyes then smiled toothlessly at her.

She looked up at Cassia. "Thanks."

Cassia smiled back and watched her bath the squirming infant. "You're good with her." There wasn't much of a resemblance, Cassia noticed with relief.

She took a soft cloth and began to clean the baby. "After taking care of four younger sisters, it's easy."

"Are you going to tell me where she came from?" The other woman offered her a clean piece of cloth to dry the baby down.

She finished washing Kai. "There you go. All better." She lifted the infant out, dried her off, and put a new cloth diaper on her, "Much better." She turned and looked at Cassia.

The dark-haired woman watched the two of them curiously, noting how easily Moriko shifted her grip on the baby, holding her with a sort of unconscious ease that she'd seen mothers do.

She bit her lip in thought for a second before looking back at Kai. "She's mine."

It wasn't a lie. Kai was hers ever since Caron had made her promise to take care of the baby.

There was a flash of pain through Cassia's eyes then she forced a smile. "Oh." She stepped back, shaking her head with a sigh. "Was Caron her Muanya?"

She reached over and took Cassia's hand, thinking about lying before she hedged the truth. "Her mother gave her to me to watch over, before she died."

"Will you come by tonight? I'm sure that my parents would like to see you again when they have things a little more under control. You could bring the little one and Valdis?" She had to go, there were things she had to take care of for Selene.

Moriko squeezed Cassia's hand and let go. "Sure." Standing up, she held a much better smelling Kai. "I need to find a more permanent place for us to live, but I should be free tonight."

Cassia nodded and started for the door, pausing with her hand on it. "What's her name? The

baby's, I mean?"

"Kai," the blonde responded. "And, Kai, this is Cassia. She's a princess, just like you." Realizing what she had just said, she flushed, and played it off. "Kai's our little princess. My whole life seems to revolve taking care of her needs."

Kai just grinned as drool rolled down her chin.

Cassia gave them both a small smile tinged with sadness. "Hello, Kai." She met Moriko's eyes "Will you come tonight?"

"Of course..." She noticed Cassia's sad face. "I'm sorry I brought such sad news."

"I'm just glad that the three of you are safe." With one last fond smile for the child, she stepped outside.

#####

Moriko once again stood nervously outside the Royal home. She held Kai in one arm, and a skin of spiced, mulled wine to be heated in her other hand. Valdis was not with her. The warrior preferred her pain to socializing.

"So what do you think, Kai? I know it's silly to still hold a torch for the woman after all these years, and you're right, young lady, we are completely different people than when we were teenagers. For one, my chest is bigger, though not as big as Cassia's. Crap, shit, shit, I said shit. Ignore that part, you're too young to be hearing about that stuff."

Sometimes Moriko really missed Talon, who had been a lot easier to talk to than a baby.

The first few lazy flakes of snow twirled down from the sky, melting as they touched the ground. The infant grabbed at one of them, squealing as it melted the instant it touched her skin.

Moriko laughed at the infant's delight, feeling lighter for the action. It had been so long since she had laughed.

"That, young lady, is snow. It's something you'll have to get used to."

"Moriko..?" Cassia opened the door, having heard what sounded like laughter outside. Not that she'd been lurking near the door waiting for her or anything. "Is it snowing?" She smiled at the sight of the child in Moriko's arms trying to grab snowflakes out of the air with her chubby hands.

"Yes." Moriko grinned and twirled the infant carefully around, before walking over to the house. "First snow of the year, I take it."

"The first snow," Cassia agreed, grinning as she reached out to brush a white flake from the other woman's hair. Blushing, she stepped back and gestured inside. "Sorry, come in, we have a good fire going, and it looks like enough food to feed a gang of fire warriors."

Moriko grinned back and held the child out to Cassia, "Can you hold her a second while I take off this over tunic? I'll over heat if I don't."

"Umm..." She tried to think of an answer, only to find herself suddenly holding the baby. Gingerly she held Kai in front of her, tentatively smiling at the gray eyes that stared up at her. "Hey, you...ouch!" she winced, as small hands grabbed a hold of her black hair and tugged, hard.

Moriko stifled a laugh, but quickly reached over and removed the tiny fingers from Cassia's hair before taking off the heavy winter coat.

"Okay, you can hand her back now."

"She's strong." Cassia handed her back, laughing as the small one kept trying to grab onto her hair.

Nix came into the room carrying another log for the fireplace. "Moriko, good to see you again, dinner will be ready shortly."

"Thank you. Oh, I brought, um, wine." She handed the wine to the tall smith. Nix removed the stopper and sniffed.

"Ah, some of the famous wine made in Abnoa. Thanks, I'll go heat it up." She moved back to the kitchen. "Honey, our guest brought wine."

"Tell her she didn't have to and to bring that child that Cassia was talking about in here so I can fuss over her. Is Valdis with them?" Selene's voice floated in from the kitchen, which was no longer part of the sitting room as it had been in their first house.

Cassia leaned closer, dodging small grabby hands. "I told them about Kai, I hope that's all right?"

"Um, sure..." Moriko felt a stab of panic before she let it go, trying to relax. She moved awkwardly towards the kitchen, unsure. "Um, Valdis didn't come. She hasn't really been herself since..."

She hadn't told anybody about how she found the woman strung up left for dead in the trees lining the path to the Royal manor. "She still needs time, I guess, to work through everything."

Selene wiped her hands on the apron she wore, moving over to see the child. "Ohhhh...what pretty eyes you have, little one," she cooed, grinning as the baby waved her hands at her. "Cassia, you still haven't set the table."

Cassia sighed, instantly reduced to that awkward teen again as she muttered and went off to set the table for dinner.

Nix looked up and grinned from where she was heating the wine. "Honey, why don't you take the baby, I'm sure Moriko could use a break. I remember when Cassia was born. I loved it when folks would come and visit. They always wanted to hold her and take care of her. It was great. I'll finish up dinner."

"Can I?" Selene asked, waiting for Moriko's reluctant nod before accepting the baby. It had been a long time since she'd held a child, and the Queen instantly remembered how much she'd enjoyed holding Cassia when she was young.

Moriko fidgeted but smiled as Selene took Kai. There was a moment of panic, but she took a deep breath and let it go. They were safe now; the last person who would hurt Kai was Selene. "Thanks," she mumbled, and sat stiffly on a wooden chair.

Cassia finished setting the table and poured a mug full of wine for Moriko. "Here, you look like you could use some of this."

Moriko smiled and said a quiet thank you as she took the wine. She blew on the hot liquid for a second before taking a drink. As soon as it hit her stomach, warmth spread out to her limbs, and she could feel her pale cheeks flush. "I like your new home." This place was much larger than the last dwelling the royal family had lived in. "I guess you can entertain large groups now."

"Tell Cassia that, she seems to think this isn't good enough," Selene spoke up from the chair she was sitting in with Kai. "Have you seen her ambitious project?"

Cassia rolled her eyes, starting to bring plates of food out to the table. "It's not because I think this isn't good enough."

The Queen smiled, tickling Kai until the baby was shrieking with delight. "That's what you keep saying, but I'm not so sure," she teased her daughter, looking up to give Nix a wink.

Nix winked back. "Now, if we can just get her to start building her own place."

Moriko smiled. "Her buildings are wonderful. More impressive than I thought they would be. Don't get me wrong, they looked amazing on parchment, but to walk next to them and see all that stone so perfectly balanced. It's humbling. All I've managed to do is train a few of the hounds to pee someplace other than the stable."

The other young woman could feel her face heating at the compliments, and she shook her head. "I doubt that's all you did. You were always amazing with animals. I bet you had horses asking you where they could jump."

Moriko laughed. "No, the southern horses are stupider than the Alcons." Her face brightened. "But the horses from the plains were amazing. There, riders had this bond with their horses. It was like they could talk to each other." She sipped her wine. "I missed the north," she mumbled out, feeling at ease for the first time in a while.

Once all of the plates were out on the table, they gathered around it, Selene still holding Kai on one side, with Nix, Cassia, and Moriko on the other. The autumn harvest had been good this year, and there was rabbit stew to go along with it. "It is good to see you again, Moriko, no matter what brought you here."

Cassia nodded in agreement. It was strange sitting around the table with Moriko again. It brought back memories of years ago, when they'd been younger, and probably more ignorant, although some days she wasn't sure.

"It's good to see all of you, too, and you'll be seeing more of me, err, us. I bought that old shack of Ethel's, near the river. I guess she died last winter, and her family moved down to Abnoa. It's not much, but once I get fixed up, it will be home." Never once had she thought about going north to her family.

She had heard, three years ago, from one of her sisters that her mothers had separated, and she wondered how much her absence must have hurt them, making them finally act like adults. This, being with Selene and Nix, was as close as she had gotten to a family moment.

"I'm sorry I didn't make it back for Crow's pyre. I got the letter too late. By the time I got it, a month had passed." She didn't feel sad about Crow's passing; the woman had had a full, rich life than any could hope to have.

"The Goddess called her onwards in her sleep. I hope she enjoyed the time she spent here." Selene tickled Kai, much more interested in playing with the baby than eating dinner.

Nix smiled then turned to Cassia, teasing her. "Look how happy that makes your Muanya. Now, if you could just find a woman to settle down with and give us a few grandkids, we'd be ecstatic." She grinned, watching her daughter sputter.

Feeling herself blushing, Cassia did her best to ignore the guest who was sitting next to her. This would be a lot easier if Moriko wasn't so pretty and charming. "Mom...." She looked to Selene for support, but found none, as the Queen was bouncing Kai. "Mom, I haven't found anyone to have grandkids with."

Nix grinned at Moriko, "It's her own fault, really. She's too picky and too focused on those buildings of hers."

"Which are great," a distracted Selene added. "But grandchildren would be nice, wouldn't they, Kai," she asked the baby, grinning as the child giggled and tried to grab the Queen's nose.

Moriko grinned weakly back, "Being picky isn't a bad thing. There are a lot of scary women out there." Some of the scarier ones were the few that followed the battle camps trying to catch a soldier. She suppressed a shudder remembering some of the women who had tried to corner her.

The dark-haired woman flashed Moriko a thankful smile. This was going to be a long dinner.

#####

It was with a sense of relief that Cassia let the door close behind them as they stepped outside. The dinner had been interesting, but one filled with its share of awkward moments. "That wasn't too bad, I guess," she commented, taking in a breath of nice, cool night air. She'd promised her parents that she'd make sure that Moriko and Kai would make it home safely.

Moriko gently cradled the sleeping infant. "It was great. Your Muanya wiped her out." She smiled softly at Cassia. "It was really nice. The best memories I have of a family dinner are at your place with your mothers. It was nice to feel that again."

"Wellllll...." Cassia smiled hopefully, "you could always keep coming back for dinner. That way you wouldn't have to pay for dinner at the inn." She frowned. "I can't believe you bought Ethel's place!"

"Maybe, I'd hate to wear out my welcome. But it's nice to have someone else entertain peanut here." She stroked the shock of blonde hair that just would not lay down flat on the baby's head. She chuckled and started moving towards the Inn. "It's not like I grabbed a lot of my belongings when I ran away from the manor. Ethel's place is the best I could afford. It will be fine, just needs a little work."

"A little work..?" Cassia was horrified by the thought of them in that shack. "Let me help? I don't think I could stand seeing the two of you living there." She paused. "Three of you, I guess. Is Valdis going to go with you?"

"I would assume so, she doesn't really have anything. Well, she has the notion she needs to protect Kai and me."

The other woman was silent as they walked, thinking over Moriko's words as they moved through the dark streets. Idly, she wondered how they could light them so people could walk around without holding torches. "I'm sorry you had to go through that." She paused, considering her words carefully. "Moriko, does that mean Kai is heir to the throne?"

Moriko nearly stumbled, her eyes darting around, and she felt panicked. "She's..." The blonde stopped moving. They were almost certainly alone, but she had learned that wasn't necessarily true, looks could be deceiving. They hadn't moved that far from the Royal house, and she pulled Cassia back to the house, ducking around the side. Her brown eyes searched the night making sure no one could see or hear them.

She moved in close to the northern Princess' personal space. "You must keep it a secret," she pleaded. "I thought I was doing so well keeping it a secret. She's Caron's child, and as far as I know, the last living heir to Keshet and Morgan's throne."

"You aren't that good at lying," Cassia whispered, smiling a little sadly as she touched Moriko's shoulder. "I knew you weren't telling the truth. And why else would Valdis want to protect her?"

Moriko sighed and looked down at Kai. "I guess I'm not offended that you find me a poor liar. But I can't help but feel scared I'm not up to the task of watching out for her."

"That's all right, we'll help. You aren't alone here. People will help watch out for her, so will my parents. I think they love her already." She smiled, sliding her hand down Moriko's arm to hold her hand, "All right?"

Moriko nodded and gently squeezed Cassia's hand. "Thank you." She could feel tears in her eyes again, but they were more from relief than sadness this time.

#####

The day was warm, an unusual event, but it seemed that winter's icy grip was going to be stayed a little bit longer. It had snowed off and on for the last week, but waking up this morning and finding the day tolerable had sent Moriko headed towards her humble new home. Actually, as she stared at the pathetic building, she figured humble was a kind word.

Kai screamed and giggled, and patted her tiny hands on Moriko's braided hair. The blonde winced and unstrapped the infant from her back, and grinned at the happy child. "No comments, peanut," she told the child then blew a raspberry on the child's rosy cheek, which caused another shriek of laughter.

Moriko stared at the shack, which wasn't much: a dirt floor, three rooms - including the kitchen - and ratty animal skins hanging loosely over two small windows. A little ways away, there looked to be an outhouse. However, she could hear and smell the river from where she stood, and the forest spread out behind her house. She was tired of the odd looks from people, and the knowing looks whenever she and Cassia were anywhere near each other.

"It's not much, but, Kai, you are looking at your new home." The infant spit up on her tunic in response. Moriko sighed and looked up for a second before looking back down at Kai. "I can tell you aren't impressed."

Gently, she lifted Kai out of her child carrier and went over to Oscar, who was examining some of the shrubs with interest. She took off the simple braided halter. "There you go," she murmured and gave the beast his freedom to roam, knowing that with a whistle he'd be back at her side. "Go explore." Looking down, she frowned at the infant. "What am I going to do with you?"

#####

A half hour later found Kai back in the child carrier that Moriko had set up like a swing from a low tree branch with the rope from the halter. The child kicked and moved, giggling, Moriko checking on her every once in awhile. She was currently up on the roof inspecting the boards when she saw a woman walking down the path towards her. She moved quickly from the roof to the ground, and immediately went and picked up Kai, uncertain.

Her mood got darker when she saw who it was. "Mother," she said icily.

The older woman flinched, and didn't meet her daughter's eyes, but she didn't turn away, either. "Moriko..." she started, lamely, before letting the rest of the sentence die.

Moriko was unhelpful. She just stood giving her mother a dark look.

"You wrote your sisters, but never your mothers. I didn't even know you were back, until Nix wrote us. Do you hate us that much? We weren't bad parents, were we?"

"You weren't parents. You were too busy fighting with each other. And you," she pointed a finger at her mother, "were too busy chasing everything that moved and feeling sorry for yourself, because your one great love got away. I'm sorry, Mother. I've met Nix and Selene, and they have eyes for no one but each other. You weren't even a passing fancy in Selene's head."

Yuri blanched, and tried to stutter something out.

"Why couldn't you have just loved us and Muanya?"

"I was a good mother, don't you make this all my fault. You're the one that ran away to the south. What, we weren't good enough for you? I knew I should have just kept you home as punishment for almost burning down the stable. But no, Crow convinced me you were just acting up."

"Me, burn down the stable. That's rich. It was you. You came into the barn drunk and smelling like that barmaid. You're the one that tried to have a mother/daughter talk in the middle of the night. You're the one that passed out and knocked the lamp over. I didn't want you two to fight again, so I took the blame." Kai began to cry, getting upset over all the shouting. Yuri looked stunned, like she had been struck.

Gently, she rocked the crying infant, trying to sooth her. "Look, Mother, I don't want to be doing this. We have nothing to say to each other."

"Your Muanya and I separated a few years ago," Yuri said quietly. "It got so hard after you left. Our fighting got worse."

"I know, Marianne told me in a letter. But I was raising everybody, you two weren't being parents. I was tired of it. I had nothing in common with any of my friends. They had all these

wonderful experiences, and I raised four kids and animals. I needed a childhood."

Yuri flushed, "I, I'm sorry. I didn't realize we did that to you."

"Yes, Mother, you did. Can you really be surprised that I didn't want come home?"

"I guess not." The older woman blew out a breath and looked lost. "I have a lot to think about. Can I come back, can we try again?" She stared at the infant in her daughter's arms, aching to ask if she was her granddaughter. But felt she didn't have that right, at the moment.

Moriko's first response was to say no, but seeing the lost look on her mother's face, relented. "I can't make any promises, but maybe."

Yuri sighed and ran a trembling hand through her hair. "Okay." Knowing they were done for now, the woman turned and walked back down the path.

Moriko held Kai and sat down at the base of the tree. She checked the ground then set the infant down. She gurgled and tugged at the blades of grass. "Of all the things I expected, Kai...that was not one of them."

Moriko played with Kai for a little bit then she put Kai back into her impromptu swing. The day was starting to get cooler, and she wanted to get the wooden roof slats checked out before there was another storm.

She lifted herself back up to the roof and with one eye on her work and another on Kai, got back to work.

"Hey!" a familiar voice called from the path that led up to the small shack. Cassia shielded her eyes from the sun so she could look up at the figure on the roof. "Did I just see Yuri in town?"

Moriko jerked, but kept her balance. "Hey." She looked up at Cassia. "Yeah, my mother was just here." Her face betrayed how unhappy she was with the visit.

Kai squealed and held out her arms at her new playmate, her tiny legs kicking.

The dark-haired woman pursed her lips. She'd been about to ask how that visit had gone, but the look on Moriko's face stopped her. Instead, she very hesitantly picked up the baby, terrified she was going to drop her. "Uh, well, I came to see how things were going?"

"If the weather holds, it should be going well. The roof's not too bad. There are a few spots that need to be fixed," she said, moving to another spot, and frowning when her foot almost went through a board.

Kai giggled and grabbed at Cassia's nose.

"Ack!" Cassia blinked, grinning at the little one. "Yeah, about that, I have something I wanted to talk to you about." Her voice was muffled, since Kai got a good hold of her nose.

Moriko looked over and chuckled before marking the weak spot with a white X with the small piece of chalk in her hand. She pocketed the chalk and made her way to the edge. She crouched down, grabbing the lip of the roof, and then lowered her body over the side, hanging by her arms. With only a three-foot drop, she let go, landing easily. She grinned happily at the pair and made her way over.

Gently, she took the infant from Cassia and blew a raspberry on Kai's cheek, getting the infant's attention. Kai giggled and let go of Cassia's nose then grabbed at Moriko's blonde braids.

Glad to have her nose back Cassia rubbed it; trying not to be impressed by how fit Moriko looked lowering herself from the roof. "Thanks, she has a strong grip." She looked over her shoulder then smiled back at Moriko. "So, about your house..."

Behind her, a line of people started down the path to the house, many of them carrying building supplies.

"Uh huh, about my...um, Cassia, those people look like they have building supplies?" She looked at the princess, an eyebrow arched like a question mark.

Checking over her shoulder, Cassia smiled and waved to Ryuu, who was at the head of the procession. "They do?" She grinned at Moriko. "You know how I said I'd help you before?"

"Yes, I remember how that may have been worked into a conversation." She nodded at the quiet woman with the silver hair, and as she had learned, a wicked sense of humor.

"Well, Ryuu here said something that made a lot of sense to me. She said we couldn't leave Kai to live in such a..." Words failed Cassia as she glanced at the rundown thing of a home. "...place. Then I realized we had all these people working on the castle." She waggled her eyebrows "Imagine that."

"Um, I..." She was stunned by the gesture. "I guess when you're the Princess, stuff gets done." She leaned over and impulsively kissed Cassia's cheek. "Thank you."

"Hello, Moriko." Ryuu bent close to Kai and produced a piece of honey candy from somewhere for the child. "Here you go, child. I'll see about setting up the scaffolding." She left the two women to themselves with the child.

Cassia blushed, smiling as she pulled out a piece of parchment. "I drew a picture of what it could look like if you want?"

Kai said something in her baby language, and bounced in Moriko's arms. Moriko took the candy

and examined it. It was a long, thin stick of baked honey that Moriko was certain would get both her and Kai messy. With a mock glare at Ryuu, she gave it to Kai. The child happily sucked on it, occasionally pulling it out to smack her surrogate mother in the cheek or nose with it.

Ryuu smiled innocently and went about getting the workers organized.

Moriko grinned at Cassia. "Let's see what you have there. It's only a simple shack, really, what can you do to it?"

The other woman coughed a little at that, opening up the parchment to show the drawing to Moriko. "Well..." she smiled, "I might have gotten a little carried away." The shack was still there, but it was attached to a rather large extension.

Moriko arched an eyebrow and laughed, "A little? Cassia, that's wonderful, but it's a bit much." She studied the drawing. "I like the expanded kitchen and the extra room so Vladis, Kai, and I can have our own sleeping area. And the barn so I can have a place for the animals." She looked at the dark-haired princess. "Can we compromise?"

"Actually," the other woman looked more than a bit sheepish, "that is the compromise. I wanted to rip it down and start fresh."

Moriko laughed. "It's not that bad."

"Hmmm..." Taking Moriko's hand in hers, she tugged the woman out of the way as a pair of Aclen's pulled a cart with lumber on it past them. "What sort of compromise?"

"Bah." Moriko waved off an attack from the honey stick. "I'll let you tear it down and rebuild, but what you have is too much, unless I have a war unit I don't know about, that's going to be living here as well."

"About that," Cassia smiled, "I was thinking maybe Valdis should train some people to keep an eye on Kai?"

Moriko frowned. "Wouldn't that just be pointing out that I have something that needs to be protected?"

The other woman frowned, she hadn't thought about that. "Oh. Well, how about we just remove this part then? That would make it smaller?" She held up the picture, wincing as Kai managed to get honey on it.

"Kai, candy goes in the mouth, not on Cassia's nice drawings," Moriko said, trying to get the honey stick away from Kai, and winced when she got smacked in the nose. "That's it." She took it away only to have the infant start screaming in her ear. "Goddess have it back."

Cassia tried to remove the honey from the picture, only succeeding in tearing it. "Ryuu," she

grimaced, glaring at the back of the silver-haired woman. "She seems nice, but she's evil."

"Yes, yes she is." Finally, she got the child interested in candy as a tasty treat, not as a weapon. "I think, though, having Valdis train some women in weapons is a good idea. It might give her a purpose and draw her out of her depression. The women who are trained can do patrols of the town, handling problems."

The princess shook her head. "Selene hates the idea of guards, wearing weapons, walking through the streets. She never liked to think of us hurting one another." The woman shrugged. "It makes sense to me though, especially if things turn even worse in the south."

"Hmmm, I can see her point. I guess I'm just used to the south. Keshet always had guards around her. Then there were guards who were in charge of patrolling just the town. They took care of arguments, fights, drunken brawls, and wild animals. So maybe just play up the town safety aspect. As the town gets bigger, people have to share the lessening space."

It made sense, although she was sure that her Muanya would hate it. Cassia looked a little shy suddenly. "So, what do you think? Will you and the little one like it here?"

Moriko just smiled at Cassia. "We already do." She blushed, realizing she was staring, and bounced Kai. "Isn't that right, little one?"

"Well, that's good." She shared a smile with the other woman then looked away as she started to play with Kai. "Let me show you where the stables will be?"

#####

Nix smiled over at her wife then nodded her head at their daughter, who was frantically trying to get her snow boots on. "So, having dinner with Moriko again tonight?" she asked casually.

"What?" Cassia nearly fell over then managed to catch herself on the doorjamb. "I'm late. I told her I'd be there earlier. But then we had that problem with the south wall at the castle..." she rambled on, finishing tugging on her boots.

Selene watched her go with a more than amused expression on her face. She shook her head and leaned back in her chair, enjoying the warmth of the fire radiating from the fireplace. "How many times does that make?"

"Three, I think, wife, maybe four if you want to count that day they had lunch and dinner." She just avoided bursting out laughing when Cassia glared over at them.

Cassia harrumphed and pulled on her coat. "I'll be back later," she called, opening the door then slamming it shut. A blast of cold air swept in, carrying with it a whirl of white snow.

"I wonder why they can't just admit they're dating. They do everything together but spend the

night." She leaned over and put another log on the fire.

Selene shivered, pulling the blanket a bit tighter around her shoulders. The cold was getting harder and harder to deal with as she grew older, finding each winter a little worse than the one before. She reached over and patted Nix on the shoulder. "You know she warned us not to meddle."

"I know, love, but I don't want her to be alone. And if we didn't meddle, she'd never do anything but draw those drawings of hers." She winced and got up, grabbing another blanket. Coming back, she draped it over Selene's shoulders. She kissed the now white hair. "I love you so much. I just want our daughter to know this feeling I feel every time I'm with the woman I love so much. Is that so wrong?" She sat down, content to sit next to Selene in silence and the warmth of the fire.

"Of course not..." Selene leaned against the warmth of her wife and sighed with contentment. "I think things will happen as they happen, though. I pray to the Goddess she'll find her way." Deciding to switch topics, the Queen turned so she could see her wife's face. "The pass snowed in yesterday. There's no way to get any more news from the south now."

Nix nodded, "Have you noticed that a lot of the refugee's bare a striking similarity to you, my love, same hair and eyes, and body type? This new leader seems a bit blood thirsty, but that could be my bias, because we know how she really got the throne."

The smaller woman nodded. "Maybe she doesn't like blondes." She closed her eyes. "The stories they have of what's going on in the south. How could it have become so bad so fast? Did we forget what we fled from so fast?"

She gently stroked the flesh on the back of Selene's hand. "Some were babies or children when we fled. They don't remember much from the trek here, so that sin is repeating the past." She shook her head. "The boat smiths say, though, that trade is still going well with those horse lovers, so it isn't as bad as I feared."

Nodding, Selene settled back against the taller woman. "True, at least they haven't gone insane." She took Nix's larger hand in her own. "I was thinking of writing down what happened, so that we don't forget. Ryuu mentioned she'd be happy to help me if I wanted."

"That, my love, sounds like a wonderful idea."

"I was also thinking of stepping down in the spring." She studied the large hand in hers, noting the differences that age had brought. "I want to enjoy more time with you, and our grandchildren, whenever we get them."

"No argument from me. I think I've been trying to convince you of that for a while." The smith grinned and lifted up her wife's hand, kissing it.

Selene smiled and rested her head against Nix's shoulder. "Good."

#####

Moriko looked down at the small puppy that was looking up at her with huge, scared gold eyes. Next to it was a small puddle. "Valdis, for the last time, the puppies need to sleep in the barn!" She was starting to regret the day she'd found them. But the bigger one had looked at her with such a stupid expression it had reminded her of Wraith. She had to wonder if Wraith hadn't left a little present of himself behind after he'd visited the north.

Valdis had come out of her depression slightly with the puppy. Moriko had kept his brother for herself, hoping to train him to kill rats in the barn. Valdis' puppy was certainly running away from his crime to hide with his brother.

"I have company coming," she muttered, grabbing a rag to clean the floor.

The warrior in question scooped up the puppy, giving Moriko much the same look as the puppy had. "He's sorry, aren't you?" She held the squirming puppy up towards Moriko, where it promptly started to lick her face. "See, he's really sorry."

Moriko sputtered, and pushed the wiggling puppy away from her face. "Fine, but please potty train him." She cleaned up the mess and tossed the towel in a pile to be washed out.

The southerner smiled; a rare thing ever since her trip to the north. "Should I guess who is coming over?"

She put her hands in a basin of warm water, washing them before checking the huge stone fireplace that was used to heat the house and for cooking. She had a large pot sitting on a metal tripod over the flames, a chicken stew bubbling away. She looked at the warrior. "Cassia's coming over for dinner."

"That's a surprise," Valdis said, a touch of her old cockiness surfacing, before she nodded towards the fancy crib not far from the fireplace that Nix had made. "You want me to keep an eye on Kai?"

"It's just a friendly dinner, just like last night." She stirred the stew for a moment before she pulled it away from the fire.

"And the night before that and the night before that..." Valdis tucked the blanket up around the sleeping baby inside of it.

A knock banged on the stout, wooden front door, and Valdis grinned crookedly. "I think I'll call it an early evening." She straightened up and headed towards the room off the kitchen that was hers. "Don't do anything I would," she called over her shoulder, closing the door to her room

behind her.

Moriko snorted, "That limits my options." She checked on Kai before rushing to the door.

A rather cold looking Cassia stood on the doorstep, despite the heavy coat she was wearing. Dark hair was frosted white with snow from the storm that was well and truly raging outside. "Hi," she smiled, shifting back and forth, shivering.

"Get in here," Moriko pulled Cassia inside. "I told you, you don't have to knock."

"Didn't want to barge in," she said, gladly stepping into the warmth of the house. It was hard to see the shack that had used to stand in its place. She smiled, as she always did, upon seeing the wrought iron and wood crib that stood not far from the fire. "Pumpkin asleep already?" she asked as she started shrugging off the heavy coat.

Two small puppies came bounding out from the small straw-stuffed canvas that Valdis had put together for them to sleep on. They yipped and sniffed at the new presence in the house.

"Hey, you two, get back." She scooped up the two wiggling, yipping masses. "Apparently these two are grandchildren to either Wraith or Rage. Valdis has named hers Thorn, and I named mine Rugor."

Shaking out her wet hair from the melting snow, Cassia managed to pet both of them, laughing as her hands got licked. "They're a handful."

The puppies kept trying to lick the exposed skin. Laughing, Moriko put them down. "Go lie down. Go on."

"Where is the brooding warrior?" Cassia finally managed to kick off her snow-covered boots, leaving them by the door, and followed Moriko towards the fireplace.

"Not so brooding. Thorn seems to be cheering her up. She actually smiled earlier." She took Cassia's coat and hung it on a hook with other winter clothes near the fire.

"She smiled?" That was indeed news. Cassia paused by the crib, her smile gentling as she watched Kai sleeping inside.

She took some metal tongs and pulled the pot of stew off. "Hope you're hungry." She grabbed some wooden bowls, quickly checking to make sure they were clean. Humming quietly, she pulled a cloth off some bread she had made. "I remember the first time I made bread. It was with you and Selene. Nix was really nice. It was burnt, but she still ate it." She chuckled a bit at the memory.

"That is because my mother will eat anything after working in the forge," she stated, brushing a hand across the unruly hair on the baby's head before moving over to help carry dishes to the

table. "This smells great though. Your cooking has gotten a lot better since then."

"When you travel around in a war camp, you either cook your own or eat from the cook's tent. Now, the cook can't necessarily cook."

Cassia made a face at that mental picture. The entire idea of a war camp was still hard for her to picture, even after both Valdis and Moriko had explained them to her. "So, any suggestions for improvements to the house..?" She'd already come up with a few ideas for springtime, when construction could start again.

Moriko blinked and looked around the house. "It's great. I have my own room, it's not a barn or a tent, and I don't have to share it. It's warm, no leaks...it's perfect." She sat down at the small table in the kitchen after checking the crib. She rubbed the scar on her forehead, hoping that it wasn't aching because they were in for a horrible storm.

"Does your head hurt?" The last time Moriko's head had hurt, it had rained for nearly a week straight, and the Winderling had very nearly flooded its banks.

"Yeah, my scar is throbbing. It's probably just the cold. It is winter, after all. I was spoiled down in the south." She forced her hand away from her head and smiled.

"At least it's not going to rain," Cassia offered, helpfully, taking a hunk of bread along with some of the wonderful smelling stew. Her stomach growled as she took in a deep breath. "Ooooh..." she nearly purred.

She fiddled with her spoon for a moment, looking like she might say something, before smiling again and started to eat. She paused between bites. "I'm glad you can come over to eat. I like spending time with you." She winced and stuffed her spoon back in her mouth. All she had to say was, "I'm in love with you, or I'd like to kiss you." All day, while she worked in her barn or the Inn's stable, she practiced how she would tell Cassia, and every night she froze up.

"I'm glad I can too." The other woman lowered her spoon, staring intently across the table at Moriko. For a moment she, too, looked like she was going to say something, then she smiled and looked back down at her stew. "I like...umm...your cooking." Mentally groaning, she forced a smile at the other woman. "You'll probably get sick of having me over for dinner soon."

"Okay, but we could go to the Inn sometimes. Valdis told me they have a storyteller, and other nights a musician." She looked at their entwined hands. "It could be like a...uh...date." She said the last part softly.

"A date..?" Cassia's squeaked in surprise, eyes wide as she looked across the table at the woman of whom she was very aware was still holding her hand.

That wasn't the response she had hoped for. "It was just a thought. It was silly." She forced a laugh and moved her hand out from under Cassia's.

"No, wait, it wasn't silly." She tightened her fingers around Moriko's fingers, trying to keep her from pulling away. "I mean, I'd like that." She smiled. "You just caught me by surprise. I thought..." she trailed off, biting her lip. "I thought I'd missed my chance after that time in the forest."

"I thought I'd missed it, too. I thought you were going to marry Sable, and I didn't even try. I just ran away from everything." She laughed. "Teenage hormones are such a wonderful thing." She paused then said quietly, "I think Caron knew, knew that I still loved you. We weren't together very long. She would just stare at my face then seem sad, like she couldn't find what she was looking for. Then after a month, she said we made better friends. I didn't understand, not until I came home and saw you again. What I felt seeing you, I think that's what she was looking for in my eyes."

Cassia smiled, feeling tears gather in her eyes as their fingers entwined. "I missed you. I thought about running away to find you, to tell you what a fool I'd been. But I wasn't sure if you'd even listen to me."

"I may not have listened at first, but who knows, I bet you could have worn me down. There were a lot of times I got scared and homesick, especially my first battle. I think, looking back, I needed that time away." She didn't mention that the thought of coming home was always deterred by the thought of Cassia marrying Sable.

"You'll have to tell me about that, these battles that you've been in." The dark-haired woman still couldn't really picture anything like what Moriko and Valdis had alluded to. Neither had been particularly interested in talking about it very much. "No more running away, then?"

"I wasn't planning on it. I have a nice house, a nice job, good friends, and maybe a great girlfriend." She looked hopeful. It was perhaps presuming a lot, but she was relaxing. The hard part of actually asking Cassia out on something other than a friendly dinner was behind her.

"Girlfriend, huh..?" Smiling, Cassia let go of her hand and helped herself to something to eat. "I like the sound of that. It helps that my parents already like you, of course." She mentally crossed her fingers, hoping that comment didn't send Moriko running. Of course, how fast she could run through a snowstorm carrying Kai was up for debate.

"Yeah, that helps. I'm sure Nix can be scary if she doesn't like someone." She grinned foolishly then started to eat her food.

"I baked a couple of sweet apples." She got up and lifted the lid on a ceramic pot on the stones next to the fire, checking on them. Nodding, she grabbed padding for her hands and lifted them over to the counter before returning to the fire and tossing two more logs on. She sat back down. "Gretchen from Abnoa brought in a shipment of apples to the Inn. Kealsy let me grab a couple then I just added some honey and cinnamon. It's really tasty, trust me."

"It smells like it." She leaned forwards, sniffing the air as Moriko brought the pot towards the table. "I think I like having a girlfriend who can cook delicious things." She enjoyed watching the way Moriko moved as she walked.

Moriko just blushed. "It's not that hard to cook." She cleared the table and set out a plate then dished one of the bubbling, gooey, messy baked apples on to it. The smell of apples and cinnamon invaded the air.

"I can't wait to see what else you can cook," Cassia grinned, getting up and picking up her chair and scooting around to Moriko's side of the table. "Mind some company?"

"Um, no, company would be great." She smiled shyly and sat down.

It took only a minute or two before Valdis had invaded the kitchen with her sleep tossed hair. "Honey apples, you made honey apples." She nodded at Cassia while eyeing the apple in the pot. Moriko sighed and dished out the last apple onto a plate and handed it to the warrior. Valdis beamed a smile at her housemate. "You're the best," she chirped happily before taking a bite, only to hiss and try and cool her overheated mouth.

Cassia let out a half laugh before managing to stop herself from going on to full-out laughing. "Hi, Valdis," she greeted, a little annoyed that her emergence from her room derailed her plan to kiss Moriko.

The warrior nodded. After she was finally able to swallow, she said, "Hi, Princess. Looks like you're spending the night - finally."

Cassia nearly choked on her own bite of the apple dessert at that.

Moriko hissed out, "Valdis."

"What? It's a whiteout outside. If you care at all for the woman, please tell me you're not going to let her walk home in that."

"What? No, no. Of course Cassia is going to spend the night, if it's dangerous." She gulped a bit and her palms started sweating.

Cassia couldn't help it. She started laughing at the outraged expression on Moriko's face and the innocent one on Valdis'.

"Good woman." She looked at Cassia and shrugged. "Be gentle with her, her heart's in the right place, but she's just a little slow to get to the point, if you know what I mean."

Moriko buried her face in her hands. "Valdis, please, just go do something somewhere else."

The warrior grinned and winked at Cassia before turning to the crib. "Hey there, peanut...look at you, being all quiet and playing with your toes. Looks like you get to sleep with Auntie Valdis tonight, 'cause Auntie Moriko is having a sleepover."

Moriko blushed until her ears turned red.

Even Cassia could feel her face turning red. "Good to see you again, Valdis." It was always interesting interacting with the other woman, who had a wicked sense of humor. It reminded Cassia of Ryuu most days, although at least her assistant wasn't so depressed all the time.

Valdis picked up the infant, who cooed, and then tried to teeth on a honey-coated finger. "Hey there, I see no need to take my finger off." With Kai in one hand and her apple treat in the other, she grinned wickedly at the two of them before leaving the kitchen.

"Well," Moriko squeaked out, "at least she's smiling and joking again." She cleared her throat then picked up her fork and nonchalantly stabbed a piece of apple off of Cassia's plate.

"She's becoming more like her old self. That's a good thing." The princess mock frowned, pulling the plate away from her. "Who said I have to share?"

"But..." She stared sadly at the plate. "It's good to share," she said hopefully.

"Hmmm..." Cassia took her own bite, closing her eyes for a moment at the taste. "That tastes delicious." Then she used her own fork to pick up another piece. "What do I get if I do share?" she waved the piece between them.

"What do you want?"

"What will you give me?" Cassia leaned closer.

"Well," Moriko scooted over closer to Cassia, "how about a kiss? Would that be a fair trade?"

Cassia looked down to stare at Moriko's lips. "That sounds reasonable." She let Moriko take the piece of apple. Licking her own lips, she set aside the fork, leaning forward to taste the apple on the other woman's lips.

A part of Moriko's brain wondered how one night so many years ago could have such a lasting impact on her. But this is what she missed, Cassia's lips. Other than Cassia, she had only kissed three other women, and all of them paled to this.

Cassia was certain that she would always remember the taste of apples on Moriko's lips as slid a hand behind her head and pulled Moriko closer. When they finally pulled apart for air, the dark-haired woman was gasping, unsteady. "Yeah, that was worth it," she whispered.

Slowly, they pulled back and Moriko sighed happily. "That's even better than I remember."

She giggled. "I'm glad. I wouldn't want to think I didn't pay my end of the bargain."

Picking up her fork, Cassia got another piece of the apple dish on it. "Good thing we have this entire apple to trade for."

#####

Moriko was up early, and even the arduous task of breaking a trail through the snow to the barn couldn't wipe a smile off her face. She quickly went to work, feeding Oscar and the two breeding females her Muanya had given her. With one last pat to Oscar's horned head, she was back outside, straining through the snow. Even though it was a few feet, it felt like a mile. Breathing heavily, she opened the door and stepped inside. She knocked the snow off her and started shedding layers. She had a guest, a romantic type guest sleeping, warming her bed.

She grinned foolishly.

"I'm so glad I talked you into getting a big bed," Cassia murmured, cracking open her eyes to watch as Moriko quietly entered the room again. "Do you always get up before sunrise?" It wasn't even light out yet, which was early, even by Cassia's standards.

"Now I see why you were so insistent. You had some sneaky motive." She rubbed her hands and her nose trying to warm them up so she didn't get booted right back out of bed. She slid under the covers. "Yep, I always get up early. Animals need to be fed, and then I go to the Inn, but not today. Keasly probably figured out late last night I wouldn't be able to get over there this morning."

"Ahh...you're cold." Despite that, Cassia slid closer, wrapping herself gingerly around the other woman. They were still hesitant in touching one another, awkward, but they got settled. "Better," she whispered, tugging the blankets a bit higher up over them.

Moriko fidgeted, "Sorry." They bumped awkwardly together for a second before easing into a comfortable position. "I tried to warm myself up. I'm not used to having company...well...Kai or the puppies don't count."

"Is the little one still with Valdis?" Cassia yawned, finding it hard to resist falling back asleep. She could hear the wind whipping around the house outside, and the room was cold, while under the blankets she had a warm body to cuddle with.

The yawn was contagious, and Moriko returned one of her own, "Yeah, as far as I can tell. We're the only two people awake. Even the puppies ran out of energy." She snuggled into Cassia's body, finding the warmth under the covers was making her sleepy again. Normally, once she was up, she was up for the rest of the day. A habit forged in youth working for her Muanya, and then again during war. There was a lot to do in a war camp, and not enough time in the day. "It's windy out, but stopped snowing. I was able to break a path to the barn."

Cassia mumbled something in response, although even she didn't know what it was. Instead, she pressed her lips to Moriko's in a sleepy kiss and decided she didn't want to get up to face the day yet. This was much too nice to give up. With just a little more rearrangement, she found a comfortable position, with her leg tossed over the warm body next to hers and an arm draped over Moriko's chest. Making a sound that was nearly a purr, she snuggled down into the warmth and let sleep claim her.

#####

Nix was staring out the window, something she'd been doing most of the morning and afternoon, ever since she realized her little girl hadn't made it home. The storm had passed, leaving a dump of snow almost to her waist. Logically she knew it was best that Cassia hadn't tried to come home last night, and she knew her daughter was smart enough not to even try, but still, her little girl spent the night at some strange woman's house.

She frowned as Selene laughed at her. Looking at her wife, a sheepish grin broke out on her face. "I know, I know, I'm being silly. Still, our baby didn't come home last night. You know I have to scare Moriko on sheer principle now?"

Selene laughed again, coming up behind her wife and wrapping her arms around her waist to hug her. "I know you will." She'd had no doubt that was going to happen ever since she realized that Cassia hadn't come home last night.

"But do you really want to scare her too bad? Maybe this means that they are finally ready to admit that they're dating?" She liked Moriko, a lot more than she'd liked Sable, and she hoped her daughter was finally going to find someone to spend her life with.

"Well, no, not too bad," she hedged. "I do really rather like Moriko, she doesn't know how to be dishonest. Please tell me you figured out Kai is the last southern royal alive, with all that stuttering and back stepping every time you ask about the baby. I thought the poor woman was going to give herself a headache."

Nix chuckled and turned around in her wife's arms, kissing her gently on the lips.

As she had gotten older, her eyesight had gotten worse. Now, she rarely had to wear the protective cloth. It was odd. At first she had freaked out, but her wife assured her that this was how most people normally saw the world.

"I know I've forgotten things recently, but I know a grandchild of Keshet when I see her. She doesn't look a thing like Moriko." It was nice to be able to look up into Nix's eyes without the cloth blindfold in the way. "I don't think we should tell her we know. She's already nervous enough about Kai. Do you think Cassia knows?"

Nix chuckled, "Yes, Moriko can be as skittish as a Pouncer in a room of rocking chairs. So we can keep pretending we don't know who Kai is for right now." She blew out a breath. "I think she knows, but as intelligent as our daughter can be, she sure can be clueless in some areas."

The Queen laughed, reaching up to tenderly pat Nix's cheek. "I wonder who she gets that from."

Nix scowled at Selene and pretended to get annoyed. "Can't be me." She was just about to pick up her wife and carry her upstairs when she noticed two figures breaking a path in the snow. "Well, they aren't sleeping together, yet?" She shook her head. "Not that I want to think about my little girl doing such things, but I was hoping they at least took a step in the right direction. The whole town knows they're crazy for each other. I think there's even a bet going when they're going to get brave enough to be a couple."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Selene was even pretty sure she knew who would have started such a bet.

#####

Outside the house, Cassia and Moriko were slowly breaking a path through the snowdrifts. They hadn't seen a single other person since leaving Moriko's place, mostly because everyone else was taking the opportunity to stay inside and avoid the bitter wind and tall piles of snow outside. That would change soon enough, but for now, the two trudged along alone.

"You didn't have to come along with me." Cassia watched her breath frost in the air in front of her, pausing at the bottom of the steps to the front door.

Moriko shrugged her shoulders, barely moving under all the layers she was wearing. "Of course I did. What kind of girlfriend would I be if I let you walk home alone in this? Plus, I want to go on over to the Inn and make sure those two Alcens are okay. It is what Kealsy pays me to do." And she was baby free, Valdis having actually offered to watch Kai. When they had left, Valdis, Kai, and the puppies were crawling on the floor, playing. She took a step, breaking through the virgin snow, only to step down further than she was expecting. Her arms wind milled for a moment then she fell over, taking out Cassia. "Sorry," she mumbled then laughed when she saw how coated in white Cassia's hair was.

The princess let out a startled yelp then laughed as they both tumbled into the snowdrift. "You did that on purpose," she accused, laughing, and then impulsively leaning in closer to kiss Moriko. Now, if only she wasn't lying in the snow, with a very overdressed Moriko lying on top of her.

"Whenever you girls want to come inside, we have hot tea," Selene's voice called out from the front door. Moriko jerked in surprise, craning her neck to see Cassia's Muanya and her mother smiling at them from the door. With a wave, Nix shut the door. Groaning, Cassia let her head flop back into the snow.

Moriko's face turned bright red, and she quickly stood up, trying to get her snowcap back on, as well as brush snow off her and Cassia. "They're not going to poison me, are they? They still like me, right?" Flustered, she momentarily thought about fleeing.

"Yes, they like you." It was actually really cute how flustered Moriko was getting. "I promise they like you. You don't have to come inside right now if you don't want to, though. I can tell them you had to go see to the Alcens at the Inn." She reached out and took the other girl's hands in hers, chaffing them to warm them through the mittens.

The blonde took a deep breath and let it out. "No, I'll come in for a little bit. Tea sounds good, plus, I can spend a few more minutes with you." She swallowed nervously, and stared at the house.

She wasn't certain why she was so nervous; she had spent plenty of time with Selene and Nix.

"It's going to be all right." Cassia clasped her girlfriend's hand, smiling even wider at the thought. "They like you, remember that." She pulled her towards the stairs up to the front door.

Nix opened the front door just before they reached it and leveled a glare at Moriko. "Do I want to know why my little girl is just getting home?" She nearly started laughing when the young woman looked like she might turn and run.

"Uh, hmmm, well...ummm, snow, lots of snow," she finally blurted out.

"Mom," Cassia glared at Nix, "stop trying to terrorize Moriko!"

The glare melted away. "Aww, Cassia. You never really brought anybody home for me to terrorize." She looked sheepish for a second, then opened the door wide to let them in. "Don't track snow in the house, you know how that bugs your Muanya." The ex-smith retreated into the kitchen.

"See," the dark-haired woman whispered, tacking off her boots in the hallway and closing the door behind them, "she likes you." Well aware that she was blushing, she realized that Nix was right, Moriko was the first girl she'd brought home to her parents.

"That's good." She smiled weakly and shed the thick cloak and overcoat she was wearing, and then finally the boots. Noticing they were alone for the moment and feeling her courage return, she leaned over and gently kissed Cassia. She blushed and mumbled against Cassia's red lips, "Not sure when I'll get to do that again today."

The smile that the other woman gave her was wide and very happy. "Hopefully a lot." Reclaiming Moriko's hand, she held it up, "You mind this?"

Moriko, quirked a blonde eyebrow in question, asked, "Mind what?"

"...If I hold your hand?" Cassia mentally crossed her fingers, not sure if she'd mind it in front of her parents.

"Why would I mind?" She looked over at Cassia. "Is there some new odd northern tradition that started after I left?"

She shrugged. "No, I just didn't want to make you uncomfortable." She paused then grinned. "Well, more uncomfortable."

Moriko snorted and pulled Cassia to the kitchen. "I survived someone trying to take my head off, how bad can it be having tea with your mothers?"

"I'm going to remind you that you said that." Keeping hold of her hand, Cassia let herself be pulled along, straightening up to face the knowing looks on both her parents' faces.

Nix was sitting at a table with three other mugs of tea. "What took you so long? Honey, what ever do you think these two were doing in the other room?"

Selene had to struggle not to laugh as she picked up her mug of tea and sipped it. "I haven't any idea."

Cassia, for her part, stuck her tongue out at her parents, feeling like a teen again as she took a seat next to Moriko. "My boot laces were frozen, Moriko had to help me get them off."

Moriko wrapped her hands around her tea and studied the cup's contents. She frowned for a moment before looking up and catching everybody's eyes at least once. "Selene and Nix, I, um, just want you to know, that your daughter and I are dating. I know you're probably having a lot of fun ribbing your daughter and me, but I just want you to know that I take what we are just starting here very seriously. I'm not certain where we'll end up, but I will treat her well and with honesty." She cleared her throat and nervously took a sip, ignoring her bright red face.

Moriko sounded so earnest in her declaration that Nix didn't have the heart to make any more jokes. "Thank you, Moriko. That's the best I can ask." She nodded and picked up her own tea.

Smiling at the shocked expression on her daughter's face, Selene reached over and patted Moriko's hand. "Well said. You realize that we both like you, and Kai." She was almost ready to tell the young woman that they knew who Kai really was, but she took pity on her and instead patted her hand once again.

"Thank you." She smiled up at Selene, before reaching over and taking one of Cassia's hands in hers.

#####

Winter had grown mild around its halfway point to spring, and the paths had turned to mud, with

dirty snow piled high alongside, framing the mud. Moriko opened the door to her home with a gentle shove of her foot. In one hand she held a muddy Kai, in the other she held a muddy Rugor, the adolescent puppy wiggling and trying to look pathetic. "Stop it, you two."

Kai cooed and made a grab for the puppy, managing to smear more mud around on Moriko's jacket.

"I swear," she grumbled. "Hello, anyone else home?"

She marched them all into the kitchen wondering how she was going to start a fire, let alone get water to be heated on the fire without letting the two squirming masses loose to get mud everywhere.

There was a note folded up on the kitchen table with Cassia's writing on it: "Gone to supervise the final work on the dome for the Cathedral. Be back later." Of Valdis, there was no sign.

"Goddess," she cursed. She set Rugor in a corner next to the fire, and shouted at him to stay. "I better not find any puppy paw prints anywhere other than that spot, buddy." With her now free hand, she tossed a few logs in the smoldering charcoal. Leaning over, she blew on the coals hoping to get some sparks to catch on the wood.

Kai took the opportunity to try and escape, wriggling in Moriko's arms as she held out both arms towards Rugor. The puppy gave a little yelp, its entire back end wagging as it started to inch towards the baby.

"Stop it. I swear I'm going to tether both of you outside to a tree," she grumbled. She easily caught the willful toddler and resettled her in the crook of her arm. Happy that one of the logs was starting to catch, she grabbed a large bucket.

Stopped from going to play with the puppy, which was how they had both gotten so muddy before, Kai began to cry.

Moriko set down the bucket and tried to soothe the baby. She was feeling like she might join the baby in crying. "Hey now, shhhh, don't be pulling that, you have no one but yourself to blame for the mud."

Kai stopped crying, but looked up at Moriko, pouting.

Moriko started laughing. "You are so Caron's child. She used to give me that look when she didn't get her way."

Even though it was still the afternoon, the sun was low on the horizon, casting long shadows through the house.

Rugor stood up in his corner, the hair stiffening and raising on his spine. He started growling,

exposing white teeth in a snarl.

Moriko frowned, looking over at the puppy. "What are you doing?" She turned, looking around. "Are the shadows spooking you?" She rolled her eyes.

From the corner of her eye, something seemed to shift and flow in the shadows that were forming in the corners of the room. It wasn't much, a darker shade of black on the already dark shadows.

Moriko froze, the hair rising on the back of her neck. She was a big believer on listening to her instincts. "Rugor, heel..." She and the puppy began moving towards the door, Moriko trying to fight the overwhelming sense of dread that was filling her.

The shadow that was darker than the others shifted out from the wall, gliding along the floor towards the trio who were backing towards the door. A flash of metal winked in the darkness and a dagger flew end over end, embedding it in the doorframe. "I wouldn't if I were you," a low voice whispered.

"Shit!" she blurted out. Being a practical person and being unarmed, she reached over and pulled the dagger out of the wood. "Thanks," she said, while her brain was trying to frantically remember what Valdis had tried to teach her.

"I suppose I should ask you why you're here, but I think we both know that answer."

The voice in the shadow sounded amused, "Give me the child and I might allow you to live." The laugh that followed that wasn't a happy one. "Or not, but I'll make your death swift, at least."

#####

Valdis stared at Ryuu then looked back down at the ink scribbles on the pressed parchment. "I don't know why you think it important I learn this. All I need to know in life is how to swing a sword or an axe. This," she pointed at the writing, "is not going to save my life."

The silver-haired woman closed her eyes in pain at the warrior's words. It had seemed like such a good idea when she'd suggested that she could teach Valdis how to read and write. Her patience was sorely being tested, though, by the warrior's thick skull. She wouldn't say it was impossible, but Valdis certainly wasn't trying hard. "It could."

Valdis snorted, "Fine. But just so you know, I'm humoring you." She picked up the ink brush then easily copied the squiggly symbols that Ryuu had done. She frowned at the page. "So what did I write?"

It was amazing how annoying Valdis could be when she set her mind to it. "That's your name." The silver-haired woman opened her mouth to say something then paused, frowning as she tilted her head to one side, as if she were listening to something.

"My name looks like snake turds?" She squinted at the parchment.

"Quiet," Ryuu demanded, suddenly standing up. Frowning, the woman turned in a slow circle, head tilted as if listening.

Valdis stood up, pissed-off at being ordered around. "Fine, I didn't want to learn those stupid letter things anyway." She whistled for Thorn, and the puppy perked up from where he was napping.

"Wait." The silver-haired woman jerked around to Valdis, grabbing her arm. "You have to find Kai and Moriko."

"What? Oh, well, they're probably at home." She stared at Ryuu, "Does Moriko and Kai need to learn how to spell as well?" she grumbled.

It took a bit of willpower to avoid shaking the warrior. "They're in danger," she managed to say in a relatively level voice. "You have to find them, quickly."

"Oh, why didn't you just say so?" She turned and whistled for Thorn to follow. The puppy was instantly at her heels.

#####

Humming to herself, Cassia walked up the path towards Moriko's house. The last of the dome had been raised up onto the cathedral. That was the end of the structure, although the finishing work would take decades more to finish. Still humming to herself, she climbed the stairs and opened the door. "Moriko!" she called, not immediately noticing the darkness.

Moriko screamed as her hand was crushed under the assassin's foot. The boot twisted and turned, and the sounds of bones breaking could be heard. The shadow woman laughed, holding a crying Kai. "If you would have just given me the infant and laid down and died, this could have been avoided. But now you have no one but yourself to blame for your pain."

Cassia froze, startled as she stared at the scene in front of her. It was such a surprise that she wasn't sure what to do. "Who the..." She started forwards.

Moriko had tried to put up a fight, but found herself quickly outmatched. She had gotten a few lucky cuts, but nothing disabling. The woman easily beat her down and stabbed her. She could feel the blood dripping from her gut, and while the wound was not life threatening, if not treated she would bleed to death.

The shadowy woman looked up, an evil smile as she spotted the princess. "Look who showed up."

Cassia didn't know who this stranger was, but she had hurt Moriko and taken Kai. Without thought, she charged her. She was Nix's daughter after all.

The assassin laughed at the pitiful attack. Grinding her boot hard down on Moriko's hand again, she shifted her stance and twirled. Her boot came around in a circle and caught Cassia in the side, sending the woman flying through the hall table before she could get anywhere near her. "Pathetic."

Moriko cried out in fear as she saw woman attack Cassia. She lunged forward, grabbing at the woman's ankle with her good hand, tripping her up. Rugor got into the fray, running and attacking the woman's feet as well.

Off balance, the woman tipped and dropped Kai as she tried to catch herself. Moriko looked on with horror as the small toddler fell towards the floor. Inches from impact, a hand with fine, white scars all over it caught Kai.

Everyone froze for a moment, and then Kai started to scream, her face turning red as she let everyone know about the pain and fear she was feeling. Valdis gently set the baby down on the ground before turning her attention to the assassin that was getting to her feet. She looked at the woman and grinned. "Bet you're not even a good work out."

Wobbly, Cassia managed to crawl up out of the shattered ruins of the table, nose bleeding. She'd never been so happy to see Valdis before. "Now you're in trouble," she mumbled, trying to get to Kai and Moriko.

The assassin snarled in annoyance. This wasn't going as she had planned. Maybe she should have just killed Moriko and gotten it over with instead of toying with her. Flowing backwards, she drew the sword that hung at her side, "Enough of this. Prepare to die."

Valdis said nothing. She drew her own sword and in a series of blindingly fast moves, disarmed the woman. "Backstabber, cowardly bootlicker," she hissed out. She was familiar with the chosen of her father's twin.

The assassin hissed with pain as she suddenly found herself disarmed. Gone was the arrogant smirk, little had she realized she was facing a chosen of the god of war. "Traitor," she sneered, hand inching to the hilt of the dagger at her belt.

Rage poured through her at that word. "Me. You betrayed the rightful Queen, you and yours swarmed out of the shadows and fell on us at our weakest moment. You put that puppet on the throne. Don't dare speak to me of traitors!" she howled out. With a snarl, she dropped her sword and threw herself at the assassin, intending to rip her apart with her bare hands. Feral energies came from her, sparking the air with the taint of chaos.

Moriko coughed and tried to gather the puppies and the baby away from the combatants. It was proving nearly impossible, wounded as she was. She had only ever seen Valdis call upon her

godly heritage once, and quite frankly, it was something she never wanted to see again.

Ducking a flying fist, Cassia grabbed a hold of Moriko with one hand and Kai with the other. She started to drag them both away, the puppy still barking and growling at the intruder.

The assassin laughed, tinged with insanity, as she drew her dagger and met the lunging woman, not caring that she was about to face someone touched by the god of war. "The weak do not deserve to rule!" She sliced at the other woman with the wickedly serrated dagger.

Moriko cried out weakly in pain and nearly passed out. With her good hand, she pulled Cassia to her. "Don't watch. And when it's over, don't try to speak to her or touch her," she croaked out in warning.

"You're bleeding!" Cassia stared at the red streak from Moriko with worry. She reached down and picked up Kai, trying to get Moriko to her feet so that they could get outside. She had a feeling that staying inside the house would be a bad idea.

Valdis' father was chaos, the creation of living through violence and primal needs. He was the hunt from the first bellow of the hound to the last heartbeat of the hunted. He was the point in battle where everything was reduced to red, and the line between friend and enemy was just a blur. For a brief moment she opened up the divine within herself and howled.

The puppies froze, recognizing the call to hunt, and threw their heads back as well, returning the call. From the forest, older, wilder creatures called out as well. Her eyes red now, the red of split blood stared at her prey. Valdis grinned and said, "I want you to run now."

The sheer power of that howl dropped the assassin to her knees, the dagger clattering to the floor by her feet. Blood dripped from her ears as she screamed in pain. By the door, Cassia managed to get Moriko and Kai outside, yelping in pain as they caught just the edge of the maelstrom.

The assassin blindly grabbed the dagger, still stunned from the mental blow. "The Goddess curse you," she yelled, staggering into the nearest shadows, trying to flee.

Moriko trembled and relaxed slightly as Valdis left to hunt her attacker. She was somewhat happy Valdis had decided on a hunt, instead of tearing the woman apart right here in front of them all.

Just outside the door, Cassia slumped down next to the house, leaning against the wall. She held Kai as Moriko slumped against her. Struggling out of her jacket, she pressed it against the wound in Moriko's stomach, "Stay still, don't move." She was nearly frantic.

Moriko held the clothing to her stomach. "Cassia, I need you to take Oscar and get me help. I need stitches right away." She had seen enough gut wounds at war to know she wasn't in a good position right now.

"Are you insane? I'm not leaving you here with an assassin running around!" She held a crying Kai to her chest.

Moriko started to chuckle then winced. "Cassia, that assassin is probably dead. Valdis called a hunt to her, and every predator in a five mile radius is hunting that woman into the ground." She let go of the cloth and reached out, touching Cassia's leg. "I can't ride...it will just tear my wound open more. And if I don't get help, I'm going to bleed to death. Please, Cassia."

There was no other option and Cassia knew it. "Don't you dare die! If you do, I swear I'll never forgive you." She knew that she was crying, but she didn't care.

"Not planning on it." She smiled weakly. "Go on, take Kai and get me some help. I promise I'm just going to sit here and wait for you to get back."

Cassia leaned in and kissed the wounded woman hard. "I'll be back fast," she promised, wiping at the wetness on her cheeks with her free hand.

#####

Nix held her daughter down. "Stop pacing. The healer will let us know something, when they have something to tell us. So sit." They were sitting in Moriko's kitchen. Willow and the healer had taken Moriko into her room and shut the door. Now, all they could do was sit and wait.

"She has to be all right, she can't..." She choked on the word, shaking her head to go stand by the crib where Kai now rested. The baby had cried for a long time after the fight, and only now was resting.

Selene came up behind her daughter, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "She will be fine." She cast a worried look at Nix, hoping that she wasn't lying.

Nix nodded then handed her daughter an old rag. "Pumpkin, why don't you go gather some snow in that and put it on your eye. It's starting to swell."

With a subdued nod, the dark-haired woman went to the door to gather up some snow for the hit she took to her face.

Once Cassia had left, she looked at Selene gravely, "A woman who can run and disappear into shadows. Does that sound familiar?"

Selene watched her go with worry, and leaned closer to her wife. "Yes, it does." She shook her head. "Will Moriko be all right?" She had arrived after Nix and hadn't seen the injured girl.

"I think so. I won't lie, the wound is deep and she'd lost a lot of blood, but she was still lucid when we arrived. That's a good sign." She wrapped her arms around the smaller blonde.

At least there was that. Worriedly, Selene turned back towards the crib, watching the small child sleeping inside of it. "Do you think it's her? Or somebody she trained?"

Nix thought for a moment, "I doubt it's her, she's our age. I know I don't feel spry enough to take on someone Valdis' age. So, sadly, I'm going to guess she had followers."

The Queen closed her eyes and nodded. She'd thought it might be something along those lines. "I don't want to tell Cassia about her." She couldn't even bring herself to say Laurel's name.

That gave Nix pause, "Why not?" she asked carefully. "I know we hurt Laurel, but she's the one that chose the path she's on. The Goddess freed us and let us have freewill. We reap the rewards or punishment as we chose to live our lives." She moved closer to her wife's back, looking at Kai. "I think we should ask Valdis to train some women how to use weapons."

That was something that Selene had resisted every time it had been suggested. She didn't like it, didn't like the idea and what it represented, so she delayed. "I don't want to tell her because Cassia believes people are good. I don't want her to know there are those who have evil."

"Honey, I don't think Cassia is as naive as you think. She was kidnapped, and just now she was attacked. I think she knows some people out there are bad, just as some out there are good. But if you don't want to tell her then we won't." She leaned over and kissed Selene's temple.

Selene nodded. She didn't want to tell Cassia about anything to do with Laurel. "As for the women with swords..." She hesitated then straightened her shoulders. "...how many do you think we should train?"

"Not many, ten or twelve to start. I think we can use them as patrols in the city and the roads near the city. They can make sure they're clear of dangerous critters and bandits. Plus if we have another problem like today, we don't have to worry if Valdis is around or not," she spoke quietly into her wife's hair.

"I don't like it." The smaller woman leaned back into the warm body behind her. "I kept hoping that we had left things like this behind once we left the lands of men."

Nix chuckled, "Unfortunately, I don't think men had the market on being assholes."

That got a laugh out of the other woman, and she turned to hug Nix, "Sadly true."

The door to Moriko's room opened and the healer stepped out followed by Willow. The small, stocky woman with small, delicate fingers walked towards the Royal couple. There was blood stained on her clothes, but her hands were wet, just recently cleaned.

She nodded to both of them. "Baring any infection, the young woman will be fine."

Selene sagged with relief against Nix, smiling as she heard Cassia walk back inside just in time to hear that. Her daughter looked ready to pass out in relief as well.

"Thank the Goddess." Cassia looked like she was going to cry in relief. "Can I see her?"

Willow patted the healer's hand and slowly made her way across to where Nix and Selene stood, making shooing motions with her hands at Cassia. "Go."

"She's asleep, and probably will be for the rest of the day and night. I had to give her quite a lot to knock her out. Feel free to talk to her, but don't expect a response," the healer informed her, watching the Princess practically run to Moriko's room.

"Thank you, Leslie." Willow gave the healer a smile and nodded towards the door. "I need to talk to these two."

The healer hesitated, not liking the idea of the high priestess walking alone through the snow. "I'm not that old," Willow laughed, to which Leslie had the good grace to blush.

"I'll see you later, then," the healer said as she left.

The smile faded as Willow turned to face the Queen and her consort. "While we were treating the wounds, Moriko was delirious. She was talking about a woman who stepped through shadows."

Nix nodded, "Cassia told us the same thing. That the attacker disappeared into the shadows."

The priestess met both of their eyes and shook her head. "I've had troubled dreams these past few nights. I thought it was because I don't sleep much anymore." Absently, Willow brushed back red hair that was streaked with gray. "They were filled with shadows. I think they were a warning from the Goddess."

The tall smith bit her lip in worry. "Ever since the southern Royal family was murdered, I've worried. We've mourned our friends, yet stayed out of their politics, but I worry. This new leader has been quiet, hasn't even tried to contact us."

"It is winter, hard for them to contact us with the pass snowed in now," Selene said. It wasn't a good sign, though.

"I guess when spring comes we'll see what comes. Hopefully not more women like the one that attacked Moriko," Nix said quietly. "It's late, maybe we should leave Cassia here to watch Moriko, and we can take the little one. It will be like we finally have grandkids."

That brought a smile to her wife's face. "I think that's a good idea. I'll go warn her that we're bringing Kai with us so she doesn't worry." Selene squeezed Willow's hand in farewell before heading for the bedroom.

Willow watched the Queen leave before turning back to Nix, eyes troubled. "There's something dark happening in the south. I know Selene doesn't want to hear about it, but I fear what might happen."

Nix nodded, "I know she doesn't, but we've talked, and we are going to ask Valdis to train some willing women in the art of war. I'm hoping it will help."

"I hope so." The priestess patted the tall woman on the shoulder and started towards the door, pausing on the way. "Any sign of Valdis?"

Nix shook her head, "None."

"I'll pray for her safety, then." The priestess left...bundled up against the cold outside.

#####

Half way to Abnoa, near the bank of the slowly winding river, the dirty melting snow was stained red. Various predators that normally would have nothing to do with each other growled and snapped in a feeding frenzy. Large, bloody prints moved away from the shredded body towards the rocky bank. In a small eddy, scooped out by the river, was a still pool of water.

The paw prints led up to the water and disappeared. In the water a few bubbles appeared then a white blonde head broke the surface of the water.

Valdis gasped for breath and slowly swam the few feet to shore.

Calling on her father's gifts always left her spent and weak, as if a fire had raged through her body and left her hollowed out. She flopped onto the smooth pebbles of the shoreline and panted, not even really feeling the cold. Wiping the water from her eyes, she noticed a pair of booted feet.

"The chosen of the Mistress of Shadows is dead," the owner of those pair of boots said. Slowly crouching down, Ryuu stared out at the river where the ice had been broken through. Around her, the predators stayed back, leaving a clear area around the silver-haired woman. She was dressed the same as she had been back in town, with no sign of how she could have gotten there so quickly.

Valdis rolled over, not really caring much that she was naked, and looked at Ryuu, a puzzled look on her face. "I have a lot of questions for you," she said, finally.

"Is that one of the questions?" the woman responded, picking up a small, flat stone from the riverbank. She traced her fingers over it, turning it over and over again in her hands.

Valdis thought about it for a moment then replied. "Um, no, that's more of a statement, I guess."

With a flick of her wrist, Ryu sent the rock skimming across the water until it hit a piece of ice and sank.

Valdis stood up. "You don't happen to have any clothes, do you? I seem to have lost mine."

Ryu looked up and smiled, her eyes taking in the way the other woman moved. "What would they be worth to you?"

There were several scars that mapped her body, on her chest alone were three precise stab wounds where a sword had run her through. She was the firstborn of a God, so she would probably live for decades, if not centuries, and in time they would fade. She quirked an eyebrow, "Depends. I won't kill anything for 'em, other than that I'm open to allsorts of payment."

"We can discuss that later, then." The silver-haired woman pointed to a packet of clothes nearby. "We should talk, you and I, and not just to try and get you to learn how to read and write."

She rolled her eyes, but eagerly picked up the clothes and put them on. "I still don't see the point in this whole reading and writing nonsense." She finished lacing the breeches and turned around. She eyed Ryu carefully then walked over to the woman, slowly circling her. She sniffed, but didn't smell anything other than the woman's scent.

"I remember you vaguely at the southern manor. You worked in that little closet with the records. Funny thing is, you've just always been there, can't remember when you started. It's like you were just part of the manor." She stopped circling and stepped forward, sniffing the back of Ryu's neck. "You smell like the wind and clouds."

She didn't know how she knew what the wind and clouds smelled like, but Ryu smelled of such things.

The woman didn't move, letting Valdis sniff to her heart's content. "I was there for a long time," Ryu agreed, picking up another likely rock and sending it skimming across the water. "We aren't human, you and I." The predators were slowly starting to disperse, leaving behind the signs of the struggle that had played out on the bank of the river.

"We aren't?" she asked surprised. "I've never..." She stepped away from the other woman. "I've never met anyone else like me."

"You weren't ready to." Ryu stood up, turning to face the other woman. "I've only met one other throughout the years, and that meeting was unpleasant." She studied the warrior's face. "I was worried you would become like that too."

There was a feeling of warmth blooming in the young warrior's chest. For a long time she thought she would be alone. In time, she knew those she was close to would grow old and die, yet she would remain as she was. "And you're not worried now?" She pointed at the bloody

carnage in the snow.

The silver-haired woman smiled, glancing down at the trail of blood that disappeared into the dark waters of the Winderling. "You stopped after you killed the assassin. If you hadn't, I would have had to try and stop you before you hurt an innocent."

Valdis stepped back and cracked her neck, grinning a little as the spine realigned. "To my knowledge, I've never hurt an innocent."

For a moment, it was on the tip of her tongue to ask whose godly child Ryuu was, but decided it didn't matter. "Sometimes when the rage gets too great it happens, like now, but I've never hurt anyone. I just go hunting, running through the forest on all fours."

"You are the daughter of the god of war..." Trailing off, Ryuu raised an eyebrow at that "You go running through the forest on all fours?"

"He has a thing for hounds. He can take that form if he wants, but now he sees it as being beneath him. Kind of like Armando and his horses, and Korgon and the dragon form." She shrugged, "I can do it too, but it takes a lot out of me."

"I'd like to see that someday." Ryuu looked up towards the cloudy sky above them, trying to judge how much longer they had before sunrise. "We should start heading back to the city. They'll start getting worried if we don't show up by sunrise."

Valdis nodded, looking up at the nighttime sky. "So how did you find me?"

As they started to walk, Ryuu looked over at the other woman, slyly. "I just looked for the place where a part of the Mistress of Shadows was dying."

Valdis made a disgusted face and snorted, "Whatever. If you don't want to tell me, then don't."

"I promise I'll tell you, just not right now." Ryuu patted the other woman's arm, grinning at the annoyed look that she got in return. "We have more important things to talk about than that right now. For example, what are you going to do now?"

"Go home and sleep. Then get up and start a new day of the same old." She scratched her head behind her ear. The same old was getting kind of old. She sighed. "I'm promised to protect Kai, but at the rate Moriko and Cassia are going, they won't need me."

Ryuu sighed. "That's the problem with you warriors; you don't know how to look long term. Do you know why I'm here?"

"To bring me clothes," she said with a smirk

That earned her a hit on her arm. "You are such a charmer." Ryuu followed the taller woman as

they began down a small, muddy path that followed the banks of the Winderling. "Did you even wonder why I left the south?"

"Cause the twins told you to take all those parchment book thingies to Cassia?" She rubbed her arm.

Ryuu considered hitting her again then thought better of it, reminding herself to be patient. "That's part of it. These people need us though." She motioned ahead of them in the vague direction of the Queen's Island. "Cassia has great ideas, revolutionary even, but none of them knew how to really work with stone. If they don't learn now, they'll fall even further behind the south in the future."

Valdis thought for a moment. "Who says they're falling behind? Just 'cause they don't have the same things the south does, that doesn't make the south better than the north."

"You are the daughter of the god of war, right?" Ryuu ducked under a tree branch "The south already has more people than the north. Now that the Mistress has some power, she'll just continue to increase her followers. Eventually, probably a few generations from now, she'll get one of her chosen or maybe even worse to rule the south. Then she'll come for these people here. They can't just stay in the running; they have to be able to survive what will be coming."

The warrior reached out and grabbed the other woman, stilling her movements. "What's coming, what has you so freaked out? Can you see into the future?"

It was on the tip of Ryuu's tongue to say some sly remark again. Instead, she forced herself to meet the taller woman's eyes, where in the darkness, they were deeper shadows. "Darkness is coming. It's a storm cloud on the horizon, slowly gathering its strength. The death of the twins and their families has set it in motion. It won't stop now until it washes across Abnoa and into the north itself. It's cold and calculating. She will take her time, build her strength, and marshal her troops. I see the end of the north in that darkness."

"So we'll see it, then, 'cause being the children of gods, we'll be around until the end of everything. Cassia, Moriko, Kai, and the others will lead happy lives. Then this will blacken the lives of the children yet to come." She could live with that; she was not emotionally invested in those she didn't even know.

She let go, and started walking through the snow. "Come on, then. I need to go make sure Moriko's wounds got treated."

Ryuu frowned, staying where she was for a moment before turning and following after her. "You don't care that their children's children will die if we don't help them now?"

"I care, but in a less meaningful way. I'm heartsick of seeing those I care about die. All around me, when Alina and that traitorous bitch the advisor ambushed us, I watched those I cared about die. You want me to take my shirt off again? I can show you the stab wounds I took, that left me

bleeding close to death. That Goddess would not even look my way. She let me lie there in my blood inches from death, but my father's gifts kept me away for that sweet peace. So no, I got to lie there and watch all my troops slaughtered, my mother gutted, and my poor, stupid hound Wraith, whom I had raised from a puppy, who wouldn't leave my body, guard it until his last breath. So you'll excuse me if I'm a little unwilling to feel concern for women I don't know, when I haven't even mourned the dead I do know."

The smaller woman said nothing as they continued to walk, considering her words carefully as they went. "I'm sorry for your pain," she said, finally "I'm sorry you watched people you cared for die." She didn't dare push further now, not when she'd seen a flash of the anguish that Valdis carried in her shadowed eyes.

"It's...I'm, I'm dealing with it. I'll help, as much as I can with this horror you see in the future, this is my home now. I'll do what I can to protect it."

"You can't tell them, about me, or what I've told you."

Valdis rolled her eyes. "Fine, it's not like they won't figure it out when you don't grow old. Moriko, I think, has noticed I don't look any older, really, than the day she met me, but she doesn't seem to care. She's kind of special that way. She just kind of decides not to let things bother her."

"I won't be staying long enough for them to notice that I'm not aging." At least, that was her plan.

"I see," she said blandly, and picked up the pace to town. "After I check on Moriko, you can make me breakfast."

Ryuu snorted. "Oh, thank you for the honor of allowing me to make you breakfast."

"Well, you don't want me to make it. Plus, if Moriko is fine, Cassia will be with her mooning. I can't stand it when girls get all moony."

Ryuu rolled her eyes. "Love isn't a very warrior thing, then?"

For a moment, she almost let loose with a snarky retort, but then settled for more of the truth. "Warriors can do love. If a woman is moony over me with concern, it's different. I just can't stand it when other couples do it."

Grinning in the darkness, Ryuu said quietly, "That's called being jealous. Your secret is safe with me though, I'm good with secrets."

"I bet you are," was all Valdis said as their feet crunched through the snow.

Up ahead, she could see the faint light of the town.

"They'll want to know how you tracked her down." Ryuu continued alongside the warrior, brushing long silver hair behind her ear. "What will you tell them?"

"I'll just tell them I'm good at what I do. Then give them the eyebrow thingy, they never ask, the how, when I do that." She grinned in the night, her teeth white in the darkness.

The other woman snorted in amusement; that was true enough. Valdis was very good at getting people not to question her when she wanted to.

"It disturbs people if I tell them that when I get really pissed, I can turn into a great white hound and call a hunt of every large predator in a five mile radius. So I don't tell them that. People love their gods, but they don't like it when proof walks among them." She frowned, missing her mother at that moment. Her mother knew everything about her, and loved her anyways.

They broke around a bend in the river and the trees cleared ahead of them enough to give them a clear view of the town. Reaching out, she took a hold of Valdis's hand to stop her. "There's something I have to tell you."

"It's okay. I know you find me attractive, most women do." She laughed at the stunned look on Ryuu's face. "I'm hurt, that's not what you were going to say."

It took a lot to stun Ryuu, but somehow, Valdis had managed to do it twice now. "No, that's not what I was going to say." She hastily let go of the warrior's hand after realizing she was still holding it. "I was going to warn you that every god and goddess can have one child. I've met one other, but that means there are others."

"They can have only one. Is that at a time or over all? So if I wasn't careful, could I have lots of little partial godlings running around?" She stopped her questions and looked at the woman, smirking. "You're kind of cute when you get flustered. It's a new sensation for you, I can tell." She started walking, heading for the path that would take her to the house she shared with Moriko. "So I should be carefully when dealing with my little brethren. I'll keep that in mind."

"Are you always so..." Ryuu trailed off as she ran through a mental list of words to describe the warrior. With a huff of annoyance, she hurried to catch up with Valdis. "I'm just warning you that we aren't alone."

"Yes, I'm always this way. Mother said it stemmed from the fact I had a father. On top of having a father, he was an absentee one, who in the end refused to acknowledge I was his child. In a nutshell, I have abandonment issues."

Ryuu made a strangled sound and followed the lean warrior towards the bridge that linked the island to the riverbank. "So you're always annoying." That was going to make things interesting, along with everything else, of course.

"No, sometimes I'm incredible." She let out a happy sigh as she spotted her modest little home, which thankfully Cassia had redesigned for them.

Ryuu watched the other woman climb up the stairs, indulging herself just long enough to admire how nice the warrior's ass looked in her tight leather pants. "I bet," she mumbled quietly, shaking her head and following her inside.

Valdis smirked and said, "I heard that," as she opened the door.

The house was dark, except for a couple of lanterns lit hanging by the door. "Hello, Moriko?"

The door for the second bedroom opened and Cassia slipped out into the main room, "Valdis?" The princess sounded relieved. "Thank the Goddess, we were worried." Actually, Selene and Nix hadn't been too worried, saying that Valdis could handle herself. But Cassia had her doubts.

Cassia hugged the shorter, yet considerably more muscular warrior in return. "I'm glad you're safe. Moriko was asking for you earlier, before the healers made her drink something and she passed out."

"I'm glad you and Moriko are safe. How is the deer herder doing? Is she going to be okay?" Valdis asked, worried.

A little confused as to why Ryuu had come in with Valdis, Cassia looked from one to the other. "What? Yes, she's going to be all right. Willow was in here earlier with a healer. She's going to be weak, but if everything goes well, she should be fine." Cassia held the warrior at arms length, looking for signs of fighting. "What happened?"

"I tracked that assassin down. She won't be hurting anyone ever again," Valdis said gravely.

"Oh." Something about the warrior's tone did not encourage any more questions about that. Letting go of Valdis, she nodded to Ryuu, who had made her way closer.

There was a scramble of puppy paws on the wooden floors of the kitchen then Thorn came bursting through into the entryway. "Hey, boy..." With an ear-to-ear grin Valdis bent down and scooped the puppy up, barely avoiding being licked to death. "I wasn't gone that long," she grumbled, trying to push his head away.

"Somebody missed you desperately, it looks like." Cassia grinned. "He wouldn't stop whining while you were gone."

"I'm sorry, boy, maybe when you're older we can go hunting." She rubbed his ears and set him down. Wiping her face, she looked over at Cassia. "Will you and Moriko be okay? Ryuu owes me breakfast, but I can stay here if you'd rather."

"I'll keep an eye on her," Cassia promised, hesitating a moment. "I want you to teach me how to

use the sword that my mother made." She didn't want to be completely useless if something like this ever happened again.

Ryuu kept her expression neutral, but there might have been an ever so slight approving look in her eyes.

Valdis eyed her for a second then simply said, "Okay. We'll start the day after tomorrow. I'm sure you'll want to keep an eye on Moriko tomorrow, make sure she's recovering okay."

For some reason, Cassia had figured that Valdis would argue more than that. She blinked a few times in surprise then smiled. "Good, then." She looked once again from Ryuu to Valdis then shook her head. "I should go back, in case she wakes up."

"Okay. Tell her she was very brave when she wakes up. I'm even slightly impressed she lasted as long as she did." Valdis turned towards the door, Thorn at her heels. She paused and turned back around. "Tell her I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner, to protect them."

She turned back around and nodded at Ryuu as she made her way to the door.

"She'll be glad that you weren't hurt," Cassia called after her, before turning to go back into Moriko's bedroom.

#####

Moriko's eyes valiantly struggled to open when she heard her bedroom door open and shut. Her head felt like it was stuffed with wool, and her eyelids were lead weight. "Hello?"

"Hey, you," Cassia said quietly, slipping into the seat next to the bed and reaching down to hold the injured woman's hand. "I didn't want to wake you up. The healer said you should rest."

"Cassia..?" Vaguely, she remembered Willow and some other woman making her drink some awful concoction. Her hand weakly tightened around Cassia's. "How are you doing?" she croaked out. Her tongue peeked out and tried to wet dry lips.

That got a weak laugh from the princess. Gently, she brushed a hand across Moriko's brow, brushing hair out of her face. "I'm doing better than you are. I'll have a great black eye, and I had a bloody nose, that's it." She leaned closer, pressing her lips to Moriko's brow. "How do you feel?"

"Um, I'm not sure." Her eyes opened a little bit more and she was able to see Cassia. "Okay, I think." She tried to tilt her head to the side to see Cassia better. She grinned, her nose wrinkling slightly. "I'm glad you're okay."

Her eyes blinked a couple of times. "You are so beautiful. You know that, right? I'm such a bad girlfriend. I don't think I've ever told you that before," she rambled on.

"I'm glad you're still alive." The tears that threatened were hard to stop, and Cassia took a moment to brush her eyes clear. "You're just saying that."

"No I'm not. I always thought you were beautiful. Even when you were a pompous know-it-all-teenager, you were beautiful then, but a bigger pain in my ass. And I can't believe Crow made me chop all that wood. I still don't think it was fair."

Cassia laughed. If the laughter was tinged with tears, she pretended it wasn't. "I can't believe you chopped it all. I think I would have tossed the axe at Crow instead of doing it all."

"It was Crow; even you wouldn't have done that." She started to laugh, but stopped and winced. "Hmmm, don't make me laugh."

"Okay." She pressed her lips to Moriko's forehead once again, smiling against the skin, glad to not detect any sign of fever. "Go back to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

Her jaw opened in a huge yawn. "Okay, but I think you should get into bed with me, instead of being all stubborn and stoic, and sleeping in that awful chair all night."

"You don't have to ask me twice." Cassia got up, kicked off her boots and pants, and crawled into bed next to Moriko, carefully arranging herself so that she didn't hurt the other woman.

Moriko grinned as her eyes slid shut, and she mumbled, "That's so much better. I can feel myself healing already."

"Sweet talker," Cassia whispered, watching as Moriko finally surrendered to sleep. She pressed one last gentle kiss to her cheek before allowing sleep to claim her as well.

#####

Moriko blinked and tried to crack open sand-filled eyes. Her body hurt, her mouth tasted like something had died in it a week ago, and her bladder was screaming for her to get out of bed and do something about it. She groaned and tried to sit up, only to have a sharp, stabbing pain in her stomach make her lie back down flat in the bed with a muffled yelp of pain. Only by the grace of the Goddess did her bladder not release.

Disoriented and confused, Cassia jerked away at the cry of pain from her bedmate. "Moriko?" She blinked, trying to clear the sleep from her eyes and brain before she realized where she was and what had happened. "What is it? Are you all right?"

Tears were leaking out of tightly closed eyelids, but through clenched teeth, she mumbled out, "I forgot I was hurt, tried to move."

That got Cassia moving. Carefully, she sat up and reached over to a pitcher left by the side of the bed. Rubbing eyes that were still sticky with sleep, she poured a glass full of the reddish liquid. "Here." She inched closer to Moriko, not touching the hurt woman in case she caused more pain. "Drink this, the healer left it for you. She said it would help dull the pain."

Moriko slowly lifted up her head, her lips finding the cup in Cassia's hand. The liquid had no smell and a slightly unpleasant taste. Once the cup was empty, her head flopped back down on the bed. She took a few shallow breaths and looked at Cassia sadly. "Um, I'm going to need help getting outside to the outhouse, or things are going to get unpleasant." Her face turned bright red in embarrassment.

"Don't worry." Cassia flashed the best smile she could, feeling her own cheeks flush a little. "Here, let's get you up carefully." It took some maneuvering, and two pauses to allow Moriko to catch her breath, but they got her standing. "Now, for your coat..." She carefully wrapped the thick winter coat around the wounded woman and helped her towards the door. "I guess it's a good thing you kept me from putting in a second floor."

Moriko groaned, not even wanting to think about navigating stairs.

Dawn was just gracing the sky with a morning blush, or pink and yellows, as they carefully walked the stone steps to the outhouse, the nighttime cold having formed ice on some of the steps.

"Even hurt you get up before the sun's gone up." Cassia shook her head in mock despair, careful to keep an arm around Moriko's waist in case the other woman might slip.

Moriko had never been so happy to see an outhouse in her life. Carefully, she opened the door looking at Cassia. "I'll, um, call out if I need any help. I should be fine. I just can't handle the walk out here." Her face turned even redder. She just knew if she had to call out for help once inside, she was going to die from embarrassment.

"I'll...ummm...just wait here, then." Cassia offered a weak smile, watching Moriko close the door behind her. Turning around, she rocked back and forth on her heels, rubbing her hands together against the chill. The snow under her boots crunched in the cold. Ever so slowly, the sun began to rise above the horizon.

Luckily, she didn't need any help, and after a couple of minutes of fumbling to get her pants back up, she was decent. Slowly, she opened the door and stepped back outside.

Just as gently as before, Cassia slipped an arm around the blonde woman's waist and helped her back towards the house. "Kai is with my parents," she reminded her, just in case she'd forgotten through all the pain of last night.

"That was going to be the top question on a whole list of questions I thought up while, um, so Kai is with your parents, I'm sure she's being spoiled rotten."

The healing drought was hitting her, dulling the pain and making her legs feel skittish like a newborn fawn.

"They like having..." It was on the tip of her tongue to say grandchild, but she recovered quickly. "...someone to spoil."

She chuckled and winced a bit, "I'm sure they do. I'm glad they can spoil her."

They managed to get back inside without any mishap. "Let's get you back to bed. The healer said I should make sure you rest as much as possible."

Moriko nodded, not arguing. "Is Valdis okay? And what happened to the woman that stabbed me?"

As they entered the house, Rugor came wandering out of the kitchen, his back-end nearly vibrating his tail was wagging so hard. With his nails clicking on the wooden floors, he followed them into the bedroom.

Making a face at that last question, Cassia helped her back into bed. Only when she was back under the covers and settled, did Cassia start to answer those questions. "She's dead. Valdis found her and killed her." Although she wasn't very clear on the details. "Valdis is fine. She came back a few hours ago."

Moriko nodded. "Good, I'm not certain I could sleep knowing that woman was still out there." She yawned. "Wonder how she knew about Kai, unless I really am that bad of a liar."

That got a chuckle out of Cassia, and she reached out to stroke the other woman's hair. "You aren't that good a liar, but I doubt it's that. Somebody must have noticed they were missing a baby in the south."

Gently, Moriko grasped Cassia's hand in hers. "I'm not certain why it is when you think you're going to die, things become so clear. I just want you to know I love you. That's all I could think about, how I hadn't told you. So I just want to be clear, I do, very much."

Rugor whined slightly at being ignored, and laid down at Cassia's feet, his eyes watching the bed hopefully.

Her throat tight, Cassia leaned closer, voice shaky as she whispered, "You are such a sweet talker," then gently kissed Moriko, careful not to put too much pressure, and only pulling back when her own bruised face started to hurt. "I think I've always loved you."

She touched the scar on her forehead. "When I got that, all I could think about while that woman was attacking me was how I should have stayed and fought for you, proven I was better for you than Sable. I felt guilty for a while 'cause I was with Caron, and I never once thought about her

when I thought my head was going to get cleaved in."

Cassia traced the outline of that scar with her fingertips, leaning closer to study it. "That must have hurt a lot." She pressed a kiss to it. "I always wondered what you were doing while you were in the south. I was..." She paused, biting her lip, and then slowly continuing. "I admit...I was jealous of the twins."

Moriko tried not to laugh. "I shoveled a lot of shit. Keshet gave me a job in the stables. I learned a lot about horses and dogs, which was great. But the real shock came when I had to go with the soldiers to war. They still needed someone to look after their steeds." She closed her eyes, paling a little bit. "The first battle I saw was shocking. I'd never seen women attack each other like that. I puked all over Valdis' boots. She only teased me a little." She opened her eyes and shook her head a bit to dislodge those memories. "I was jealous of the twins, they got to see you and talk to you. They wouldn't ever tell me anything. They said if I wanted to know how you were doing I should go home and ask you myself."

"So you told me." Cassia smiled and pulled the blankets up a little higher around the wounded woman. "I really wish I hadn't messed things up after we danced in that clearing. I go back there sometimes, you know. It took me almost a week to find it again after you left."

Moriko yawned. "We should go back there and dance again. I'm a much better dancer now."

"I'm not." Cassia grinned, cupping Moriko's cheek in her palm. "Sleep, you need to rest."

"Okay. You should come back to bed too; it's too early for you to be up," the blonde managed to get out between yawns.

It took the princess about three seconds to consider that offer: stay up and alone in the cold room, or curl back in the warm bed with Moriko. Yeah, that was a hard choice. "That sounds good." She slid under the covers, careful not to jostle the wounded woman.

"I hope I heal fast, this is a pain," Moriko mumbled, slipping into sleep.

Rugor lay on the floor at the foot of the bed staring up at the bed longingly for a while before he rolled into a puppy ball and started to dream of chasing rabbits.

#####

Valdis cheerily stomped down the path to the house. It was a cold winter's day, the sun being obscured by clouds, and she was almost certain it might snow again. She wasn't really certain if she liked snow, or the cold, but she did like certain things about the north. She started whistling.

As she climbed the two steps to her front door, she knocked the snow off her boots and opened the door. "Hello, Cassia, Moriko?"

Thorn bounded in behind her, tracking in mud and melting snow.

Valdis frowned. "Come on, puppy. Don't track that everywhere. Moriko will kill me."

The door to Moriko's room cracked open and Cassia slipped out, closing it behind her quietly, "Valdis?" She smiled on seeing the warrior. "Moriko's sleeping again." Her wounds were well on the way to healing, but she was still tired a lot of the time.

Valdis looked up and nodded. "Well, at least she's healing, and there hasn't been any infection, that's a worry with a gut wound." She threw a couple of logs into the huge fireplace and attempted to get the fire going again. Without looking, she pointed at Thorn, who was trying to sneak out of his sleeping corner. "Don't even think about it until your feet are dry."

Thorn's tail drooped and he sat down with a huff.

The dark-haired princess smiled in amusement, watching Valdis work. "So when are you going to have me do more than just run around in a circle? I thought you were going to teach me how to use a sword." True to the warrior's word, they'd started practicing the day after, although practicing seemed to consist of running until Valdis told her she could collapse to her knees, wheezing.

"Well, to be honest, you're not in too bad of shape, for a Princess. But while you're training with me, you'll run everyday rain, sun, and apparently snow." That was a new experience for her. "We'll start sword practice next week. I need a nice bulk of practice swords, which you all have none of, and I'm having to carve them out of wood myself."

Run every day, no matter what? Cassia winced at that. This was going to be a painful learning experience, she was certain of it. "Oh." Well, at least they didn't have to go swimming. That was something, right? "I heard in town that you've started interviewing people to train as well?"

Valdis grabbed a large pot and went outside to fill it with snow to melt on the fire. Peeking in the front door, she asked. "Do you want me to melt some snow for you? You could give Moriko a cloth bath? I'm sure she stinks." She chuckled as Cassia blushed.

She came back to the kitchen and hung the pot on an iron hook over the crackling log that had just caught fire.

"No, that's fine." She shook her head at the annoying warrior before heading for the front door. "Since you're here, keep an eye on Moriko for me. I need to run home and see how my parents are doing with Kai. I might also have to do some of that taking care of north business thing that I've been neglecting."

"Can't have them spoiling Kai, the horror," Valdis joked.

"They love her. They can't wait until she's older so that they can spoil her when she can really enjoy it," Cassia called over her shoulder, laughing as she pulled on her boots. With a huff of annoyance, she brushed her hair out of her eyes. "I'll be back in a while."

She pulled open the door, blinking in surprise when she saw Ryuu standing there, "Oh, hi, Ryuu."

The silver-haired woman smiled, stepping aside to let the princess pass. "Did you need something from me?"

Ryuu shook her head. "No, thank you. I've come to see Valdis, actually."

Cassia raised an eyebrow at that, but let it pass, heading out as Ryuu stepped inside.

Valdis peeked her head out the kitchen door and chuckled. "I told you you'd find me irresistible."

"Really, when did you say that?"

"That morning I let you make me breakfast," she said offhand as she checked the melting snow.

A snort of disbelief came from Ryuu. With one last pat of Thorn's head, she headed towards the annoying one. "You made me make you breakfast."

"Uh huh... I don't think you have me fooled. I know I'm incapable of making you do anything you don't want to do." Finding the now melted water hot enough for her purpose, she lifted the pot and dumped the water in a washbasin. She set the pot down to cool and started washing dishes. After a moment, she looked up. "What's up? I assume you're not here so we can have sweaty sex on the kitchen counter."

Despite herself, Ryuu let her imagination run away with herself at that, indulging herself in remembering what Valdis looked like naked in the moonlight. "That's probably a safe assumption on your part." She sat down at the table, watching her clean the dishes. "I wanted to talk to you about these women you're going to train."

"Uh huh," she replied, not really paying attention as she set a plate in the wooden drying rack.

"I was thinking you have a good idea, teaching a group of people how to fight instead of just one. I thought I should do something similar."

"Sounds great..." She pointed a finger at the puppy. "I don't think those paws are dry yet, buddy."

Putting her elbow on the table, Ryuu cupped her chin in it and narrowed her eyes at the dark-haired woman. "You aren't even listening to me right now, are you?"

Valdis put the bowl she was drying in the rack and looked over at Ryuu. "Of course I was paying

attention."

"Really..?" Ryuu drawled "So do you think the statues are a good idea?"

"Well, of course, statues are always a good idea." She frowned, wondering what the statues were going to be of.

"Good. Then I guess we just have to get you to pose naked for the artist." She offered a sweet smile at the other woman.

"Okay. Is she a cute, single, artist? I find that helps me relax when I'm going to be naked."

Ryuu narrowed her eyes, grabbing a dried apple from the dish on the table and tossing it at Valdis. "You are insufferable."

Valdis ducked the apple and laughed. "I take it you made up the statue part because I was, indeed, not paying attention to you." She stopped washing dishes and turned around, giving Ryuu her complete attention. "Okay, you have my full attention now." Her blue eyes watched the woman in front of her intently.

She was a little startled by the sudden attention, since not many people paid such close attention to her, Ryuu preferring it that way. Easier to escape notice and work from the background that way. "I was telling you that I was going to take on some of these young women as apprentices. Teach them like you are going to teach some of them to become warriors."

"Okay, I wasn't aware you were a Master Fighter. What are you going to train them in?"

The silver-haired woman sighed. Shoving back from the table, she got up and walked towards Valdis, getting close enough so that she was certain that there wasn't going to be any misunderstandings. Which in Valdis' case, was until she was nearly speaking right in the other woman's ear. "You're the fighter. I'm going to train them in those things you don't like: reading, writing, keeping books, and records."

Valdis' nose wrinkled in distaste, but she didn't say anything. Deep down she knew her distaste came from the fact she just couldn't get it, and it frustrated her to no end.

"Well, those that can't fight, should...do...something, I guess."

Ryuu laughed. "How nicely put." She smiled then looked quickly towards Moriko's door, afraid she might have woken up the wounded woman. Quieter, she continued, "Which reminds me, when are you going to come learn how to read again?"

Valdis did frown, "Soon. Once I get those women started in a training program. I'm not a stupid warrior who just runs around whacking people with my sword, I'll figure out what those chicken scratches mean."

The silver-haired woman shook her head in mock exasperation. "Stop thinking that you're just a dumb warrior. It takes more than one try at learning how to read to do it."

The frown didn't leave Valdis' face, but she turned her back on Ryuu and went back to washing dishes. She didn't used to think she was stupid, but ever since everyone had been killed at the manor, she wasn't so sure. She should have seen the trap, or at least felt it, or smelled the deception in the air.

She forced a laugh, "Well, I do have nearly forever to get it. So I'll get it eventually, I'm sure."

Tilting her head slightly to one side, Ryuu considered the broad back of the warrior, hearing something more than just laughter in Valdis' voice. "I don't think you're stupid, Valdis. You know that, right?"

Valdis gave a lopsided grin, "No, you and Cassia think I'm annoying. That's an upgrade from stupid." Finished with the last dish, she dried her hands and turned back around, her temporary moment of self-pity over.

Ryuu opened her mouth, started to say something then thought better of it in favor of a more joking response. "Who knows," she turned around and headed for the door to the outside, "someday you might become tolerable."

Valdis shook her head and laughed. "Goddess forbid you find me tolerable." She took a few quick jogging steps and caught up to Ryuu. "So you came all the way out here to tell me you're going to start a group of writers?"

Unable to help herself, she leaned in, sniffing. Ryuu smelled of clouds and wind again. The woman didn't always smell of such things, but Valdis found she rather liked it when she did. It was a wild smell, which definitely attracted a part of her.

"That's it." Ryuu pulled on both boots and straightened up so she could see Valdis' face. "I was out and about and decided to see if you were here feeling sorry for yourself again." She smiled to take any sting out of the words. "But it seems like you're babysitting Moriko, so I'll leave you to it."

"Um, uh," the warrior mumbled out, not really paying attention again. She leaned in again, sniffing. "How do you smell like that?"

A wide grin split Ryuu's face before she reigned in the happy expression. "It's a secret," she whispered.

Valdis blinked and digested that. "I hate secrets," she mock growled then stalked forward until she had the slightly shorter woman pinned up against the wall. "I'll figure it out." She leaned in, sniffing Ryuu's hair, neck, and throat. This time she exhaled with a tiny grin, watching the skin

her warm breath washed against pebble.

The move surprised Ryu, and with wide eyes, she found herself pushed up against the wall. Those eyes narrowed to mere slits as she fought against the urge to groan against the delicious feeling of Valdis ' body pressed against hers. "You're not going to find anything out that way," she gasped, fingers sliding around the other woman's hips to hold her close.

Suddenly, the answer hit her. It was so simple she was shocked she hadn't considered it before. "You smell of flying." Moriko's hawk had smelled similar.

Shocked out of her growing arousal, Ryu nearly slammed her head against the wall, jerking backwards. Placing a hand on Valdis ' chest, she pushed the slightly taller woman backwards away from her. "What?" How had she figured it out?

She smirked, looking into Ryu's dark eyes, "Moriko's hawk sometimes smelled similar. You smell much better, by the way." Plus, if the smell of that hawk had the same effect on her, she would have locked herself away. "What's wrong?" Her smirk vanished, realizing that the other woman looked a little freaked out.

The other woman took a breath and slowly relaxed, shaking her head in annoyance at herself. "I underestimated you. I hate it when I do that."

Valdis laughed, "Don't feel bad, everyone does it. I'm strong. I fight well, and have a reputation with the ladies. So I must be some dumb sword wielding warrior who can't think beyond the swing of my sword or my crotch."

"And after I just finished telling you the very same thing." Ryu shook her head again at herself. She'd promised herself that she wouldn't do that again, then slowly smiled. "So you think I smell good?"

Valdis brightened, seeing Ryu relax. "Shit yeah. Word of warning, if you keep coming around me smelling of clouds and wind, I'm not certain I can pretend to be a responsible adult."

Reaching for her coat, she slipped it on. Grabbing the door she paused, "Who said I wanted a responsible adult?"

Valdis threw back her head and laughed. "In that case, you came to the right place."

"I'll see you later, warrior." Ryu patted her on the shoulder affectionately. "Maybe I'll let you in on my secret someday soon."

"Can't wait..." Valdis stood on the front step for a while watching Ryu's form turn into a dot and disappear around a bend, a large grin on her face. She didn't feel the cold, only some odd warmth uncurling inside her chest, which she refused to examine at the moment.

"Valdis... Valdis! I'm freezing! Get in here and shut the door," Moriko said grumpily. The warrior blushed, being caught, and quickly went up the steps and shut the door.

Moriko stood, pale but more alert, in the hallway. "Cassia's going to get pissed at you if you corrupt Ryu." "

Valdis snorted, "I doubt that's going to happen." Oddly, she thought Ryu was corrupting her.

#####

Winter was nearing her end, creating days of soggy, muddy earth, and other days of freezing temperatures. After months of seemingly never ending freezing temperatures, snow and ice, it was finally ending.

It was one of those soggy days, and Moriko was trying to stifle her laughter as she watched Valdis' recruits slog through the mud. She had just finished checking on the few Alcens in the Inn's stable.

She nodded at Kealsy, who had a small, curly headed toddler on her hip, and stepped out into the warm afternoon sunshine. Nearly all the snow had melted, except for a few tiny dirty patches in dark shaded nooks.

She sat on a rock not far from the training field and munched on an apple. Her brown eyes quickly found Cassia's muddy form.

She stretched then took another bite of her apple, chewing it thoughtfully. Her wound was well healed, leaving a thick, pink scar. It gave her no pain or discomfort, but Cassia didn't seem to believe that. While their relationship was good, the more physical aspect of it ended at hot, needy kisses, and Moriko wasn't sure what she needed to do to convince the Princess she was more than capable of taking their evenings a little bit further. Valdis would just tell her to tell Cassia she wanted sex, which seemed a little blunt. Cassia was a Princess, after all. She sighed and took another bite.

Cassia gasped for breath, slogging through the mud with dogged determination, just one more muddy shape among all the other muddy women. Valdis had been taking them out on these marches to the abyss twice a week since she'd selected the women she was going to train. The rest of the week was filled with fight training for half of the day. Cassia thought she was going to die.

"Water break!" Valdis, who Cassia noted with annoyance wasn't even sweating, called out. Most of the recruits collapsed where they were. Cassia managed to stumble her way over to Moriko and fall down onto the rock next to her. "Kill me," she gasped.

Moriko laughed and reached out, wiping mud off of Cassia's nose. "We'll go to the bath house

after this. Bet you could use a good soak." She frowned at the mud on her finger and wiped it on the rock next to her.

The mere thought of taking a bath caused Cassia to groan. "You're not just saying that, are you?" she asked, a little desperate. "I think Valdis is trying to kill us."

"Nah, if she was trying to kill you, you'd know it, she gets a creepy look in her eye." She reached over and snagged a water skin and handed it to the heavily panting woman. "Take small sips or you'll puke."

She was well aware of Valdis' training methods, having gone through them herself. "If I can live through her training, I know you can." She went to pat Cassia's shoulder then thought better of it.

"I love you," Cassia gasped, greedily taking the water skin and forcing herself to slowly sip it instead of gulping it. Wiping her face after drinking, she shook her head. "You're stronger than I am."

Moriko laughed. "Let's leave it at we're both strong."

"Are you two lovebirds done? I'd like to finish sometime today," the warrior snarled.

Moriko blinked. Valdis had been kind of a bitch lately. She'd just chalked up to sexual frustration, since she hadn't seen anyone ducking out of the warrior's room in the wee hours of the morning in a really long time.

Cassia made a groaning whimper sound and forced her sore body off the rock. The warrior was trying to kill her, she was sure of it. "Sorry, Valdis," she responded, seeing the other women groaning and standing up as well.

Valdis snorted and easily twirled the wooden practice sword in intricate series of movements.

Moriko sighed. "You'll be fine. I think someone just needs to get laid." She blushed the minute the words came out of her mouth.

"I heard that, Moriko. You want to come out here and help me demonstrate?"

From behind Valdis, Cassia made a face, mouthing the words 'You're in trouble now!'

Moriko gulped, the bit of apple still somewhat unchewed in her mouth tasting like ash. She sighed and got up, looking at the practice swords and shields with a sinking feeling.

Cassia picked her own heavy wooden shield and practice sword back up from where she'd dropped them when the water break started.

Valdis grinned, "Well considering how horrible you were with a shield and sword, it seems

hardly fair for everybody else." She went over to another pile, picked up a long pole, and easily tossed it at Moriko. "Moriko has happily volunteered to help us learn to attack someone with a pike."

The princess winced, hoping her girlfriend wasn't about to get a beating. She wasn't sure her parents were going to be happy if they had to take care of Kai for a while again.

Moriko walked over and picked up the pole. She wasn't any better with a pike. The only thing she was really good at was a bow or a spear from the back of an Alcen. She hefted the pole, testing it, and moved to the spot Valdis gestured for her to take on the field.

"Now, if your opponent has a pike, they have a longer reach, so your trick is to get inside to get the kill." She raised her shield and sword and lunged at Moriko.

Cassia cringed, not sure if she wanted to see how this was about to turn out. The other students clustered around, watching with a sort of weary curiosity at the demonstration. Everyone was sympathetic to Moriko, but no one wanted to change places with her.

Moriko did well for a while, but as soon as Valdis was done toying with her, the warrior easily moved in, slamming her shield into her arms, and the wood sword into her throat, proving the point of Moriko's now...deadness.

Everyone in the group of watching women had been at the receiving end of that move in the last few weeks, and as one, they winced in sympathy as Moriko went down.

The next two hours went about the same, only with everyone getting a chance to take out the pike-woman, to practice the moves Valdis taught them. Finally, when Moriko was sure it would never end, Valdis called a halt. "Good work today, ladies." She bit her lip for a moment. "I have to go up north and take care of some stuff, so you'll have five days off. I would advise you to practice and run all five days, but you can do what you want. However, I'll be testing you all personally when I come back."

"Thank the Goddess," Cassia groaned as the other students started to disperse. She moved over to where Moriko was laying on the ground, limping only a little bit, and offered her a hand up, "You still alive?"

"I'm not certain," the stable mistress croaked out. Slowly, she held a hand up and grabbed Cassia's hand. "I really thought my days of weapons training were over."

"I really hope she's happier after she does whatever she's going to do up north." Moriko started to sway, and Cassia slipped an arm around her waist. "You still up for a trip to the bath house?" They were both covered in mud. "We can drop off our stuff on the way," she gestured to the wooden shields and training swords.

"Oh yeah, I really want a bath now. Before I was just being the supporting girlfriend, now I'm

being selfish. I hope your mothers don't mind watching Kai and the puppies for another hour or so."

"Considering Selene's decided to retire, I think they can deal with them for a little while longer." It took a little detour to drop the weapons off at the house that had become the warrior training facility before stumbling to the bathhouse. A few others of Valdis' students had found their way there as well. "Guess we're going to have to get a private booth," Cassia said, seeing the amount of people going inside.

"Um, that's fine with me." She tried really hard to be nonchalant about it.

With an equal amount of nonchalantness, Cassia smiled at the attendant and followed her into the last of the private baths. Accepting the towels that were offered, she smiled nervously at Moriko after they were left alone and the curtain drawn closed. "Umm..." She toyed with her mud encrusted shirt.

Moriko blinked in confusion, "Umm? Oh, ah, I can turn my back. Just let me know when you're in the tub."

It was silly, but Cassia was still having unexpected bouts of shyness when it came to Moriko. Quickly, she pulled off the sticky shirt and crusty pants, which hit the marble floor with a wet, slopping sound. The water was hot and felt oh so good on her abused muscles as the princess slipped in. "Okay," she called, ducking under to get at least some of the dirt out of her long, black hair.

Moriko turned around and started taking off her clothes. She was fumbling with the ties of her trousers when a thought hit her, maybe she should be shyer. Having spent several years marching with Keshet's troops, her shyness had quickly disappeared. She stood in her bare feet suddenly at a loss. "Um..." She coughed. "...does it bother you that I'm not..." Not what? She frowned and lowered her head, going back to the ties, telling herself not to be self-conscious.

Cassia squeezed some of the water out of her hair and leaned back against the side of the tub, watching with obvious interest as the other woman started to undress. "Bother me that you're not what?" She grinned. "Not in here and naked already?" she managed to say, despite blushing.

Her clothes weren't as caked with mud, but they still made the same noise as Cassia's when they hit the tile. Moriko looked up at her, somewhat relieved, and quickly got into the large tub, sighing.

"I know I used to be so quiet and shy before I left here, I guess I still am. But I guess I was wondering if it bothered you that I'm not so much in other areas, like before." She looked at the water. One thing that seemed to bother Cassia was the fact that she and Caron had dated.

To get her attention, Cassia splashed a bit of water at her, smiling when she got Moriko to look

up. "I'm happy you're back, no matter what. I think you've grown up, and I like that you're not as hesitant as you were. I'm not really sure why I'm suddenly so shy about..." she faded off, waving her hands towards her clothes.

She wiped her face and looked over at Cassia. "It's okay. It's endearing."

"That better be code for wanting to kiss me until I can't breath." Cassia had been about to say sexy, but she'd chickened out at the last second.

Moriko was a bit startled at that, and she felt her cheeks heat up in a blush. "It, um, it can be." She slowly got up on her knees and moved until she was sitting next to Cassia.

"See, you're not the only one who can be not shy," Cassia whispered, leaning closer, shivering despite the hot water as skin pressed up against skin. Licking her lips, she slowly kissed the other woman, eyes closing as she deepened the contact.

Moriko sighed into the kiss, happily following as it flowed into something deeper and more intense.

"Is this all right?" she asked, moving a hand up and around Moriko's waist, her gaze wandering as she got distracted as the other woman moved.

As it ended, she let her head fall back and a large smile was plastered on her face. Her eyes still closed, she basked in all the wonderful things she was feeling. "Oh, that was more than all right." After another moment, she opened them, but they only opened half way, and she looked at Cassia. "You are a wonderful kisser."

The princess shifted, moving closer to the wonderful feeling of pressing up against the warm, wet, strong body next to hers. "I don't want to hurt you," she said, worried that she might do something to hurt one of Moriko's wounds.

She reached out and took one of Cassia's hands, dragging it under the water so it rested on her stomach over the scar. "You're not going to hurt me. You feel that. That's scar tissue, thick and healthy, there's no chance my insides are going to suddenly be on my outside."

It was the first time that Cassia had touched the wound since it had happened, and she let her fingers trace the long, thin scar. Another inch and the assassin would have gutted Moriko like a fish. The realization of how close her girlfriend had come to dying still caused Cassia to wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, and was the only thing that kept her suffering through Valdis' training class. "You almost died," she whispered, watching her hand trace the scar.

"No I didn't. This wound would have been a long, slow, horrible death, if I hadn't gotten medical attention. But I got medical attention; you got a healer to me quickly. I was fine. I am fine." Her breath hitched a bit as Cassia's hand wandered. "I'm not easily breakable."

Cassia wasn't entirely paying as much attention as she probably should have been; it was hard to focus, considering she had a naked Moriko next to her. Amazing how energized she felt despite the day long run she'd suffered through earlier. "I don't want anything to happen to you." Her hand slid lower below the water then trailed back upwards.

"I like that you feel that way. I don't want anything to happen to you, either." She wiggled a bit, feeling overwhelmed with all the sensations that she was feeling. She reached back under the water, stilling Cassia's hand. "Despite the fact I would really, really like your hand to wander a bit farther south, I think you should keep it above the waist. I know a lot of women use these private tubs for romance, but I'd like our first time together to be more private." Moriko was fairly certain her self-control was nearly at its limit.

It took an impressive amount of self-control to pull her hand up out of the water, and Cassia was well aware that she was pouting as she did it. "Fine," she sighed, then grinned. "That mean's we're going to have a first time?"

Before she could censor herself Moriko, blurted out, "Goddess I hope so." As soon as she realized what she said, she turned bright red. "Shit, I just channeled Valdis, didn't I?"

Cassia laughed the sexual tension breaking. It wasn't gone, but it wasn't threatening to burn out of control, either. "Don't worry. Even Valdis has her moments." Grinning, Cassia dunked under the water to wash out her hair, wiping the water out of her eyes when she surfaced. "Although, less so recently."

Moriko smiled, relieved that Cassia didn't seem upset from her less than stellar statement. She ducked under the water and came back up, frowning as she tried to work the mud out of her braids. With a sigh, she realized the only way her hair was going to get clean was to take them all out.

Reaching up, she undid the leather ties, some snapping easily, letting her know it was past time to undo them.

"Here." Cassia moved around behind the other woman, reaching up to bat her hands out of the way. "Let me do that." She started to gently remove the bands that held Moriko's long blonde hair in a braid. "I really do like the way this looks on you. I should start having it like this when we go running; it would stop getting in my face all the time."

"It's helpful when you're fighting, keeps it from obscuring you're vision." After awhile, she stopped trying to help and just let Cassia do it, enjoying the other woman playing with her hair. She felt almost like a Pouncer that had gotten caught in a sunbeam.

Reaching over the side of the tub, Cassia got one of the wooden ladles and started pouring hot water up over Moriko's head to wash out her hair. "Any idea what's going on with Valdis? She's been a little more...umm...intense than usual."

"Not really. She's been a little more terse than usual, and when she's not training you all, she's in her room. She doesn't seem like she's getting depressed again, just more intense."

"Did I tell you that I met Ryuu's pupils yesterday?" She brushed hair out of her way so that she could start to rub Moriko's shoulders, avoiding what looked like a sizeable bruise starting on her arm.

"Huh?" Moriko managed to say, her eyes now half-lidded from relaxing than arousal. "Um, no... Are those the ones that are learning how to read and write?" Moriko knew how to do the basics of reading and writing, having helped her mother keep a ledger book of the animals they raised, keeping bloodlines straight, as well as cost.

It took another feat of willpower for Cassia to avoid leaning forward and kissing the exposed skin. For a second, she got distracted, watching the muscles move under the skin at her fingertips. "Um, anyway, they came by the building at the castle." Most construction had ground to a halt during the winter. "She has twelve of them, quite a few from down at Abnoa. She might not be terrorizing them like Valdis is doing to her students, but I think these girls aren't getting a lot of free time either."

Moriko yawned. "Maybe Valdis is pissy 'cause her and Ryuu haven't been spending any time together. I used to catch Ryuu at our house all the time. Now, not so much, I wonder if they had a fight."

The hands that were messaging her back slowed at that. "You think Ryuu likes Valdis?" From her tone, it was pretty obvious that Cassia hadn't even considered that.

She ran her hands through her hair, which felt odd not to have it in braids. "Well, I'm not certain Ryuu likes Valdis, but I think Valdis likes Ryuu. I caught her one day just standing on the steps in the snow watching Ryuu walk away from the house. She had a weird look on her face."

"I'm glad I got over my crush on her." Even if she hadn't gotten over it during the years that she hadn't seen the warrior, the training program would have wiped any trace of that away. Resuming her massage, she echoed Moriko's yawn from a moment earlier with one of her own. "I better wash up before I fall asleep in here."

Moriko moved over to the other side, giving Cassia space to wash up. "I'm glad you got over it too, I don't think I could get outrageously jealous and stand a chance to beat her up." She tried to fix an innocent look on her face. "You want to see if your folks will watch Kai tonight, I could return the favor and give you a massage."

The slam of arousal was so fast and intense it took the dark-haired woman a moment to recover. "I'd like that. I might fall asleep if you give me a massage, though."

Moriko grinned, slowly getting out of the tub. "That's okay. Valdis has been working you hard, so if you need your rest, then rest, but you know what?" She grinned as Cassia just shook her

head. "Valdis has given you five days off, which means you can stay in bed tomorrow morning. I'm sure your moms won't be expecting us until at least noon." She stepped out of the tub and started drying off. Peeking out of the curtain, she found their clothes cleaned and dried. She scooped them up and ducked back inside. "Some day I have to figure out how they do that so quickly," she muttered to herself.

"That sounds like a great plan." Cassia got up out of the bath and quickly grabbed a towel, despite trying to be casual about being naked in front of Moriko. "I asked them that last week. The attendant just laughed and said it was a house secret." She took her pants after drying off and shimmied into them.

#####

Valdis stared at the map then back at Willow. "So, this valley up farther north, you're positive there's nobody living in it, just some predators that hibernate for the winter?" She wanted to be absolutely positive there was nobody there who could get hurt if her bloodlust got out of control. It had taken her almost attacking Moriko, the poor girl didn't know how close she'd come, to finally go to the older Priestess for insight.

The old priestess nodded, pointing down at the map. "There's only one town a day to the south, a mining village. Other than that, there won't be anybody around other than the occasional hunter." She leaned back in her chair, studying the warrior. "Are you sure you want to go there?"

Valdis thought for a moment then shrugged her shoulders. "Not really, but until the Blood Star sets, I'm not really safe to be around. Plus I don't think my dignity could take being locked in chains for five days." She sighed and ran a hand through her white blonde hair.

Green eyes studied the obviously worked-up warrior. "I haven't asked this of you before, but I feel like I have to now. Who are you?" The house was quiet, most of the other priestesses and acolytes were holding a ceremony in the temple. Willow hadn't been feeling particularly well, and had stayed in.

Valdis grinned. "I'm Valdis, daughter of Penka." She knew the answer was flippant, but she was surprised Selene or Nix hadn't passed on what she'd told them so many years ago. "Aren't you Priestesses supposed to be all knowing?"

Willow snorted, reaching for her cup of tea. "That is a common misconception. I never pretended to know all of the answers, or even many of them." She took a sip and let the other woman get away without really answering the question. "Do Moriko and Cassia know you're going?"

"They know I'm going north for five days. I haven't told them why." She fidgeted for a moment under the other woman's gaze. "It's kind of embarrassing."

"How often does this happen?"

"Once a year... Before, it wasn't a big deal, I was in the south. I could go to the temple with the rest of the warriors of Vladlin. But I can't now, especially after killing that assassin. She was a Chosen of the Mistress of Shadows, Vladlin's twin. They are kind of protective of one another."

With deliberate slowness, Willow sat down her cup of tea. She was seriously considering how much she really wanted to ask Valdis about what had happened. "Is there anything you want to tell me about all that?"

"No, not really," she snapped in annoyance. "That woman is dead. She won't be hurting Kai or Moriko ever again. Why do you all want to know the how of her death?"

"I don't, not particularly." Willow sighed. She was too old to deal with all these problems. Maybe it was time to start thinking about seeking the Goddess' approval of a replacement high priestess. Selene had a good idea with retiring. "I think what I'm going to do is wish you a safe trip and pray to the Goddess that you come back in one piece."

Valdis nodded her head. "Thank you for your help and your prayers, Goddess knows my father doesn't listen." She bowed and reached for the door, tucking the map away.

"Be safe," the priestess whispered, closing her eyes, having a horrible suspicion of who Valdis' father was.

#####

Moriko stared at Cassia's back as it was slowly exposed as she inched the sheet down. It was early, still the pre-dawn blackness, sunlight hours away. She grinned amazed at the smooth skin displayed before her, as well as the fact Cassia hadn't stirred. It was rare she got moments like this. Cassia had the annoying habit of being a light sleeper, so when Moriko got up, Cassia soon followed.

Valdis must have really been working her recruits over.

Happily, Selene and Nix had no problem watching Kai overnight, and with a knowing twinkle in their eyes, had told the two of them to have fun.

She gently touched Cassia's shoulder and trailed her fingers down, enjoying the silky, warm feel of the skin under her rough, calloused hand. They hadn't done anything last night, and honestly, it didn't make a difference to her. She made them dinner and had lured Cassia to the bedroom with some hot, needy kisses, but in the end, she had followed through with her promise of a massage.

Her fingers paused at a bruise, and she leaned over, kissing the abused flesh, her now unbound hair flowed around her face, tickling the skin of Cassia's back. Brown eyes watched the Princess' breathing hitch then even back out in sleep. She had enjoyed giving the massage, happy to touch Cassia's bare flesh, mapping it to her memory. She took note of the places that tickled, which

caused a sigh of pleasure or a grimace of pain, cataloging it all so it could be recalled and used later.

The night ended with Cassia asleep on her stomach, and Moriko curled up around her, quite content. Her fingers stroked down to the hip, and she stopped, blowing out a puff of air in frustration. It seemed that Cassia was still well and truly sacked out. With a wry grin, she slipped out of the bed and drew the sheet back up over Cassia's back. She would take care of the animals then return to bed. Quickly, she threw on some clothes and hurried outside.

As she went about her morning chores, it occurred to her that she really didn't know much about Cassia's love life before her. She had been rather candid about her brief dating experience, and it suddenly hit her that other than Cassia's rather messed up dating experience with her and Sable, that maybe there really hadn't been a lot of intimate moments. She swallowed thickly, and almost missed the feed bucket. Cassia might even still be a virgin, it hadn't come up.

She technically still was. Never let it slip to a group of soldiers that you're still a virgin, they make it their life's goal to help you lose it. After one campaign, they had returned to the Queen's city, and Valdis and the rest of the warriors had taken her out to a temple and made a hefty donation in her honor for the night. The Priestess in the temple had been beautiful, and very nice, but once finding out Moriko still had her Maiden Shield, the tempo of the night had changed considerably.

The woman kissed Moriko tenderly, "No, sweetheart, that is something you should save for someone you love, someone special."

Moriko flushed, feeling again like an awkward teenager. She had been eighteen when she'd had her first kiss. How much further behind everyone else was she going to get, the teases from the other soldiers still sounding loud in her ears.

The woman had smiled understandingly, and slowly kissed her red cheeks and lips. "I am a follower of the Goddess of Love, dear heart. I think I know a thing or two about matters of the heart and lovemaking. That, you should save, but," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "there are other things we can do."

It had been amazing, and one of the most overwhelming moments of her life. She had cried for what felt like hours afterwards, and then some more from sheer embarrassment. If pressed, she would admit she'd gone back a few more times to see the priestess, but she was still technically a virgin, the woman had never taken that. Nor had she and Caron gone that far. She had, with some pride, used a few of the things she had learned in the temple to curl the southern Princess' toes.

She scratched Oscar's ears, easily avoiding his horns. She would have to build a fenced-in area for him and the other Alcens in the summer, giving them a nice, big, safe area to roam in. She gave him one last pat on the nose and quickly jogged back to the house. Once inside, she threw a couple of logs on the fire and rushed back to her room.

Cassia was still asleep, although she had now turned on to her side. Moriko quickly undressed and slid back into the bed then leaned forward and kissed Cassia's shoulder.

The princess stirred, stretching slowly and luxuriating in the feeling of slowly waking up. Ever since she'd started training with Valdis, the warrior had them up before dawn, running every day. She'd really missed having a chance to wake up slowly.

The fact that there was a nice, warm body pressed up against her made it even nicer.

"Hmmm...you got up early again, didn't you?"

Moriko smiled against the sleepy, warm skin of Cassia's shoulder, "Uh huh. Animals needed to be fed. How are you feeling? You didn't wake up when I got out of bed, so either my massage was that good or Valdis is that much of a hard ass."

Cassia smiled, turning around so that she could see the other woman. "I'm sorry I fell asleep. You give a very good massage, though." The last thing she could clearly remember last night was the feeling of Moriko's hands rubbing the soreness out of her back. Then, from the looks of it, she'd passed out and hadn't woken up until well after sunrise. "How are you feeling?"

Moriko beamed a bit and leaned over, kissing the tip of Cassia's nose. Leaning back, she said. "I'm fine." She was intimately aware of the heat of Cassia's skin and how, when she had leaned over, her breasts had lightly skimmed across the other woman's. She swallowed and mentally told her body to behave.

"I'm glad I could get you to relax, you've been working hard. I can tell." She lightly trailed her hand over Cassia's arm. "You're getting some definition." She blushed, realizing that could be taken badly. "Not that you didn't look good, but I..." She stared at Cassia somewhat mortified, and ducked her head. "I'm just going to be quiet now."

It took only the slightest of movements to shift closer to Moriko. The blankets were nice and warm around them, and the other woman was even warmer. The feel of skin pressing against skin was enough to cause the dark-haired woman to groan in pleasure. "I know what you mean. I thought I was doing well before, but I have to admit, Valdis has me in good shape after all this training."

She returned the favor, stroking a hand up along Moriko's arm, smiling as muscles twitched under her fingertips. Sunlight lit up the room, but under the blankets, she could still pretend it wasn't time to get up.

Moriko sighed, happy that she hadn't said anything wrong. Her cheeks were still warm, but she could feel them starting to cool. She turned her head, kissing Cassia's hand, and then slowly lowered her body so she could kiss Cassia's elbow, then her shoulder, and finally her neck. "You want me to stop?" She breathed out the question against the flesh of Princess' neck.

"If you do, I'm going to have to hurt you," Cassia answered, breathless, her hands warm against Moriko's cold skin. "You're skin's cold." She pulled the blonde closer, trying to share body heat.

Moriko let herself be pulled down, grinning a little as Cassia gave a little squeal as her chilled skin touched her warmer one. "I was outside. Mornings will still be cold for a while yet." She nuzzled the patch of skin just under Cassia's ear, remembering how the Princess seemed to enjoy that. She smiled a bit, quite proud of the goose bumps that rose over the body under hers.

It took a bit of effort for Cassia to avoid groaning in pleasure as she got nuzzled. "I hear that the easiest way to get warm," she slid her hands under Moriko's shirt, pulling it higher while sliding a leg between the other woman's legs, "is to get naked under the covers with someone else."

Moriko pushed herself up a bit, and looked deeply into Cassia's eyes. "Is that what they say? Must be true, 'cause I'm warming up a bit." She leaned her face down, peppering Cassia's face with kisses before pulling back just a bit. "Are you sure you want to warm up this way?" she asked, seriously, searching Cassia's eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was anything Cassia wasn't certain she wanted.

"I haven't been this serious about anything for a while now..." Cassia leaned up, kissing Moriko, slowly tracing the other woman's lips with the tip of her tongue, grinning when she felt the lean body pressed up against hers shudder. "...unless you don't want to?"

Moriko was incapable of articulating a sound as a furious bolt of pleasure rippled down from the top of her head to her groin, and she couldn't hide the shudder of its aftermath. Finally, when her brain was able to form language, she said in a shaky voice that was husky with want, "No, I want to. I very much want to."

The other woman paused, her fingers spread out along Moriko's rib cage, feeling her chest move as she breathed. "But..?" There was something else there, something else that Moriko hadn't said yet.

Moriko looked down, puzzled, "But what? Is there something wrong? Have I done something?" She was starting to panic a bit.

Cassia blinked in surprise at that. "No, you're doing everything right." Not that she had a lot of experience, but she was pretty sure that the urge to rip all of Moriko's clothes off and immerse herself in the feel of the other woman pressed against herself was a good sign. "You just...I don't know." The dark-haired woman shook her head, not sure how to explain it. Instead, she moved her hands up Moriko's back then scratched down her spine.

Unable to help herself, she arched her back as Cassia's nails lightly trailed down the flesh of her back. She tried to get her brain back on track, Cassia seeming to have a serious question that was trying to get out. "You're being evil, distracting me." She blew out a breath then leaned down, kissing Cassia tenderly. "I just what?" she asked, trying to pry out whatever Cassia wanted to ask.

If it was important enough to be brought up now, it had to be something that should be addressed now, rather than later. "This should be special. If you have any concerns or worries, I'd hate for them to ruin this. Tell me?"

Cassia bit her lip, looking at Moriko bashfully. "I just wanted to ask..." She took in a deep breath. "Have you done this before?"

Of all the questions she had expected, it really should have been one of the top five, but it wasn't. For a moment she was flummoxed, and it took a second for her to compose herself. She smiled easily, to reassure Cassia she wasn't upset by the question. "I'm, well, technically, I'm still...um...you know...a virgin." ...Which was still slightly embarrassing, because she was almost twenty-seven years old. "But I've done stuff." ...Which was, after she'd said it, incredibly vague.

The other woman grinned, "Stuff?" She pressed Moriko onto her back, sliding up over her, the blankets draping over her shoulders as she ducked down to kiss the other woman thoroughly. The feeling of being pressed up against Moriko like this was exquisite, especially the contact of their hips and chests as she pressed close. "What kind of stuff?" she whispered, fingers slowly pulling up the shirt that Moriko had worn into bed.

Moriko felt her breathing hitch, incredibly turned on by how easily Cassia had reversed their positions. She lifted her arms, letting Cassia remove her shirt. "Do you want details?" she squeaked out.

"Depends on what kind of details they are." The shirt flew off the bed and Cassia licked her lips at the sight below her. Reverently, Cassia gently cupped the perfect breasts below her with one hand, while supporting herself with the other.

It was hard to concentrate, but Moriko tried, then groaned in pleasure at the feel of Cassia's hands on her. "I...I..." She swallowed and tried again. "Years ago, during a battle, Valdis and some of her troops found out I was still, um, a virgin. And they did their best to take care of that for me. One night, after we had returned from a small war over, I think, a cow field, they took me to one of the temples dedicated to the Goddess of Love, and well...made a hefty donation in my honor." She wasn't thinking too clearly, and was uncertain if she was giving too many details Cassia would rather not hear. "She was a nice woman. She showed me a lot of things, but she wouldn't take my Maiden Shield, said I should save it for someone special. We talked a lot. She told me I was sweet and kind and that would be far more important in life, so to stop listening to stupid warriors."

It was incredibly hard, but Cassia forced herself to stop for a moment. "I..." She shook her head, touched by what Moriko was offering her. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "I'm not." The indiscretion, or stupidity, depending how you looked at it, of her youth, once again coming back to haunt her...

Moriko frowned and rolled them over, raising herself up on her arms so she could look at Cassia

and know she had the other woman's full attention. "You're not what, beautiful, charming, special? You're all those things to me. What happened years ago, doesn't matter. I really don't think we're those girls anymore." She kissed Cassia deeply then pulled back. "I want the woman I met and am with right now in this bed. I think she's very special."

It was exactly the right thing to say on Moriko's part. Her words banished Cassia's doubts, and she pulled her own shirt up over her head. "You, my love, are a sweet talker," she said, leaning back down and groaning, this time as skin pressed against skin.

The blonde beamed in happiness, then got an evil look on her face. "Oh, I can be much more than a sweet talker."

She rolled them both over so they were on their sides facing each other, lavishing kisses on Cassia's cheeks, lips, chin, and neck. Slowly, she stopped and just looked at Cassia, realizing, somewhat belatedly, that the woman had done it again. The Princess had gotten her to talk about herself, yet revealed nothing. "So, did you and Sab...er...did you, you...um, have you done this...before?"

Guiltily, Cassia looked away, nodding. "I'm sorry," she said, looking back to the other woman, worriedly, hoping she wasn't about to ruin the moment. "That night, before it all went wrong and Sable stayed over."

There was a sting, but Moriko figured all lovers must feel it at one time or another, secretly wanting to be their love's one and only and finding it not to be true.

So in truth, she was surprised, but not, by the answer. "It's fine," she whispered, and shifted once again, this time so Cassia was on top. "This okay?" she asked, her hands trailing down from Cassia's shoulders to her hips. The sexual tension was still there, although it had dampened a little during the fumbling conversation they'd just had. "The morning I left, she made it kind of clear." She stopped, knowing she was being petty. "Its okay, it doesn't matter, really."

Cassia's lips twitched at that, and she shifted so that they were intimately pressed against one another again. "It doesn't really matter, huh?" She didn't believe that for a second. Slowly rolling her hips to press against Moriko, she smiled at the startled gasp beneath her. "So I shouldn't try to make you forget about it?"

"Um..." She was trying really hard to form a sentence, but Cassia had completely crashed her higher brain functions. "Forgetting is good, never liked...Sable much...anyway." In truth, though, it didn't matter, she was with Cassia now, and Sable had her sailor, she had won in the long run. She couldn't help but grin a little at that. The grin only lasted a second before disappearing in a gasp of pleasure.

"Good," Cassia mumbled, using her fingers to trace down the side of the lean body beneath her. She marveled at the feel of Moriko moving beneath her, shuddering in response to her touch. "You're so beautiful," she whispered, claiming the blonde woman's lips in a deep kiss.

Moriko blushed at the words, never really thinking of herself in terms of beauty. But to have such words come from Cassia's lips, caused her to feel wonderful, yet shy at the same time. As the kiss ended she sighed, basking in its aftermath, and enjoying the weight of Cassia's body on top of hers.

Hesitantly at first, she started to draw her hands over Cassia's body, then slowly as her confidence rebuilt and the hesitancy left her. Her hands were rough and thickly calloused from all the work she did, but Cassia didn't seem to mind.

The feel of Cassia's skin, warm and silky under her touch, was intoxicating. Under that softness she could feel the strength of the muscles hidden there. Where their bellies touched, she could feel how she trembled, and Moriko hoped it was from desire, not from fear or nervousness.

As Cassia leaned back, she could feel her nipples tighten into points as the cool morning air rushed into the empty space between her bodies. She looked up, gasping at the hungry look in Cassia's blue eyes. She'd had women give her that look, but never was she comfortable in receiving it, until now. Having Cassia look at her that way was different. Her gasp was followed by a moan as hands and fingers now returned the favor of mapping her body. She arched into Cassia's hands as they moved southward from her face and shoulders to her breasts. Unconsciously, her hands bit deeply into Cassia's skin, leaving a wake of reddish scratches as her hands moved from the woman's back to her ass, where she grabbed Cassia roughly, pulling her more firmly into her body.

Their hips started a discordant rhythm that was frantic and harsh, their legs intertwined. Slowly, they began to search for a rhythm that would move them in sync. Moriko held on tight to Cassia's body, feeling as if she were unraveling. Belatedly remembering how the Priestess had told her most women liked communication while having sex, she nuzzled the Princess' face until she found an ear. She nibbled the earlobe, grinning slightly as Cassia made the cutest noise, and then began to whisper how good she felt, how amazing Cassia felt, how much she enjoyed that thing Cassia did with her hand. She tried to tell her everything she felt, until words became beyond her ability and then she shattered into a million pieces.

The words that Moriko were whispering were the most erotic thing that Cassia had ever experienced. Them, combined with the feel of the naked woman beneath her, the slide and press of them, sent her shuddering over the edge soon after her lover did. They lay there on the bed, the blankets long ago having been tossed to the floor.

Cassia lifted her head an eternity or a few seconds later, gazing down at the beauty below her. It had been too fast, she wanted more, she decided.

"More," the princess whispered, kissing her way down the well-toned chest. She paused at Moriko's breasts, laving them with her tongue until her lover was squirming beneath her.

More, she thought, sliding even further down until she could rest between the blonde woman's legs.

"Cassia, you don't have to..." Moriko started to say then abruptly groaned as Cassia's tongue found her mark. The princess hummed in pleasure at the intimate contact, loving the taste of her lover. She didn't have much practice, given that it had been a long time since Sable, but she was inspired.

There was pain, but it was brief and soothed away by the immediate onrush of pleasure. Before had been good, but this, this seeped pleasure into her bones and then rolled on liquid waves through her body until it was too intense for her body to contain. Then she was crying out, clutching hands tightly into Cassia's hair.

The sight of Moriko crying out in her release, feeling her contract around her finger, and tasting her as she did so, was seared onto her mind. No matter how many years would pass, or what the future would bring, Cassia would never forget this moment.

It was one of the most profound things Moriko had ever experienced, and again, she found herself crying, only this time she didn't feel any need to cry again due to embarrassment. She was happy to note through her tears that she hadn't scared Cassia off. "Sorry," she sniffed in a way she was sure was less than sexy, "just got overwhelmed. I'm okay, honest."

#####

Valdis stood next to the bar in some small tavern she had found. The town was a small mining village full of rough women who looked as craggy as the mountains they toiled in. She had, over all, found the women to be rude and course, which didn't really bother her that much. All she really wanted was food and a place to sleep. While she found the first, the latter was harder to come by. Apparently they didn't really like strangers in their town. So, she would have to push on tonight to the valley Willow had told her about. It was probably for the best, she could feel the Blood Star rising. As it rose in the south, so did her bloodlust.

The star, the sign of her father, calling all his faithful to worship at his temple, all of the women who followed the God of War would be flocking to his main temple outside the small farming town of Thullis. There, they would fight, feast, and fuck, all the while singing the praises of Vladlin.

She, however, could not go. She was self-exiled from her land of birth, and a murderer of one of the Chosen of the Mistress of Shadows, her father's twin. She had well and truly made her bed, and now, she would just have to deal.

As she raised the mug of steaming hot liquid to her lips, a body crashed into hers, slopping the liquid all down her front. Booming laughter started up as well as some jeers. "If you can't handle your wine, maybe you should go somewhere else."

She closed her eyes and counted to ten.

"Awww, the baby is going to start crying."

Valdis started grinding her teeth together and tried counting to ten again. A woman stupider than the rest came up to her elbow and said, "You're a little slow, aren't you? Let me make this as blunt as I can, I'll use small words. We don't want..." She grabbed Valdis by the neck of her thick cloak, and tried to pull the stout warrior.

The moment she touched Valdis, the warrior moved, ducking under the woman's arm, twisting it. She then grabbed it at the wrist and the elbow, and with a quick thrust, the breaking of bone could be heard. The woman fell to the ground crying out in pain.

Valdis turned, glaring at the woman's friends. "You really going to stand there and let me make you all look like fools." The three thick, barrel-chested women looked at each other and at the woman standing there smirking. They glowered for a moment then charged.

It was over fairly quickly, and Valdis turned back to the bar, popping her knuckles. "Lazy and sloppy," she muttered while motioning for the bartender to refill her mug.

The woman sidled over and poured more of the hot-spiced wine in the mug. She stood there a little bit longer, watching the muscles twitch and pop in the blonde's forearm. She smiled and put the pitcher down. Attentively reaching out, she stroked the hand around the mug. "So?"

Valdis looked up, her blue eyes taking in the woman. After a moment, she grinned. "Let me guess? You like your women strong, rough, and brutish?"

The woman blinked a few time at the rather blunt if not crude assessment of her, but didn't move her hands away. Finally, she gave what she thought was a seductive look. "You left out bulky. You're kind of on the skinny side for my tastes, but after watching you handle those roughnecks, I find myself wanting to make an exception."

Valdis snorted. "When's your break?"

"I'm finding your bluntness endearing. I own the place, I can leave whenever I want."

Without a word, the warrior slammed her hot drink, not even feeling it burn her throat.

The bartender smiled wolfishly then called over her shoulder. "Ginger, the bar is yours for the rest of the night." She nodded at Valdis to follow her.

The woman had a small room near the back part of the tavern, and as soon as the door was closed, they fell on each other, tearing and removing clothes. There was nothing gentle about it, but Valdis was well aware the woman wasn't interested in wine, roses, and romance from her. Easily, she picked the woman up and tossed her on the small cot she used as a bed, grinning at

the slight squeal of surprise she made, and then stalked over to the bed like an animal hunting prey.

She mercilessly plundered the woman's body; the rougher she got, the wetter the other woman got. Her hand was delved deep into that wetness, and the woman's head was thrown back, her dark brown hair tangled with sweat, and Valdis could hear the tattle-tale beginnings of the whine that meant the barmaid was close. She grinned into the woman's chest as she screamed, and then pushed Valdis away.

"Enough. You're going to kill me," the woman begged.

Valdis gently kissed a breast then rolled off. "Yep, but what a way to go," she joked.

The woman snorted then yawned sleepily. "That was wonderful. I'm sorry to say you wore me out. Let me take a power nap and I'll return the favor."

"You're welcome," Valdis whispered softly as the woman's eyes closed. She waited a few minutes until the woman's breathing evened out then got off the bed with a frown. As she dressed, the frown didn't go away. She felt no peace or satisfaction. In fact, she was still really horny, but really had no desire to let the other woman touch her. She chewed on her bottom lip as she explored what she was feeling. If she was to guess, she would say she was feeling guilty for what had just occurred.

Dressed, she quietly left the woman's rooms and snuck out into the night, preferring to deal with the harsh cold than her emotional state.

#####

The valley was just as the Priestess had told her it was, remote and empty of any humans. However, there were several Greenbacks and mountain lions that made it their home hibernating for the winter. She had found a large cave to her liking, and after rousting the Greenback that was hibernating and a fierce battle, she had herself a temporary home.

She spent the rest of the night and early morning cleaning the cave and setting up her meager belongings. Now, she was sitting on a large bolder that overlooked the small lake, waiting for the sun to rise and trying to meditate. The battle with the Greenback had eased her bloodlust, and now she was trying to capture what she was feeling, hoping to hang on to it for the rest of her temporary isolation. This far north, the valley was still covered in snow, and she looked at the whiteness, not really seeing it.

She took another deep breath and winced as several lacerations she had received from the Greenback's claws pulled open and bled sluggishly. She tried to ignore it, knowing in a day or two they'd be gone.

"You know, if you wanted to get me all alone to yourself, all you had to do was ask and mean it,"

a voice casually spoke up from just outside the cave mouth, on the other side of the boulder, "although, the boulder is going a bit far."

Valdis sighed and ducked her head a second before looking back up. Her eyes could have been mistaken for bloodshot, but they weren't. "This isn't a good time for snuggles and foreplay. Why are you here?" The last part was nearly growled out in annoyance. "Aren't there little readers somewhere who need their daily lesson?"

The silver-haired woman gave her a bright smile and wandered a bit closer to the boulder, looking out over the lake. "It's nice up here. I should come visit more often. Even the air smells different." She took in a deep breath. "All the little readers are going to be busy for a few days."

"Oh," she replied rather lamely. Then figuring her mediation was done for the day, she moved, wincing slightly, then lightly leaped down from the boulder onto the soft snow in front of Ryuu. Unthinking, she began to walk in a circle around the woman, eyeing her. "Why are you here? How did you know I was here?"

"Well, when I realized you weren't trying to kill your recruits yesterday, I asked around. Willow said you'd left because of a star coming up in the sky." Ryuu shrugged, not moving otherwise as she let Valdis circle her. "So I came looking, and I'm glad I got here in time for the show."

Valdis' eyebrow quirked in question, "Show..?"

Ryuu slowly smiled. "What did you do last night?" she asked in way of an answer.

The warrior's mouth drew into a thin line. "Had a drink in the mining camp not far from here," was her terse answer.

There was a lot more than that, but Ryuu wasn't going to call her on that, yet. "Oh. Well, I think some of your drinking buddies are coming to visit." The silver-haired woman tilted her head, as if listening to something far off. "Actually, I think all of them are coming to say hello."

"What?" She stopped circling and cocked her head to the side, and really listened. Then she moved slowly in a zigzag line, smelling the different wind currents. "Fucking great," she muttered. It smelled like at least fifteen of those miners were clambering down the path, trying to be stealthy.

While she was distracted, Ryuu leaned close and gave the other woman a kiss on the cheek. "Have fun." That said, she turned around and hopped up to take a seat on the boulder that Valdis had previously been sitting on to watch the coming confrontation.

Valdis was startled for a second by the kiss, and turned to look at Ryuu in question. It also caused a rock to form in her gut, weighing her down slightly as she remembered what else she did the previous night.

She turned back around and faced the now visible miners stumbling down the snowy path. The warrior raised her fisted hands and started marching through the snow to meet her new friends. "You beat up a bunch of assholes in a bar and you never hear the end of it," she muttered darkly. Her bloodlust rose, flaring up, burning through her as she prepared to fight.

The first of the women made their way around a curve in the trail trying to be sneaky, which was hard, considering the heavy rock picks and shovels that most of them were carrying. Spotting Valdis and realizing that they weren't going to get to sneak up on her, the first wave of women charged her, yelling.

The women were all tough, and angry.

Angry will get you far in a fight, but Valdis was a trained fighter, and the daughter of the God of War. At first she tried being nice, but that lasted until one of the women imbedded the tip of her mining pick in Valdis' shoulder, then everything dissolved into red. In a berserk fury, she tore into them until they were crippled and bloodied in the snow.

"Get up," she taunted. "You are the most disorganized, sloppy, and worthless fighting group I have ever had the displeasure of meeting in combat. Get out of here! And don't let me see any of you again, or until you know which end of a mining pick is what." She deliberately turned her back on them, showing how non-threatened she was, and started walking back to her cave.

She was sweaty, bleeding, and probably stunk, but she felt her bloodlust purring in her gut like a satiated kitten.

From her perch, Ryuu watched those who could more or less walk start to help their sisters-in-arms up from the ground and begin to straggle back towards town. The last few minutes had been a painful lesson in what a well-trained woman could do against a disorganized mob.

Hopping down off the boulder, she trailed along behind Valdis, studying the blood leaking from the wound in the shoulder. "I'm glad you didn't kill any of them."

"They're too pathetic to kill," she said with a snort. As she passed by the dead Greenback that had owned the cave she now used, she pointed to it and said, "That was more of a challenge."

Ducking slightly, she winced and entered the cave, a small pitch-covered torch still burned where she had left it jammed in a crack. Plus an opening at the top allowed some sunlight in from the rising sun, as well as fresh air. She went to her pack and started digging around in it.

As Ryuu entered, she tossed some clean bandages at the silver-haired woman. "Ah, can you help me with this wound?"

Snatching the bandages out of the air, Ryuu moved over to the other woman and tugged her shirt

up over her head without asking first, "Certainly." The tip of the pick was still in the warrior's shoulder. Grabbing it with her fingertips, Ryuu yanked it out without warning. The metal tip hit the floor with a metallic clink. "We could go to another town and you could beat up another boatload of women to sate your blood lust."

Valdis flushed angrily as the comment struck a nerve. "I didn't want to beat those women up, period. All I wanted last night was food and a place to sleep. They started it," she said somewhat childishly, then winced as Ryuu started binding her shoulder. With her good arm she pulled the shirt the rest of the way off, not wanting it near her body. It smelled strongly of her, and blood was splattered all over it.

"And you didn't really mind the fact that they started it. You kind of liked it too, didn't you?" Ryuu stepped aside as the shirt was tossed away, and then she finished binding the wound on her shoulder. "If there was a healer around, I'd say you should probably get her to see to your shoulder."

Valdis actually pouted, for a moment. "Of course I didn't like it." It sounded hollow even to her ears. She sighed and rolled her shoulders, and nearly passed out at the pain. "Shit!" There were black spots dancing a jig in her vision. She didn't think it was that bad, but her shoulder really didn't have any feeling in it any more. "Wow." She shook her head and looked at Ryuu. "I'm fine. Honest."

Judging by the expression on Ryuu's face, she didn't believe the warrior. "Just think of the stories that they are going to tell about the day they got beat up by some stranger who wandered into their village." Taking Valdis' hand, the shorter woman tugged the warrior over to a rock. "Sit. You need to eat."

Without any argument, Valdis sat down, leaning against the rock wall of the cave. She had done a forced march to this valley, and had eaten very little. "Food would be nice." And sleep, she hadn't slept in thirty six hours.

"Good thing I came prepared, then." From somewhere, Ryuu produced a slide sung sack that she hadn't actually been carrying around earlier. The sack itself was full of fresh food, and even a mug of sweet wine, which the silver-haired woman offered to Valdis. "Here. Eat, drink the wine, and I'll keep watch while you sleep."

Valdis raised an eyebrow in question, but didn't ask. Ten to one Ryuu wouldn't give her an answer anyway. She took a sip of the wine and hummed in pleasure. It was southern, and while the northern hot wine was good, this had an added bonus of reminding her of home.

Finishing the mug, she looked up at the other woman. "I don't think you need to keep watch. I would seriously doubt they'll be back today...maybe tomorrow." She ate the food, humming again at the wonderful taste. Wiping her mouth, she looked up. "Can you hand me a shirt out of my pack, I'm getting slightly chilled." She chuckled slightly as a faint hint of red dusted Ryuu's cheeks.

The silver-haired woman quickly went to grab a shirt for Valdis, even if she had been enjoying sneaking peaks at her breasts. "I can see you're getting a bit chilled." She held out the simple shirt in offer, eyes once again drifting lower than Valdis' face.

Valdis chuckled again, and said, "My eyes are a little higher." She awkwardly got the shirt on, only managing not to cry out as she pushed her hurt arm through the sleeve, by biting her lip. She panted for a second then said, "Besides, aren't you intellectual types only supposed to be interested in my head? Do my thoughts and emotions mean nothing?"

Ryuu narrowed her eyes and resisted the urge to throw something at her, knowing how badly injured Valdis was even if the warrior refused to admit it. "Are you insinuating that I'm attracted to you?"

The warrior frowned then pushed herself up to her feet. "You can go back to town and your writers. I don't need a baby-sitter. I can take care of myself." She turned her back on the other woman, and with gritted teeth, started lying out her bedroll. Insinuating...she wasn't quite sure what the word meant. She thought it was along the lines of accuse. Apparently she was accusing the other woman of attraction. That didn't sound good. Her frown got deeper in frustration. Apparently she was just a stupid warrior.

Ryuu rolled her eyes as Valdis turned her back on her. Honestly, there had to be some sort of requirement to be a warrior. Most of the ones she'd met in the south were like Valdis, annoying, although with their own odd charm, which could surprise you. Valdis was a lot smarter than most of those warriors, too. "Stop being so stubborn and let me help you." She should just leave Valdis to herself.

"I can take care of myself," the warrior growled out, even though sweat dotted her forehead and the simple act of setting up a sleeping nest was wearing her out. She could hear Ryuu stiffen in anger and annoyance, almost feel the other woman's teeth as they ground together, but it was the moment she heard footsteps head towards the mouth of the cave she realized she was being childish and she didn't really want Ryuu to leave. Although, considering it was only day one of the Blood Star, she should just let the woman leave. But instead, she turned and called out, "Wait. What does insinuate mean?" That took a lot for her, because she was admitting her own ignorance.

Ryuu paused at the cave mouth, considering her answer. Since Valdis had a penchant for making her annoyed, she should just go back to the village and keep teaching her students and helping Cassia. Instead, she turned back towards the southerner. "It means implying, or are you saying that I'm attracted to you."

Valdis frowned again, thinking about what had been said. "I don't know, I think I'm more confused now," she finally admitted. "I always imply you're attracted to me because I think you are. It's fun to tease you because you don't want to be attracted to me, I think." She blew out a

breath and sat down in the pile of stuff she had just dropped. She cradled her arm. "I'll stop teasing you if you want." It was said almost sadly.

Now, why had she gone ahead and done something like that? She looked like a puppy that had just gotten kicked. Ryuú sighed and walked back to take a seat next to the injured woman. "I like your teasing," she admitted, reluctantly. "Let me keep watch for you tonight, I'm good at keeping watch. You need to rest, especially if those women come back tomorrow."

Valdis nodded a bit uncertainly. Something had happened, and it had affected her internally, but damned if she knew what had occurred. "You just did something? I have no idea what it was, but something inside me just changed. You do that a lot, and I'm not certain I like it. Like last ni..." She trailed off, not really wanting to go into that with Ryuú. As a rule, she respected all the women she slept with. She never treated them badly, never spread tales, and never kissed and told. She liked sex, and last night had been an odd experience.

Blue eyes glanced up at the warrior then back down to the bedroll that she was arranging into a bit more of a comfortable position. Gently, she got Valdis to lie down and arranged the blankets over her. It was going to be a cold night, and Ryuú wondered if she should get a fire going to keep the injured woman warm. "What about last night? I already know you were in a tavern drinking."

Valdis shook her head slightly. "I don't really want to talk about that. It's sort of private. Let's just say I couldn't finish something I started." As soon as it came out, she really wanted to take it back. No matter what scenario Ryuú's mind came up with, it just sounded bad. She laid back in the coarse, woolen blankets with a groan and threw her good arm over her eyes. "Pretend I never said that."

Firmly pressing her lips together to avoid even a whisper of a laugh, Ryuú took a second before answering. "No problem." Carefully, she reached over and pulled the blankets up over Valdis. "Just rest now. I'll see you in the morning."

Valdis looked up and smiled sheepishly. "Thanks." She burrowed a little bit into the nest then opened her eyes, looking at the other woman. "Um..." She blew out a breath then attentively said. "If...if you get cold and want to...you can snuggle with me under the covers. I promise to act like a...um...responsible adult."

"If I get cold..?" Ryuú kept her voice as neutral as possible, even if her eyes were sparkling with mischief. "And you swear to be a responsible adult?"

Valdis just nodded. "I didn't expect company, so I didn't bring extras. I swear I can act like an adult."

Ryuú wasn't sure she entirely believed the warrior on that point. However, it was going to be a cold night, and Valdis was hurt. Shaking her head at herself, Ryuú took off her boots and coat then slipped under the covers with Valdis.

Honestly, the warrior hadn't expected Ryu to actually take her up on it. Her eyes were a little wide as she laid back and tried to get comfortable with her bad arm. She yawned and made sure there was a small gap between their bodies. She had made a promise, and she would respect it. Now that the short conflict was over between them, she felt her eyes droop, the food, wine, and her body's need to heal itself making her sleepy. "See," she mumbled, "I can be good."

"I'm sure you can be good," the silver-haired woman whispered, waiting until her breathing evened out, then shifted closer until they were pressed up against one another. "Now I have to be." Tugging the blankets up around them a bit more securely, she settled in to wait out the night.

#####

Valdis woke, to her great embarrassment, wrapped around Ryu's body. It was a tender, romantic embrace that she was more than capable of, but one she normally reserved for the morning after sex.

There was another problem this created in her...she could still very much feel the pulsing of the Bloodstar. And while the fight yesterday had soothed her, that had been yesterday. Now, she felt it rising again, like some beast that had not been fed in days. The intimacy of their position raised her lust, as well as her lust for battle and war.

Being as stealthy as she could, she eased away from Ryu's body and fled to the entrance. From the mouth of the cave she could see the sun rising, beautiful over the icy lake and snow.

Stretching, she found herself healed, only a faint stiffness in her shoulder. With a longing look to the nest of blankets and the woman who slept there, she ducked out the entrance and went running.

In the pile of blankets, Ryu cracked open an eyelid after Valdis had fled. It had been a very pleasant way to spend the night, and even the wake up freak out had been less extreme than she had expected. Quietly, she slipped out of the covers, pulled on her boots, and trailed after the warrior, curious to see where she was fleeing too.

It was hard work to run through the snow, and she was half tempted to shift her form and run on all fours, but the extra strain of pushing through the snow was what she needed to burn out the violence in her system. She sniffed, smelling rabbits, a coyote, and a few mountain lions roaming nearby. Altering her course a bit, she headed to the path the miners had used the other day, curious to see if anything had been left behind, or perhaps see if there were signs they were going to try to come at her again.

Struggling up the slight grade, she sniffed and carefully explored the path. There was no new snow, so the area of the fight was still clear. There were splatters of blood, footsteps, and a broken weapon or two. Slowly, she zigged-zagged up the path looking for any signs they had come back.

Then suddenly, she stopped moving, all the air whooshing out of her lungs, almost feeling like she had taken a blow to the gut. Inside her head was a ringing, an overwhelming compulsion to return to the south. Her father's voice drew her tight like a fishing line with a fat fish, and he plucked cruelly at her desires. She fell to her knees, not feeling the cold snow under her. He showered her with promises, showed her the great battles to come that she could lead, the beautiful women who would be hers for the taking. He played to her weakness like a master musician.

Silently, Ryuu padded along behind the taller woman, following her path. She watched, curious, as Valdis scouted the entire area where the fight yesterday had taken place. The moment that Ryuu had known would be coming, arrived, faster than she had expected. She'd thought to have at least another day or two before Vladlin applied pressure on his daughter. Apparently, that wasn't the case. She moved closer, stopping not far away from where the southerner was kneeling in the snow. "Valdis," she called softly, not wanting to startle her.

She had never felt his attention so clearly directed at her. Shivering, she covered her face with her hands, trying to block everything out. She moaned pitilessly at the voice. "Please, go away." Whom she was talking to wasn't clear.

The pitiful voice plucked at Ryuu's heart and she moved closer, hands pausing just before she would have touched the other woman's head. "Listen to me, Valdis. Listen to Ryuu. He isn't here. His voice is only in your mind."

The god snarled at the interference, his anger radiating out through his daughter. Valdis snarled, her hands dropping away, exposing red eyes. But she didn't move to attack the other woman. Her hands balled into fists and she drove them into the snow, her mind filled with bloody visions, and her nostrils flared and her pulse raced. Trembling, she blinked and looked over at Ryuu, "How do I shut him out?" she begged for an answer.

The silver-haired woman gracefully sank to her knees in the snow in front of Valdis, not caring about the cold. "Will you let me touch you?"

The warrior nodded. "I don't want the things he's showing me." Which was a lie, part of her did, wanted them very much.

If Valdis had been a mortal, there would have been no way that Ryuu could have interfered. She would have been bound by the same oath that bound her mother, and forced to let Valdis fight her own battle without interference. But Valdis was anything but mortal, and Ryuu's hands reached up to cup the warrior's face. "You are here, Valdis, here with me."

The god didn't want this woman to touch his daughter, and he begged then ordered her to use her godly gifts, to call a hunt. All she had to do was throw back her head and call the hunt, and every predator in this valley would be on Ryuu. Valdis refused her father. She opened her eyes and looked at Ryuu. Pain was etched on her face, but her eyes were once again an icy blue.

"Good," the silver-haired woman murmured, searching Valdis ' eyes for signs of her father. "Focus on me, Valdis." She brushed her fingers up through the hair on her temples, slowly messaging them. "He has no power in the north, not yet."

Valdis flushed in rage. For so long she had wanted some sort of acknowledgement from her father, and now he finally bothered to give her attention only because it served him some purpose. Raising her hands out of the snow, she grabbed Ryuu's arms tightly, centering herself here in the snowy north, and closed her eyes. Searching herself, she found the tangled red thread that had always been there tying her to her father.

Ryuu's eyes widened when she sensed what Valdis was trying to do. "Valdis, are you sure you want to do that?"

No, she wasn't certain. If she did that, she knew that was it, he'd never have anything to do with her again. But she'd made promises, ones that couldn't be compromised by his influence. He was not a god of honorable battle, but of Chaos and war. She could feel his will darkened by that of his twin, the Mistress of Shadows, whom he loved more than his own blood. This was how they'd known about Kai, she could feel the truth. She'd unknowingly betrayed them while weak in her own depression.

She drew the thread out and hefted a sword, feeling his anger and his promise of vengeance if she followed through. He had given her the gifts of war, but her mother had given her the knowledge of honor and trust. She chose her mother's teachings. Quickly, the ties that bound them were cut, and after a moment, there was nothing but silence in her head, the raging torrent gone.

Worried blue eyes studied Valdis ' face as the tension and pain that had been there a moment before eased then disappeared. "Valdis..." She trailed off, not knowing what to say or even how to begin. "He has no ties to the north, now, again."

Valdis felt like crying, but was, in the end, too much of a warrior to do that. "Why now? I don't understand. He ignored me for so long, why now?"

"Because you're here," was the simple answer, nodding towards the snow-covered landscape around them. "With you as his prophet, the fire clans would flock to his worship. They would become one of the most powerful of his followers, and eventually, they could take the north for themselves, under your banner and in his name."

She nodded, hiding the hurt. Of course, it had nothing to do with her. Laughing hollowly, she tried for a joke, "Those lazy miners? I seriously doubt they could rule the north." Her rage was silent inside, and she had to wonder if now that the tie between them was severed, if she was merely mortal. She felt so calm and ordinary.

"They have potential." Ryuu smiled, brushing a stray lock of blonde hair from the other woman's

forehead. "You've already made an impact on them."

She laughed. "Well, their bruises will heal, in time." Shakily, she stood, releasing her grasp on the other woman, wincing as she saw how tightly she had grabbed Ryuu's flesh. "Shit, I'm sorry." It looked like she would leave a bruise on more than those miners.

Ryuu made a dismissive gesture as she stood as well. "You still feel like beating up people?"

"Not really. I feel like I've done a forced two-day march, fought a war all day then got rode hard at the temple. I'd say feeling more worn out than anything."

"That's good. How about coming back to the island with me, then?"

Valdis nodded, "I guess my recruits will be upset. I promised them I'd be gone for five days." She brushed the snow from her legs and started back down the trail to pack her things.

#####

The mid afternoon sunlight streaming in through the windows behind her gave Cassia more than enough light to study the picture she was sketching. Instead, she found herself setting aside the plans to watch as Moriko played with Kai. She'd thought that they would have to pry the child out of Selene and Nix's hands when they had come to pick her up that morning.

Since Valdis was still gone, she had the afternoon off and was making full use of it to catch up on a couple of neglected projects. Although the abrupt disappearance of Ryuu had put a kink in a few of those plans. "It can't be just a coincidence that Ryuu left at the same time as Valdis."

Moriko looked up from the floor where she was chasing a now crawling Kai and two hyper puppies. "Perhaps love is in the air," she said with a grin, then turned to fend off the two puppies. "Settle down or you're going outside." Understanding outside meant leaving the warmth of the house, the two puppies whined and tucked their tails between their legs.

"Oh, poor puppies," Cassia laughed, immediately regretting it as the two turned and bumbled over in her direction, skidding across the wood floors. "Oof, I asked for that one didn't I?" She scratched both heads, fending them off from jumping into her lap.

"Yes, love, you did. You looked at them, that's where you went wrong." Scooping up Kai, she walked over to Cassia and sat down. "Actually, I doubt Valdis is Ryuu's type. She seems too sensible."

"Too sensible..?" Cassia grinned. "I guess that is one way to put it." She managed to get the two pups to lie down before they tried to jump up onto the table and play with Kai again.

The princess smiled at that, rolling up the parchment and getting it out of the way before something bad happened to it. With both Kai and the puppies around, any number of stains or

tears could result. "Selene wanted to talk to me about something while you and Nix were fussing over Kai this morning."

"Was it something good or something bad?" she asked, rocking Kai gently, trying to get the toddler to calm down.

Cassia winced as once again Kai managed to snag a strand of her hair and tugged, hard. "I'm going to go bald. I just know it." She managed to pull back her hair. "She wants to step down in the spring." She looked up at Moriko, nervous about how the news was going to be received.

Moriko cooed and gently unwrapped the child's small fingers from Cassia's dark locks. "Are you okay stepping up into the roll of Queen?"

She was more than a little nervous about it, which was surprising, considering she had known this day was coming her entire life. "Depends if I'd be doing it alone?" She bit her lip, staring up at Moriko.

Moriko was a little breathless at that. "Um, are you asking me...what are you asking?" She was hopeful it was about marriage, but perhaps it was too soon. They really hadn't been dating that long. "I'm not running away, I think Kai can handle you even if you're Queen. Isn't that right, Kai?" The toddler just said something in her baby language and clapped her hands.

The dark-haired woman licked her lips, palms suddenly damp. She really should have planned this a little better. There should have been candles or something like that. Dear Goddess she was going to mess this up. "I, umm, I'd like you to be my...ummm." Cassia's eyes widened in horror; why couldn't she think of the word. It was Rez something...raven, raisin? No, that was wrong.

Moriko just looked at her in question, "Friend, lover? Honey, I think we have those covered, and they're not going to stop just because you're Queen, although we might have a harder time sneaking time together."

Cassia laughed, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I'm messing this up." All right, what did Nix say? Right, get on the knee. The dark-haired woman got out of her chair and went to a knee in front of Moriko and Kai, almost tripping over a puppy as she did so. Ignoring the outraged yelp from the dog, she took a breath and looked up again. "Moriko, I want you to be my wife." There, that was easy. She could just avoid the whole raven, raisin, whatever it was thing.

Moriko sucked in a breath. "Cassia, are you sure?"

"I'm very sure." She smiled widely. "Does that mean yes?"

#####

Valdis slept on the floor of Ryuu's small house. Oddly, she hadn't tried to push any of Ryuu's buttons to get into the woman's bed. She merely accepted the pillow and the blankets and bedded

down on the floor next to the fireplace.

It was almost worth it to see Ryuu's confused look.

She had decided to stay with Ryuu instead of going home. Nobody was expecting her for another two days, might as well let them have their break. Besides, she was still dealing with the stillness inside her after severing the ties that bound with her father.

Ever so quietly, Ryuu slipped out of bed well after she had said goodnight to Valdis. Ever so carefully, the silver-haired woman stepped out into the living room, avoiding the squeaky boards near her bedroom door. There was no sign of movement from the figure by the fireplace.

Letting out a slow breath, she gently opened the door and stepped outside, closing the door carefully behind her. Barefoot, she started to walk through the snow, heading out of the town.

Valdis opened her eyes and stared at the door for a moment before a cocky grin sprouted on her face. In a flash, she was up and dressed. Silently, she followed sniffing to make sure she had the right trail.

The moon was high in the cold night sky. Even with spring on the way, the nights were still well below freezing. A hazy ring of thin clouds surrounded the nearly full moon. The world was shades of white and gray, with pits of black shadows. Ryuu walked out of the town, treading through the snow until she reached the bank of the river.

Once there, she stopped on the very edge of the ice. Arms spread outwards, Ryuu stared upwards at the moon, head tilted backwards. Quietly, she started to sing, her voice carrying across the water. The words weren't any that were from a human language.

Valdis hid in the shadows, her breath streaming out in white puffs of air. She listened, but understood nothing. It was beautiful. The woman had a wonderful singing voice. She was uncertain why Ryuu was out here. Was this some ritual to the Moon Goddess she was uncertain of?

The song trailed off, and for a moment, Ryuu stayed where she was, arms outspread. With what sounded like a hum of pleasure, she lowered her arms, and in one movement, took off the sleeping shirt she'd been wearing, tossing it aside. Naked, the woman started to walk across the ice, not pausing when she reached the open water in the center. With a leap, she jumped into it, diving deep under the surface of the Winderling.

That was unexpected. For a moment, Valdis stood rooted then began to run to the bank of the river. After the first couple of steps, she stopped herself. Ryuu, like her, was part god. She stood shifting nervously from foot to foot, waiting for the woman to emerge from the icy water.

The moonlight rippled off the water, disturbed by the current that swept past the open ice. Then the reflection was shattered as something large moved beneath the surface, causing the water to

bulge outwards, spilling up over the ice and onto the riverbank.

Then a moment later, a silver blur burst out of the water, showering water everywhere. The long, slender shape unfolded its wings, and with a flap, the large creature started to gain height, the moonlight turning the dragon's scales liquid silver.

Valdis watched in awe as she watched the silver dragon take flight. Then she had to grin, that was how the woman sometimes smelled of wind and clouds.

In quick, efficient movements, she stripped off her clothes, stacking them next to Ryuu's, and then started running after the dragon. One second she was a pale, naked woman running in the night, then in a blink of an eye, she was gone, leaving a large, white-furred canine.

The dragon gained, continuing to fly eastwards, away from the Winderling, and paralleling the mountains to the south. Every once in a while she would dip down until her wings nearly skimmed over the treetops, and then with a few flaps, she would gain height again. Miles flew by underneath her wings, a soft shadow cast by the moonlight racing along under her. Finally, she slowed and landed on the top of a towering cliff. Far below, the sound of waves crashing against the rocky walls of the cliff echoed.

If Valdis had any question of her godly heritage being gone, it was answered as she barely kept up with her own mile-eating lope. Though she was not as fast as the flying creature, she was still able to keep it in sight.

Why she followed, she didn't know at first. But as she ran through the northern woods, it became more about the joy of running. Bounding up the steep mountainside, her thick, muscular shoulders and legs powered her onward. She had no idea how far they had come, but this smelled of ice, wind, and water, so she was almost certain they were in the territories preferred by the boat builders of the north.

The dragon perched on the edge of the cliff, rearing back onto her hind legs, wings flared, she roared out to sea for the sheer pleasure of being able to. Then she dropped back down onto her front legs, turned, and settled to wait, vivid blue eyes watching the edge of the trees.

Valdis stood in the scant tree line, her ruff standing up, and she knew that, somehow, Ryuu knew she was there. Her tail drooped and tucked between her back legs, she wondered if she was in trouble.

The dragon snorted, the gust of air causing the snow to billow up in front of her nostrils as she spotted movement far back in the shadow of the trees.

Slowly, the large canine emerged from the shadows, slinking along towards the dragon.

The dragon watched, eyes a vivid spot of color on the otherwise monochromatic landscape.

"Valdis," the voice brushed across the other woman's thoughts.

The hound's great head hung, almost as if embarrassed. She tried for a few moments to respond back, before getting the hang of it. *"Yes?"*

"I thought you were asleep." The voice didn't sound annoyed, it sounded amused, if anything.

"Surprise," she joked. *"I'm a light sleeper, years of guard duty."*

"I'll have to remember that," Ryuu's voice laughed in her mind, even as the dragon huffed in amusement. *"I was going to save this form as a surprise."*

"I was, but not really. I already knew you smelled of flying." She chuckled, a grin appearing on her canine face. *"Okay, so I was surprised."*

"Glad I can surprise you once in a while." The dragon lifted her head, turning to glance down at the moon reflecting off the sea below. *"Next time, bring your clothes and I'll take you flying."*

The large head swung back around to look down at the large wolf, blue eyes narrowing suddenly. *"I didn't know you could change shape into a wolf."*

Vladis chuckled. Her shape was very wolf-like, but more rough and fierce. *"I'd say this is the template form for all canines, the first form. Calling me a wolf or dog wouldn't do it justice. Unfortunately, you're just a dragon."* The last part was said mockingly. Then quickly, she was darting into the trees and racing down the mountain with the parting shot of, *"See you at home."*

The dragon huffed, turning so that she could watch as the moon continued its path across the sky, until it would set eventually across the sea. *"See you there,"* her whispered thoughts followed Valdis as she ran.

#####

Valdis sat at Ryuu's kitchen table. She had thrown some logs in the fireplace and lit a few candles. On the small table she had two hot cups of tea.

She glanced around the house, which wasn't really meant for entertaining. That thought made her perk up a bit. She really wasn't happy with the idea of the woman entertaining a lot of other women. Although as she thought back on it, at Keshet's manor, she'd never noticed the woman with anybody. Well, truthfully, she'd barely noticed Ryuu at all. She pondered why that was.

The door opened and Ryuu stepped in, shutting it quickly before too much of the warmth of the room could escape. The silver-haired woman looked a little surprised to see the warrior sitting at the kitchen table. *"You're still awake."* She immediately scowled, always having hated it when people stated the obvious. *"I thought you would be asleep by now."*

"Yes, well, it's not everyday I get to see a beautiful woman turn into a dragon. I'm a little too keyed up to go back to sleep," she offered in explanation. She slid the still warm tea towards the woman. "I made tea."

Ryuu smiled, "Tea, perfect." She hadn't been wearing a coat, so she simply walked to the table and pulled over the other chair. "So you think I'm beautiful?" she asked, peering interestedly at the southerner as she took a sip of tea.

Valdis rolled her eyes. "Stop fishing. Yes, I find you beautiful. I've told you that on more than one occasion, not my fault you didn't believe me." She sipped her tea with a smirk, watching as Ryuu's almost went down the wrong pipe. "You really don't expect it when I'm so blunt, do you?"

"I must have spent too much time in the southern court," Ryuu recovered, shaking her head in amusement at herself for once again getting caught by Valdis' honesty. "I'm used to political back-speak."

"Mmm, yeah, can't say I miss that. I'll miss that about Keshet, she really couldn't censor her mouth." She gave a sad laugh.

Reaching across the table, Ryuu gently clasped the other woman's hand in silent support. "I miss her too. I tried not to be seen in court, or to get involved, but it was hard not to like them."

Valdis lightly squeezed Ryuu's hand back. "Why are you trying so hard not to be noticed?" She didn't understand that, the woman was obviously very smart, and beautiful, why hide.

"Hard to explain how I don't age." Ryuu gave a wry smile, leaving her hand where it was while picking up her teacup with her other hand.

"I see." There was a sinking feeling in her gut at that answer. "I'll miss you. You, I'm sure, will be happy to get away from the annoying warrior."

"Come with me?" Ryuu asked, hopefully, as she looked up from their hands. "There is so much to see and experience throughout the lands. We wouldn't have to stay away forever. We could come back...eventually." ...When the people who had known them had passed away.

Valdis raised Ryuu's hand and kissed it. "Maybe, we'll see if they're ready for me to leave when you're ready to go. I can't leave them defenseless against the mysterious, what's to come."

It wasn't an outright rejection, so Ryuu was going to take it. "Good."

She gently set the hand back down and started blowing out candles. "Finish your tea and go to bed, you have budding writers waiting for you, and I have one more full day of nothing to try and survive."

"You could always give them a surprise exam or inspection." Ryuu stood, grinning.

"I could, but I've pushed them hard, and they deserve the break. If I push them too hard too fast, they'll resent me and their training, and then we'll get no soldiers at all." She stepped in front of Ryuu then leaned over, their faces separated by a millimeter of air; and blew out the last candle, bathing the room in the darkness of night.

As she leaned back, she smelled Ryuu, sniffing the scents of wind and clouds, and sighed happily. Valdis placed a kiss under her ear, then her neck, and finally on Ryuu's chin.

"Is this okay or am I insinuating again?"

The smaller woman sighed in pleasure and leaned closer until their bodies touched. "You could insinuate even better if you came to bed with me." She coughed a bit. "Umm, I mean, it's warmer in the bed."

Valdis laughed. "It's always warmer in bed. I just wanted to make sure you want me there. You send a lot of mixed signals, but the fact you didn't gobble me up into your dragon belly, I think says a lot of how much I'm wearing you down."

Ryuu stepped back, eyes narrowed at the taller woman. "I send mixed signals because you're annoying."

"Some people call it charm," Valdis said, stepping forward, enjoying their closeness.

Ryuu closed her eyes and leaned her head against a muscular shoulder. "How about you just come to bed? Just to sleep," she clarified, even as her hands stroked down the warrior's back.

"I can just sleep with a woman. Most of my reputation is exaggerated. I never, ever kiss and tell. I always have the greatest respect for the women I...er...spend time with." She sighed happily as Ryuu's head rested on her shoulder, and slowly, her hands came around and stroked her back. "Come on...let's go sleep, running around as a dog always wears me out. I can't imagine what it feels like as a dragon."

Ryuu mumbled something that sounded like exhausting but fun. The bed wasn't far away, one of the few benefits of having a house that wasn't very big. "Do I even want to know why you have a reputation at all, then?"

"While I may have respect, sometimes the women I spend time with, it turns out some of them don't. Or gossip starts when someone leaves my rooms at odd hours. It is what it is, but I'm not like that." She pulled back, looking at Ryuu's eyes, hoping the woman believed her.

Blue eyes studied the warrior intently for a moment, before Ryuu yawned. "All right," she simply said, sliding under the blankets after tossing off the shirt she'd been wearing. "You should stop hanging around with those women, then."

"Maybe, I will," she said softly into Ryuu's hair after she had crawled into the small bed. Thinking that for as long as Ryuu had been around, she hadn't really wanted to hang around with other women. Well, that one in the mining camp, but she'd been in a weird place, mentally.

The bed wasn't that large, so they didn't have much of a choice when it came to being close to one another. It was nice, Ryuu admitted to herself, to be able to hold someone who knew what she was. Actually, Ryuu grinned in the dark pulling the covers a bit higher over them, it was nice to hold someone. It had been a long, long time.

Valdis just nuzzled the back of Ryuu's neck burying her nose in her silver hair, smiling as she smelled winds and clouds. This was one of those things that had changed inside her. Gone was the swirling vortex of raw emotion that often left her incapable of slowing down and just enjoying richer emotions. "This is nice."

The smaller woman shifted closer, reaching behind her to grab one of Valdis' hands and pull it over her body in an invitation to hold her. "I have to admit, I never pictured you as somebody who would curl up in bed," she whispered.

Valdis chuckled. "I'm finding it's a new thing I'm willing to try. In fact, I'm enjoying it a lot. I'm assuming it's the woman I'm with." Contrary to her normal nature, she didn't try to roam her hand any lower or any higher, willing to let Ryuu navigate the pace of whatever they were doing. She wasn't really sure.

"How's this for another new experience, sleeping the night with a woman and not trying to get in her pants." Ryuu let out a sigh of pleasure and closed her eyes, enjoying the warm body pressed up against her back.

"This isn't bad. Getting into someone's pants is more fun, but this is quickly working its way up to fun experiences." She kissed the back of Ryuu's neck. "Sh, sleep now. We'll work on getting into your pants later," she said jokingly.

A soft mumble was her only answer from the sleeping woman.

#####

Valdis yawned so wide for a second, the only thing visible was the dangly thing in the back of her throat. Then her jaw shut with a light click of her teeth hitting each other.

She stared suspiciously at Ryuu's small potbelly stove.

She had unwound her body from that of the scribe's, which had been painful, because Ryuu had gone to bed naked. The warrior had been tempted to stare at the pale, naked flesh that had been exposed all morning. Good sense finally sent her from the bed. She had snuck out and bought

some stuff for breakfast. Although cooking, let alone cooking to impress a woman, was a foreign concept to her.

She threw a couple of logs into the stove and slowly blew on the faint embers until they sparked back to life. Rustling through the cookware, she found a small skillet, and lifting it up in the faint light, she stared at it trying to remember if she had seen Moriko use something similar when she cooked eggs. With a sigh she realized how much she really did take advantage of the soft-hearted young woman, although she did her fair share of chores around the house. But the young woman did all the cooking and most of the taking care of Kai.

She set the skillet on the table and held a hand over the top of the stove, checking to see if it was hot enough yet to cook. Glancing over her shoulder, she checked her ingredients. Eggs - check, fresh milk - check, one fresh from the oven loaf of bread - check, cheese - check.

That, she hoped, would be a good breakfast. Determining the stove wasn't hot enough yet, she added another log, and wandered around the small room. After one quick circuit, she realized there was nothing homey in Ryuu's house, at all, nothing personal.

A knock at the door drew her out of her thoughts, and without thinking, she opened the front door, grinning slightly at the shocked look on Cassia's face. "Close your mouth, Princess, you'll swallow a fly."

"Valdis..?" The woman stared at the woman who had opened the door for her. She'd been expecting to have Ryuu open the door this morning. Instead, there was an amused looking warrior in the doorway.

"It hasn't been five days yet," was the first thing that Cassia thought to say, worried that Valdis had somehow managed to be waiting to ambush her at Ryuu's place and make her run. She'd been enjoying the time with Moriko, even if the other woman did have the annoying habit of getting up before sunrise.

"No it hasn't," Valdis said with a laugh. "I can tell I've been missed." She ushered the princess into the house and shut the door. "Well, I'm certain you're not here to see me, let me go see if Ryuu is up."

Cassia stared in astonishment as the warrior slipped into the small bedroom. She would have to tell Moriko that maybe the attention wasn't as one sided as they'd thought it was.

The southerner slipped into the darkened bedroom and leaned over the still slumbering woman. "Hey, beautiful," she whispered into an ear. "Cassia's here to see you."

The sleeping woman made a groaning sound as she stretched, blinking sleepily up at the woman who'd awoken her. "Mmm..." She couldn't resist leaning up and slowly kissing her, smiling, still half awake. "I can't believe I slept that long," she stated when she finally sat upright.

Valdis was so stunned at the kiss she went from her awkward half-crouched position next to the bed to her knees. "Morning," she managed, still somewhat dazed.

Wrapping herself in a robe from next to the bed, Ryuu grinned at the kneeling woman. "Come on...let's go see what the princess wants." She pulled Valdis to her feet and stepped out into the small main room.

The dark-haired woman looked up from where she'd been watching the flames consume the logs in the fireplace, a mischievous smile on her face as she spotted them both.

"So this is what it means to go up north for a few days?"

The southerner coughed, and looked at Ryuu to see if the woman was uncomfortable at all. "Well, I decided to come back early, and to be nice, I stayed with Ryuu so you all could have a few more days off. But if you want, we can go for a run."

Cassia held up both hands. "Oh no, no, don't let me disturb your vacation." Ryuu watched them both with amusement. Shaking her head she moved to the small stove.

"Have you eaten already?"

Cassia nodded, "Moriko made breakfast."

Ryuu turned back to the stove, sorting out what Valdis had brought back from the market.

Valdis blushed slightly at all the breakfast food sitting out waiting to be turned into breakfast, so much for a romantic breakfast in bed. "I, was...um...going to attempt to make us food," she finally admitted.

"I'll get to the point and leave you two to your..." she glanced at Valdis with a wide smile, "...breakfast," making sure to stay on the other side of the room from the warrior, just in case. The princess became more serious.

"I wanted to tell Ryuu, but actually, it's good that you're here also, Valdis. Selene's going to formally step down in the springtime." She hesitated a bit then continued, daring both of them to say anything. "And I've asked Moriko to be my wife."

None of it was very surprising, though it slightly hurt to realize that Valdis wouldn't be needed in Moriko's and Kai's life for that much longer. She forced a happy smile to her face. "That's great. Did the deer herder pass out when you asked her? You go away for a few days and people become Queens and get married," she joked.

With a knowing look at the bluffing warrior, Ryuu slipped her arm around the taller woman's waist and gave her a slight squeeze. "Congratulations, Cassia, your parents place a lot of faith in you. And I already know that they like Moriko and Kai."

There was nothing shy about the thankful smile that Cassia gave them both. "She didn't pass out, Valdis, although it was close. It's not going to happen until spring, though."

"A spring wedding will be lovely. Congratulations, again. You two were meant for each other." Valdis reached over and took Cassia's hand, squeezing it gently for a second. "You'll be a wonderful Queen."

That wasn't a typical Valdis answer; it was far too honest and without any jokes attached to it. Both Ryu and Cassia looked at her in surprise at that. "Umm, thank you." Cassia blinked. "I'll see you later. Don't forget, we have another day before you can start torturing us again."

"Fine, I'll wait another day to torture you. Now go have fun with your deer herder." She wondered briefly how long she should wait to move herself into a room at the Inn. Moriko would never ask her to, but the house would get crowded quickly.

After Cassia had left, Ryu gave the other woman another squeeze and started to walk back towards the bedroom. She paused at door to look over her shoulder at the warrior. "Weren't you going to prepare breakfast in bed for me?"

"Um," Valdis blinked. "Yes, yes I was." But it was a little scarier now. If she screwed up, Ryu was awake to know.

The robe that Ryu had been wearing fell to the floor as the naked woman climbed back into the now cooler bed. "Don't let me stop you, then."

Hesitantly, she got up and approached the stove, grabbing the skillet, butter, and eggs. Staring at the stove, she said, "No funny business."

From the bedroom, Ryu kept talking. "Things are going to get interesting in the spring, I think."

Juggling the food, she managed to get the butter melted and cracked the eggs. She frowned as one shell broke apart into the egg. Looking over her shoulder, she quickly dumped it into the garbage and tried again. "Yep, looks like I'll be moving back into a room at the Inn. I doubt the newlyweds will want me poking around their business."

Happier that this egg had proven less difficult she poked it with a wooden egg flipper thingy that she'd seen Moriko use.

A soft laugh came from the bedroom at that. "We'll have to see about that. I doubt that Moriko or Cassia want you going too far, considering the assassination attempt on Kai. Besides, that isn't what I meant."

She flipped the egg and frowned as the yolk broke. With a sigh, she decided that was hers. "Well, what did you mean, then?"

"Would you let me get away with saying something cryptic right now?"

"Do you want me to let you get away with it?" Valdis asked in return.

Ryuu laughed, staring up at the ceiling above her. "Not really."

Valdis laughed and flipped, what was now her egg, onto a plate before trying again. As the next egg cooked she sliced some cheese. "So, just to get this straight, you want me to push you to be less cryptic?"

The silver-haired woman considered her answer to that, pulling the covers up around her a bit tighter. "It's hard for me to give straight answers sometimes, must come from my mother's side of things."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask who Ryuu's mother was, but she let it go. It didn't matter. What did matter was that Ryuu's mother had a beautiful daughter that Valdis loved... That made her thoughts crash. After a moment of frozen panic, she shook it off, and flipped the egg cooking in the skillet perfectly.

"So what's this cryptic thing you want to try on me so I can come in there and force the non-cryptic truth out of you?"

"The darkness is beginning to gather in the south. The spring should bring it to our doorstep," Ryuu answered, charmed at the way Valdis was talking in circles.

Valdis snorted in amusement. "Honey, I must be learning Ryuu speak, because that made perfect sense to me." With a little flourish that sadly no one but herself could see, she flipped the egg onto a plate and sliced up some more cheese, as well as sawing a few slices from the dark bread they had up here in the north. Juggling two plates and two glasses of milk, she made her way to the bedroom.

Blue eyes watched her enter. "You called me honey," she said in a subdued voice.

"I did?" Valdis' face took on a look of bewilderment as she thought back. "I, ah, guess that I did. That was probably a bit much, I'm sorry." She blew out a nervous breath. "You still want breakfast? You want me to leave?" She shifted nervously from foot to foot, wondering if she had just screwed everything up.

Rolling her eyes, Ryuu reached out and grabbed the other woman's arm to keep her from running away, letting the blankets drop as she did so. "Stop, I liked it. Now how about you come here and help keep me warm?"

That she understood. "Okay." She handed Ryuu her breakfast and set hers on a shelf where it

balance precariously. And with a practiced carelessness, pulled her shirt over her head and undid the ties to her pants, letting them slide down her legs to the floor, leaving her only in her thick, woolen socks.

The wound from the mining pick stood out on her shoulder as a fresh, angry, red scar. She grabbed her plate and jumped into the small bed. "If I'm going to be sleeping here, with you, we need to get you a bigger bed," she said and started eating her food.

A silver eyebrow arched at that comment, and Ryuu paused between bites of her eggs. "So you think you're going to keep sleeping with me?" She had to work hard not to grin as she asked the question.

Valdis rolled her eyes: that was a silly question. "Yes." She went back to eating.

The other woman laughed, turning back to her breakfast. "Then I guess I'm going to have to start charging you some sort of rent like they do at the Inn."

"Rent?" she sputtered. Setting her empty plate down, she looked at Ryuu with puppy dog eyes. "Why would you charge me rent?"

"Well, it wouldn't necessarily have to be coins." Ryuu met the warrior's eyes with an innocent expression. "I might consider trade or services."

Valdis brightened. "Um, what kind of trade or services, I can be rather handy? And since you didn't spit your breakfast out, I can assume it was tasty; proving my point of handiness."

"Cooking is an acceptable trade." Ryuu leaned closer until she was practically pressed up against the muscular woman's shoulder, lips just grazing her ear lobe. "But I had some other ideas in mind."

"Really..? I'd be open to hearing about those ideas." She shivered at the touch, but waited patiently, a grin tugging at her lips.

Ryuu purposefully moved her and Valdis ' tray of food off the bed, then moved back to her position from a moment before, licking her lips. "Well, I think I'd have to show you some of them."

The grin finally blossomed on her lips. "Show me, huh?"

Ryuu's grin turned into a sexy smile. "Yes," she whispered, finally giving in and pressing up against the warm body in bed with her. "Time to earn your rent," she whispered, before pulling them both under the blankets.

Valdis laughed, but easily followed Ryuu's lead. Once under the covers, her arms wrapped around Ryuu. "Told you, you found me irresistible." She punctuated the statement with kiss.

"Shut up," was the answer as Ryuu found more important things to do with her lips.

#####

"You sure you don't mind Kai coming with me today?" Cassia watched Moriko getting ready for the day. The other woman had gotten up earlier to take care of the animals as usual, but Cassia had managed to coax her back into bed, without her clothes, the way Cassia liked her. Now that Kai was up, they were both getting ready for the day.

"Are you positive you can handle her? She's crawling fast, and now she can pull herself up things and knock stuff over. I can take her with me to the Inn, and she can play with Tamera, Keasly's young one," Moriko said, standing and stretching a second before grabbing Kai, who had pulled herself up the table leg and was now standing, wobbly, trying to grab a hunk of cheese. "I prove my point."

Kai squealed in disappointment, as the cheese was now out of grasp.

Cassia scooped up the disappointed child, swinging her up into the air and catching her on the way down to delighted laughter. Kai promptly tried to grab onto her hair, which Cassia now kept bound back in a braid for just these instances. "Well," she frowned, "I wanted to show her the cathedral. But I guess it might not be good to have her in a construction area."

Moriko lifted the now giggling child out of Cassia's arms. "I tell you what. I'll take a lunch today and Kai and I will both come over for an hour and look at this thing you've named cathedral."

That sounded more than reasonable, and Cassia leaned close to steal a kiss, wincing as a small hand managed to grab onto her ear. "I'll see you then." She pulled on her coat, grinned at them both, and headed out into the relatively warm spring day.

Moriko whistled for Rugor then she, Kia, and the puppy started down the muddy path to the Inn, following at a much slower pace. "I can't wait for all this thaw to dry out," she mumbled to herself.

An old woman stepped out into the path in front of them. "Moriko?"

Moriko paused. "Mother, um, you remember Kai." She was startled, but quickly regained her composure.

Rugor went berserk barking at the stranger. "Rugor, heel..!" The puppy gave one last bark then snorted, going to his mistress' side.

The older woman took a hesitant step closer, stopping when the puppy gave a low growl from Moriko's side. "I haven't had a chance to meet her yet."

"I wasn't certain I wanted you to."

The older woman winced, but said nothing in response to that. "Can I meet her now?"

Moriko frowned for a moment then stepped forward. "Yuri, I'd like you to meet Kai. Kai this is my occasional mother." The toddler gurgled then grabbed a chunk of Yuri's hair and pulled.

Yuri winced at the hearty tug. "She's going to be a strong one." The older woman looked uncomfortable standing there. "I just wanted to tell you that Pax and I are getting back together. We're trying to work on our problems. Who knows, we might actually get somewhere."

She gave her daughter a fond look, staring at her face for a long moment to memorize it. "You have your life here." Then she turned and started to walk down the path away from her.

Moriko paused. "Mother, wait." She wasn't certain how she felt about this. "I'm happy you two are working on things. Are you going to try acting like an adult?"

The older woman stopped, thinking for a moment then shrugged. "I don't know," she answered honestly then grinned, "one thing at a time."

Moriko laughed at her mother, a first in a long time. "Um, how about we try having breakfast at the Inn?"

Her mother looked uncertain, then straightened her shoulders and nodded, "One step at a time, right?"

Moriko nodded, "But I'm proud of you two for trying again. And since none of us live at home anymore, I know you're doing it for yourselves, not us kids."

#####

Moriko walked into the kitchen of the Inn and washed her hands and face in the dishwater. She smiled at Keasly. "Kai and I are taking lunch. Be back in an hour or so." The Innkeeper just nodded and went back to making bread dough.

She scooped Kai out of the playpen they had erected on the floor for Kai and Tamara to play in, keeping the rambunctious toddlers out of everybody else's way.

"Ready to go see Cassia?" she asked, blowing a raspberry on the Kai's cheek. The toddler just squealed and clapped her hands. "I'll take that as a yes."

Exiting the Inn, Rugor waited outside, his tail wagging furiously when he spotted his mistress, and easily fell in line behind her as they walked towards the large structure. As they passed through the open market, she spied Valdis looking perplexed at a stand of fresh cut flowers and fruit. The warrior was definitely looking at the flowers. She waved hello and the warrior blushed.

and sheepishly waved back. That was odd, and Moriko decided to remember to talk to Cassia about it later.

Now that she thought about it, Valdis hadn't been home a lot, recently. "Wonder what's up with Auntie Valdis?" she murmured in Kai's hair.

The building they were walking towards was huge to Moriko, but Cassia had assured her that the castle was going to be bigger.

Construction on the actual structure was mostly finished. The tall building soared over the surrounding homes, the top of its dome the highest point on the island. Scores of people were hard at work on the inside, sculpting stone, placing windows, and carving wood.

The interior would be a work of art when it was finished.

"Hey," she said as she noticed Cassia bent over a large parchment, her braid winding down her neck and over her shoulder, that Moriko found extremely sexy.

The basic structure of the cathedral was finished. The majority of the work was now being done inside, which was fine with Cassia, since it was muddy outside now that the spring thaw was on. She looked up and smiled widely when she spotted two of her favorite people. "Hey," she answered, straightening up and stretching her back. "Is it lunch time already?"

"Yep, and we are here, as promised, to tour this honking huge pile of stone."

"Don't you listen to your mother Kai; this is more than just some pile of stones." Cassia gave Moriko a mock glare.

Moriko looked down sheepishly. "Okay, so I could have picked a better way to phrase that."

A raised eyebrow was her only answer. "Come on, I have the perfect spot for us to take a little picnic then I can give you a tour if you want?"

"Sounds perfect... Bet you didn't make time for breakfast this morning," Moriko chided, coming up next to Cassia to follow her.

"That's because somebody kept me in bed and I was late." A nearby worker looked up from the bench she was carving at that. Cassia winced. She hadn't intended to say that quite so loudly. "Over here." She hurried them away from the laughing woman towards a staircase that led up to one of the balconies that would overlook the central area of the dome.

"Kept you in bed," Moriko said with a chuckle. "I believe I was up and ready to start my day when someone..." She glanced down at Kai then covered the toddler's ears. "When someone convinced me to get naked and back into bed."

Cassia gave her a wicked grin, "Seems to me you didn't need that much convincing." A rough, wooden bench had been set up on the balcony, and food was already laid out. Scaffolding blocked some of the view of the dome above them.

Moriko uncovered Kai's ears and laughed. "True, you turn me into a big old pushover." She stepped onto the balcony and her eyes widened. "Wow."

"What do you think?" Cassia watched the other woman anxiously, hoping that she liked it. This was the first time that Moriko had come to see it since the dome was finished.

"I think it's amazing. How did you know it would work?" Moriko said in awe, slowly turning around in a circle.

The princess picked up Kai and twirled her around before starting the process of seeing which of the foods the little one was actually going to eat this time.

"Some of the books that Ryuu brought with her had descriptions of how to build an arch. She explained how we could make a dome using the same sort of principles. It took a lot of small models though." She liked it a lot better than the original plan, which had been to make a series of terraced flat roofs. This was so much more elegant in her opinion.

Moriko sat down next to Cassia and Kai, laughing as the toddler stuck some food in her mouth that she didn't like. "It's beautifully designed. Plus having the curved dome will prevent the snow from building up on top, which could add a dangerous amount of extra weight." She leaned over and snuck a kiss. "You're so smart it's down right sexy," she whispered before picking up one of the small winter apples and taking a bite.

The dark-haired woman blushed at the compliment. "I'm glad you like it." Kai rapidly got her attention back by spitting out a bit of the mashed beets. "I don't blame you, kid, I never liked those either." She offered the child a different food. "How are things going today at the Inn?"

"The Inn is fine, nothing exciting. Alcens poop and I clean it up." She paused for a moment, a gentle down turning of her lips that wasn't quite a frown. "My day has been kind of odd. I ran into my mother while I was leaving the house. She came all the way down here tell me she and my Muanya are going to try again." She bit her lip in thought, still not sure how she felt about the early morning meeting.

Cassia looked up from the fair-haired toddler she was trying to coax into having some mashed apples, looking a bit worried at that. "What happened?"

"It was a good meeting, nothing bad happened. It's just odd having her back in my life. She was really a horrible mother; it was more like having another sister sometimes. That's not what I needed or wanted. I sometimes have to wonder about the Goddess, that she decided it was a good idea to let my mothers have children in the first place."

At Cassia's worried face, she corrected herself. "They weren't mean or abusive, and sometimes it was a lot of fun, but I did most of the mothering growing up, and that's something they should have been doing."

The dark-haired woman nodded slowly. "I keep forgetting to ask, where are your sisters these days? I'm just wondering if we should invite them to come here for the ceremony."

Moriko brightened. "Oh, yes. I'd love to see them all in one place at the same time. Um, three of them live up north; they're way into mining. Well, I take that back. According to Mia, Goldy, she's the baby, is into wine making. Marianna lives down south at Abnoa pass. She fell in love with some hunter and stalked her all the way back down south." She had to smile as she thought of Marianna. As the middle child, she just had to be different.

"I'd like to meet them." The concept of having sisters was one that she'd always wondered about. What would it be like to not be the only child? "I think Kai should have sisters," she found herself saying, then froze, spoon halfway to Kai's mouth, as she realized she'd said that out loud.

Moriko just smiled happily. "I think she should have sisters, too. I figured we would, at some point. Kai's not really northern blood and I'm not certain if everyone would be okay with her ruling, and she may not want to. I know you didn't for a while. I just figured we should have a couple, and hopefully one of them will think ruling an ice box will be fun." She reached over and sliced the hard, yellow cheese and held a sliver up to Cassia's lips.

"Are your moms okay with us getting married? I wasn't even sure you told them yet. Since nobody ever came around asking me about these mysterious Rezan tasks."

Cassia relaxed as she realized Moriko wasn't upset with her little slip, and took the sliver of cheese, chewing it thoughtfully. "Actually, I think they're up to something. Nix has been rubbing her hands together gleefully anytime I mention the ceremony, and Selene gets that smile that means she's planning something evil."

The blonde's face went a little pale. "Should I be worried? They like me, right? They told me they liked me."

It was Cassia's turn to reassure. Smiling, she patted Moriko's arm. "Don't worry. They do like you. I think they just have to make sure that everyone is happy that they followed this Rezan thing."

Some of the color returned to Moriko's face. "Being royalty is harder than I thought. Well, love, I promise to do my best by you." She leaned in and fed Cassia another bit of cheese, and followed it with a kiss. She leaned back and ate some of the wonderful food Cassia had gotten them. After a moment, her eyes went wide as she remembered Valdis in the market. "Hey, I have to tell you something weird. Valdis was in the market looking stressed out over flowers."

It was a close thing, but Cassia managed to avoid choking on the cheese. "What, flowers?" That was a hard image to picture. Then she remembered the last time that she'd seen Valdis and grinned. "Bet I know who it is that she wants to bring flowers to."

Both of Moriko's eyebrows rose in question, "Really? I can't see Valdis ever being serious enough about a woman to get her flowers. Although, she hasn't been home a lot at night, and you guys are training four times a week, instead of six, like before." Moriko felt bad, she hadn't even noticed the changes in her friend.

"I went over to Ryuu's to tell her about us and Selene stepping down in the spring." She grinned. "Want to guess who was cooking breakfast for her?"

Moriko's forehead wrinkled in thought for a second. "No way, I didn't even think Valdis could cook."

"I think she's been holding out on you." Cassia grimaced as she got a small handprint of food on her cheek from a laughing Kai. "I think you do this better than I do."

Moriko laughed at Cassia's expression. "You're doing fine, love. You just need some practice." She reached out and tickled Kai's belly, gaining the toddler's attention. Happy to have a new playmate, the child crawled quickly over to the stable mistress, with Moriko scooping her up onto her lap, not minding the sticky child handprints on her already mucked-up clothes.

"I guess I'll just have to spend a lot more time around the two of you," she answered, using a napkin to clean off her cheek. "So you're all right with your mother's visit?" She asked again, just wanting to be certain.

"Yeah, I think so. It's odd that she wants to be close now, but I'm hoping she's sincere." Moriko shook her head. Time would tell with her mother.

#####

Valdis had thought it fairly straightforward. She'd seen other women do it. You lo...like someone a whole lot, you get them some flowers. But it seemed that you just didn't go into the forest and pick some, no, no, no. You got her exotic flowers from places other than where you currently were.

So simple go to the market and get some. But the vendor kept asking what her lady friend's favorite color was, did she have allergies, and on, and on, which made her feel lousy because she didn't know the answers to the questions.

The vendor smiled hopefully at the warrior, a little nervous at the more than slightly annoyed expression on the older woman's face. "Do you know what kind of flower she likes?" the young woman asked, helpfully.

Valdis shook her head slowly, "Um, actually...no." Actually, now she wasn't sure if Ryuu even liked flowers.

The vendor flicked her long blonde braid over her shoulder, frowning in thought. "We have some very nice dried flowers from the south, if you'd rather give her those?"

But she had to get the woman something, because, because she had acted weird this morning. They had spent almost all of yesterday having fiercely, passionate sex, except for the end, when it had turned soft, gentle, and nearly heartbreaking. This morning she had woken up in Ryuu's arms and felt content, happy, and like she never wanted to leave.

Which had prompted her to have a mini-freak out, as Moriko would say. "Um, what was that, dried flowers?"

The young woman nodded hopefully. "They're very nice," she pointed to the bundles that were hanging from some of the rafters.

She frowned then sighed in discontent. She had no idea. "Yes, they are nice. And they'll last a long time, won't they? Which tells her I plan to last for a long time and be with her, right?" She looked at the woman hopefully.

Sensing a sale, the young woman nodded again and reached up to pull down the largest of the bundles. "This one has dried roses in it. They smell good." She offered the bundle for Valdis to smell.

The warrior sniffed, "Um, okay, I'll take," she looked sheepish, "however, much it takes to say sorry I'm a dumbass."

"I'll wrap it for you," the saleswoman said with a wink, "in something pretty." She had just the right thing.

For the first time all day Valdis brightened in relief. Paying the woman, she quickly left, headed back towards Ryuu's.

Once there, however, she hesitated.

Shifting from foot to foot, she stared at Ryuu's door, wondering if she should knock or go right in, or maybe she wasn't even home, maybe she was teaching reading and writing.

"Valdis?" a familiar voice called out from just in back of her, as Ryuu walked down the small path to her front door.

Valdis whirled around and tried to hide the package behind her back. "Ryuu, you're, you're here, um, hi." For the first time ever, she felt her palms sweat.

The silver-haired woman paused, eyeing the warrior quizzically. "Where else would I be?" She stepped around Valdis to open the door.

"I wasn't sure, if you would be, thought you might be out teaching reading and writing, and all that good stuff."

"I left my students with some reading to finish." It was more than a little reading, and should take them at least several days to finish. "I wasn't sure you'd be back after this morning." She still wasn't sure what had exactly happened.

"Yeah, about that..." She followed Ryuu hesitantly into the woman's modest home. "I'm sorry I was a little...well, weird this morning." She brought the wrapped flowers out from behind her back.

Ryuu crossed her arms, eyeing the dried flowers. "So to tell me you were sorry you're giving me dead things?" She arched an eyebrow in question.

The warrior eyed the flowers, her face going a little red in embarrassment. "I-I-I..." She stammered, uncertain what to say. "I didn't think of it like that when I bought them." Her shoulders drooped a little, and mentally beat herself up, wondering what she was thinking. There was no way she could be any good at a relationship.

Relenting, Ryuu stepped closer, breathing in the nice smell of the flowers before kissing Valdis. "Thank you for the flowers. I was kidding, I like them. I didn't feel like letting you off the hook that easily."

Valdis let out a breath and perked up a little. "I'm really sorry about this morning. Please believe me."

Taking the flowers from the other woman, she started to look for a good place to put them. "Want to tell me what happened?" She had a guess, but she wasn't sure.

Valdis scratched her head and shut the front door, realizing she'd left it wide open. "I'm, well, I've..." She frowned for a second trying to find the right words for what happened.

Finding a pitcher that more or less resembled a vase, Ryuu put the dry flowers into them to make a nice arrangement. Then she turned to look at Valdis, folding her arms over her chest and waiting for what she was sure was going to be a great explanation.

"Because last thing I knew, we were having some very nice sex, then all of a sudden, you bolted out of here like a southern razorback was after you."

She sat down and rubbed her hands vigorously through her hair, "Arghh! I'm not sure what happened. One minute you're very pleasantly wearing me out, the next, I'm lying there holding

you, realizing I've never really wanted to be with anyone holding them. It was nice and wonderful, and it's never felt that way before. It's never felt like I never wanted to leave. I got scared. What if you did want to leave? What if..." She sighed. "Just what if."

Ryuu sighed and moved closer, wrapping her arms around the tense woman and leaning against her. "No matter what, I won't leave you unless you want me to. I promise that." The smaller woman rubbed her hands up and down Valdis' back, feeling the tension there. "Just because I can't stay here forever, doesn't mean I will leave you."

Valdis nodded, relaxing a bit. It wasn't a perfect answer, but it wasn't a perfect world. "I'm sorry. I know what I did was shitty, but I'm trying to make up for it. I don't know how long you've been around, but I'm still just a baby at all this."

The shorter woman continued to stroke Valdis' back, trying to relax the muscles she could feel there. "I'm older than you, but not that old, considering the possibilities."

The warrior nodded and slowly relaxed. "I've never...I've never really wanted to wake up with the same woman before, day after day. I woke up this morning and there wasn't any place else I wanted to be. I had a little freak out. I really like you, Ryuu." She wasn't quite up for using love, not yet. Time would tell, and she hoped she was up for it. But being with Ryuu settled her, making her not want to go crashing down a hill of enemies, sword in hand. She used to live for the thrill of battle, now, most days, she didn't want to get out of bed and leave Ryuu.

Twining their fingers together, the silver-haired woman started towards the bedroom. "That is one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me," she smiled, letting go of the last bit of anger from the morning. "Just don't leave again without letting me know first, all right?" Her hands slipped under the other woman's shirt, a gleam in her eye.

Valdis grinned a little, relieved she was forgiven. "Next time I have a freak out over my internal issues, I'll wake you up, promise." She kissed Ryuu, lingering to nibble on her lips. Leaning back slightly, she asked, "Can we have make-up sex now?"

Lips curling into a smile, Ryuu slid her hands up the front of the taller woman's shirt. "What do you think?"

"I'm thinking that's a yes." She picked up the scribe, and in few quick steps, was dumping them both on to the bed. "For once I'm really happy your place is too small."

Laughter filled the small house once again as Ryuu drew the other woman down to her.

#####

Cassia opened the door to the house, humming happily to herself. It had been a productive day, and she was finding that she loved it when things got done. The bright sunlight outside just added to her feeling of happiness as she closed the door behind her with a practiced backwards bump

with her rear then took a step to the side to avoid the majority of the dog's happy greeting.

"You'd think you haven't seen me in weeks," she muttered, scratching the much larger dog behind the ear until he collapsed against her legs in ecstasy.

"Hmph, some guard dog you are." She laughed at his antics, stepping over him to go in search of the house's occupants. "Anyone here?" the princess called out, pausing at the desk in the corner to drop off her pile of papers from the day's work.

A giggling Kai toddled out of the kitchen, her big head guiding her unsteady steps. Her chubby arms reached up at the dark-haired woman. "Mommy, mommy, mommy," she shouted the one word she knew.

Reaching down, Cassia swept up the little girl, throwing her up into the air then catching her on the way down. "Hello, Princess." She laughed, hugging her tight. "Now where is your other mommy?"

Moriko emerged from the kitchen, chuckling. "I'd feel jealous that she calls you mommy if she didn't call the dogs, Aclens, and the flowers mommy as well." She wiped her hands on a cloth and leaned against the doorframe, smiling, "How was ruling the empire today?"

Easily ignoring the small hands grabbing her ear and tugging, Cassia carried the squirming girl to Moriko. "The arrangements are all set for the ceremony. I think Willow's getting a laugh out of making me go through all of this after all the trouble I caused her when I was younger."

"Are you sure you want to do this? Only one more week of freedom, then you're going to have the responsibilities of both ruling the north, and having a family. Ruling the family isn't an option," she said with an easy grin. Walking over, she scooped the small child out of Cassia's arms and headed to the kitchen. "I made your favorite."

Licking her lips, the dark-haired woman followed after her. "The venison stew, with that good bread of yours?" she asked, fixating on the last bit first, hopefully. The dog trailed along with her, hopeful as well for some of the leftovers. "Seems like a good time to do both at once. You're not getting rid of me if that's what you're asking."

Moriko laughed and Kai laughed as well, although the small child didn't know what was funny. "I don't want to get rid of you at all. And yes, I caught a deer today, so you, my lovelies, are getting stew as well as bread."

She eased Kai into the special chair Nix had helped her make for the child so she could sit at the table at a proper height. Once the child was secured, she grabbed some bowls and dished out stew for her and Cassia. Then after setting the bowls on the table did she gingerly ease into a chair. Two nights ago she had completed the Rezan task for the clan of Fire, a test of strength, not all that surprising. She had preferred the Waverunner clan's test of wits more. Unfortunately, she still had two more tasks to go.

"There was a little bit of a surprise today, though." Cassia took her seat, smiling, as she smelled the delicious smell on the air. "Ryuu has a test for you."

Moriko groaned and her ribs twinged in sympathy, still not over the last test. "I can't wait. That woman is evil, albeit a more relaxed evil person since Valdis started sleeping there most nights."

The dark-haired woman helped bring the bowls of stew to the table, and cut the still warm bread. "She's not evil, just misunderstood." Cassia grinned, not at all believing that after having been on the receiving end of the silver-haired woman's vicious sense of humor several times now.

Moriko wasn't sure if she would go so far as to say Ryuu was misunderstood. "Valdis, I thought, was intense as an instructor, but she and Ryuu are on the same level. I saw one of her lessons once. Who knew reading could be so cutthroat?"

She smiled in thanks at the bread, and placed some smashed apples in front of Kai, knowing how much the young child liked them.

"She wants to see you tomorrow." Cassia leaned in close to her bowl, inhaling deeply and letting out a slow breath after savoring the delicious smell. "We got a messenger from the south today, too."

Moriko tensed, bad memories rushing through her for a moment. Slowly, she forced herself to relax. "What did it say?"

"A delegation will be coming north to greet us sometime soon." Cassia kept an eye on the other woman as she used her wooden spoon to take up the thick stew.

Moriko frowned, not liking it, but she wasn't certain if it was her own bad memories or actually foreboding. "Valdis is going to go berserk the moment she spots them. You should talk to Ryuu. If anyone can reel Valdis in, it would be her." She chuckled for a second. "I still can't believe Valdis got Ryuu to fall for her, and I would have thought Ryuu was more sensible."

The dark-haired woman shrugged. "I guess she knows what she's doing." Cassia took a bite and savored the flavor before swallowing and leaning over to kiss Moriko. "Ryuu's smart, don't worry about her. How bad is Valdis going to take this?"

Moriko went quite for a moment. Then, in a subdued voice, said, "Badly. They thought they killed her, left her to die on the floor of the dinner hall, but she wasn't. She watched them kill everyone she knew and cared about, and she couldn't do anything to stop it. Then they strung her up along the road with the rest of the dead for the crows to eat. That's where I found her. I thought she was dead, but I couldn't leave her there, so I cut her down to give her a proper burial." It still hurt her, a raw wound. She could only imagine what it felt like for Valdis.

Cassia slowly stirred her stew, watching Kai as the youngster played with her mashed apples. "Selene wasn't very happy about it either, but shouldn't we at least try to get along with them?"

Moriko stirred her stew absently. "Maybe, but I can't quite trust that they want to get along. If you want to get along, you don't murder innocent women and children."

Reaching over, Cassia used a clean rag to wipe Kai's cheek. "What else can I do?"

"I don't know. I'm just a stable hand." She nearly shouted back, frustrated that Cassia would just simply turn the other cheek and let that murderer just waltz up into the north. She gripped her wooden spoon tightly, as she could almost smell the blood and the screams of the dying from so long ago. "But in your infinite wisdom, apparently we should just get along with everybody, even if they are murderers."

Cassia frowned at Moriko. "What would you have me do? Start fighting with them? How many more people would die because of that?"

The spoon snapped. "Better to die on your feet than a sword in the back! I don't know what to do, but I certainly wouldn't let that nest of vipers into my home!" She slammed the broken pieces down on the table and got up. Her face was turning red in anger, part of her knowing she wasn't being very logical or understanding of Cassia's position, but part of her could only remember the terror of that day. Fearing what she might do, she quickly stormed out of the house.

The dark-haired woman blinked in surprise when Moriko stormed out, quickly getting up and picking up the now crying Kai. "Shhh, shhhh," she tried to sooth the girl, feeling sick to her stomach with anxiety and worry. "It's all right." Although she wasn't sure it was.

Cradling the child, Cassia went in search of her soon-to-be wife; sure she hadn't gone too far. "Moriko?" she called softly, as she went down the stairs to the outside.

Moriko had only gotten as far as the bottom step. She held her face in her hands, hiding it as great sobs took over her body.

Quietly, Cassia took a seat next to her, holding Kai in one arm and pulling the sobbing woman to her in the other. Moriko resisted at first then slowly leaned against her. "I'm sorry," she whispered into blonde hair.

For a while, Moriko didn't say anything. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and hesitantly wrapped her arms around Cassia. "I'm sorry. I wasn't being supportive or listening, I just got angry, the thought of those women here...remembering what they did. I'm sorry." She burrowed into Cassia, needing the other woman's support, part of her glowing to know that she hadn't lost the things most dear to her.

The three of them sat there, wrapped together on the steps of the house, bathed in the starlight. "I'll do whatever you want me to do with them," she whispered, finally.

Moriko sniffed and wiped her face. "If you're going to give in that easily when I cry, I'll have to do it more often. We need to do what's best for the north, not what I want, which would be to just let Valdis loose on the whole lot of them, especially that creepy advisor."

"Please, no more crying, I don't think Kai or I could take very much of that." She hefted the baby, who had promptly started to suck on her thumb the moment that things had calmed down. "Right, Kai?"

Moriko gave a watery smile. She lifted the toddler out of Cassia's arms, kissing her gently on the forehead. "I'm sorry I got mad." She was looking at Kai, but it was said to both of them.

Cassia gave her own kiss to Moriko's forehead then helped her up from the steps. "I know they hurt you. I wish I could hurt them for what they did to you, Valdis, and Kai."

"It warms my heart knowing you want to right all the wrongs in my life, but politics of the situation is I don't think the north could take on a southern army." She paused before following them inside, her mind working. "We might want some of those trackers in Abnoa to watch the trails." She shrugged sheepishly. "I know I must sound paranoid, but I'd feel better knowing that Alina wasn't trying to sneak in a reserve of troops."

The princess nodded, making a mental note to have a messenger falcon sent in the morning. "In one of Ryuu's books there's a picture of a castle," she grinned "Not like the one that we're building here, but one that's meant to be defended, thick walls, with parapets that can easily be defended. I was wondering if maybe we shouldn't think about something like that for Abnoa."

Moriko swung Kai around before setting her down in her high chair at the table. "That pass up is the easiest and safest way to get an army or anybody up the mountains into our territory. A castle might not be a bad idea." She tried to smooth Kai's unruly hair, only to chuckle as it stuck back up. Then she covered Kai's ears. "Have I told you how hot you are when you're brilliant?"

Laughing, Cassia moved closer until she could whisper into the other woman's ear, brushing blonde strands out of her way to do so. "No, but you could show me tonight?"

"It's a date." She softly brushed her lips over Cassia's then sat down. Kai slapped her hands down on the tray holding her smashed apples, and without thought, Moriko caught it before it hit the ground. She placed it back up. "If you throw your food on the floor, I might think you're not hungry, young lady."

"Good luck, then. I have to get back to our castle. I figure that by the time Kai's old enough to have her own family, it might be ready to move into the first wing," Cassia said, wryly. Heading towards the door she paused, to give Kai a goodbye kiss, avoiding the messy hands that reached up to grab her. "I won't be too late."

Moriko sighed, watching her soon-to-be wife leave. She had ruined perfectly good lunch together

time by having a fit. "See you later." She picked up a spoon and tried to get the toddler to eat something. "Good thing I know better or I might get jealous of a building." Kai just spit apples down her chin in response.

#####

The silver-haired woman brooded as she watched her small group of students work in the afternoon sunlight. The dozen or so women and teenagers were bent over their rough wooden desks, studying or copying texts that she had given them. Ryuu frowned in thought as she watched them. Despite what she had said to Valdis, she was acutely aware that her time here was drawing to an end. Soon she would have to leave, she could feel it in her bones, smell it on the air, and see it in the moon anytime she glanced up into the night sky.

Valdis walked silently up the steps to Ryuu's classroom. She had cleaned up the best she could. Those northern miners had shown up a couple of days early, surprising her. They had demanded that she teach them how to fight like she did. They were improving, but she wished more of those Daughters of Fire could be a little more trainable like Moriko.

The silver-haired woman swept to her feet, moving through the class to see how her students were doing. "Good, Bethany." She smiled at the youngest student then moved onwards to study the next pupil's text.

"Interesting," she tilted her head. "You've been listening to the priestess' again, haven't you, Faris? You must draw your own conclusions about the Exodus, not just take other people's word for it."

"Teacher, you've never told us what you think of the Exodus," The narrow-faced woman rejoined as the other students paused in their work to listen curiously.

Ryuu sighed, going back to her seat in front of them. "Have you not learned anything from me in these past months? I don't want to tell you what to think. You must think for yourselves. You are not warriors who will bend people to their will with swords. You must use your thoughts and knowledge to do that. You, my students, must drive the thirst for knowledge in the north. Without that, all of this will remain just as it is for hundreds of years, never advancing."

Valdis hovered outside the door, listening, uncertain if she should go in. Lately, Ryuu had been grumpy, snapping at her. She smoothed her hair back out of her face and checked her breath. All she could think of was that it was all going to come to an end soon, and she knew she couldn't leave yet.

Maybe in a year... She frowned. Who was she fooling, it would take five to ten to get someone trained to the point they could take over drilling and training. She frowned, overhearing Ryuu's comments about warriors. She bit her lip for a moment, uncertain, and then letting out a breath, she poked her head in the doorway.

"But, teacher, can't you do that?" one of the other students spoke up, frowning. "You've already shown the princess so much. Why can't you just stay here and teach us more?"

"Hala help me..." Ryuu sighed, turning away from the class for a moment. If she had turned the other way, she would have seen Valdis hovering in the doorway.

"That is not my path," the silver-haired woman finally spoke, head slightly bowed. "I can not stay here with you, my pupils. My time is drawing short here. Soon I will have to leave." Turning back to them, she swept her arm in a motion at all of them. "You are my legacy to these people. You will soon have to become the teachers. Stop looking to me for all of the answers, and think for yourselves!"

Then she did spot Valdis as she turned to head towards the door, wincing slightly at the sight of the warrior. Silently, she slipped past the taller woman and started down the outside stairs, leaving the students to stare after her in confusion and surprise.

Valdis frowned as Ryuu passed her without a word. Quickly, she started back down the steps. "Hey!" she shouted after the retreating woman.

Ryuu stopped in the courtyard outside, silently turning to face her lover with a frown.

Valdis jumped the railing and easily landed on the floor below and ran outside to catch up with her lover. "What was that all about?"

"They don't listen to me." Ryuu glared up at the building above. "They keep looking to me to tell them all the answers! They have to think for themselves, but they never will if I'm here to answer their questions for them."

"No, not that, not my problem you picked a bunch of marsh hens...just walking off, acting like I wasn't there." She crossed her arms over her chest.

Ryuu closed her eyes for a moment. "I was embarrassed. I didn't realize you were listening to all that."

"Well, I came to...um," she held out her tablet and chalk, "to sit in on your class. I wasn't eavesdropping on purpose."

The other woman deflated slightly at that, feeling like an idiot for blowing up in front of everyone else. "How about we study out here?"

Valdis frowned then bit her lip in thought. She dropped the tablet and chalk, and in a quick move, hefted Ryuu up and over her shoulder so the woman's long silver hair draped down Valdis' back. "I have a better idea. You're too tense."

"Hey!" the smaller woman let out a startled yelp then laughed despite the foul mood she'd just been in. "What are you doing?"

"Manhandling you," she rolled her eyes and swatted Ryuu's ass. Easily, she carried the woman down the main road to a less used path that took them to the river.

The woman let out a laugh, waving weakly to a startled passerby as they moved down the road then out onto the path. "I figured that much out. Why are you manhandling you?"

"Because I can, because you needed a change of scenery. You were getting upset, and all 'oh poor me, everybody is an idiot'." Still not breaking a sweat, she walked down the path deeper into the woods. Finally, when they reached a calm cove of water hidden by a corpse of trees, she gently lowered Ryuu to the ground.

She stayed crouched over the woman for a moment, her blue eyes staring with intensity, mapping her lover's face. "You're leaving soon." It could have been a question, but it came out a statement.

Ryuu sighed then reached up and cupped the other woman's cheek, smiling sadly. "Sooner than I thought," she said quietly.

Valdis nodded then stood up, pulling her shirt over her head. "Best to make use of the time we have, then." She balanced on one leg and then the other as she got rid of her boots, her trousers following soon after. Then with a wink, she was running and diving into the water.

A startled laugh followed the running warrior. Getting up, Ryuu quickly tossed off her own clothing, running towards the bank of the water. With a leap she dove in, grinning in joy at the cool feeling of the water. "I like the way you think."

A white blonde head broke the surface of the water, and Valdis wiped water out of her eyes. "Well, I've been known to use my brain on occasion." She smiled softly, treading water. If she could, the warrior would beg and plead for the other woman to stay. But it wouldn't do any good, so she wouldn't put that pressure on them. She would do what she could so Ryuu wouldn't ever forget her.

The slim woman swam closer until they were nearly touching, the water swirling around them each. It was easy to see the worry that still lurked in the other woman's eyes. "This won't be goodbye forever, you know."

Valdis nodded. "I know. You need to teach me to read, so when you send me letters to let me know where you are, I can understand them and go find you."

"No one said I couldn't come visit you either." Ryuu wrapped her legs around the other woman, grinning widely as she nearly sent them both under water with that move.

Valdis easily shifted her strokes to a more powerful one to keep them both afloat. She grinned

seductively. "There's something naughty about your lover sneaking into town to seduce you and no one being the wiser."

"There are other ways to be naughty." The silver-haired woman pressed as close as she could while Valdis was keeping them both afloat.

Valdis raised an eyebrow. "Is this where you try to see how far you can get before I lose concentration and let us sink?"

Ryuu waggled her eyebrows. "Sounds fun, doesn't it?"

The warrior just grinned rakishly. "I bet I can surprise you."

"Bet you can." Ryuu strove to try and find out exactly how far she could go.

#####

A laughing Ryuu dragged up a boneless Valdis onto the shore. The warrior gave a chuckle or two as well. "Holy shit...that's all I have to say about that." Weakly, she flopped in a patch of sun that filtered through the trees. She looked up into her lover's dancing eyes. "Admit it, you were impressed."

That had been more than a little impressive, and Ryuu gave a laugh as she dropped down on the bank next to her. "Very impressed," she smiled, using her as a pillow. "I don't think I want to move for the rest of the day."

"Sounds fine by me... You feeling better?" She reached out and pulled the other woman to her so she could use Valdis' stomach as a pillow.

"Yes, but I might get cranky again later, so be ready to impress again." Ryuu pressed a kiss to the warm skin on the warrior's stomach, grinning as it twitched. Thoughtfully, she trailed her fingertips along Valdis' thigh. "I'm sorry. I thought I had more time."

Valdis held a single finger to Ryuu's lips. "No more sorries. Makes me think you regret the time we did have, makes me feel like we're ending. I finally found someone I want forever with, and forever with us means just that. The five or ten years I have to stay and train someone to take over will be a drop in the bucket compared to the years we will have at each other's side. So just let me get my breath back so I can impress you later."

"No more sorries, then," the other woman agreed, closing her eyes and enjoying the moment. "Forever is a long time. I can't wait to see how you can impress me again in the future." That was a promise, as far as Ryuu was concerned.

They laid on the bank, the sound of the river lazily passing them by. After a while, it took some doing, but Valdis was able to shake off the languid filling that had invaded her bones. Utterly

focused, she rolled them over until she was on top of Ryuu.

Slowly, she kissed the woman, mapping the other woman's skin, inhaling her scent and memorizing her taste. She wouldn't be rushed, no matter how much strong, slender hands tried to direct her touches, or how a melodic voice begged. She pushed down her own desire and became completely dedicated to her lover's desire.

It was like being consumed. Ryuu had never before been the focus of such single-minded attention, and it was almost too much to bear. For a while the world ceased to exist around them, and when she finally could bear no more and found her release, she blacked out from the overwhelming sensations.

"You're trying to kill me," she whispered when she slowly woke up, cradled in Valdis' arms.

Valdis snorted in amusement. "I'm not certain you can even die." She frowned for a second then seemed to try to sort something out. Finally, frustrated, she said, "No, I'm...I guess I'm trying to show you what I'm incapable of saying." She left it at that, content to hold the other woman.

Ryuu managed, somehow, to dredge up enough strength to sit up so she could look the other woman in the eye. "I know," she said, leaning in for a kiss that was chaste in comparison to the one's they had just shared. "I love you too," she whispered, settling in against the warrior.

#####

The party of southerners, a small party made up of twenty women, rode quietly up the mountain. Most of the women were obvious veterans of war, others were silent shadows with dark eyes, but none of them looked like ambassadors of peace here to have talks with the northerners. At the head of the group rode the new southern Queen, Keshet's crown polished of the blood that had stained it, gleamed in the spring sunlight.

Alina was a stout woman, with a sneering face and dark, soulless eyes. She turned slightly in the saddle, those dark eyes catching the advisor. "These simple barbarians won't be much of a challenge. I don't see the need to send Deasun and her troops up that rabbit trail. All I'll end up with is a bunch of horses with broken legs."

The advisor was covered head to foot in dark robes, as if hiding from even the pale light of the moon above them. "They are more resilient than you think them to be," the harsh whisper of a ruined voice came from under that robe. Several of the nearby warriors drew away from her, their mounts skittish at her voice.

The advisor's plan had merit, and the woman hadn't steered her wrong yet. She was Queen, after all, thanks to her. But as she stared at the rocky, harsh landscape that lay before them, she wasn't certain she wanted the north.

She sighed. "Well, this Princess better be as attractive as you've told me. I'm not marrying an ugly woman and having ugly babies. So you think a force of arms will get this Selene and Nix to agree to a royal marriage." While she wasn't fond of the marriage thing, although she figured she could still sleep with whomever she wanted, she did like the idea of being known as the Queen who unified the lands. After this, she just needed to go down and roll her army over those horse-loving freaks.

"They will respond to your show of force, when the time is right," the advisor agreed, giving a cackling laugh. "We must time it carefully, though. You must not let them attack before the time is perfect."

Alina nodded, ignoring the unease that voice caused. She would not let some milquetoast advisor scare her. "I'm pretty certain I can take them myself with these women. Especially those shifty servants you borrowed from your Goddess' temple. Who can fight women who disappear into shadows?"

"Remember what I told you...do not say her name here. We would only attract unwanted attention." The horses started down the north side of the pass, before them, lay the entirety of the north.

Alina didn't miss the knowing looks as the advisor chastised her. "I am Queen here. Do not tell me what I can and cannot do," she snapped, trying to save face in front of her women. It was silly, though, the advisor's dark goddess scared her too much, and they both knew she would not dare utter the Mistress of Shadow's name.

But appearances had to be maintained, and the advisor bowed her head. "Forgive me, my Queen," she whispered, loud enough for those around her to hear above the ever-howling wind.

#####

The dawn found Cassia sitting on the side of the bed holding a finally sleeping Kai, the infant having finally fallen asleep sometime just before the sun had started to lighten the far horizon. Moriko was curled up near her on the bed, sleeping after her stint with Kai.

The child had been crying all night, sick. She really wasn't sure if the stuff that the priestesses had given them was actually doing any good.

"Hey," she whispered, running her fingers through Moriko's hair to gently wake the other woman, "it's almost time." The southern delegation would be entering the city this day.

Moriko yawned, her eyes cracking open. "It can't be time, I just laid down," her voice came out a pathetic whine.

"I'm sorry," Cassia whispered brushing bangs back from her love's eyes. Even as she spoke, she could see more detail than a few moments before, as the sun continued its relentless climb into

the sky. "They'll be here soon."

Moriko gave another pathetic moan then sat up. Her eyes were bloodshot, and dark circles had formed under her eyes. "Are you sure you want to have more kids?" She yawned then leaned over, resting her head on Cassia's shoulder. "I think the snot maker broke me."

"It can't be this bad all the time," Cassia murmured, yawning as well, and leaning against the other woman. It would be so easy to close her eyes and slip into sleep right there sitting up on the edge of the bed. Then she groaned when she had a horrible thought. "I hope she isn't as bad a teenager as I was."

Moriko started chuckling, then laughing, falling back over onto the bed unable to contain her mirth. "Oh no, darling, it's going to be much worse. Suppose she acts like Caron or Caitlin?"

And that made Cassia groan in near despair, almost waking up Kai. Not wanting to have to hear another screaming infant, she forced herself to get up and go over to place the infant in the crib. Only then did she come back to crawl on the bed next to Moriko. "Please don't say that. It can't be that bad." She was silent for a moment. "Can it?"

"Keshet seemed to handle them fine, but they were terrors. You, honey, were tame compared to them. But we could catch a break and Kai will act like her Muanya." Moriko rolled over onto her side and kissed Cassia gently on the temple. "But if we do have kids, we could luck out and they'll be like me." Yawning once more, she attempted to sit up.

The dark-haired woman tried to help her, but instead, managed to get in the way. Somehow they ended up sprawled on the bed instead, with Cassia lying across Moriko's middle, seriously contemplating sleep again. "I wouldn't mind that. Little Moriko running around with a gaggle of animals following her." She smiled at that mental image.

Bemused, Moriko looked at Cassia, "A little Moriko, huh. Well, we don't need any more animals in this house. How about a little Moriko following Queen Cassia around asking question after question on how to build castles?"

She grinned, liking the picture that formed in her head. "You'd be a wonderful mother," she whispered, stroking Cassia's hair.

Tired eyes opened, and the other woman groaned in pleasure at the stroking. "You already are a wonderful mother. But we should talk about this when we have more time." The idea of having a child with Moriko was nice; it would be good for Kai to have a sister or two as well. Cassia had to force herself to sit back up, taking a momentous force of willpower to convince herself to get up.

Holding out her hand, she helped her love up as well, smiling at the still sleeping infant in the crib. "She looks so peaceful like that." In comparison to the screaming child they'd held all night long.

Moriko rubbed her bloodshot eyes and let Cassia help her up. Once up, she walked over to the small crib they kept in their room for such occasions as last night, when Kai was sick. "I'll get dressed and take her over to Valdis. I'd feel better if the warrior was watching her while the southerners are visiting."

That sounded like a good idea. For a moment, Cassia paused by the sword rack that held the swords they'd used to train with Valdis. Leaving them where they were, she went to get dressed, hoping that Selene and Nix weren't going to beat them to the bridge. She wasn't sure she could deal with jokes about sleeping in late this morning.

#####

Nix and Selene waited by the bridge, Nix frowning slightly and looking over her shoulder for her daughter and her soon-to-be daughter-in-law. "Think they'll make it?" she questioned softly.

Around them, stood six women that had trained under Valdis, and had been chosen as Royal guards for this occasion. Once, Nix would have felt it unnecessary, but now, she wasn't so certain. She had woken this morning with a feeling of dread itching at her scalp.

The spring morning was promising a warm day to follow, which was fine as far as Selene was concerned. She smiled fondly at her wife then looked at the bridge behind them. Seeing no sign of the heir apparent or her soon-to-be wife, she turned back to watching the road for signs of their soon-to-be visitors.

"I'm sure that they will be here soon. You know Kai's sick. I have no doubt she kept them up all night long. Willow said a healer went over, but I don't know how much good that did. Remember the time Cassia was sick for a week?"

Nix groaned then chuckled. "Yes, couldn't forget that. Near the end I wanted to scream and cry right along with her, I was so tired." It was an awful week, but she wouldn't trade that or any of her memories of Cassia growing up. "She's turned into a wonderful woman, hasn't she? We did good."

"Yes we did." Selene leaned against the taller woman, smiling as she heard noise on the bridge behind them.

Cassia hurried down the ramp to where the small group was waiting, smiling apologetically. "Sorry. Kai was sick all night." She rubbed at her eyes, hoping she didn't look as tired as she felt. "Moriko is getting Valdis to watch her." The warrior had point blank refused to meet the new queen of the south.

Nix nodded, not blaming Valdis at all. She didn't much trust what was going to happen today, but she and Selene had decided that they should at least meet the woman and see what she had to say. If they trusted the woman, they would move the meeting into the town.

She was fully aware of the break system Valdis and Cassia had designed in the bridge. In case of attack, levers could be pulled and the supports would drop from the bridge, collapsing it.

She hugged her daughter warmly. "How was your first tour of motherhood, everything you expected and more? Does it make you long for more little ones running around?"

Giving her mother a mock glare, she gave her a light punch on the arm. "I know you just love this. You probably think that this is some sort of retribution for all the problems I used to give the two of you."

Selene had to force herself to avoid smiling at their daughter.

Nix roared with laughter, her blue eyes dancing with mirth. "It's all worth it, especially when they grow up to be so wonderful."

They enjoyed a family moment, a rare one, now that their family had expanded so much.

#####

Moriko rode on Oscar, urging him to run faster towards the bridge. She really hadn't expected to find a melancholy Valdis moping around Ryuu's house. She was shocked to find out that the quiet silver-haired woman had left a few hours before she had shown up. Not in as left to go to the market, but in left, never to come back.

She had stayed as long as she dared trying to cheer up the woman, but Valdis finally just told her to go and not worry. She would take good care of the toddler who was now giggling on the floor, playing with the gentle giant that was Thorn, the dog having grown up into a fearsome looking beast.

With a sigh of relief, she spotted the bridge not that far ahead.

Cassia waved when she spotted the figure riding a running Alcen over the bridge. "There she is, told you she would be here soon."

Selene smiled in welcome at the woman who would soon be a formal part of their family. "Good morning, Moriko, I hope that Kai is doing better? Cassia said you had a long night."

Moriko dismounted the Alcen, not tethering him, knowing she didn't need to, and then ran to join the royal family. "Yes, Kai seems to be doing much better. She was playing with Valdis and Thorn when I left." She ran a hand through her unbraided hair, wishing she'd taken the time to redo it.

"I hope you made this one take care of Kai as much as you did. Nix tried the whole 'I'm so tired

because I banged on metal all day' routine a few times when Cassia was sick," the Queen whispered, conspiratorially.

Moriko bit her lip to keep from laughing. "No, Cassia ran to Willow's to get a priestess in the middle of the night. After that we pretty much took turns."

You could hear the southern party before you could see them, the horses sounding like thunder. Moriko straightened and checked her clothes one last time then frowned. That sounded like a lot of horses, more than a simple goodwill party. "I'm guessing fifteen to thirty horses," she mumbled into Cassia's ear.

The princess bit her lip and looked to the six women that Valdis had trained and were here as guards. They didn't look all that certain about their abilities either. "That's more than a 'Hi, how's it going' party."

Moriko nodded then whispered, "You, uh, did that thing, to the bridge, right?"

"Yes. I don't know if we can run faster than horses over it, though." She frowned, annoyed she hadn't considered that. Worse come to worse, they could always swim across the river.

Moriko frowned and looked back at the bridge.

#####

Alina frowned. It was hard to look impressive when she couldn't fan her troops out behind her due to the stupid trees that engulfed the landscape. It was also hard to look impressive when one had spent the night on the cold, hard ground, spring was colder here than back home.

Finally, she saw the break in the trees where the light stopped being filtered through green pin like needles and burst into warm, all-surrounding sunshine. For a moment she was blinded. Then they were through the trees, out on to a cleared plain. She spotted them waiting on the bank of a river and frowned. She felt almost insulted, only six guards.

She warranted more than just six guards. Weren't they aware of the fact she had wiped out the entire southern Royal family!

"That's a lot of weapons and armor," Cassia said quietly, as the horses rode towards them from the tree line. She felt her stomach tighten at the sight of the armed warriors astride their horses and now wished she would have brought her sword with her.

Moriko just wet her lips, nervous. She felt her limbs tremble, fear for the safety of those around her as she recognized faces from before.

The new southern Queen stopped her troops not far from the Northerners, not dismounting, wanting them to feel at a disadvantage as she loomed above them on horseback. Of course, a

couple of the women were tall enough it might not work. She easily recognized Selene, and guessed the others. She smiled, pleased that the northern Princess did seem to be attractive.

The advisor hung back from the front of the group, making sure her hood still covered her face as they drew up near the group of women, letting the group of warriors swarm ahead of her to block her from view.

Selene stepped forwards to get the attention of the woman who was staring so intently at her daughter. She could feel Nix stiffen next to her and couldn't blame her wife. The southerner was looking at their daughter like a dog eyes a particularly juicy piece of meat. "Welcome, my name is Selene."

An insolent smile crossed the woman's face. "I'm well aware of who you are. I'm not sure what you are expecting, so let me be blunt. I am announcing to all here to bear witness. I am the new Queen of the south, and through the divine will of the gods, it is my destiny to unify the whole of our lands. I am here to let these intentions be known. I would prefer to do it through marriage, to your lovely daughter there, but if that is not an option, I will lay siege until you break under me."

Nix and the advisor sighed at the same time in annoyance.

Moriko stiffened and muttered out, "She's certainly blunt, isn't she?"

The northern Queen's smile became a bit more fixed at that, and her eyes hardened. "My daughter is already promised to someone." She didn't sound at all sorry about that fact.

Cassia was well aware she was glaring at the southerner, and didn't care if she wasn't being political. "So go away," she mumbled.

Nix rubbed her face. "I suggest we all just walk to the other side of the bridge now, because this is going far worse than I imagined it was going to go. I expected a little wining and dining before it got ugly."

Alina scowled at Selene's comment. "For your health, I suggest your reconsider this promise." Her fingers itched to grasp her sword.

The Queen agreed with her wife, this had the possibility of getting very ugly. Around their Queen, the southern warriors were inching their hands towards their sword hilts. She could feel the six trained northerners responding in turn. "I will consider your words. Let us meet again later to discuss this after you have rested from your trip here."

Alina looked confused, and looked towards the advisor for guidance. Should she let them leave, should she just attack?

The advisor was glaring at her, eyes the only part of her face visible under her hood. The woman was beyond furious. This was not how it was supposed to go. What stupid idiot of a warrior had

she gotten to take over the position as Queen?

In that moment of confusion, Selene took hold of her daughter's arm and pulled her away. Nudging Nix with her shoulder, she started them moving up the bridge. The six warriors that they had brought with them formed up behind them as Cassia took Moriko's hand and pulled her with them.

There was the smooth sound of a sword being drawn from a sheath. Alina held the well-used weapon aloft. "Don't turn you're back on me!" she screamed, furious that they would dismiss her so casually. Then in a smooth arc, the sword tip fell forward, and the tensed and ready soldiers behind the southern Queen surged forward.

Moriko broke out into a run over the bridge. Once across, she jumped off to the side and grabbed an axe left hidden next to the bridge.

"Run for it!" Cassia yelled, which everyone seemed to think was a great idea.

"We're getting too old for this," Selene grouched as she hurried to keep up with Nix across the middle of the bridge.

Seeing Moriko break away from the rest of them, Cassia waited until all of the northerners had crossed the break in the bridge. "Now, Moriko!" she yelled, feeling the bridge vibrate as the horses started up the other side.

The axe hefted above her head then came down, slicing through the thick taut rope. The severed rope quickly went limp, and the sounds of stone and wood grinding against each other could be heard.

The massive logs shifted around them, and the last of the northerners had to leap for the shore as the bridge collapsed in on itself. There was the scream of horses as the first wave of southerners went in with the collapsing bridge.

Cassia stood next to Moriko, breathing hard after the mad dash, "So much for my bridge."

"I'll help build you a new one, because you are not marrying that bitch," Moriko said in a huff, the axe resting on her shoulder, and she glared across the water at Alina.

"That could have gone better," Selene said, having finally caught her breath after leaning against Nix. "Cassia, I think you better go rouse all of the women that Valdis has been training. We might need them."

Nix nodded, "Let's retreat. You, and you, run back and sound the alarm bell," she pointed at two women who nodded and took off.

On the other side of the river, Alina moved her horse over to the advisor, "You think that was

enough of a distraction for your women to get that brat. I don't want my reign cut short because some bloodline of Keshet's still breathes." She was well aware of the Oracles decree mentioning both she and the advisor would fall as long as blood of Keshet's still lived. She had grand plans to build an empire that would put those of Korgon's to shame.

It was, the advisor thought with annoyance, a pity that she hadn't been able to find someone who had a keener edge for these things. Using Alina was akin to using a battle-axe to open a glass bottle. The results were usually messy. "It might have been more...dramatic than I expected."

Alina snorted, "Well, when this is all over, maybe I'll still marry that girl. She was pretty enough. And you can have Selene, as I promised, and torture her to your heart's content."

She stood in her stirrups and shouted at her women to regroup.

#####

Valdis lay curled up on the floor with Kai, a heavily panting Thorn not that far from them. She smiled and patted the child's head, trying to smooth the hair. This is what she needed. She could forget Ryuu and her absence and tend to the needs of a child. Still, her melancholy thoughts drifted to her now gone lover. Ryuu, true to her word, had left earlier than she'd expected.

The next morning, after their impromptu swimming, she'd kissed Valdis awake and left. Pensively, the warrior watched Kai tug on Thorn's tail.

She missed the thickening of the shadows and the taint of corruption in the air. Thorn's low growl alerted her to the danger in her own house. Figures emerged, rising out of the blackness, knives glittering cruelly in their grip. Twisting, Valdis covered the child's body with hers, hissing in pain as knives pierced her flesh. She felt the blood bubble up and spring from her body like a broken fountain.

On her hands and knees, she looked up through pale lashes then swung a fist at the leg in front of her, grinning as the knee joint gave under her fist with a sickening crunch and a body fell to the floor. There was a grunt of pain as Thorn's teeth sunk deep into a thigh.

The child on the floor started to cry at the sudden action around her.

Two more shadows detached from the corners, forming into humanoid shapes as they moved swiftly towards the injured warrior and the baby she protected. Their intent was clear, as wicked serrated knives glinted in the sudden dimness of the room. Where a moment before it had been fairly bright from the fire and the sunlight coming in through the windows, the room was cloaked in deep shadows now.

"Who do you think you are to resist us?" voices whispered, dark and seductive, urging to give up. "We will kill you and take the child, just resign yourself to your fate."

"I think I'm the daughter of a god," she breathed out, closing her eyes, reaching deep inside herself and unlocking the blessings of Chaos and War.

"Quickly," one of the shadows hissed, sensing what the warrior was doing. The shadowy figures swarmed her, blades slicing through the air towards flesh and bone. They focused their attacks on the warrior, trying to cut her down before she could find her focus.

It was an odd feeling of déjà vu, this could have been a similar scene played out months ago in Keshet's manor. Now she could not fail or the life of a small child would be forfeit.

She opened her power just a crack big enough for her to slip through, and her form shimmered like a desert illusion, and then a giant white-furred hound was in her place. Jaws with knife-like fangs locked into flesh and bone, and claws tore through muscle and ligaments.

"Now!" one of them yelled, and a net with strands of a black tar substance was hurled over the large hound. Knives followed it, stabbing into the right haunch and twisting viciously.

Valdis howled, wildly twisting in the net, she felt one of her legs give out and she scrambled to stay upright. They were prepared for her, waiting for her tricks. A trickle of dread washed over her as she fought not to collapse on to the body of the crying child below her. She was going to fail, again. More blood would be on her hands as those she was sworn to protect would die.

She howled loudly, wondering why no one came. Why did no one hear all the noise?

"Make all the noise you want, our Queen has made a distraction," s voice laughed, kicking the hunting hound in the side.

"The baby, get the baby," another voice demanded, followed by a scream of pain as a hand passed too close to Valdis' mouth, and the wolf crunched down on the forearm hard enough to shatter bone.

The taste of blood sent her into overdrive, while the net burned and ripped at her fur and skin. They were at a stalemate, but for how long, she didn't know, as her wounds slowly healed.

The door to the house swung open with enough force to bang against the wall. A small form stood in the doorway, and if her hair was mostly silver now, her eyes were still clear green. "Valdis!" the high priestess, Willow, shouted.

"Get her!" one of the voices yelled, enraged at being disturbed. Two of the shadows stopped attacking Valdis, leaping towards the figure in the door.

In that momentary freeze of distraction, Valdis focused and discarded her animal form, feeling the net slide away. She punched one woman in the face, feeling the nose pop under her fist like an over ripened fruit and gush blood. Easily, she pried the knife from loosening fingers and

scooped up Kai. It was harder now that the child was bigger.

"Fuck, Ryuu, where the hell are you when I need you?" she grumbled, resentful for a moment that her lover left for the good of a nation, but wouldn't return for her. With the flick of a wrist, the knife went sailing into the skull of one of the women who turned to attack Willow.

The three remaining assassins redoubled their attacks on Valdis, desperate now to get to the baby that she was protecting.

Then she wondered why they were fighting at all. Concentrating, she snatched the weapons from their hands, along with the ones that had fallen to the floor. "Stand down or I will gut you on your own blades." It was a promise as the knives hovered in the air, ready to pierce the soft flesh of their throats. With another muttered curse, she locked them out of their shadows. "Your Goddess does not rule here." The room brightened.

"Release them!" the lone assassin that had survived to get to Willow shouted, her arm around the chief priestess, a knife pressed up against her side ready to bleed her.

Valdis rolled her eyes, "Why would I do that, one life for that of many? No offense, Willow."

The priestess made a squeaky sound as the arm around her throat tightened. "Do it or I'll gut her in front of you."

"Really..? You seem to think you're in control of that knife. I'm the daughter of war, not you." Her eyes blazed red. "All instruments of war are under my command. So I suggest you put it down and let them go or you're all dead."

The assassin knew what awaited her if she failed. With a scream of defiant rage, she tried to force the blade up under Willow's rib cage, angling for the heart.

"You should have just done it and distracted me with her death. But instead, you wanted to bask in your own importance, your sense of beating me." She flicked a finger and every knife sunk deep into throats, coating the floors and the walls in a spray of red. Then at the woman's own stunned inaction as she watched her sisters die, Valdis tossed her own blade, finding a home in the assassin's eye socket.

Willow didn't fall down with the dead assassin, but it was a close thing. The priestess was left gasping for air, massaging her throat as she did so. The house reeked of blood, and she found it hard to avoid throwing up at the massacre. "Kai," she coughed. "Is Kai all right?"

Valdis handed the crying toddler to Willow. "I think she should be with you in the temple right now. Bad business is going on."

The priestess took the crying infant, hushing her as she cradled her to her chest. "That's what I came to tell you. Something happened down by the bridge. I saw it collapse."

She looked uncertain for a second. "Um, about what I said, I wouldn't have let you die...well...I would have tried really hard not to let you die."

There were no guarantees in battle.

The priestess smiled a little. "I put my faith in my Goddess. If it was my time then it was my time."

She wiped the blood from her face, "Must be nice to have such faith in a god. I find most of them to be arrogant pricks." She frowned as she looked at the corpses that littered Ryu's house. "I don't think she's going to forgive me for this."

The priestess backed out of the house so that Kai wasn't so close to the bodies. "No word from Ryu?"

She found her armor and began to put it on. Cuts bled and healed slowly, after all, she was still half mortal. The warrior looked up. "No, she can't interfere, not even for me."

She switched her gaze to her weapons: axe, sword, axe, sword, sword, axe. She went with both, no shield for her just utter courage, if she lived, that much better.

The old woman watched her get ready for battle and hiked up the now quiet child, holding her closer. "Come on, Kai, we're going back to the cathedral." Now seemed like a good time to pray.

Valdis nodded, praying sounded good, even to a Goddess that seemed so removed from her own people. She twirled the axe, getting used to its heft, and smiled grimly. She heard the bells ringing, signaling danger, and women spilled out into the newly cobbled streets.

"You two," Valdis snarled as she ran into the town center where two women were frantically pulling on the rope for the bell. "Stop it and tell me what happened."

The taller of the two, Evian, stopped pulling on the bell rope, eyes wide. "The southern Queen threatened to kill Selene and Nix, and take Cassia as her wife to occupy the north."

The second woman, Stein, nodded in agreement, "Then they charged at us. We had to run over the bridge and collapse it behind us."

Valdis frowned, not very surprised, really. "Relax, soldiers, I want you to guide those who can't fight to the temple. I was attacked by women who can jump in and out of shadows. If there are any more I didn't kill, I want the rest of the northerners to be safe in the temple." She hoped the Moon Goddess would protect them.

She turned and found herself surrounded by women looking at her to lead them to battle, and felt a swelling of pride that they would protect their homes without question.

Most of the women were from the training sessions that Valdis had led. The others were miners from the north armed with picks, shovels, and whatever else that they could find. They might not have been as well trained, but they weren't going to hide in the temple with the others.

"What do you want us to do?" one of the fire clan women asked, hefting a sledgehammer, an angry look in her eyes.

What did she want, she wanted to kill them all, let vengeance sort it out, but instead, she took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Valdis stared at them all, measuring them. "I need twelve volunteers to stay and guard those at the temple. If we fail, it falls on you to protect those that cannot protect themselves."

She whistled and Thorn came to her side. She crouched down and touched her forehead to his for a second then stood. "Thorn will go with you, listen to him, he can sense those that walk shadows and alert you to them."

The warrior rolled her shoulders and said, "The rest of you follow me. I have no idea what the odds are, but we will meet them toe to toe and drive them out of the north!"

The smaller group split off, hurrying down the street towards the temple to the Moon Goddess, Thorn leading the way through the night. The remaining women started to follow Valdis towards the river.

#####

"Valdis..!" Cassia yelled, seeing the warrior and her cohorts running towards them. This was the second time she'd been this happy seeing the warrior. At least she hadn't been kicked a lot, and Moriko hadn't been stabbed this time. "Thank the Goddess. I don't know where Alina and her people went after the bridge collapsed. They started riding up the river."

Valdis studied the river. "They're looking for a better place to cross. We need to find it and set up archers. If we can kill them in the water and thin their numbers, our chances of survival increase."

She looked around, "Anybody know where that might be?"

Selene touched the warrior on the arm to get her attention. "There's a place where Nix and I swim, the water isn't that deep in the summer, and they might be able to forge across. Do what you must. I'm sorry I didn't support your training of warriors more."

Valdis grabbed Selene before she could pull away, "Nothing to apologize for. Serving under Keshet taught me to expect war. Serving under you, I came to understand peace and why it's worth fighting for."

The Queen leaned up to kiss the warrior on the cheek, whispering, "Protect them and yourself." Then pulled away to take Nix's hand. They were too old for what was about to happen, and looking at Moriko and Cassia, she knew that she couldn't stop them from going. "All of you, go with the blessing of the Moon Goddess, and protect your sisters."

The princess leaned close to her mother. "Umm...mom...I need to borrow a weapon." She felt extremely foolish now for not bringing her sword earlier.

Valdis sighed and smacked Cassia on the back of her head. "Every good soldier always carries a weapon." She turned to Moriko. "Get on that funny looking deer of yours and get to that spot, the rest will follow on foot. You have your hunting bow?"

Moriko nodded, and after a quick look to Cassia, swung onto Oscar's back and went racing into the trees, others following behind.

Nix smiled. "Honey, I think she's ready for it. No time better than now to pass it on. It might just help her survive."

Selene nodded in agreement. "This would be yours soon enough anyway," she stated, taking off the sword that Nix had made for her all that time ago. *Very nearly a lifetime now*, she thought, feeling her eyes water as she handed the sword over to their daughter.

Aware of what it meant, Cassia took the simple but well crafted scabbard that contained the glowing blade from her mother. With a look to both of them, she hugged them both quickly then had to run to keep up with the others. "Don't worry," she yelled back, "I won't break it!"

Nix watched them go, and felt the tears in her eyes. "It will be okay," she murmured more to herself.

"Yes, they will be." Selene slipped her hand into the larger one of her wife. "We should get to the temple."

#####

Moriko arrived at the river well ahead of everybody else. She could hear Alina's army, and felt her lip curl back in unconscious anger. With her knees she guided Oscar to a large tree that overlooked the bank, and from his back, she easily sprang up into the tree. Swiftly, she climbed from branch to branch until she got the vantage point she wanted.

They were there, just as Selene had thought, which begged a point that wiggled around in the back of her mind; that someone familiar with the north was working for Alina.

The southerner had obviously gotten some reinforcements from when they had met at the bridge. The size of her group had doubled, and the women and horses were slowly fording the river. The

current was slow enough to avoid sweeping them away, and there were sandbars that they could climb up on to rest between the deeper parts. Only someone who knew the river could have known that such a spot existed.

The southerners were so confident that they made little effort to remain quiet, fording through the water and calling to one another quite loudly as they made their way towards the Queen's island.

Moriko released a breath, and with forced calm, drew an arrow. A woman sat on a horse on a sandbar close to the bank. Moriko watched her laugh at something then watched as her arrow blossomed like a deadly flower out of her neck. Before the southerners had any clue as to what had happened, Moriko was drawing the bowstring back and letting another arrow fly into a mark.

"Archer!" someone screamed, and then the mass of southerners began rushing towards the bank. They had no other option than to grimly take the hits as they forged forwards. None could see where the arrows were coming from, and even if they could, she was out of reach for their smaller bows.

"Get to the beach!" Alina screamed, enraged as another of her women dropped from the saddle.

Moriko stamped down the feeling of fear as the women got closer to the bank. She was doing what she could, but it was hardly a thinning of Alina's ranks. Oscar would protect her, but even then, there was only so many the two of them could handle.

Alina sat on horseback on the other bank, out of range, letting her soldiers take the bulk of the hits, and she was the one target Moriko wanted, she wanted her to pay for the deaths of her friends.

The first of the southern soldiers made it to the beach of the island, riding their horses out of the water. One of them took an arrow in the face for her trouble, and fell from her horse, screaming. The remainder surged up onto the bank, blades flashing as they started to search for the hidden archer.

"Kill her!" Alina yelled from the other side of the river.

Moriko released one more arrow and started scrambling down from the tree. She wondered where everyone else was, but she couldn't stay in the tree, which would only leave her trapped and vulnerable.

"There she is!" a warrior yelled, finally spotting the Alcen and the woman coming down out of the tree. Two arrows whistled out of the darkness from the southern short bows, one punching into the tree trunk just inches from Moriko's face, the other sailing off into the darkness.

Moriko yelped and let go of the branch, falling a short way before she was able to grab another, her arms wrenching painfully in their sockets. Her bow clattered against a few more branches before hitting the ground.

With an exultant laugh, the first southerner ran through the shadows, long sword held with a deadly purpose as she closed with the Alcen and the woman hanging from the tree branches. Behind her came more southerners, each with an as deadly intent as the first.

The Alcen didn't even twitch, he was that well trained. His deadly horns lowered, and with a power twist of his neck, he caught the southern soldier in the chest, impaling her, and then flung her away. With a wince of pain, Moriko made it to the ground and ran to Oscar, easily mounting him. She wheeled him around, preparing to fall back.

"Charge!" a voice screamed from the darkness. A moment later, shapes burst through the trees around Moriko, as the northerners finally caught up with her. The first southerners were on foot, and even with their better swords, were quickly dispatched. Valdis led the way, a maniacal grin on her face as she disemboweled two southerners in a row.

One of the northerners wielded a glowing sword that illuminated all around her, and she scrambled over to where Moriko was, grinning up at her. "Are we late?" Cassia asked.

Moriko let out a breath of relief. "No, I'd say you were right on time."

"Glad to hear it." Cassia ducked around under Oscar, patting the Alcen on the side as she did. The woods all around the beach were filled with flashing swords and yells as the northerners and southerners fought in the weak moonlight. For all of their enthusiasm, the southerners sadly outclassed the northerners, and more than one fell under a southern blade.

After the arrows had stopped, Alina had turned to ask her advisor for, well, advice, only to find that the woman had suddenly disappeared. Frowning, she turned back to the sound of fighting. With a snarled curse, she urged her horse forwards. To the abyss with the advisor, she wasn't going to sit here while there was a fight going on!

Valdis roared as she jumped into battle with no thought to her personal safety. She used her great axe to hook enemy swords and spears, leaving her opponents wide open for a thrust of her sword.

A woman fell before her, her head nearly cut from her shoulders, and her bright blue eyes latched onto the woman of her anger and rage. "Alina!" she yelled.

Cassia took exactly two steps past the Alcen before the first shadow sprang at the two of them. On instinct driven into her by endless hours on the sparing ground with Valdis, she lifted her sword to block the enemies slashing attack. A quick reverse brought her to the side, and her sword cut through something wet and soft. Swallowing, she continued forwards, the blade dimmed by the blood on it.

The southern queen lashed her horse forwards, smiling wildly as she emerged from the water. The sword she drew was shaped from shadows as much as the one that Cassia wielded was forged from the light. The first fire warrior in her path was cleaved in half by a swipe from it

before she even knew the southerner was upon her. "Where are you, Valdis? I know you're here, you failure of a warrior!"

Valdis snarled at that, and quickly dispatched her current opponent. "I'm right here, Alina," she growled out.

The southerner laughed. "Failing to protect those you care about again," she taunted, her massive horse dancing back and forth, tossing its head at the nearness to one with obvious immortal blood flowing through her veins.

"At least I'm not scared of a baby," Valdis taunted back, as she brought the sword and axe up in a cross-guard.

Kicking her heels into the horse's flanks, she drove the large beast down onto the warrior, her blade cutting down towards Valdis as she attacked.

Valdis easily twisted out of the way, moving to place the horse's body between her and that dark blade. Just as the horse's back haunch passed the warrior, she brought the axe down in a vicious strike, crippling the horse. As both horse and rider went down, she winced in sympathy for the horse.

"You bitch!" Alina yelled, rising up off the ground and stepping over the struggling form of her beautiful horse. "I'm going to kill you for that," the queen snarled, her face a mask of rage.

"Blah, blah, you always say that, yet I'm still here." Valdis didn't wait, and was charging the other warrior, the sword and axe a blur as they twirled in deadly motion.

The addition of the axe was a nasty surprise, but Alina hadn't survived to where she was by not being able to handle nasty surprises. She drew a long dagger from her belt and used that to block the wicked axe. Her sword connected with Valdis', and the other warrior's blade exploded in shards of metal. "Looks like you're down a weapon."

Valdis felt that jarring blow all through her body, and she stared for a second at the remains of her sword. "A new toy, I see."

"A gift from a friend," Alina laughed, which was a sound that was anything but humorous, and then continued her attack.

Valdis found herself on the defensive, an odd place she had rarely been. She dodged a wild swing, her skin chilled where the shadows that trailed the blade touched her skin.

She saw an opening and swung her axe, but only managed a shallow cut, Alina managing to dodge the brunt of it.

"I keep forgetting how good you are," the southerner admitted, grudgingly, as the two women circled each other. Fights continued throughout the woods around them, and for a moment, Alina was tempted to go after the woman with the glowing sword. "Not good enough though." She swept in close, throwing her dagger at Valdis, which the other woman ducked easily, of course. Alina slashed with her sword, smiling as the sword caught flesh.

Valdis hissed at the wound, stumbling back. All around the wound was numbing cold that radiated through her flesh. "I'm still better than you," Valdis said through gritted teeth.

"Please, look at you, you can barely stand straight," Alina laughed, ducking as a blade whistled through the darkness behind her. One of the northerners that Valdis had trained had tried to sneak up behind her. Casually, the southern Queen thrust her blade behind her, gutting the northerner and letting her crumple to the ground. "Pitiful."

Valdis attempted another charge, for a second catching Alina by surprise, and then they were trading vicious blows until Valdis' axe shattered. With a scream of rage, she embedded the broken oak handle into Alina's arm, the half-god's strength easily punching it through the armor the other woman wore. They came to a stop in an oddly intimate embrace, held in each other's arms. Valdis felt nothing but mind numbing cold. Her lips opened to speak, but only blood came spotting her now pale lips.

Alina stepped back, a smug grin decorating her lips. The sword of shadows slid out with a wet sound, and Valdis collapsed to her knees.

"I knew that this sword from the Mistress of Shadows would prove useful," the southern queen taunted, raising it up for a killing strike. Not even Valdis could survive without a head.

Even though she knew it was coming, she refused to look away as Alina drew her sword back for a killing stroke. One hand covered the wound on her abdomen, but still blood continued to gush out around her fingers. Her mouth opened again, but only a rush of air was expelled, followed by bloody bubbles. More time, she really thought she and Ryu had forever, and now, in a sudden rush, she was dealing with the issues of mortality.

The wind suddenly gusted up around them, blowing twigs and leaves through the trees. The force of the sudden gale threw women to the ground, and Alina had to shield her face with her arm. "What," she screamed, trying to hear herself over the roar of the wind.

Except the roar wasn't actually from the wind...

The southerner had time to gape up through the trees in astonishment at a huge shape that blotted out the stars. Then something slammed through the trees, sending tree trunks shattering to the side. The huge creature landed on top of the southern Queen, wings outspread. With a roar, the dragon lowered her head, grabbed the woman who had been about to kill Valdis, and ripped her in half.

Valdis tilted her head up and grinned. "You came back," she whispered then her head fell forward, and she fell, collapsing onto the blood-soaked ground.

All around the riverbank, the fighting ceased, as all eyes stared at the silver dragon in horror. The only dragon they knew of in their history was the black dragon Korgon.

Cassia picked herself up from where she'd been thrown over a tree trunk, wondering what exactly had just happened. One moment she'd been on the defensive with Moriko, with three southerners trying to flank them, then the next, the wind had picked them up and tossed them aside like toys. "Moriko?" she called, freezing as she spotted the dragon that had just killed Alina.

Moriko sat up. "Are we winning?" she croaked out, rubbing her head where it had met with a tree branch.

"Umm...not sure right now," the dark-haired princess whispered as the large beast flared its wings, turning its head back and forth to study the people staring up at her.

Eloquently, Moriko summed everything up. "Ah, shit."

The silver dragon reared upwards, wings spread, and roared, the sound forcing the women nearest to it down to their knees, hands clasped to their ears. Coming back down, the dragon lowered her head to the nearest trembling southerner. "Take your Queen and leave the north!"

Many of the southern soldiers scrapped and bowed, others hissed in outrage, their black eyes staring daggers at the silver scales. In the end, though, they did as the dragon commanded. They picked up the bloody halves of Queen Alina and her sword, and fled across the river.

Only when the last of them had crossed the river did the dragon lower her head again, to look at the unconscious form near her. Valdis was still alive, of that much Ryu was sure. She was also badly hurt. "Help her," the dragon said, spreading her wings and leaping to the sky.

Cassia, Moriko, and the remaining northerners watched the dragon until it disappeared in the night. "That was...unexpected," Cassia said finally, moving to see how badly Valdis was hurt.

Moriko scrambled to the warrior's side. "Shit, shit, shit. She's not healing. Goddess she's bleeding badly. Get a healer, now!" This was much worse than last time.

"It'll take too long," Cassia frowned, slipping her hands under the wounded woman. There was no help for it. "Come on, we have to get her to the temple...hurry."

Moriko nodded, and together with Cassia and a few other women, they lifted the warrior into the air.

#####

Nix frowned as the forest seemed to grow dark, the shadows more prominent. "I think we should hurry. The town's not far." There was a very bad feeling growing in her gut.

"They'll be fine, won't they?" Selene asked, anxiously looking towards where their daughter had followed Valdis towards the riverbank. Maybe she was wrong, maybe Alina and her followers had just left. She sighed, not believing herself either.

"All we can do is think good thoughts and stay out of their way. War is a young woman's game. How sad is it...that we clawed and fought our way here, over mountains and desert, only to fall victim to ourselves?" The smith looked back sadly.

Taking her wife's hand in hers, she continued walking towards the town. "I always feared we might become what we left behind."

Nix nodded, "I don't think it is men or women, really. I think it is power, and the desire for it, that drives us insane."

Selene said nothing to that, just tightened her grip on Nix. "We did good, didn't we?"

"I think so. When the end comes, I'll have nothing to regret, a wonderful wife and daughter. I made things with my hands and helped create a city, if not a nation. I think that was very good, and there's still more to come. I'm certain we will have a gaggle of grandkids soon." Nix smiled at the future of her family yet to be born.

"I love you, you know that?" Selene smiled. She started to say something else then paused, frowning at the way the shadows had suddenly seemed to deepen around them. That was odd.

Nix let go of Selene's hand and stepped in front of her wife. "Who's there?" she challenged.

"Forget me so quickly? And here I thought you promised to love me forever, Selene." The northern Queen's name was spat like a curse.

A shiver of dread coursed down Selene's spine at that voice. It was older, harsher, but she still knew it. "Laurel," she whispered, horrified.

"How lovely, I haven't been forgotten, although I tried to forget you, both of you. But after a while I got bored, and thought I'd fuck with your lives. Then you two had the nerve to thwart me at every turn. I'd setup Sable to marry your daughter. That brainless mooncalf would have been so easy to rule through, and imagine the fun I would have had tormenting your daughter in your name. But then that mooncalf went and got a brain."

The northern Queen gripped Nix's hand tightly in her own. She could hear the hatred in Laurel's voice, the venom that had poisoned her. "Leave our daughter out of this, Laurel. She's done nothing to you."

Laurel laughed and stepped out of shadow, grabbing Selene from behind, ripping her out of Nix's grasp. Covered in head to toe in black, she was almost hidden, except for her cold eyes, and the dirk she carried.

Nix turned quickly at the loss of her love's hand in hers, but was felled as a large, black serpent slithered out of another shadow and wrapped around her legs. She winced as she hit the ground.

"I'm not going to do anything to your child. I'm sure Alina will take good care of precious little Cassia. That idiot was drooling enough, I'm sure she'll spare her," Laurel snapped.

Selene let out a startled gasp as she got dragged away from Nix. Valdis had said that the women could move through shadows, but to see it was something completely different than hearing about their ability. "What have you become, Laurel?" the Queen asked, trying to pull away from the strong hand that held her close. Age had apparently not weakened the other woman.

"I have become what you made me, Selene. You and your silly Goddess discarded me, but my new Goddess has blessed me." She pulled off the hood from her face, revealing she had not aged at all. "I am her chosen, and she has blessed me accordingly." The thick scar on her face made her lips twist, giving her a perpetual sneer.

Once, a lifetime ago, Laurel had been her lover. Whatever humanity, goodness, had once been in the other woman's eyes was gone. In its place was a coldness that held no warmth. Selene gasped when she saw Laurel's eyes, her pupils now those of a snake. "Nix..." she gasped, looking to her wife, who was wrestling with a snake, truly starting to fear.

"Yes, the smith, Nix," Laurel's attention turned to the smith, "the lumbering rival whom I never suspected of stealing the lovely and fair Selene from me. Just look at you, all brutish, with those muscles. Tell me, when you killed that woman, did it feel good to finally achieve your true purpose in life?" She laughed at the stricken look on the smith's face.

"Stop it! She never tried to steal me from you. You know that, Laurel." Selene again tried to pull free from the stranger and again failed.

The blade of her weapon, coated in a thick, black substance, tapped against Laurel's thigh. "I'm going to give you a glimpse of my torment, smith. You're going to stay there and watch helplessly as I steal the love of your life away from you."

The blade was lifted. "I'll make it quick. I'm not really concerned about your pain and torment," Laurel whispered, her serpentine eyes focused on Selene's throat, where it soon would be gushing red.

As if responding to Laurel's voice, the large, dark snake coiled tighter around the smith's legs, trying to hold the large woman in place.

In a roar of anger, Nix reached down and crushed the snake's head in her massive hands. It thrashed for a second in its death throes, but it was enough for the smith to free her feet. Scrambling to the horrible scene in front of her, she pushed her wife out of the way. The blade cut a deep furrow into the northern Queen's shoulder. Surprised by the sudden move, Laurel twisted her grip and turned, thrusting with the dirk.

Selene screamed in pain and surprise at the sudden shove and cut, tumbling to the side as Nix attacked Laurel.

For a minute nobody moved, frozen by what had just happened. Laurel broke the silence first, laughing, the sound chilling, touched with insanity.

The light dimmed in Nix's eyes, and the massive woman crumpled to the forest floor, the dirk embedded to the hilt in her chest.

"Noooo..!" Selene cried, crawling towards where her wife had slowly slumped to the ground, not caring that she was crawling over the dead snake or towards the still laughing Laurel.

"Unbelievable," Laurel shrieked. "She even screws up my great death scene! I spent years planning this, setting things in motion. At first I blamed you," she pointed a finger at Selene. "Then I came to realize that...that...that smith was far cleverer than I had originally given her credit for. She stole you from me, she needed to pay..." the woman ranted, spittle covering her chin as she ranted.

Continuing to ignore the raving madwoman, Selene crouched by Nix, stroking a hand through dark hair gone silver. "Love," she whispered, crying as she tried to stop the blood gushing around the dirk sticking from her chest. "Oh dear Goddess...Nix!" she cried, desperate.

For a moment, Selene could feel her love's chest move beneath her hand as Nix drew in a breath. Then there was nothing. Even the pulse of blood slowed to a sluggish flow, and the body beneath her hands became still with the finality of death.

"Too bad you didn't have that magical sword of yours, like last time," Laurel gloated, reveling in Selene's pain. "Could have prevented all of this," she cackled.

"You bitch." The words were ash in her mouth as Selene looked up from the body of the woman that she loved, her wife for the majority of her life. "You will never know love." The only weapon was the dirk in her love's chest and she was about to grab that and try to kill Laurel, when they both heard the women rushing down the path towards them. From the yells, it was Cassia, Moriko, and the others.

Laurel watched Selene's hands move toward the weapon. "Try it. Go on. Take joy in your vengeance, which is the place of my Goddess. Your days are numbered. The blade is coated in poison," she whispered the last part. Then she was turning, preparing to dart into the shadows as women came crashing into the clearing.

"Mother..?" Cassia called, stumbling a bit as she saw the body that Selene was crouched over. She nearly dropped Valdis, her grip on the injured woman's shoulder slipping.

"That godling warrior as well, oh beautiful, beautiful day," Laurel cheered as her eyes fell on the limp body of Valdis.

Moriko's face went cold as she recognized the clothes of the advisor. "You, traitor!" she roared.

They managed not to completely drop Valdis, more or less gently placing her down on the path near the still crying Selene.

Cassia had only to look at the body of her mother to know that she was dead. Drawing the sword cast pale shadows throughout the area, and she gave a scream of rage, charging towards the advisor.

She swung her sword with deadly intent, trying to take her head off.

Laurel frowned as the shadows she wanted to use disappeared, and she barely sidestepped the charge. She gave way again and again, crying out in pain as the sword of light nicked her flesh. "Mistress of Shadows, your most humble servant begs for help," she cried out as the tables were reversed.

The air grew still then a column of black fire sprang from the ground. Laurel's eyes lit up in joy. "I'll see you later. I will not rest 'til you and yours are dust." As she stepped into the fire, her expression changed from joy to horror, as a voice not meant to be heard by human ears hissed out. "You have failed me for you're own selfish reasons. My will is the only one that matters."

Laurel's screams of pain lingered long after the column of black fire vanished from view.

#####

Cassia sat silently in front of the fire, watching the flames dance in the fireplace that she had helped to design. The main room of her parents' house was quiet, with only the crackle of the fire to keep her company. People would come and go through the door, but they left her alone, heading up the stairs to her parents' room or to her old bedroom.

If she concentrated she could just barely hear the murmur as Willow talked to Selene. The wounded Queen had been brought back here and the healers summoned. Valdis had been brought here as well, and put in Cassia's old bedroom, where healers tended to the unconscious warrior.

Nix... Cassia shook her head, brushing at the tears that immediately threatened as she pictured her mother. No, she wouldn't think about it, not yet. Any moment now Nix would come in through the door and call her pumpkin. Cassia closed her eyes, feeling her shoulders move as she pictured her mother at work over the forge, the smell of the fire and hot metal.

No.

She wouldn't think of it yet, wouldn't picture the body that had been brought to the cathedral.

No. Not yet.

With a deep breath, she opened her eyes, focusing on the fire in front of her. The image wavered through the tears that still lingered, and she angrily brushed at them.

Moriko had gone to get Kai from the priestess, and she would be back soon. Goddess only knew if Cassia would be able to hold it together then. She should have held onto the other woman, she'd wanted to, desperately wanted to, but something had held her back. So instead of being held in Moriko's arms, she'd said nothing as Moriko had tried to talk to her, finally leaving to go get Kai with a sad look to Cassia.

"Princess..."

Blinking her eyes, Cassia turned and smiled grimly at the priestess who stood on the stairway.
"Yes?"

"The High Priestess would like to see you."

That didn't sound good. Cassia nodded and got up. The walk up the stairway was longer than she remembered.

Willow stood just outside the door to her mother's room. Her normally smiling face was grave, and an unnatural strain showed in her eyes.

"Cassia..." She took the woman's hands in her own.

"How is my Muanya?"

The priestess sighed. "The blade was poisoned. We have done what we could, but the poison has spread."

The taste in Cassia's mouth was bitter, "And Valdis?"

Willow's eyes brightened a bit.

"She should be dead. The wounds she sustained have killed many a woman. Her healing is faster than anyone I have ever seen."

At least that was one bit of good news. Cassia let go of the old woman's hands and walked to the door of her parents' bedroom. "I want to see my Muanya." She opened the door, gesturing for the

women inside to leave. Then she closed the door behind her, going to kneel by the side of the bed and the dying Queen who lay upon it.

#####

It was dark, the darkest night of the month, the night where the Moon Goddess hid her face. Considering the dark deeds of the day, it seemed fitting to match the night with the emotions of those that dwelled there.

The royal house was silent, those within succumbed to sleep. Cassia lay on the couch, her head pillowed in Moriko's lap, the stable mistress' head against the back of the couch, snoring softly. At their feet, the hound Rugor slept, and in a makeshift crib Kai quietly played with her toes.

Outside the Queen's rooms and the one Valdis' occupied, a healer, each, slept outside the doors on stools, even in sleep though their ears strained for sounds of discomfort or pain.

There was a very conveniently located tree outside of the bedroom that Valdis was recovering in. Well after sunset the day after the fighting had finished, Ryuu climbed up the tree and managed to cross over the gap to the window.

The silver-haired woman managed to open the window and slip inside the room, which was empty except for Valdis.

Padding quietly across the floor, Ryuu sat down on the edge of the bed. Smiling gently at the injured woman, she leaned in to press a kiss to her lips.

"Time to wake up, beautiful..."

Valdis was naked on the bed, except for a large, bulky bandage on her stomach. The wound still bled blackish, tainted blood, and the normally active warrior had been still as death since receiving the wound.

At the kiss, eyelids fluttered, and finally, slowly opened. Unfocused blue eyes tried to make sense of what they were seeing.

"Hello." Ryuu smiled as those blue eyes opened. "Careful, don't move too much, you were hurt badly. It will be a while before you can move without pain."

Valdis smiled softly, and nodded her understanding. There really wasn't any pain, just cold, biting, bitter cold radiating from her stomach. Fumbling with an uncoordinated hand, she tried to grasp Ryuu's hand. "You came back," she croaked out. "I thought it wasn't allowed?"

"It wasn't. But you needed me." The other woman took her hand, enfolding it in both of hers and trying to give Valdis something to hold onto. "You can't keep thinking that you can take on

anyone who challenges you. I warned you that there were others out there."

Valdis felt herself warm at the contact, and unconsciously relaxed. "I always need you. As for Alina, I've faced her before during training. She's not like us, it was that sword." She shivered. Just thinking about that sword made the cold inside her intensify. "That shadow sword gave her an edge. I've never seen such a thing."

"It was crafted by the Mistress of Shadows, whose true name I will not utter in the north." Ryuu slid a hand down the injured woman's stomach, gently placing her palm over the wound. Where she touched, the cold diminished, and slowly, warmth returned.

"If you were mortal, you'd be dead."

Valdis nodded. "Yes, I would. I'm sorry I made you break whatever cryptic oath binds you from interfering, but I'm glad you did. I hope you're not in too much trouble."

Ryuu laughed, quietly, but she laughed and bent closer to kiss her again, more thoroughly this time. "It was worth it. I would never have forgiven myself if you'd gotten hurt."

Valdis sighed into the kiss. "I thought I was going to have to wait a lot longer to get to do that. So I take it we won, since I'm not dead on the field." Slowly, she was waking up, and she frowned slightly, feeling the undercurrent of sorrow that blanketed the Queen's city.

The smile died on Ryuu's lips. Sadly, the other woman nodded. "You won. Several of the women who went with you died in the fighting." She paused, considering how to say what she had to tell Valdis. Finally, she just said it. "Nix is dead. Selene is dying in the next room over."

"I see," Valdis said stoically. Normally she reserved her tears for privacy, but for the first time in a long time, she didn't mind crying in front of another, and after a few seconds, she broke down, holding Ryuu tightly. "I failed another Queen," she said bitterly.

"No you didn't. Cassia's safe. There was nothing you could do for Selene or Nix." Ryuu climbed up onto the bed with her, holding the crying warrior. "You saved this island. Without you Alina would have killed everyone she could, and the north would have fallen."

"Don't you mean without you? I was nothing but a big pincushion for that woman. You're the one that stopped her." She hiccupped, but finally managed to stop crying, her face turned so it was tucked under Ryuu's chin, and she once again relaxed, smelling the familiar scent of wind and clouds.

Strong fingers massaged Valdis' shoulder, trying to get her to relax more. She pressed a kiss to the dark head tucked against her. "You taught them to defend themselves, gave them a fighting chance. If you hadn't been there, I wouldn't have interfered."

The warrior groaned in pleasure. "You and your common sense, it's hard to feel sorry for myself

when you're doing that." She knew what Ryu said was true, and in time the truth would overcome her sorrow at what had happened, it would take time though.

"Good. Then don't feel sorry for yourself. I hate it when you do that." The slender woman moved her fingers up until she was lightly massaging the warrior's scalp, smiling at the sounds that Valdis was making.

Valdis relaxed, slowly, the last of the tension easing away. "Don't want to fall asleep. I'm afraid you won't be here when I wake up," she mumbled, her eyes slipping shut despite how much she tried to resist, which was why she missed the look of sadness that crossed Ryu's face.

Leaning closer, she kissed Valdis on the lips, gently. "I'll hold you while you sleep."

#####

The next day, Valdis, as she had suspected, awoke alone. Gruffly, she bellowed and shouted, scaring away anyone who wanted to check in on her, preferring to do what Ryu hated most, wallow in her own perceived misery.

#####

In the next few days, Valdis' health grew better, as the Queen's turned worse. Moriko slowly brushed Oscar down every once in awhile, her gaze switching to the royal house.

She knew Cassia was hurting, they all were, but the Princess was shutting her out, as well as snapping at everyone. Logically she knew Cassia didn't mean it, but it still hurt. The stable mistress bedded down in the stable, reflecting it felt like the first time she'd met Cassia. Leaning over, she blew out the lamp, descending the room in darkness.

#####

Inside the house, Cassia sat by Selene's bedside, keeping a vigil over the ailing Queen. Throughout the night her Muanya's breathing had grown progressively more strained, and the healers had, one by one, done what they could and left, leaving her here alone. She knew she'd driven away Moriko, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

"Hey, pumpkin," came a quiet, faint voice from behind her in the room.

Now she was hearing things. Cassia covered her ears, shaking her head back and forth, once again forcing herself not to cry. That had sounded exactly like her mother's voice.

"Cassia, really, I thought you outgrew that stage by now." Nix's voice was clearer now, tinged with amusement.

"Mom..?" Cassia jerked upright. Had she completely lost touch with reality now then barely

managed not to scream in surprise when she saw the faint outline of the figure standing at the base of the bed.

The ghost walked slowly up to the bed, the air growing chilly as she sucked a little bit of life from the room to create her presence in it. She raised a wispy, vaguely formed hand to touch her daughter's, but stopped and let it fall.

"I'm so sorry, honey. I tried to save her, tried to give her life so she could help guide you, so she could see all those grandbabies she wanted so desperately. In the end, I failed you both."

"Mommy..?" Cassia lost the battle with her tears, and she finally started to fall. "I miss you so much," she choked, trying to reach out for her mother, only for the ghost to step away out of her touch.

"Pumpkin, the dead and living should not meet. It would take too much from you to make me solid. But I love you desperately, you and your mother both. I know you'll do good things. I should have stayed hidden, but you seem so lost, I couldn't help it. But I wanted you to know how much I regret what I did. I ended up taking us both away from you. If only these big, stupid hands had been faster."

"Oh hush about your hands. I like them just as they are," came the hoarse whisper from the bed. Cassia jerked in surprise for the second time in the last few moments, as Selene opened her eyes. She smiled slowly as she spotted the two women in the room. "You waiting for me, my love?" she asked Nix.

Nix smiled, turning to the bed, "Of course. I couldn't move on without you. Not certain what it holds, but I figure it would be fun to discover it together. Maybe the Goddess of Death will lead us to paradise, maybe we'll get reborn and get to find each other again, or maybe we'll fade away. Either way, I want you at my side, always and forever."

"Always and forever," Selene whispered, her eyes slowly closing.

"No, Muanya, please, stay here. I can't lose you both!" Cassia desperately took the still living woman's hand in hers.

Selene's eyes fluttered open and she gave a weak laugh. "Where your mother goes, so go I. I'm sorry, daughter." Her eyes slowly wandered the room then looked back at their daughter. "Where is Moriko?"

Cassia looked ashamed, but didn't answer, so Selene looked to Nix for answers.

Nix sighed. "Cassia, you're hanging on to the dying and ignoring the living. Moriko is tossing and turning in the barn outside, watching over you the best she can, because you drove her away. Lucky for you she still loves you enough to overlook your dark mood and your stinging tongue."

Nix came closer to the bed, sitting on the edge, her ghostly hand taking Selene's. "Pumpkin, you're not dying, and you're not dead. Stop acting like it. Celebrate our time together, remember it fondly, and draw out good memories and savor them on dark days. But it's time to let us go."

It was starting to be a struggle for the Queen to keep her eyes open, but she managed it for a little while longer as she used her free hand to squeeze their daughter's. "Listen to your mother; she always was the voice of reason." It wouldn't be long now, and they all seemed to realize it. "Promise me you will go to her, Cassia."

Tears ran freely down the younger woman's face as she nodded, not able to speak.

Selene sighed and turned to the ghostly form of her wife. "I love you," she whispered, "I love you both," her eyes slowly closing for the last time.

As Selene drew her last breath, Nix started to fade away, "I love you, Cassia. I couldn't have asked for a better daughter," she whispered, and then was gone, the chill in the air leaving as well.

Then Cassia was alone in the room with the Queen's body.

#####

In the crush and press of the Queen's death, Moriko felt forgotten. She and Cassia weren't married yet, and now she wondered if they would. Not once did Cassia ask for her help, and when she tried, she was told firmly that Cassia would handle it. Death, especially that of a nation's queen, could have vast impacts, but not like this, this she never would have imagined.

She was hiding in the woods; in what she was fairly certain was the clearing that she and Cassia first kissed in. She hummed softly, and missed Talon. Rugor tried, but he didn't listen as well as the hawk had.

"Moriko?" the voice was a ways off yet, but sounded strained and worried, as Cassia walked through the forest, trying to find her love. *Please, Goddess, she prayed, let me not have lost her also.*

Moriko stiffened, and for a moment, held her voice, then called out, "Cassia?"

The dark-haired woman very nearly wept in relief when she heard Moriko's voice. "Hi," she called, changing course slightly and walking towards the source of that voice. "I'm sorry!"

Moriko bit her lip and waited, the fingers of her right hand drumming against her thigh. She watched Cassia slowly emerge from the trees, but she didn't get up to greet her.

Pausing on the other side of the clearing, Cassia managed a sad smile as she spotted her. "I'm sorry," she repeated, petrified by the distance that seemed to have developed between them. "I didn't mean to push you away like that." She didn't know how to make this better.

"Then why did you?" Moriko asked the hurt at being pushed away coming to the surface.

Shaking her head, Cassia let out a sigh, looking down at the ground at her feet. "I was scared," she whispered.

Moriko ran a hand through her hair then rubbed her forehead. "I have one question. Do you still want there to be an 'us'?"

"Yes!" Cassia jerked her head up so fast she was sure she had just strained her neck. "Oh Goddess, yes I want there to be an 'us'," she stared, wide-eyed at the other woman.

Moriko smiled in relief. "Good. I do too." She patted the space next to her on the log she was sitting on.

Cassia very nearly fainted from relief; it was a near thing. Her legs were very wobbly as she went to sit down next to Moriko and grabbed her in a tight hug. "I'm sorry," she whispered, over and over.

"I know, but don't do it again. If there is an 'us', then you need to treat 'us' as a couple. I wanted to be there for you. I knew you were hurting. But instead, you lashed out at me. You really hurt me, I felt like I didn't matter."

It was a luxury to rest her face in the crook of Moriko's neck, and Cassia luxuriated in it. "I didn't know how to," she admitted finally.

With a happy sigh, Moriko held her soon-to-be wife. "Then instead of being an asshole, tell me you're scared or unsure."

Cassia let out a laugh that was almost a sob. "I'm scared and unsure."

Moriko just held her tighter. "I know, love, and I'm here for you." She kissed Cassia's head and face. "What do you need? How can I make you less scared and unsure?"

"Don't let me push you away?"

"Okay. I think we're okay now." She slowly rocked back and forth, humming softly.

Within moments, Cassia's shoulders started to shake, and then her entire frame as she sobbed, giving in to the tears that had threatened ever since this morning.

"You've been holding that in for days now. Go on and let it all out," Moriko whispered. "It's

okay, I have you."

It felt like hours later, but finally, the dark-haired woman's tears slowed then stopped, making no effort to move out of the arms that cradled her. The idea that she'd almost lost this caused her to tighten her grip on Moriko. "Will you come back with me?" The funeral, funerals, would be tomorrow.

"Of course..." She kissed the top of the head that was under her chin. She had missed this closeness, and was loath, at the moment, to give it up.

Cassia twisted a little so that she could look up. "Where's Kai?"

The blonde reached down and gently moved the hair out of Cassia's face. "Willow and Valdis are watching her. Actually, I think Willow is watching both of them." She bent her head, brushing her lips against the other woman's before leaning back up.

She sighed with relief and burrowed back against the warm body next to her, content to be in Moriko's arms. They'd have to go back to deal with things soon enough, but for now, she was content to stay where she was.

#####

Hours later, Moriko got them home and put Cassia to bed, before coming out and thanking Willow and Valdis for watching Kai. Willow smiled mysteriously, and said something about young love before taking her leave.

Moriko scratched the scar on her eyebrow and asked Valdis, "What was that look for?"

"You have twigs and dirt in your hair," was all the smirking warrior said. "So I assume it was a good bout of..." Moriko scowled at the warrior. "...making up?"

Moriko sighed and rolled her eyes. Valdis just handed her the sleeping Kai and went to her old room, which was now the guest room to sleep.

Moriko looked at Kai. "Please don't grow up to be a warrior."

She rocked the small child and wondered what tomorrow would be like. She had, so far, missed the funerals of those that were important to her.

#####

The day had been beautiful, and had faded into a cloudless, starry night. Valdis wasn't familiar with pyres, but on a day of such mourning, she felt that maybe the day should have reflected it with rain and gloom.

She was healing, her abdomen mostly healed. The sword had left a black stain on her, swirling out from the thick scar tissue like inky tendrils. Sometimes it ached with coldness, and she used a cane to get around, but everyday she was getting better.

She stood slightly behind the Royal family, watching as the Priestess held their ceremony.

"You look better than the last time I saw you," a familiar voice whispered from her left hand side, a hand slipping into Valdis' as the two bodies were raised up to the pyres that had been built.

The crowd of women around them was silent as the bodies were laid out. Then the songs began, those with the purest of voices stood near the pyres, singing the lives of the two women who had led the north ever since the Exodus.

Valdis squeezed the hand and whispered, "I've missed you." She took a step back, which put them even more into shadow, so she was now flush with Ryuu. Her eyes, however, stayed fixed on the scene before them. "They were wonderful people."

"They were special," Ryuu agreed, leaning against the warrior's side. She smiled faintly as she spotted Cassia and Moriko at the front, with little Kai sitting between them. "She will make a good Queen with the support of those around her."

Valdis nodded. "She had a sheltered time growing up, this has taken its toll, but it looks like she came through it just fine."

The silver-haired woman nodded towards the women who stood not too far away from the soon-to-be Queen. "How are your pupils doing?"

"They are recovering. Some of them didn't transition well to the real thing, others lost friends, the horror and sorrow of battle sits heavily on them, but they know they did well and protected their lands. I'll get them whipped back into shape."

Ryuu nodded sadly. "You're not ready to leave yet." It wasn't really a question, despite Ryuu's hopeful tone.

Valdis turned her blue eyes away from the dead, who were being consumed by fire, and looked at her lover. A sad smile graced her features. "Look at them; they're such babes to this, not like the south. It's almost as if we never stopped fighting the Exodus there. I promise I'll be with you as soon as I can." She kissed Ryuu's lips then whispered, "I miss you terribly."

She smiled and returned the kiss. "I know. You will do well. They respect you. Just see how those fire warriors are putting their heart into following your teachings."

Valdis rolled her eyes. "Stupid miners," she muttered. "How long do I have you for before you disappear while I sleep?"

"Tomorrow," the other woman squeezed the warrior's hand, "after the coronation."

Valdis just nodded, not happy, but accepted it.

"But until then, can I interest you in spending the night with me?" Ryuu whispered as the singing came to an end.

Valdis gave a warm smile, "Of course. And lucky for you, I even managed to pick up your house a little bit today."

"Lucky me," she agreed, pulling Valdis away from the mourning that would continue for a while.

#####

The morning sunlight was slowly lightening the window as Ryuu draped a naked leg over the hip of the woman lying in bed with her. There had been very little sleep last night, for either of them, and she smiled in sheer happiness at the memories that would have to last her for a long, long time. "How are you doing?" she whispered against damp skin.

Valdis opened eyes that had nearly shut in exhaustion. "I am either out of shape or you were really, really trying to kill me." She stroked the skin of Ryuu's bare thigh. For the first time ever, she had felt self-conscious of her body. Last night, when she had taken off her tunic, she wanted to put it back on to hide the scar and blackness left behind by the Mistress of Shadow's sword. Ryuu had put her at ease, but still, it bothered her. Unconsciously, her other hand rubbed the scar.

With a low, throaty chuckle, Ryuu swung herself up over the other woman, grinning down at her. "I'm just making sure you aren't going to forget me." Her hands reached down and gripped Valdis' hand, stilling it.

Looking sheepish, Valdis mumbled out a sorry then placed both her hands on Ryuu's hips. "I won't forget you. You are truly unforgettable, no matter how hard you try not to be noticed."

She looked over her shoulder at the window, judging how much time was left before she had to leave. "Let's just make sure." Ryuu grinned wickedly and leaned down, covering the well-muscled body with her own.

#####

Valdis was well aware of one thing in her semi-conscious state...she was going to be walking funny tomorrow. That's what happens when you have a relationship, you stop sleeping around. She was also aware that Ryuu was trying to leave without be noticed.

The sun had risen considerably higher by the time that Ryuu did her best to slip out of bed, wincing a little as she stood up. She was sore in the most interesting ways. Quietly, she started to slip on her clothes, intending to get out of town while everyone was gathered for the coronation.

The fewer that saw her, the fewer questions she would have to answer.

"I guess I should get dressed and get to that big ta do over at the temple," Valdis said with a yawn. She rolled over, looking at the guilty looking Ryuu. "You know, honey, sometimes a goodbye is a nice thing before you take off, makes me feel less whore-like."

The silver-haired woman winced. "Sorry, love. I didn't want..." she trailed off, not sure how to explain it. She didn't want there to be any more pain. "I didn't mean it like that."

Valdis sighed and smiled softly. "I know." She sat up and stretched, feeling a slight pull in her gut from the scar tissue.

"Does it still hurt?" Ryuu asked, noticing the wince.

Valdis nodded. "It aches and sometimes it's cold. The healer said something about nerve damage. It's...it's not healing right, not like in the past, perhaps it's because the Goddess made it and blessed it somehow." She shrugged, "Anyone other than me would be dead."

Ryuu reached over and gently stroked a hand over the scar tissue. "I can't do much more than I did before," shrugging apologetically.

Valdis smiled and held her hand over the wound. "And that was enough." She studied Ryuu for a moment, her eyes intense for a moment, and then lifted the hand and kissed it. "You're not a half-breed godling like me, are you?" she asked, already having a good idea of the answer. While Valdis was formidable and powerful, she couldn't ease suffering and pain with a touch.

Silver eyes blinked in surprise, although Ryuu wasn't sure why she was surprised. Despite all that Valdis thought about herself, the warrior was anything but slow. "Would it change things between us if I was more than that?"

For a moment, Valdis looked insulted. "Honey, nothing could change things between us...well, maybe if you tried to kill me, but other than that, nothing will change how I feel. For crying out loud! I don't even notice other women, or sleep around, um...and whatever unrelationship things I use to do."

Cupping the taller woman's cheek, Ryuu smiled. "I love you, you know that?" She turned serious. "But I'm not going to see you for a long time. I'm sorry, but that's what is going to happen. You have to remember me, Valdis. Please, promise me that whatever happens, you'll remember me?"

Valdis frowned, not liking this one bit. "What do you mean, a long time? You were just asking me if I could leave with you, yesterday."

"Things have changed," she answered, sadly. "I broke the rule."

With sudden great clarity, she understood, and it hurt almost if clarity had been forced upon her. "You interfered, by saving me, by showing up, and now you're being punished?"

Closing her eyes, Ryuu lowered her head until her silver hair hid her face from sight. "It's not really a punishment. More like a...penance."

Valdis reached out and cupped Ryuu's face, studying it. "I will wait, and I will remember." She kissed her lover's eyelids then her lips.

"Promise..?"

Valdis rolled her eyes, "Of course."

"Good." Ryuu tenderly kissed her, nearly desperately deepening the kiss before reluctantly breaking off. "I have to go."

Valdis nodded, and turned to grab her clothes, hiding her face and her tears, not wanting to make it harder than it already was.

Ryuu paused by the door to the room. "I love you," she whispered then left before the hurt in her chest stopped her.

#####

It had been a long few days, Cassia thought with a touch of bitterness. The funeral had been everything that her parents had deserved. The entire town and many women from across the north had turned out, flooding the streets of the city. The pyres had been impressively tall, and burned bright and hot as the bodies of Nix and Selene had been laid to rest, together in death as they had been in life. Willow's priestesses had sung the flames high, singing their life and commanding their spirit to the Moon Goddess. Throughout it all, she'd cried. Cassia felt hollow today, empty of everything. If Moriko and Kai hadn't been there, she wondered if she would have just floated away upon the smoke.

Today that same crowd was gathering in the streets for a different reason, and Cassia grimaced as she pictured standing up in front of them. "I think I'm going to be sick," she whispered, leaning her head against the wall and listening to Moriko get Kai ready in the other room. *Please, Goddess, she prayed, just get me through the next little while.*

Rugor whined and nudged her hand with his wet nose, causing her to jump a little. "Thanks, boy," she patted him on the head, took a deep breath, and peeked around the door to see how Moriko was doing. The emptiness inside her eased as she watched the two people who were her family. "You look good."

"Mmmm," was the non-committal answer that came from Moriko as she practically hog-tied Kai into her dress. "Come on, Kai, I don't need this one trait of your mother's coming to the forefront

right now. Just work with me," the blonde pleaded her brown eyes near tears with exhaustion.

The soon-to-be Queen went inside and kneeled down next to the little one, hoping to distract her while Moriko kept up her tries with the dress. This was proving to be more difficult than either of them had expected. "I know you don't like it, Kai. We won't ask you to do this often," Cassia promised, hoping to reason with the young girl.

Moriko smiled in thanks as Cassia kneeled down next to them, although she didn't really blame Kai. She'd never owned a dress, much less worn one before today, and she wasn't all that comfortable either.

Kai just squealed and said "Mommy" over and over again while trying to grab Cassia's nose.

Cassia finally just gave in and let her hang onto her nose so that Moriko could finish her dressing. "I promise we won't have to force her to do this too often," she said, hoping to see at least a hint of a grin from the other woman.

Moriko laughed as Kai firmly grabbed Cassia's nose. "For your well being, you better hope so. I'm not certain your nose could take this on a daily basis." She finished the last tie and kissed Kai's head while firmly removing the child's small hand from Cassia's nose, "Looks like we're all ready."

"Are we?" The dark haired woman captured Moriko's hand in hers, searching her eyes intently, still unsure after the last few days.

Moriko nodded and stood up, dragging Cassia with her. "Yes, we are ready." Her gaze softened and she reached up, stroking Cassia's cheek. "And we're okay, just don't do that again. I can understand if you need space, but don't push me away. I thought you didn't want me anymore, or blamed me for bringing Kai here and putting all this into motion." Unshed tears glistened in her eyes. "I didn't know they'd find out. I tried so hard to keep it a secret. It's my fault they died."

Cassia pulled her into a hug, holding onto the smaller woman tightly. "It isn't your fault. You didn't make them come here. You didn't cause this," she whispered. "I love you and Kai, no matter what."

"I thought you were mad, I thought you were blaming me for their deaths. Please don't shut me out like that again," Moriko said into the crook of Cassia's neck.

"I promise," Cassia whispered then smiled as small hands grabbed onto her leg and tugged. "I think someone doesn't want to be ignored."

"She's spoiled," Moriko said, then bent down and scooped up Kai. "Uff, you're getting big, Kai. Soon I won't be able to pick you up anymore." She held out her other hand to Cassia. "Come on, it's time to become a Queen."

Cassia laughed, kissing both of them, "Time to become a family."

The End
